

# Our Pilgrimage to Tibet



By  
Michael  
Erlewine



# **Our Pilgrimage to Tibet**

**By  
Michael & Margaret Erlewine**

**This Book is Dedicated  
To my Kids:**

**lotis  
Michael Anne  
May  
Michael Andrew**

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

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

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## Introduction



## Introduction



### **Preface by Michael Erlewine**

That 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 he always 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.

## Introduction

And my wife and I could not just up and leave the kids. After all, we had never even had a babysitter in all these 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 would be another story. I hope you enjoy this one.

## You Are Going to Tibet

### Our Visit to Find the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 have been interested in Buddhism for many years, I never seriously considered going to Tibet. Then suddenly, in less than a month, I am in Tibet, along with my wife, two daughters, and 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 we could manage it. Here is our story:

My wife and I are long-time students of Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery. Rinpoche was sent to the U.S. in the mid 1970s by His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16<sup>th</sup> 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, with His Holiness the Karmapa representing the first tulku (reincarnated lama) in the history of Tibet,

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and all other reincarnations of this sort being 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 (also in India) his student Naropa. Marpa, the Tibetan translator, traveled to India and received these teachings from Naropa, and brought them to Tibet, where he 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 (17 incarnations) have been successive reincarnations of that same essence. In fact the lineage today represents an unbroken chain of students and teachers that culminates in the young 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, who resides in Tibet. The Karmapa is the

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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, it is a chance for the students to practice and be together and to receive 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 (due to his age), it will have to be now.

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

## You Are Going to Tibet

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

We all looked at each other in amazement, because 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, how life is short, and that 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 travel and had never seriously thought of going there. 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 would always ask him if there was anything

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particular I should be doing. Aside from encouraging me to keep practicing, he never gave any specific direction. I was always a little disappointed that there was not ever something more specific he wanted me to do. And now this. Rinpoche had just told me to go to Tibet, and this summer. It was already mid-July. After the surprise cleared away, we knew that we were pumped.

In fact, we were so charged up 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 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, later coming down 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 our directive from Rinpoche. From that first day, we were 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 to attempt to book tickets within a month. In that short time, we had to get passports, visas, a tour set up, 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, too, come in slow and expedited forms. Here, too, we had to pay extra to expedite the process. Even then, they just came through in time. And for passports, you need up-to-date birth certificates, the ones with an imprinted seal on them! It turns out that some of our certificates, while good years ago, no longer came up to specs. This precipitated a frantic search (and extra fees!) to get fresh copies of what we already had and have them overnighted to us. The passport people just held up everything 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 shots at all? We pulled all the information we could get from books, the internet, and local doctors, but they did not agree. We began calling disease control centers and national experts. One thing is for

## Getting Ready to Go

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 tight schedule too, because our 11-year old had not had all of his shots as a child. Somehow, we all got 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, that 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 Tibet experience. 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

## Getting Ready to Go

language, the medical supplies, the trekking equipment, the pilgrimage spots, the maps to find, the clothing – the works.

Speaking of the Tibetan language, I got 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 they 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 they could need to piece together sentences. That 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 these from all the books I had plus 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 the kind of practical advice we thirsted for. As for experience, we had the invaluable and much needed help from Andy Quintlin and Ward Holmes, both Tibetan guides on occasion. It was Andy who helped us get the tour setup. And Gloria Jones, who lives in Kathmandu, helped us in so many ways, in particular, when we were in Kathmandu. She was always ready to help, 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 down all of these lists

## Getting Ready to Go

into a master list of items that we had to consider, which list was promptly ridiculed by my 21-year old daughter (who was coming along), who felt that she would just bring what she wanted to bring along. The list is posted elsewhere here.

I made many trips to K-Mart and Wal-Mart with 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 the allopathic items that would at least address the symptoms. I collected things like laxatives, diarrhea medicine, antihistamines, and all those things we love to hate, until we need them.

As for clothing, we soon found that most of the old standard mail-order catalogs that used to carry outdoor wear had kind of upscaled and now had more preppy clothes than substance. Even old L.L. Bean is now selling dog beds and Christmas wreaths, looking more and more like a JCPenney's catalog. This forced us, for some items, into hiking catalogs like Patagonia, Marmot and to whatever expedition and outfitter stores we could find. It was fun when the store cliff-jockey, who was telling us about the advantages of this or that sock combination, asked us, "Where are you going to be hiking?," to be answered, "Tibet." Their eyes would bug out, despite their best efforts at self-control. Not that we were going to do that much climbing.

## Getting Ready to Go

When it came to hiking and camping gear, we really got sidetracked. I believe my wife ordered some 10 different pair of hiking boots, nine of which she sent back. It took weeks to figure the boot angle out and she went hiking only once. I settled for a pair of comfortable Nike hiking boots, rather than with the more uncomfortable real thing. They worked fine for the two times I really hiked. And socks. You know that everyone had to have some \$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 thing we didn't take were decoder rings and Ovaltine labels.

But I really spent those late nights on the itinerary for our Tibetan journey. There being no detailed map of Tibet available to me, I photocopied tiny section maps from Victor Chan's "Tibet Handbook" and pieced them 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 high-energy time – those weeks preparing for the trip – and visions of Tibet danced through my head.

The reaction of my family to the trip was mixed and changed with the weather. Most were

## Getting Ready to Go

against it right off, because they knew I wanted them to go and that they were not really being given a choice. I can't blame them. Our 11-year old was loathe to give up his friends and habits and "have" to go anywhere. Pretty much the same response 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. 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 has regretted the decision to go.

The nightmare of tickets, passports, visas, airport taxes, immigration, customs, and the like, I will spare you for now, although I am sure I could save any of you that are thinking of going some suffering by giving details. Suffice it to say that each of these many obstacles appeared (at times) formidable, 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 with all of our baggage to begin our trip, 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, with block-long lines of angry fliers, chaperoning 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. We even tried to rent a car and drive to Chicago, but we

## Getting Ready to Go

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 home town to await a flight the following day. Talk about anticlimactic. We slunk back to town, didn't tell anyone we were back, and pretended 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 one to Tokyo, 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.



**Our First View of the Himalayas**





## The Overseas Flight

### The Overseas Flight

The 12-hour flight from Chicago to Tokyo is probably something best left not described. It is part of the price any traveler pays who wants to visit Asia. There is no way around it, so you just have to bite the bullet and ride it out. Like most of the other flyers, we did not fly First Class and we eyed 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 those 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 make all of the economy-class seats suddenly vanish, you would be in very close company with a few hundred people.

Pretty much, you have to kind of hold still for 12 hours. Trying to get comfortable is a waste of time. You don't get comfortable; you just get through the experience and that takes time. In the end, the best position was to just sit in the seat and close your eyes. Trying to find the right angle to sleep never worked out.

And I underestimated how cold the air-conditioning would be on the plane and 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.

And the in-flight movies in theory make sense, but they were not really good movies and they

## The Overseas Flight

ended up reminding me of the times when I wake up after falling asleep watching television when I have a fever – something flickering on and on. And the earphones, when they worked, were not much help against the roar of the plane. I am almost done here, with just the food to comment on.

The food is really funny. In the beginning, when the flight is young, you get a smart 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 with the list on the menu. Is this green gelatinous blob really the "Creamed Spinach Soufflé?" Could it be?

A greater mistake was to request vegetarian meals or what the flight attendants call "Special Meals." "Does someone in this row have a 'special meal?'" they would ask. That would be me. The problem is that we did not get vegetarian meals, but someone's (who for sure is not a vegetarian) idea of a vegetarian meal. For the most part, they were inedible, but we ate them. 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. But from now on, I will take the standard meal, meat and all. At least it is recognizable.

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

## The Overseas Flight

### 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 the one where we tried to get outside the enclosed airport terminal and breathe some fresh air, not an easy task. You cannot just walk outside or even out on an observation deck and 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 time of form filling and line standing, we got to go outside to the terminal entrance. And 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 could admit to ourselves that this really sucked and went back in and again through the long process of passports, immigration, etc.

And we were tired. Although it was light out, in reality it was two or three in the morning by our internal clocks. There was just nowhere to rest and our flight had been delayed. Finally we found a small floor area behind a sign, where we piled our carry-on bags and tried to take a few minutes nap, only to awaken to a Japanese guard (worried perhaps that we were street people) asking if we had airline tickets. We showed him our tickets and explained that the airlines had delayed our departure and that

## The Overseas Flight

we were tired and had nowhere to rest. He understood and left us alone.



### **Arriving in Hong Kong**

Although the Tokyo airport is about as much of Japan as we saw, I liked the feel of the slice of Japan that we did see. Although 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 is a different story.

### **Hong Kong!**

It was a night flight from Tokyo to Hong Kong and as we approached the island, the huge brightly-lit high-rise towers of Hong Kong rose out of the darkness like a setting from a sci-fi movie. I have never seen buildings placed so close together in my life. The effect was surreal. We didn't have the best experience in

## The Overseas Flight

Hong Kong, so I probably should not say much at all. I can't resist a few notes:

Our arrival there meant claiming our luggage and somehow getting it and us to a hotel in 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, in search of a taxi. And we got off to a bad start.

As we came out of the terminal, a man rushed forward to solicit that we 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 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, a long row of people queued up for taxis and a long line of matching taxis were up ahead. We would go there.

Next, all of us and our luggage would not fit in one taxi, so we had to take two. Even then, our bags hardly fit and the taxi trunks had to remain open for the ride to the hotel, with the attendant worries of maybe luggage flying out on the street. Then, the two cabs did not stay together, again dividing my family. Hong Kong taxis drive like mad and most of the drivers are not at all friendly, sometimes scarily unfriendly. So, we hurtled through the streets of Kowloon

## The Overseas Flight

at breakneck speed, with a driver that did not respond to English.



### **The City of Hong Kong**

The hotels in Hong Kong are exorbitantly expensive, with a single room going for between \$200-\$300 and little other choice. We just had to pay. Once at the hotel, we went out and walked through some of the shopping district – side-by-side shops packed with electronic gear, clothes, etc. Everything in

## The Overseas Flight

Hong Kong seems 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 served as huge channels for the air that moved like rivers through them. As you walked by a cross-street, you would be flooded by a tide of garbage smell and have to hold your breath and get out of that intersection before you dared to breathe again. Everywhere, everything is for sale.

It may be my imagination, but it is my impression that the Chinese don't much like westerners or, at least, Americans. I did not experience anywhere else in Asia the coldness that I did from the 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 the largest Chinese Buddhist temple, where we experienced the only peace and space in that city. We also took a sampan boat into Hong Kong harbor and saw the boat people, an entire subculture that live there 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 what really impressed me, as I wrote earlier, was how closely they could place high-rise buildings and the obvious



## The Overseas Flight

discrepancy between the very rich and the very poor. We saw some incredible tenements, some quite old, some quite heartbreaking. And we wandered by mistake into the basement of one building while looking for the Buddhist center we wanted to visit. 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, 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.

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 and I prayed that it would not lose power and get stuck there.

That elevator summed up everything about my experience of Hong Kong. Talk about a foreign 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, whom I'm sure are wonderful, but for my particular experience, I wish it had been different.

## The Overseas Flight

### **Hong Kong To Kathmandu**

After our Hong Kong experience, the 4-hour flight from there to Kathmandu came as a welcome experience. For one, suddenly we had a mix of Asian peoples – Chinese, Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan. The flight attendants had to announce everything in three languages instead of just Chinese and English as 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 we had experienced so far. We were going to Kathmandu! We sat next to a Nyingma monk returning to his monastery and it turns out that we knew some of the same people. It was a very nice time.

## Kathmandu

### We Arrive in Kathmandu

The flight from Hong Kong began to descend from the clouds into the beautiful Kathmandu valley and thus our first real view of Nepal. In the approaching twilight, we could still see clearly the rich terraced green of the endless rice paddies and fields below. As we got lower, we saw whole towns and then individual houses. After deplaning, entering the airport itself, we walked along a path filled with blooming plants, alive with the loud 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 of the forms, pay the airport taxes, examine our passports, receive a visa, get through customs, and exchange money. A note about money

## Kathmandu

exchange. I had spent far too long studying the various travel catalogues, trying to pick out a money purse or secret money pouch, as they are sometimes called. In the end I kind of took one of each, 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 that almost no vendor is able to cash something as huge as the equivalent of \$20, much less \$50 or \$100. Perhaps a few huge 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 the next bank at the next 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 people and shops will even look at. It is not that they are not willing; they don't have the change!

So, the result is that you exchange say, \$1000, for huge packs of money, sometimes 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 that cannot be removed by hand. You need pliers. So here we are, with all these nifty secret money pouches and a wad of dough 7 inches wide. Go figure. So you fill up all your money

## Kathmandu

pouches with about \$10 worth of money and stuff the rest (most of it) in your knapsack. Your money belts clings to you; you cling to the knapsack.

At any rate, with large rubber-band-bound packs of Nepalese currency jammed in my pockets (like Uncle Scrooge), we were ready to leave the protected area of the airport and venture out 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 we were a day or so late (remember we had to drive back home for a night) and there was little chance of someone we did not know being able to track our belated progress through the various delays to this arrival. So the lot of us crept outside the terminal. I had my family stand back (behind the police lines) with our mountain of baggage, as I ventured forward and carefully surveyed what awaited us.

And it was indeed scary. On all sides, men rushed up to try and seize any baggage you might be carrying. Each spoke in broken English with authority that they alone would help you, that only they could 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 you could trust from the one that might drive you off who-knows-where?

As I emerged from behind the police line, I could see a whole wall of people behind a fence across the road, all beckoning to me. We

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were about the only passengers coming out just then, but all of these people seemed to want our attention. And then, in the middle I saw a group of maroon-colored robes, Buddhist monks, who almost seemed like they were really 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 want to believe it? But no, they kept point at me and beckoning. I wasn't dreaming. They did come! These were the monks from Thrangu Monastery, including their head monk, and they had been waiting for us 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 forward toward them and suddenly we had to almost 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 too, not to mention the monks on top of that. The unwanted helpers, who had obviously been drinking, were now demanding money, but I had not had the foresight to have any small bills handy at that point. The monks were laughing. We were packed in with (I believe) four of us smashed in the front seat. Much of

## Kathmandu

me was hanging out of the side window as we pulled away from the airport.

Words fail me to describe that initial ride from the airport into Kathmandu on that first night. 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 the Toyota Land Cruiser. Literally, much of me was leaning and hanging out the window, so everything along the streets was crystal clear to me. It was night and there were no regular street lights and few lights of any kind. It had been raining here recently and the road was filled with small and very large puddles, many of which had to be driven around. And we were moving at what I felt was considerable speed, given the road conditions. And 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 were all over the roadway, walking, standing, alone and in groups. And the extreme poverty of this city impressed itself on me along with all of the other input. Beyond the road, people were everywhere in the dark, in small groups, smoking, exchanging things, watching us, getting out of our way.

And the Land Cruiser's leaning on the horn did not give anyone or any animal enough time to escape our forward motion, or so it seemed to

## Kathmandu

me. I kept looking for the main part of the city or for any area of bright lights (civilization) to appear before us, but I saw only the dark of the streets, with brief glimpses here and there of what was happening around me. The city I imagined never materialized and it began to sink into me that there was no city like that here and that we were in a very different kind of place than I had ever been or even imagined. I was numbed by the constant jolts of the car on the street, lurching from side to side, as it hit the potholes. It was a crazy ride that seemed 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 that I was very tired, but now also very awake and taking all of this in.



### **We Never Got to the Bright Lights**

And the streets got narrower and narrower until we were crawling through alleys with only inches of side-room to spare, passing faces only right before my eyes. "What had I gotten



## Kathmandu

us into?" I thought. Thousands of miles from anywhere I knew and 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 at 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 our two women friends, who had arrived some days before us. One of them was in tears to finally see us safely there. I was, by this point, quite numb. We were literally helped to our room, our luggage deposited with us, and left alone. Gecko lizards with their suction-cup toes on the walls outside our door were catching insects. Dogs barked continuously in the distance. Our rooms were shabby, dirty, soiled, used. There were no towels and the bedclothes made me sure 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 drained out a corner of the room. We were all a little in jet-lag shock, culture shock, too. And at the same time, I was so glad we were there. 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 and that, only two days before, the dark of night here in Kathmandu was the middle of the day in Michigan. Trying to sleep that first night was one of those never-quite-drifting-off affairs, not helped by the jet-lag that we were experiencing, the strange smells and sounds. Just before dawn, all of the surrounding monasteries (like right next door) began sounding gongs and chanting. Then came sets of Tibetan horns, the ones that sound like oboes and the deep bass rumbling ones. And then the dawn. It was almost eerie, but beautiful, listening to 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 two days on our trip, we had lost the three-day safety zone we needed to apply for visas for India and Sikkim. We almost lost the time needed to get our Chinese group visa for Tibet, but that had been taken care of by paying a bunch of extra money. We were to fly to Tibet the next day, but whether we would get to visit India when we returned was another matter. The three-day waiting period for that visa application had now vanished. Worse, this one day we had left was a Nepalese strike day, something we would come to know only too well.

It seems that the government of Nepal is trying to create a value-added tax (VAT), something

## That First Day in KTM

like they do in the United Kingdom and many other countries. It is perceived as a real hardship by the people and they had organized a series of national strikes in protest. On strike days, no motor traffic (cars, buses, etc.) would be allowed, thus strangling business for that day. The penalty for violators was stoning of the vehicle. The result was that we were stranded in 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 to pick up the rather large sum of cash we had to deliver to him and carry it through the streets of Kathmandu. Trusting this much cash to an unknown carrier in itself worried us. In the end, the main guy came himself to get his money, including the extra cash we had to pay to the Chinese to do all 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 at the center of downtown Kathmandu, something still might be done, he suggested. 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 had any breakfast, but I was unwilling to give up on visiting Sikkim, because Gyaltsap Rinpoche 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 the trip, was too beat to

## That First Day in KTM

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. However, I managed to find one man about my age who knew and he said he would go with us. As for bikes, all we could find were some not-too-bad old-style one-speed American bicycles, 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 he really had in mind his young (perhaps 12-year old) son for the trip, not himself. And so the three of us, with the young boy leading us, in a sort of Mary Poppins kind of way, started out on the 7 kilometer trip through the streets of Kathmandu from Boudinath (where we were) to near the royal palace where the Indian Embassy resides.



**Primary Means of Traveling**

## That First Day in KTM

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

Everywhere there were people and animals, with shops crammed in 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) for a store – a single jar. And there was this sense that everyone was 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 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 the exertion. We had the young boy look after our bikes, while Anne and I 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,

## That First Day in KTM

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, this time mostly uphill.

I did make it back, covered with sweat, exhausted, hungry, but exhilarated. My butt was bruised and sore for many weeks from that ride. Margaret was so proud of me and so amazed at my going. We got to meet Ward Holmes (of the Tsurphu Foundation) and Gloria Jones (secretary of Thrangu Monastery) 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, and arrange to meet him in his office, which I 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 filling out the forms, something that I believe every Indian, at least Brahmins, are fully able to do. Here I am

## That First Day in KTM

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 vehicle of the street, whisked our stuff into it, and transferred it and us to the bus. That was not so impressive in itself, because he should have known that he could never get that bus in that tiny alley.

What was really impressive was the way he handled the airport. The problem for him was that there was a planeload of people and baggage and only one counter where they had to file through. When we arrived, there was already a long line of people. Paying no attention to that, 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 around him, as he looked at and handled other people's 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 checked through ahead of everyone's, and three sets of window seats on the side of the plane (left side) where Mt. Everest and the rest of the Himalayas could be seen. Of course, he applied liberal baksheesh (bribe money), but even with that, it was an amazing display of grace and power. He pushed us through the checkpoint and wished us a good trip. We were off to Tibet. We were finally on board the one-hour flight from



## On to Tibet

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.

### Tibet

#### **Gonghar Airport**

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

#### **Our Guides: Penba and Tashi**

We had been warned about the guides we might have assigned to our group, once we reached Tibet. There was only so much control that could be exercised from a distance and it was partly 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 who knew and cared something about the dharma. If you were unlucky, you could count on arguing and even ordering your guide to go to the places you wanted to go and not those most convenient for him. In this regard, we were very, very 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 that he had once been a monk, but I don't know if that is true or not. Certainly he knew an enormous amount about

## On to Tibet

the places we visited, complete to the last statue detail. 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 is what we 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 and 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 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 I understood from others that a guide like this might make \$200 a month! I am sure the driver made even less.

As time went on, we shared 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. Penba took great care to explain, in great detail, all of the sacred places we visited. In fact, many times I had to wander off from his explanations so that I could find time to connect to the place

## On to Tibet

and make aspirations. He was very thorough and knew almost every statue, every thangka.

And he was not just faking interest either, although he had been to these sacred places a great many times. He had also visited His Holiness, the Karmapa, a number of times before. He had tears in his eyes as His Holiness looked at him and said, "You are starting to have confidence in me."

## The Tara Shrine

### **The Tara Shrine**

With the guides came a 12-seat minibus to house our crew and all our baggage. This was better than the two jeeps I had expected. We piled in and headed up the road toward Lhasa, traveling alongside the wide Tsangpo river on our way to a very special shrine to 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 seemed like a small store, behind which was a large monastery-like compound made of adobe. There were dharma banners hanging from the walk-through gate as we entered the long courtyard, at the end of which was a large shrine room covered in front by a large 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 Asia (anywhere for that matter). When one enters a gompa (monastery) shrine room, the first thing one does is to offer three prostrations toward the central deity or shrine center. After this, you proceed down the left-hand side of the shrine room and up to the very front. And most shrine rooms have something at the front left, front middle, and front right. Often you will find smaller shrines on either side of a main 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 to these side shrines or deities. Then you move along to your right to the main center of the shrine and again bow or pay homage to that deity. Often pilgrims bow and touch their heads to the base on which the deity is sitting. Others will touch their mala

## The Tara Shrine

(rosary) to the base of the deity. More common is just to place your hands together and bow toward the deity. One then moves again to the right to whatever shrine or deity is at the far right-hand side of the shrine front and, again, bow or acknowledge the deity there.

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



### **Some of the Large Tara Statues**

The Tara shrine had 21 large and exquisite statues of Tara, plus those 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 by the spirit of the place or the vibrations and just found

## The Tara Shrine

ourselves weeping. We were very happy here. Perhaps it was because this was our first sacred contact in Tibet or perhaps this is indeed a very special place, but 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**

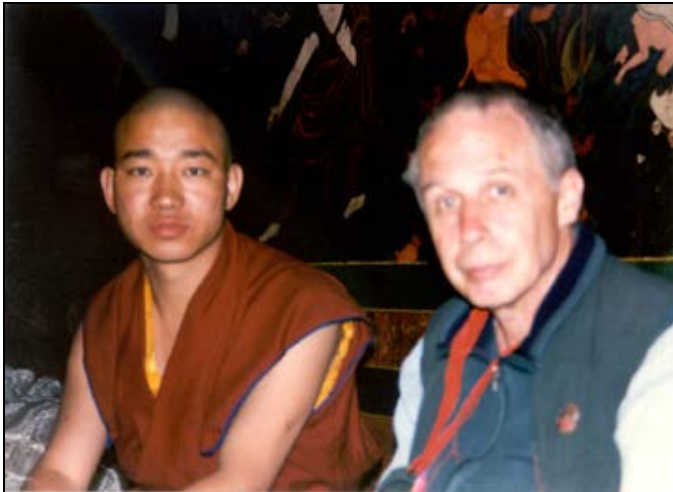
It took about half a day for altitude sickness to really take hold. And I, who got the worst case of it, was not really prepared. Khenpo Rinpoche had a premonition that one of us would have problems and maybe need some extra oxygen, but he was kind of looking at my wife, Margaret, and she and I both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

From the books, you get no idea that when they speak of "altitude sickness," they really mean sickness. You get sick. When you are rushed by plane from Kathmandu to Lhasa, you go from around 3,000 feet to over 13,000 feet in less than an hour. At this 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 at last being in Tibet, with the bright, bright Sun, the crisp, clear air, the clouds close overhead. You get the idea.



## The Tara Shrine

Within about half a day, what with 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 and I begin 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, with 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 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, and headed out, only to soon find myself feeling my way back to the hotel room, gasping and grasping again for that chair. And there I sat. Or I would lie down on the bed and there I would lie, and for a long time. I couldn't believe it. I was trapped in what

## The Tara Shrine

amounted to an old-age body, limited to the least doing of anything.

Typically, they say you must spend three days in Lhasa, getting used to the altitude. And that means three 24-hour days and nights. Often you can't sleep. You just are awake. Your head aches and your face feels puffy and tingles. Something seems very wrong or at least very different. You can't really do much because (against your will to get out and see this new country), you don't feel like doing much. You just don't feel too great, 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 that, coupled with a cold, eventually resulted in three days of fairly high fever, ending with the whole thing going into my lungs and bronchitis, having to take antibiotics, and just being 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 that oppressed my lungs, already weakened from my prior history of smoking 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), 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 (the very famous old Buddhist shrine), so, as far as my experience is concerned, the Jokhang is the center of Lhasa. My first visit to the Jokhang was just too tourist-like for me, with paying to get in, being pushed through by the crowds of pilgrims, and never really getting a moment to absorb what was there, to look closely at the statues, much less to do any practice.

I will not try to detail all of the many fine statues and thangkas in the Jokhang. There is so much to see there and there are plenty of books and photos available on the shrine itself. The place is large and very old. It is quite dark within the buildings, with the only real light coming from the many flickering butter lamps. The floors are thick with butter from the endless pilgrims who spoon the hardened butter granules into the burning butter lamps, always managing to spill some small amount on the floor. My pants were always grease-stained in Tibet from doing prostrations on the 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 Jokhang**

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

Luckily, we came back on another day when it was closed tight and by knocking at the door, we 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 linked-chain screens were open and we could venture inside. Lifting the heavy chains, we would squeeze through and have an 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 Jokhang**

Outside of and encompassing the huge Jokhang is a large circular walkway, the Barkhor, around which pilgrims endlessly circumambulate with their bead malas (rosaries). An constant stream of people walk

## Waiting in Lhasa

in a clock-wise direction, swinging their malas in their left hands. This circular Barkhor is filled (on both sides) over its entire length with shops of all kinds, most with dharma items or clothes. Unfortunately, aside from very fine kataks (white Tibetan offering scarves), most of the dharma items for sale were not of high quality, many things having been simply imported from Kathmandu. This was ironic, disappointing. An exception were 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 that was attached to the larger Jokhang, called Meru Nyingba. It 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 on down an alley and the end of which is a gompa (shrine room) and a number of smaller shrines. I fell in

## Waiting in Lhasa

love with a tiny protector shrine, the Jambhala Lhakhang (the oldest part of this complex), that, aside from Jambhala (connected to wealth), had a number of statues of protector deities, including my favorite Vajrapani and Nam-Tö-se (Vaishravana), the protector king.

I was immediately attracted to Nam-Tö-se, 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 and his ability to protect wealth made a certain sense. I met a young monk who watched over this particular shrine. I would find my way to Meru Nyingba, whenever I had the chance.

On to Tsurphu

## On To Tsurphu

So, I waited out the three days in Lhasa until we could head toward Tsurphu and His Holiness. I still had altitude sickness, but it was now time to go on with our trip's schedule and we headed Northwest out of Lhasa in a large van. The road was paved but became progressively more bumpy, including sections where it consisted of squares of rock laid together. I asked about the bumpiness and our guide said that it gets a little bumpy after we turn off the road we were on. "Gets a little bumpy. What then is this now?," I wondered. But he was so right. It did get bumpier. After some time, we made a sharp left turn 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 moving very slowly up the valley trail. It was like an endless series of speed bumps, placed side by side.

Bumps and sickness aside, the three-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 up close and far off – sometimes scattered on



## On to Tsurphu

the mountainside around us. As to other cars: there were none. And the traffic? As soon as we crossed the bridge from the main road, we were just out there by ourselves. Here and there were small villages and everywhere people were working in the fields. Harvesters and workers waved to us; children raced toward us, waving and saying "Hello," perhaps the only English they knew.

We continued on, heading up the valley toward where the two mountain skylines converged before us, 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. And as we moved on (time now slowed by our eagerness to arrive), that speck grew steadily larger. Now I could see reflecting golden roofs in the sunlight, but it was still so far away. And then it would be lost for a long while 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, now less than half a mile to go. Winding up the last of the trail, we passed through a narrow walled road into the courtyard of Tsurphu and arrived before the large stone steps of the monastery itself. It was an imposing and welcome sight.

## On to Tsurphu

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 (suffering from advanced diabetes), the man who single-handedly saw to the rebuilding of the monastery after the Chinese destroyed it. But just who were we?, the monks gathering around us must have wondered. We proceeded to seek out monks who sought out still higher monks, etc. until we found someone 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 could see just who we were and that we were not a danger to Karmapa. We were not even searched for weapons, as I have been told most are. A family of five and two additional ladies we were harmless enough. Our group was then led inward to an open courtyard, where we climbed to a second level and into a good sized room. It was there that we were first served the legendary Tibetan butter tea.

We were thrilled to be there. Waiting in that room, 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 rug, slowly drinking our tea. Every few sips of tea found the monks filling the cup up to the rim again, as is the custom. This strange salty buttered tea was a new but satisfying taste for

## On to Tsurphu

me. I almost inhaled it. And there were the ever-present sugar-filled cookies and candy. It was a little cold up here 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 monks, but mostly 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 (at the one taste I gave it) a little funky and old. But food of any kind was good after the long drive and we were thrilled to be getting what apparently was VIP treatment. We ate and then just waited until a monk came and we were told that we would see his Holiness that day, at least briefly. We were to hang loose and would be told when.

## On to Tsurphu

Until then, we could 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 monastery steps. Wearing tall curved red hats, they carried large flat drums that they held up sideways. Here was some 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, is that they were doing it for its own sake, just for themselves. How odd!



### **Monks and Ceremonies**

Outside the room where we parked our stuff, along the inner face of the second-story courtyard, were a whole series of small shrine rooms dedicated to the fierce Tibetan protectors, the dharmapalas. Above these rooms and stretching along the whole

## On to Tsurphu

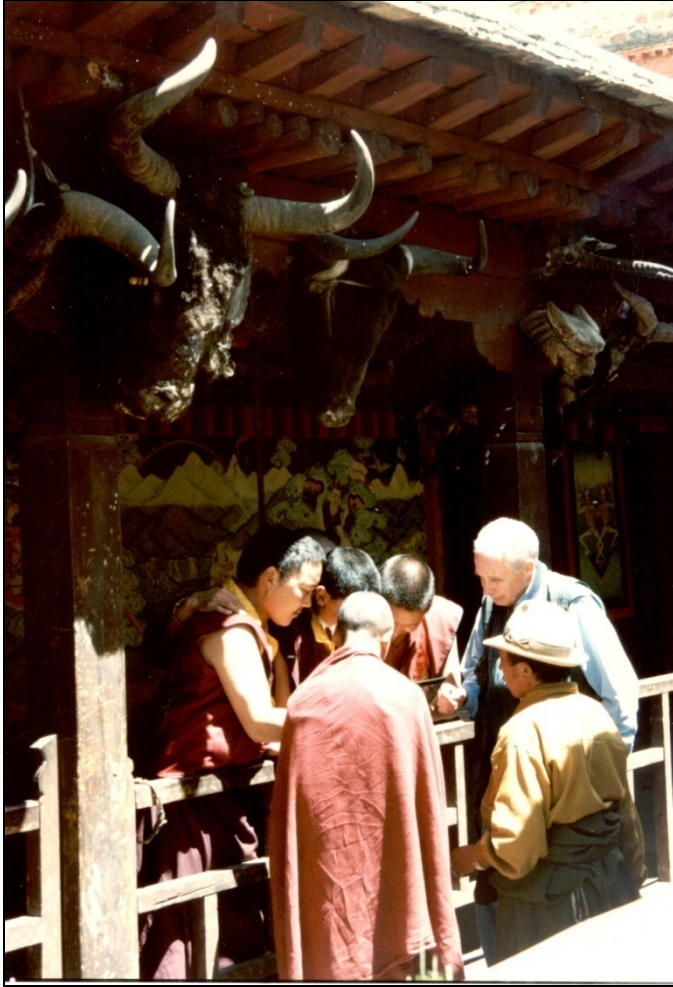
courtyard were a series of carcasses, mostly of yak heads (and the bodies of other local animals), all in various states of decay. I was given to understand that these animals had been found dead, killed by poachers, and were here for prayers and as an example of what should not be done. The effect was eerie and smelly.

All along this upper courtyard, beneath the carcasses, were small shrine rooms, which were dark, candle-lit, and most often smoky. In each room was either a lama or a lama and an assisting monk or two, who were busy making tormas (food offerings), practicing some puja, or just watching over the place. It looked like some of them 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, deciding finally to attempt some practice in one that had my particular favorite protector, the fierce form of Vajrapani, in it. Using hand gestures, I asked if I could sit and do puja and was motioned to go ahead and take a seat.

Everywhere that I practiced like this in Tibet, monks would surround me. Perhaps they had never seen a westerner practice before. They would sit close, right next to me (often on both sides), behind me, and most disturbing, often 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 (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 three-year

## On to Tsurphu

solitary retreat) wanted to see me do the vulture posture which leads to the dissolution of 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 for him. I am afraid (particularly with the low oxygen) that I did not put in a very good performance, not to mention not being 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 kind of situations, I would end up showing the monk(s) the small photo album I had brought with me, with pictures of our center, our lamas, our place of business, and the house we lived in. They couldn't get enough of looking at those pictures and would crowd around until the small picture



## On to Tsurphu

book would always float 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, being long gone from Tibet and so many, many thousands of miles away.



**My Son and Karmapa’s Teacher**

## On to Tsurphu

And they all liked Michael Andrew, my 11-year old son. I don't mean just a little. Monks surrounded Michael, shaking his hand, putting their arms (or robes) around him, taking him off 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 and used it. Who knows? We liked to think it was because of what the lady oracle near the Ramoche Temple in Lhasa had to say about Michael Andrew, which is a bit of a story itself. Here goes:

### **The Ramoche Oracle**

We were told by a monk from Rumtek (in Sikkim), who was visiting us at our home while we got ready to leave for Tibet that, if we got to Lhasa, we should try to find a famous woman oracle who uses a small copper mirror to tell you about yourself and 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 to locate here and one morning we drove to the Ramoche Temple and just asked around. Did they know of such an oracle, a lady? Did they ever. We were led by a young girl down roads and alleys, finally to a door just on a courtyard, where people were washing up. We knocked and were shown into a small room. In it was a lovely shrine and two long bed-like couches, on one of which sat the lady oracle. She had nothing of the Jeanne Dixon look of so-called readers here in the West. Middle-aged and very reserved looking, she was kind of lovely, in a very serious way. We liked her at once.

## On to Tsurphu

This is what a reader – an oracle – should look like. We sat down in front of her on the floor.



### **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

## On to Tsurphu

reflective. The woman asked the year of our birth and with that information retrieved the animal (and element) for our birth year, as per 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 then began to speak. I, of course, asked her about some business problems that I was involved in and received a clear and positive answer about their resolution. And we asked about our four children and also got clear and very helpful responses for each one. She went down the list of our kids, 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 who was capable of keeping all 250+ Buddhist rules that this high-level of monk keeps. 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 to thinking about him in a new light.

I mention this, only because of the inordinate amount of attention he received from about 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 and led him around on his own private tour, later presenting him with the traditional white scarf. We have picture after picture of Michael, surrounded by monks. We

## On to Tsurphu

mentioned this fact to Bokar, Rinpoche, the main meditation monk in our lineage (and a tulku), and he said that he had no way of knowing whether it was true or not, but even if it is, the path to bringing out those qualities would be long and arduous. And of course, we have a picture of Bokar, Rinpoche with his arm also draped around Michael Andrew. At the very least, an interesting sidebar.



**Bokar Rinpoche and Michael Andrew**

## The Karmapa

### The Karmapa

And now, back to Tsurphu, where we waited to be led into the presence of His Holiness, the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa. Every day at 1 PM, His Holiness has 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 and that we would see him privately. The time ticked away on the slow track as we all waited, filled with anticipation. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, in his previous incarnation, but we felt like we had been in endless touch with him through the lineage, all this time. 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 little hope of ever seeing His Holiness, since it is very uncertain when the Chinese will ever let him leave Tibet. And now, here we were at his ancestral home, about to meet him in person.

And at last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So, off we went in single file toward his interview room, some two stories up from where we were. And remember that I was 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. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath, as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder (like on a boat)

## The Karmapa

than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep. You really climb. We came to a small courtyard outside 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 kind of inset in this wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. 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, 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, gave me a welcoming kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of our group.

In this short interview, we presented ourselves and what questions we had. In my case, I had written out two questions in Tibetan (or 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 tomorrow for a longer time and that 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 were too many liability problems that might reflect badly for Karmapa with the Chinese. However, they said that they would talk it over. Just before we left, they said that we could stay the following

## The Karmapa

night and so, after spending a number of hours at the monastery, we started back down the Tolung Valley toward Lhasa over the same slow, crawling, bumpy road that 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 more free to look around. Small villages of adobe were near and far along the trail. With very few windows and not much room at all inside, these solid fortresses were all that separated the Tibetan people from the harsh winters. And there are no trees at this height, so fuel is scarce and limited to

## The Karmapa

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, on the top 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 easy ones. The smaller or round droppings, like horse and so forth, were first gathered very carefully into small mounds and then these mounds were mashed down into patties. The South side of many houses were plastered with drying patties, like small pizzas, that were 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 particularly dirty,

## The Karmapa

but more as we might treat dried vegetation. Their most every meal is cooked on it and it heats their houses, many of which have no chimneys! Smoke is a way of life in Tibet.



### **A Tibetan Horse Race**

And on our journey, miles from any road-connected town, we came across a large group of Tibetans having themselves a horse race. Dressed in bright red, with tufted hats, and decoration of all kinds, came a procession of would-be riders and village people, led by one who carried some sort of holy picture (we could not make it out), perhaps of a rinpoche. Smoke swirled from the central bonfires and the participants were totally involved in this celebration – all of this many miles from what you or I would call anywhere. Where they all came from or what this was all about, we could not be sure, but a celebration it was indeed.

We were told this was all part of the harvest festival, the harvesting of the barley in Tolung Valley. And the barley fields were all around,

## The Karmapa

tucked away in every possible piece of land. Most were small to mid-sized and many small fields were planted side by side, rather than there being a few large ones. There were countless thousands of them, all golden in the Sun, waving in the wind their long extended tassels. After this experience, I must say that barley is perhaps the most beautiful grain in the world.



### **Thousands of Small Barley Fields**

We stopped at one 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 Tibetan mountain streams that, deep, like small aqueducts, run every which way down the valley. The stream ran into one side of their small house and out the other, powering a large grist mill in the center, above which a leather bag of roasted barley corns hung,

## The Karmapa

dribbling its 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 semi-popped, a little like our popcorn, when it does not quite pop full. Swirling, choking smoke engulfed these ladies who worked all day in it, while out on the lawn, on a huge blanket, mounds of fresh-popped barley corns were tossed to separate 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 that it does not get much better than this.

## The Karmapa



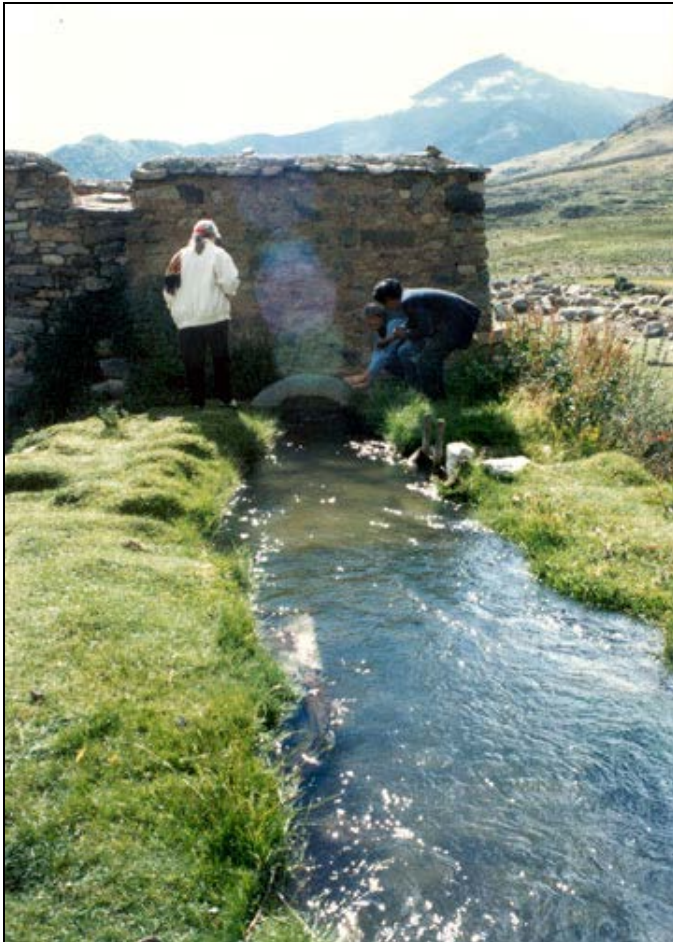
### **Popped Roasted Barleycorn**

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 again) perhaps the only word of English they knew, "Hello!" They were wide-grinned delighted when we answered the same back to them. Everywhere along the road, people were 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 idle road traffic that we were to find later in our trip, in the hot plains of India and southern Nepal.

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

## The Karmapa

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 reached so far as this. Here things were as they had been for thousands of years, a somewhat terrifying experience for thoroughly-modern Michael. They were just out there by themselves. And perhaps that is just why they were working so hard.





## The Karmapa

### **Small Streams Run Deep and Fast**

And a word about the water – the small rivers and streams. First, there were many, many streams and they seem to be going in all 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 and sometimes became the road itself as we drove up into the streams. And, for the most part, they were not shallow streams, but 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 imagine) helped to direct some of these streams over, under, and along the road, until you almost got the sense that they were like the deep Roman aqueducts, carrying the most water in the smallest possible space. Or, perhaps more likely, these were all natural, just nature's way of handling the heavy mountain runoff.

And lest I forget, we were in a valley, one that never seemed all that wide, which meant that on two sides were rocky mountains thrusting up, channeling us, guiding us toward Tsurphu. And there were smaller valleys, on occasion, that shot off at right angles to where we were going, taking other travelers we know not where. But valleys, in Tibet, are where all the life is. There is nothing that can be done with the mountains themselves, other than to park the occasional monastery as high up on them as human hands can fashion. And there was

## The Karmapa

the sky, a roof for the valley, always opening upward and filled with those classic Tibetan clouds, the kind they paint into thangkas – so lovely and always grand.



### **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 just physically much closer overhead than elsewhere. Perhaps this fact explains the overpowering, even 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, dragging 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. And the fact that it exists today is the work, in main, of one man, Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche, who came from His Holiness' (the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa's) monastery at Rumtek in

## With the Karmapa

Sikkim and set about rebuilding the entire edifice, aided by the support of the surrounding people and the Tsurphu Foundation. As of late, Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche had been very sick and suffering from advanced diabetes and that, too, was part of our mission.

We brought with us one doctor, Kate White, and bags of medical equipment to see what could be done for Rinpoche. Drupon Dechen, Rinpoche was in a small apartment in a building separate from the main monastery, a room with many windows that was part of a small sunny courtyard. He had been very sick not only with the diabetes, but also unable to sleep and with still other problems. We were admitted to see him and, after prostrating to him, we offered the traditional white scarf or katak, which he graciously placed around each of our heads, while giving us each a special protection cord.



**Drupon Dechen Rinpoche**

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

With the Karmapa

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



### **H.H. the 17th Karmapa**

In the afternoon, we were summoned to His Holiness and I slowly climbed the multiple sets (three) 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 settled in. Gradually I realized we were in the middle of the Mahaka puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete with the Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce

## With the Karmapa

look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never one quite like this. I don't really know how to describe what happened next.



### **The Karmapa and Our Family**

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice and my mind ranged over that practice, examining where I was within it and what it was about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/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 what was the essence of it? In my own mind, I was somewhat of a tough character and I

## With the Karmapa

carried that strength or toughness to my practice. In fact I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, 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 that I was playing with. Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of my self, in this case, that part that 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 this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so...so sensitive and, at heart, even kind. I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather: the realization that I was (and always had been), at my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and



## With the Karmapa

caring, and that this was my natural state. Not something to strive for, but already in fact the case – the state of my being, something to be uncovered, opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my natural state. All I had to do was to relax and let it shine through.

And, again, I should point out that this was not a concept or idea, 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 of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I feel I understood myself and my practice, all 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, during which Karmapa gave the answers to the questions that 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 from the experience I just described and to hear the various

## With the Karmapa

particular answers. And later, he came out in the courtyard and just kind of spent a little time with us. You can see from the photos of us from 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**

## With the Karmapa

I had heard many stories about His Holiness, both this one and the previous incarnations, stories of amazing actions, all pointing to his extraordinary character. Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is, that sort of thing. Yet these stories were nothing compared to the sheer 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, who you are, why you are here, etc.? I learned things about myself when I was in the presence of His Holiness that I never knew 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. Settled in our room, we had food brought to us by the monks. We ate what they ate: thukpa (a meat

## With the Karmapa

and noodle soup), rice, that sort of thing. And as night came, we hunkered down. And 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 candles, it was dark. We did what everyone else did in that area of the world when the sun goes down. We went to sleep, or so I thought, at any rate.

For I was about to have a problem. Each time I drifted off to sleep and my breathing would begin to go into the slower mode of sleep, I would start awake, gasping for breath. I just was not getting enough oxygen to go into normal sleep breathing. Like rising to the surface of a swimming pool after too long an underwater swim, I would burst awake trying to breathe, gasping for air. It was frightening, to say the least. After many times of repeating 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. And so, I stumbled around Tsurphu trying to find someone who spoke English. I tried to explain my problem to monks with no 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. She checked my lungs and fever, pronouncing that 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 day. I doubt that many ever 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 is 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 feet or so. That aside, I was soon back in Lhasa along with everyone

## With the Karmapa

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 there 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 that I had never suspected.

We drove back up in the late morning of the next day for our third and final visit to Tsurphu and 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 stowed our gear on the front porch of their adobe home. After the customary butter tea, we toured the small compound, discovered their pig pen, and in general wandered around. We soon found that the villagers here too were celebrating the harvest with a full-scale Tibetan opera. Hundreds of villagers from miles around were gathered in sort of a natural bowl-shaped arena, listening to a country opera, with actors dressed 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 near where a horse was tied. It was a lot like a dream.

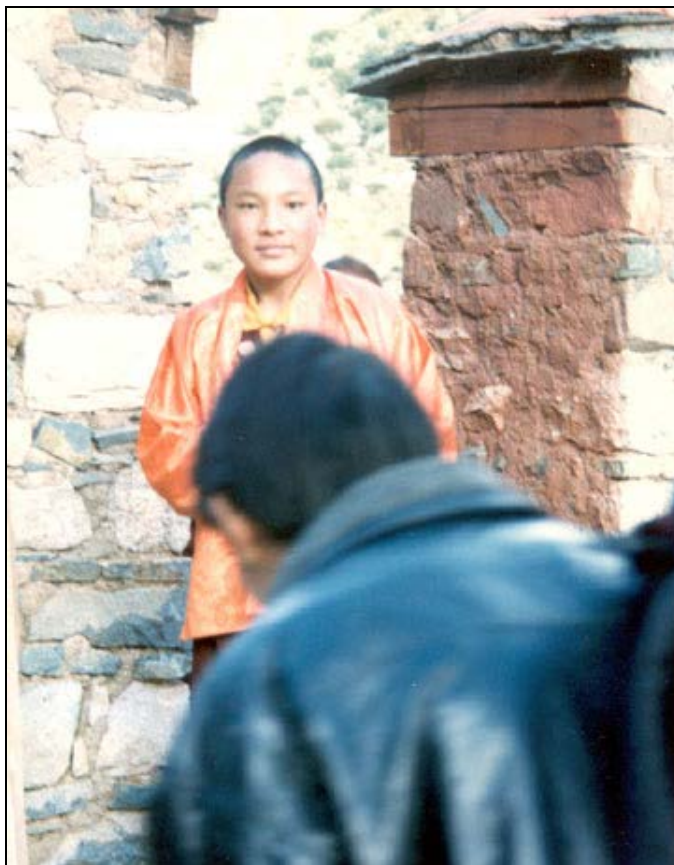


## With the Karmapa

And we were so tired from the night before. We tried to find some shaded area to crawl under and drift off, even 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 is that this was a favorite outdoor bathroom spot for the opera goers. 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 made it back to Tsurphu, where everyone was glad to see that I was alright. We paid our respects and 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 gave us each a special blessed knot to wear around our necks.

## With the Karmapa



### **The Karmapa Giving an Audience**

Look back, it was a special time that we spent in Tsurphu, 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, and so far from anything we call home, but still so very much a part of him – a home for our hearts. Even looking at the pictures from that time, it is clear that we had entered into the mind and mandala of His Holiness, the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. You can see it in

## With the Karmapa

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, working to realize ourselves. I am less distracted now by all 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 dimly worked for perhaps one half hour.

## Samye and Chimpuk

After we left Tsurphu, we returned to Lhasa and headed away from that city toward Tsetang. 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 that we would not be back again this trip. We had said our goodbyes. On the way, we stopped once more at the lovely Tara shrine along that road, the Drolma Lhakang at Netang, and then continued on, this time driving right past the Gonghar airport toward Tsetang, following alongside of the great Tsangpo River.

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

## Samye and Chimpuk



### **The Boat to Samye Monastery**

We were on our way to Samye Chokor, said to be the first monastery built in Tibet, itself unreachable by any highway. The way to Samye was either overland by back-pack and horse or by ferry, which is where we now were. The day was hot and the Sun, here in the open, was fierce. We had to cross the Tsangpo, but we ostensibly were waiting for another vehicle that brought our cook and a car full of cooking supplies. Where we were going, we needed our own cook. Since I had no idea when the cook might arrive from Lhasa, I volunteered to pay the extra boat fee so that we could get started across right away. It was clear that few of us could take the Sun exposure for the length of the crossing plus an unspecified waiting time beforehand on the open beach. All of our gear was piled at the end of one of the boat.

## Samye and Chimpuk

Next ensued a lengthy and hot argument between our guide (and driver) and the staff at the boat livery. It seemed 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 he was to have and 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 have a boatman at all. We would.



### **Crossing the Tsangpo River**

The trip across to the village of Surkar took more than one and  $\frac{1}{4}$  hours, as the boat, not able to just go straight across the river, moved slowly through a maze of sand bars. As we got a certain distance out from the shore, we could see our cook arrive and there was discussion about going back to get him. I said we should not – just too much exposure to the Sun. On

## Samye and Chimpuk

the far side, we could see other barges moored and several large trucks waiting for us. The trip by truck from Surkar to Samye was some eight kilometers.



### **May and Michael Anne Hang On**

We piled our stuff in the back of a truck and climbed on ourselves, hanging on to the overhead frame that stretched over the truck bed. And hang on we did (for dear life!) while

## Samye and Chimpuk

the truck lunged down the road, across sand dunes, going as fast as the driver could push it. The older kids loved it and the driver knew it. The rest of us got numb knuckles just trying to keep from flying off the side. Along this road are the Rignga Chortens, five small stupas that have been carved out of solid rock from the mountainside. Painted white, they are even visible from the Gonghar road on the south side of the Tsangpo.



### **Samye Monastery Grounds**

After the ride through the dunes, 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, located at 45-degree angles from the North-south/East-west axis. Destroyed by the Chinese, Samye is far along



## Samye and Chimpuk

with reconstruction. Inside the perimeter wall are four very large stupas, all of which have been recently 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 surrounds the actual gumpa (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 gumpa.

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 nerve-wracking, everyone was very friendly.

There were not many amenities at Samye. The best we could do was 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 would 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 to breathe free. And there was no fresh air or, if we opened the two small windows, we had a continual stream of smoke and bathroom smells. It was one of those lovely Tibetan 2<sup>nd</sup>-story open bathrooms,

## Samye and Chimpuk

with some kind of shielding up to your thighs. The idea is that you have to squat down, if you want no one to see you. No stand up peeing, like we 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 it with smoke, cooking and tobacco. 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 whether 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, that 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 Gumpa at Samye**

I can remember one morning, rising before dawn, and going down to the main gumpa, 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 the 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 Chimpuk Caves



#### **By Horseback to Chimpuk**

One other memorable story is our climb to Chimpuk, the Guru Rinpoche caves high above Samye. My wife had taken my son, who was sick, back to Tsetang, accompanied by our 15-year old daughter. This left me, my 21-year old daughter, and our two sangha friends at Samye. One of the goals of my trip was to visit some major Guru Rinpoche caves and Chimpuk is near the top of anyone's list. 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 get us through the plains and lower mountain slopes. This meant that he had to travel to a village one hour away in search of mounts.

## Climbing to the Caves

Sure enough, early in the morning there were three horses parked outside the building where we stayed. Tibetan horses are much smaller than what we think of as riding horses here in the States, but don't be fooled by their size. They are tough and nimble animals and used to carrying heavy loads. We mounted up and headed slowly out 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 distance was measured with time passed and by looking back. Each time, the glittering gold roofs of Samye were harder to see and then were gone altogether.



### **Guide and Michael Anne Start Out**

The plains gave way to hills and a path that wound back and forth along canyon rims and on up the steep slope. The horses were patient and sure-footed, if slow. Soon we were into more mountainous vegetation, thick carpets of bright green short grass, rushing streams, and

## Climbing to the Caves

much more humidity. Blossoms and plants thrived here. In particular, there were the most varied and beautiful kind of plants with thorns that I have ever seen, long, sharp, brightly-colored thorns with rich green leaves. It was a natural botanical garden, almost like an acid trip or a vision out of a Carlos Castaneda novel, with the slow treading of the horses and the vivid landscapes. 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. The trail turned into a steep path until the horses were actually climbing up the side of the mountain and I had to just hang on. These trails were really meant for climbers or trekkers. After a very long climb, we arrived at the Chimphuk Utse nunnery or ani gumpa that marks the point where we have to leave the horses and begin to climb on foot. The horses tied up, we had a small lunch in

## Climbing to the Caves

what must have been part of the nunnery kitchen. The only uncomfortable event 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 decided to come in to protect, I am not sure whom.

Farther on, when we began to climb, a group of monks passed us going down. We were told that there was an important Rinpoche in the group and that perhaps the guard was watching him or watching out for him. I know that with the appearance of the Rinpoche, the guard stopped trailing us.

Now we began to climb in earnest, with both the guide and my daughter not having real trouble. I lagged behind and just did the best that I could. It was an endless zigzag trail that always went higher. Sometimes I just had to sit down and rest, embarrassing as it was for me to have my daughter peering down on me from above to see if dad was alright. The guide then took my day pack, giving me more breathing room and a lighter load.

Finally, after what seemed like too long a climb for me, we arrived at some buildings where an old man and woman were. It was so steep that I literally crawled up and collapsed on a ledge where they sat. I could not tell if they were lay people or monks, because they seemed to have pieces of clothes of different types. My daughter and Pemba, our guide, were already settled in as I reached the ledge outside the

## Climbing to the Caves

house. They brought us some butter-tea and it tasted good. It turns out that they were Karma Kagyu and were thrilled when I showed them the picture of His Holiness, the Karmapa, that I had taken less than a week before. I gave them each a copy and they were really moved to have the pictures. It is fun to find someone who cares about the same things you do.

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, footprints of Guru Rinpoche, special rocks, etc. This was a real help and we got to see many small spots and grottoes that otherwise we might have just passed by. After a time she turned off and we climbed on toward the main cave. By this time, I was in a full sweat and feeling pretty good from the general substance elimination that sweating brings.

At last we reached the top and the Drakmar Keutsang cave, which is said to be the Buddha-speech place of Guru Rinpoche, the spot where he first gave his special teaching on the eight meditational deities called the Drubpa Kabgye. A two-story building had been erected around the actual cave, which is toward the back of the structure. Aside from many statues, we were shown the rock containing the impression of the body of the princess that Guru Rinpoche brought back from the dead in order to give her a special teaching. And the attending monk took the special lingam-shaped rock that is housed there (said to have come from the Shitavana



## Climbing to the Caves

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 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 on that high courtyard. It was great. Far, far below us was the plain from which we climbed, shimmering in the distance. We could not even see Samye from where we sat.



### **Prayer Wheels at Samye Gompa**

Our return trip to the nunnery was a lot easier than going up. We distributed the rest of our food and provisions with the nuns and prepared to return to the plain. The shrine room at the ani gompa was very beautiful and I lingered there awhile. I then tried to switch horses for the trip back, because my first horse

## Climbing to the Caves

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 together we went on down the mountain. The horses really took over on the way back, carefully selecting each foothold. Any prompting of the horse on my part was mostly ignored, as the horse actually climbed down the trail. About all I could do was brace myself to keep from falling off, sit back (or hang on), and enjoy the ride. As we reached the plain, my horse went off on a side trail, which was actually the way back to his village, refusing all guidance and kicks from me. This ended up with me on the other side of a small canyon from the other riders, but, after much urging on my part and a few kicks, we rejoined the others, just before we crossed the wide, shallow river.

And the trip down was in full Tibetan sun, which meant I ended up extending my shirt cuffs over the backs of my hands, just to keep them from being scorched. It was hot! We re-crossed the small river with difficulty (my horse refusing for a time) and wound our way back 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 just lay down on the bed with my clothes on and went to sleep. With the rest of my family gone to Tsetang, it was kind of strange being there in Samye. And 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 those of the Nyingma Lineage. It 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 Bön influences under oath. Many termas were hidden and revealed here to practitioners like Orgyen Lingpa and others. I felt I had to go there.

Both of the experienced Tibet trekkers that 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 suggested that anything that I had read suggesting that it was doable, was probably written by someone who did not know how difficult this journey is. My will to reach the Crystal Cave was not as strong after hearing this and 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 gumpa, we came to one room with a striking gold statue of Guru Rinpoche. I remember reading that the original statue of Guru Rinpoche had been removed from the Crystal Cave for safekeeping and placed in a nearby monastery. This had to be it and, as the monk at the temple explained, so it was.

## The Crystal Cave



### **Guru Rinpoche Statue**

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

## The Crystal Cave

One thing I knew is that we had to start early, since it would be an all-day hike. Most of our party elected to not even try, staying instead in the Tsetang area, where our driver would shuttle them from gumpa to gumpa. Those of us who would try to reach Shel-Drak were myself, my wife, our 15-year-old daughter May, and our Tibetan guide.

As for directions, all we knew was to drive to the Tsechu Bumpa, a well-known stupa in the village of Kato (on outskirts of Tsetang), try to find a local guide, and perhaps hire a tractor to carry us 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, the small 2-wheel, 2-cycle engines 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, or (most often) people.

Our driver found the Tsechu Bumpa Stupa, one of the three main stupas in the Yarlung Valley area, whereupon we begin to knock on doors. We located one man with a tractor but since it was the harvest time, he had already agreed to work elsewhere that day. Things did not look good. But then he suggested that there might be one fellow, a newcomer to the area, who might be free. Knocking at his house aroused his fierce dog and brought his wife to the door. He was still asleep, but she would wake him.

## The Crystal Cave

After some time, he came out rubbing his eyes and 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 couldn't afford to refuse. This tactic worked; he agreed to take us and our own driver left us standing in the road, waiting for the tractor man to get his machine. Although it seemed from the outside like a garage, the man opened a garage door to what turned out to be 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 brought out just before we were 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 we were off, although at what seemed a snail's pace.

## The Crystal Cave



### **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 was no road 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 in the soft mud and we all had to get out

## The Crystal Cave

and push. Pretty soon, we were spending more time pushing than riding and it was apparent that we could go no farther. So we left the driver and the tractor to wait for us, perhaps the whole of the day.

I have no pictures from the first part of the trip, because we were shrouded in mist and then clouds. I can tell you that it was tough going even from the start, as in: all uphill and steep at that. Our first goal was to climb to the small village of Sekhang Zhirka perched on a ridge (call it our base camp), from which we would push off up the mountain to Crystal Cave, a hard three-hour climb from the ridge. But reaching that village was a long haul from the valley floor, perhaps five 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 bad side effects of the caffeine. At last, we did reach 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, 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 the so-called path became 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 just kind of dropped behind, while our daughter and the guide went ahead. After awhile, the two of us gave up any pretense of being tough and just began to sit down when 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 here looking for lost yaks, hoping to drive them back down for the coming winter. He and the guide went on ahead and our

## The Crystal Cave

daughter, who quickly passed them, left both of us in the dust. One of the guys took Margaret's pack to make it easier for her. We were walking in the clouds or at least 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 blurbs that I read, the next place to arrive at would be Lumo Durtrö, a female naga cemetery dedicated to Tamdrin, the horse-headed deity. This was a traditional Tibetan sky burial place, where bodies are cut

## The Crystal Cave

up with sharp tools and fed to the vultures. However, this spot was not readily forthcoming.

We climbed and climbed and climbed. Somewhere along in here we met a old man with skin like leather, coming down, who motioned to us to come close. He took what looked like a piece of quartz crystal from his pack and began to hack away at it, eventually handing 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 eat normally, turned out to be just the thing and 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. This was the place we should have reached an hour ago, itself 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 these far-glimpsed places. It just takes time and suffering. We reached the sky burial place and sure enough, there were human bones and meat cutting tools scattered around, a wrist and hand lying under a small bush. And clothes 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. And this stupa was just a way station. We did kora (circumambulating) around the stupa and looked to see if there were any more human remains (fascinating) and marched on.

## The Crystal Cave



### **Walking in the Clouds**

After a very long time, the trail began to even out some and there were sections that almost resembled walking, but not quite and not for long. Margaret offered to help me carry my pack and we took turns for a while. We began to have glimpses of a monastery across a canyon that, believe it or not, our guide informed us we had to get to. It seemed so far away from where we now were. By this time, we were high up and our yak herder began 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 adept at winging rocks across the canyon and 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, so hard was I breathing. It was all I could do to look at the ground in front of me and put one foot in front of the other.

## The Crystal Cave



### **Above Shel-Drak Monastery**

The path turned into almost a rock staircase just before we reached Shel-Drak Monastery, which is dedicated to the famous Nyingma terton, Sangye Lingpa. We scrambled up and into a wide courtyard. The monastery front had a single large door, but it was closed and looked for all the world like it was abandoned. “What to do?” I asked our guide. Try opening

## The Crystal Cave

the large door,” he said and, sure enough, it swung open. We pushed inside and collapsed on a porch in a sunny inner courtyard, where we had lunch and butter-tea. It was only hard-boiled eggs, some bread, and a few cookies, but it tasted like ambrosia after the long hike. We were so tired. As it turned out, this gompa marked the end of the easy ascent. From here on it is almost straight up, like rock stairs. The good news is that in this last stretch it takes less than an hour of climbing to 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 and began our climb. This is the Terchu or "Rediscovered Water," a spring sacred to Guru Rinpoche. From here on, the way was indeed steep, with sheer drops on one side and a rock face 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

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Margaret and myself often plopping down to rest and staring out over the valley or looking 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 must have taken this very same path, there being no other. I imagined that perhaps Khenpo Rinpoche (not to mention Guru Rinpoche) had climbed in this same space.



## The Crystal Cave



### **Inside Guru Rinpoche's Cave**

Exhausted, but exhilarated (and proud of ourselves), we finally made it to the top and 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 is an incredible view of the entire Yarlung Valley below. Next we climbed some steep ladder-like steps to our left and entered a tiny room, which contained a few

## The Crystal Cave

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 who was 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 and before which were butter lamps. We brought a photo of the young Karmapa, which the attending monk at once happily put in the center of the shrine.

When the puja was ended, the monk handed around pieces of tsok torma to everyone and then the pilgrims (and the monk) withdrew from the smaller cave room. We were able to do our prostrations and whatever other practice we felt like offering. It was special to be here and we asked for Guru Rinpoche's blessing, each 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 that we had come from the very bottom to here. The valley, which stretched on far below us, is said to be the place from which the entire Tibetan civilization arose. Indeed, it was vast and beautiful, awesome would be a better word. I could not imagine how in the

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wide world we could ever get from where we now were (on 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 from bracing for the downhill climb and my toes suffered. I could feel it happening, but there was nothing I could do about it. Down we went and down we went, mile after mile.

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### **Yeshe Tsogyal**

(above: Guru Rinpoche's consort)

Our tractor was still there and we rattled back down the riverbed to town, just as the rains rolled in from the mountains. After some tea at the man's home, the rains slowed, and 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 seen westerners ride in the back of a tractor, as Tibetans do all the time. It was a slow cross-

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town ride through some 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, despite obstacles, made the climb to the Crystal Cave on Crystal Mountain and made an aspiration to Guru Rinpoche, on his home turf.

## Leaving Tibet

### 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 AM. Since Lhasa is a 3-4 hour drive, what this means is 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 the Chinese-run Gonghar airport hotel or a total fleabag. This quite large modern looking hotel was a real joke. Like many Chinese-run hotels in Tibet, this was essentially an emulation of what, here in the West, we would call a five-star hotel. There were marble floors, high ceilings, long corridors, etc. But that was where the similarity ended. The Chinese communists have no clue

## Leaving Tibet

as to what service is, serving other people. Communism is more of a self-serve kind of thing and the concept of service is in my experience unknown to them.

For one, nothing worked! The toilets didn't work and there was no hot water. In point of fact, there wasn't even any water, only a bare dribble. Our rooms were spacious, but had been totally trashed by letting the Tibetan nomadic people more or less camp in them. The lovely artificial pond outside our window was filled with trash and green slime. There were 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 we did not like.

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But it was our last night and we all camped out (like good Tibetans) in the two-room suite we shared. As usual, we had airplane worries. The plane from Tibet to Kathmandu only runs two days a week. The previous plane was unable to take off for one reason or another, and all of the passengers had to remain in Tibet until our flight. What our guide feared is that all of these people, plus all the people scheduled for our flight, would turn up at once to claim the same seats. All would have valid tickets and there was every reason to worry that we might not have seats and thus be forced to wait for many days and the next plane, etc. 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 what would happen if there were 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 want to go out. He points at his watch and tried to shoo me away, but I would not go. He finally, after giving me a disgusted look, 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. I, in my sandals, was not prepared for this, but I thought I could somehow make it quickly to the terminal. I wandered in the darkness and the wet 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 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 AM, 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. People begin to arrive. A tour bus full of trekkers shows up, having driven all the way from Lhasa most of the night. Their Tibetan guide and our guide knew each other. More people trickle in, but the wait was long.

When the doors began to open, we all raced for the locked gateway. The other guide and his people got there first, but I walked right in front of him and said that I had been here since 5 AM and was not letting 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 sleep on our baggage pile.

## Leaving Tibet



### **Waiting for the Plane**

At last the Communist officials arrive and the process begins. More positioning and shoving. This time, the other 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 and calmly hand our papers to the confused attendant. And so it goes, with nothing to be very proud of on anyone's part here. But we did make the cut, got seats on the plane, and flew out of Tibet and back to Kathmandu, sorry to leave beautiful Tibet, but happy thinking of the much better food in Kathmandu.

## The Food in Tibet: An Opinion

Food is important to many of us and I have to say something about the food in Lhasa and in Tibet, for those of you who may be going. However, the food in Tibet for vegetarians (like myself) is not what I would call good, so what I have to say comes so close to complaining that many of you may want to just skip over this section.

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

Each morning, they would have a row of dishes waiting for us to help ourselves to, smorgasbord style. However, they never lit the burners under the pans, so all the food was always cold. Second and more serious, they put sugar and egg in everything. Any bread they served all came from the same dough, no matter what shape they had managed to bake – rolls, sliced bread, etc. The dough was filled with egg, sugar, and cheap oils, which may not sound so very bad to you. However, 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, perhaps a small can of Chinese mango-something juice (loaded with sugar) and maybe the so-called porridge, if you could stand it. That was about it. Toward the end, I found something called the masala omelet, which was actually good, but I could not eat the scrambled eggs, which had sugar and I know not what other strange stuff in them. The bottom line is that we all lost a lot of weight in Tibet, not because there was no food, but because we just could not eat it.

A typical evening would find us sitting in the outdoor courtyard of the restaurant that our tour was paying for. The scene itself was nice enough – big paved courtyard, shielded from the Sun by overhanging brightly-painted canopies, and so on. One of the problems is that you had about two choices of air: one was the charcoal fumes from the kitchen (which

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were real bad) and the other was 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. As for the western cuisine, you really had to guess to recognize some of them. Their idea of pizza was vaguely reminiscent of the real thing, only very thick, 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 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 shops, the thukpa broth was much worse and I won't elaborate.



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### **Lots of Food, but Little We Can Eat**

You can't eat raw salads or vegetables that have not been cooked to death or 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. Which leaves eggs. We ate a lot of eggs in Tibet, something we don't usually eat much of. We ate them hard-boiled or in small omelets. As mentioned, they insist on putting sugar and milk into scrambled eggs,

## Food in Tibet

so they 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, it was the worst. Better were the small round Tibetan breads, a little larger than our English muffins, but much heavier. They could sometimes be eaten and were good when fresh and hot. However, many times the oils were so bad that these too could not be eaten. Most often, after several bites, you would catch a taste of something not good in the dough and just give up. Unless they 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.

Drinks were interesting. You could not drink the water or use ice or have any drink that had water in it, like 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, each time your taste buds realize there is Iodine in the water. Even boiled water can be problematic, because at the high altitudes of Tibet, bacteria is not all killed when the boiling point is reached. You need to drink water that has been boiled for 20 minutes. In Tibet, where fuel is at a premium, getting anyone to boil water that long is a problem. They just say they did and serve up hot water.

## Food in Tibet



### Food Vendors

So, one drinks bottled water that you buy, sometimes by the case, or boiled water served up in the huge thermos jugs used in Asia. And these thermoses are kind of cool. Standing about 2 feet tall and maybe 8 inches in diameter, these large jugs are everywhere. All hotels offer you a thermos full of boiled water for your room and the water is often still hot after 24 hours. You get 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 pellets, and eaten with the fingers. I liked it when I ate it, but it is kind of tricky to make yourself and one did not always want others to make it for you, with worries of dirty fingers in the dough. It got complicated.

## Food in Tibet

We are vegetarians who eat seafood. Since there was no seafood in Tibet, at different points in our trip, we ate a small amount of meat. Sometimes there was little else or it was already in the food or 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 and one taste was plenty. At His Eminence Gyalsap Rinpoche's monastery, we were served meat and ate it, like we would eat meat at tsok, as a feast offering. Looking back, I can see that our refusal of meat in a country where there was little else was somewhat of a foolish gesture.

## Bhadrapur and Bharitpur

While we arrived in Kathmandu at the international airport, we knew little about the adjacent domestic airport from which we were about to fly from KTM to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeast Nepal, very close to the Indian border. From there, we planned to cross over into India at the border town of Karkavitta and on to Sikkim, where we were to visit more Karma Kagyu centers. All five of our family members had elected to go and we arrived at the much smaller domestic airport and managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts and pile it nearby 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 up this bag or that one 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), it might not be a DC-10. We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was boarded to make sure we were not somehow missing it. Finally, it was time to board and we climbed aboard 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, to pull up in front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp.

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The small hatchway of the plane had a 3-4 rung ladder hanging down to 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 couldn't 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 little. We dropped lower and lower. I still could see no 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 and 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 half an hour's drive. I was hoping to find a driver who might take us across the border and all the way to Mirik, in West Bengal. "How far to the border?," I asked one driver. "Which border?," he replied. "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 one half-hour from here. "No," he said, "the Indian border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here." I didn't get it.

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"This is Bhadrapur, is it not?" "No, this is Bharitpur," he replied, in Western Nepal, some ten hours from the border and in the opposite direction from where we 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. 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 trying to speak English, which they could not, we were finally helped by a Brahmin, often the only Nepalese who really could 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?

Well, I refused to accept that fate, spending a night in this little sweatbox of a town and completely screwing up our trip, with people waiting (eventually worrying) for us to arrive later today at the other end. By God, I would rather spend the next 10 hours driving to the Indian border, arriving late that night, but

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getting on with our journey. I set about hiring two cars to drive us that great distance, since my family plus baggage were too much for any one taxi. We were then driven to the local Royal Nepal Airlines office, a one-room spot soon filled with onlookers ogling us.

We managed to find one middle-aged man with somewhat of a wreck of a taxi (who was willing to take us) and, after a while, a young Nepalese driver (who was the only one of the two who claimed to know English, which it turned out he did not) popped up with a very tiny but newer vehicle. 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 were starting 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 went in the larger, older car, while my two daughters May and Michael Anne 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 driver kept motioning me from his car to take the wheel of the car I was in and just take off with the car and leave the older man. Funny guy, thought I. And as the driver came out with his license, the young driver started right off toward the nearest main drag. We followed as soon as we could close the doors and get moving. Yet, when we reached the main street, there was no sight of the car with the girls. Looking to the right and left, we saw nothing. He had vanished and with him went 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 had told the young driver to stay in locked-step with us, I stammered to the older driver, who understood not one word. All he did was throw his hands

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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 and ask 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 to head back to the town of Bharitpur and 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. My wife wanted to contact the police at once, but the agent really didn't want to do that. He kept saying that we should get back on the road and keep driving and that, if after one hour of driving, we did not find the girls, then we should drive another hour back to his office and THEN he would go with us to the police. My wife was having none of that and 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, with no real effect. We probably wasted a good 45 minutes in there before they insisted that we drive the one hour West along the road to the next town and that, if we did not find them, we were to call them from that town and they would institute a major search. In the meantime, they would call on ahead to the next town with the word. This

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was not really what we wanted, but we had little choice. We headed back out that same road we had traveled before, covering the same ground for the third time in what seemed like a kind of 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. After more than an hour, we were still going, looking in every filling station, every store, and there are nothing but stores along Nepalese roads. I was sick with worry by 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, 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 not want to ride with the young man any farther. Nothing much had happened. He had

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made eyes at them and otherwise had tried to impress them. And of course, he had paid no attention to our instructions. I spoke strongly to him. We decided that we could not conceive of trying to get this combination of cars, people, and drivers all the way across Nepal. We gave up and drove back the same damn road for the fourth 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 the word "frustrated."

Back at the Royal Nepal Airline office, I fumed and spouted, refused to pay the young driver much of anything and arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town, which everyone warned me 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 and we packed up all our gear and girls and 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 out. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate – just plain hot. The entranceways and even some rooms had geckos (lizards with suction-cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch catch insects. As we (half starving) waited for dinner to be served at what seemed a very late 7:30 PM, we discovered that what the Safari was really all about was taking trips (safaris) into the nearby jungle, straddled atop an elephant. Since we had nothing to do, but wait for the next day's place, we resolved to set off into the jungle on elephants the following morn, starting out for the jungle at 5:30 AM. It was our first non-pilgrimage act, but seemed like the right thing to do.

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### **Entering the Jungle**

And sure enough, at the crack of dawn there we were hurtling down back roads in an open jeep, heading toward the jungle. All around us were grass houses and shacks with people and animals, all starting their day. Everywhere along the road were flowers and plants, long roads filled with blossoms in the dawn light. 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 backs. It was four people to an elephant plus the elephant driver way up front.

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### **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 mile wide. As the current got stronger, the elephants turned sidewise (facing the current) and began to sidestep toward the distant shore, which was a little scary. But, gradually, we crossed the expanse of the river, climbed up the other shore, and began to move into the jungle proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant because the grass we walked through (oddly enough, called "elephant grass") was at least a good 5-6 feet high. 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 group of three rhinos – a mom, pop, and three year old baby (not so much a baby anymore).

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There they were, just that close. And 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 we made our own trails, insects and leaves rained down from the foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled something ahead of them in the jungle that they were not sure of. The steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded, with the elephants often having to get down on their knees to climb up the other side, after making the crossing. I must say that it was an experience that I won't soon forget. I sure got close enough to a real jungle. On the way back, I saw a large crocodile eyeball us as we crossed the river. Not a time for swimming.



### **Elephant Going Where No Trail Exists**

After eating breakfast at the camp at the jungle's edge (playing with giant six-inch



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millipedes that crawled over our hands and arms), we were back at the hotel by 10 AM, where we grabbed our bags and made it to the airport and stood in the heat. The Sun was fierce and I was soaked with sweat that later dried, actually leaving 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, stuffed cotton in our ears, and were on our way back to KTM to catch the correct plane to Bhadrapur, not Bharitpur. However, after this experience, our two girls elected to not go to India, but to spend the next week in KTM, just doing whatever they felt like. We could not really blame them and, although we hated to be separated, said goodbye to them at the airport.

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

## **Bhadrapur and Mirik**

### **(Bokar Ngedhon Chokhor Ling)**

This time the tiny plane did seem headed in the right direction and we watched the mountains of Nepal align themselves to 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, I, 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 really was 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 not only take us to the border, but could drive all the way to Mirik, high in the mountains of West Bengal. That was the good news. The bad news was that he did not speak English, but what the hell.

The important thing is 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. The best was to drive right through without stopping. We were told that cars had recently been stopped and, in the past, people even killed in that area. 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 crazy Americans. To aid to our paranoia, as we set off to the border, another man jumped into our jeep, uninvited. This kind of thing is common in Nepal and India, where everyone wants to get on board

## Bhadrapur and Mirik

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



### **Nepal Countryside**

And so we drove toward the border on what was called by our driver a "national highway" (a road that was as wide as your average driveway), 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 was some religious celebration that they were preparing for and for which they demanded donations. Our driver handled this in one way or another, often promising to pay on the way back (which in fact was a week away). Or, claiming he had no small bills, he

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would catch them on the way back. Still, all of this was worrisome to us.

Soon we were at the rugged border town of Karkavitta, not a place I really would want to spend the night in, and pretty rough overall. We were passing through its congested streets horns-a-blaring and reached the border checkpoints for Nepal and India (all three of them), each with their meticulous forms to fill out. I had to laugh. Here I am, in the heat of the Karkavitta night, in a one-room office with no screens (malaria!), trying to fill out a form by candlelight that is more detailed than any U.S. Customs form. And the Indian in front of me is writing these details in an ancient ledger, while high on a shelf above him sits a stack of similar ledgers, molding away. He takes all the time of ours he can, insisting on every detail. Sometimes I wonder if they just are curious to see and watch westerners. Why else should it take so long? The Nepalese checkpoint was not as bad, but both (two!) of the Indian ones were excruciating. Yet, at long last we were through the border and on to the hot Indian plain and night.

Although our driver did not speak English, we both knew that the stretch of road just outside of Karkavitta and into India was a dangerous stretch over which we must pass at whatever speed we could muster, which was hard because of the many speed bumps that caused us to slow down to a crawl or sometimes reach a dead stop. These were the areas where we were vulnerable to attack. And night was falling fast, the worst time to travel

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there, which made these areas even more disturbing. To make things worse, the road was filled with animals and people, dark forms slowly moving in the twilight.

But we made it through the steamy lowlands and on up into the hills. The road began to climb very sharply and a coolness began to replace the hot breath of the Indian plains. Also, the roads were less thronged with people and driving became somewhat easier. We could relax. For hours we climbed higher and higher, now on switchback mountain roads, with an endless stream of packed buses that either we were behind or, if in front of us, made us back up to let 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.



**Bokar Rinpoche's Monastery in Mirik**

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We did not arrive at the town of Mirik, high on the mountains until after 10 PM. It was not hard to find directions to Bokar Ngedhon Chokhor Ling, the monastery of Bokar, Rinpoche, and we made the slow climb up an even steeper very narrow road. Our friend, Ngodup Burkhar, who (when we had not arrived on time) had worried about us for two days now, had given up for the night and was already asleep. He appeared bleary eyed, but happy we were OK. In the cold of the mountain night, he found a warm room with Tibetan carpet couches for us and proceeded to prepare a fantastic meal of eggs, rice, too-sweet cookies, and hot water or tea. Food 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. Fairly seedy and 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 and the chief retreat master. We visited the rare and beautiful Kalachakra stupa housed there, which contains a huge prayer wheel that rings a bell each time it goes around. The stupa and the surrounding wall paintings are exquisite, as is pretty much

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everything about the monastery, a reflection of fine sensibilities of Bokar, Rinpoche. We were lucky enough to receive a long-life empowerment given by Rinpoche to some older monks and lay people. We crowded into the small room, where it was given. It was very moving.



### **Bokar Rinpoche's Personal Shrine**

Later, I was also able to attend a long Amitabha puja (connected to death and dying) that lasted most of the afternoon. Present were



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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 tsok, the feast offering. At each break point, a flurry of the youngest monks dashed around serving everyone, filling the 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, sitting with me short times. The large group of monks, in particular the young elementary school-aged monks, watched little Michael like a hawk.

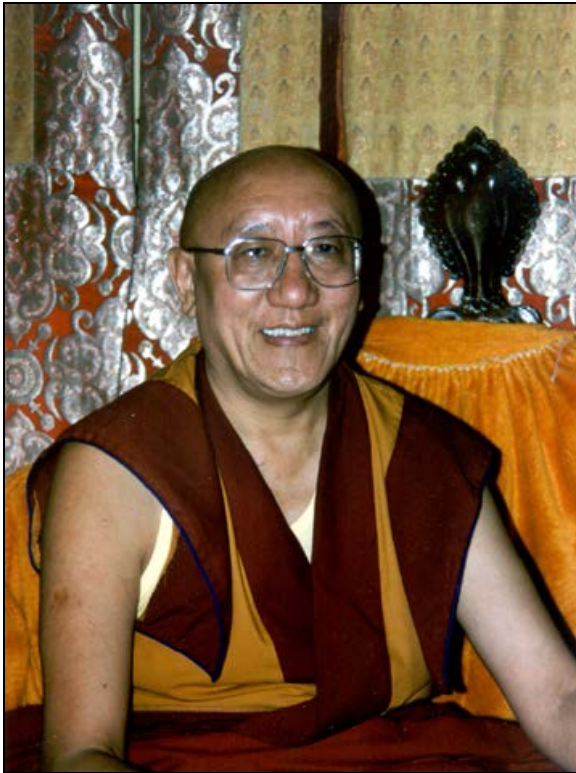


### **Shrine Hall at Mirik**

Watching them and sitting at the rear of the hall in a special seat, the monk in charge of

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discipline kept a close eye on the youngest monks. He was not above moving quickly down the aisle and reprimanding those who were foolish enough to indulge in horseplay, finally evicting one of the worst offenders. Later, he would go down the line of monks giving a small sum of money to each of the monks, money that had been donated by patrons to have this particular ritual performed. He also gave a tiny sum to each of the child monks.



**Very Venerable Bokar Rinpoche**

Later, a personal interview with Rinpoche further impressed upon me that here was an

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exceptional lama. His comments were direct and very much to the point. Basically he told us that we had been to see His Holiness and obtained his blessing and that of many other sacred places, both in Tibet and Nepal. We really had no choice but to turn our minds to the dharma and to practice well from now on. This was the kind of helpful comment we received. I was sad to leave Rinpoche, and look forward to seeing him whenever that might again be possible. When we left, about 20 monks, who were about to go into three-year retreat, had just arrived from Pullahari, Jamgon Rinpoche's monastery in Kathmandu. They were there to take a series of empowerments to prepare them for the retreat, a process that would take two or three weeks to complete.

My old friend Ngodrup, who lives quite a Spartan existence in order to be near Bokar, Rinpoche, decided that he would take the time to leave his work as Rinpoche's English translator and go with us for 6-7 days, knowing that wherever he was, our way would be eased and worrying that something might happen to us otherwise. There is no way I can thank him for this kind of sacrifice and the gift of his self and time, not to mention that here is one of the most fun people to be with that I have ever known. So, we were off on the mountain roads to Sikkim, made ever so much safer with our friend, Ngodrup, long-time friend of the KTD Monastery in New York and former translator (12 years) for my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

Ralang

## 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 from village to town and on. 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, tea plantations, misty-mountain driving in fog and through clouds, 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 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 road remained, clinging to the cliff-side in our jeep, with one set of wheels edging over the space where the road was missing. I didn't care much for that.



### **H.E. Gyaltsap Rinpoche's New Monastery**

Gyaltsap, Rinpoche's new monastery, is magnificent and huge. Almost brand new, it stands out there in the mountains of Sikkim, right in the middle of what seemed like a rain forest. Huge beetles and moths were everywhere to be seen. 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 showed us around the monastery complex. Aside from the main shrine hall, where we were able to practice, we saw the special shrine where His Eminence does the red-crown ceremony plus the exquisite apartment they have built for His Holiness, the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa, whenever he may happen to visit.



### **Unfinished Mahakala Statue**

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

## Ralang

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 have never seen anything better. They were 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 himself, 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.



Ralang

### **H.E. Gyaltsap Rinpoche and Family**

Here is a rinpoche that is more of a yogi than the average lama in our lineage, spending most of his time in practice and semi-retreat. Because of the various problems within the lineage, he has been the main one to watch over Rumtek monastery, all of these years. Not given to small talk or to 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.



## Ralung



### **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. Moreover, the food was great or we were tasting great. 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 16<sup>th</sup> Gyalwa Karmapa and the seat of our lineage until the discovery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa and his enthronement at Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet. This was another long perilous mountain passage, complete with oncoming trucks, sheer drops, plus landslides and their effects to negotiate and I will spare you the grisly details.



### Michael & Ngodup at Rumtek Monastery

Rumtek Monastery, built by the 16<sup>th</sup> 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 with most of the rinpoches that used to reside at Rumtek working elsewhere around the world in their own monasteries and activities, this too changes the picture. It was great to visit the home of Rigpe Dorje, the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa.



### **Rumtek Kitchen**

We stayed in a lovely house next to Rumtek that is 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 the photos and that great film, "The Lion's Roar."

## Rumtek Monastery



### **Strange Smoke Apparition at Rumtek**

#### **Rumtek to Darjeeling**

The ride from Rumtek to Darjeeling was remarkable in its difficulty. Taking the back way, a driveway-like ribbon of road that went almost straight up, we drove hour after hour, all on switchback curves. At one point, one curve was a full 360-degrees, crossing over a semi-circular bridge. This trip was the only time during our week-long journey in the mountains that the jeep overheated and we just had to stop and let the car rest, looking out over the endless tea plantations to the valley 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 clouds. And you just had to drive through the mist and clouds, not seeing anything of what was coming at you. It was that or just sit there. And it was all about curves. It was a full day's

## Rumtek Monastery

trek and we were exhausted when we reached Darjeeling on our way back toward Mirik. Also, by that time, our son Michael Andrew was pretty sick, throwing up and the like. He got this way when he would become overtired, upset, or eat too much of the wrong kind of food – bad oils, etc.



**Ngodup Tsering Burkhar and Michael**

Darjeeling is a quite large town perched some 8,000 feet in the air on the side of a mountain.

## Rumtek Monastery

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 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.

And the service was from another era, as well, including all kinds of maidservants and menservants, many with the classic Indian turban. For example, meals were included in the price of the room and were served precisely at specific times. When you came down to dinner, your personal table was 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 pace. Each dish was brought to your table and your portion was served from a platter. You could have as much as you wanted.

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### **Darjeeling**

When you finished that 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 some attention to taste and the quality of what was served there. I am sure it was an imitation of a bygone era that I know nothing of, but it was good eating and kind of fun. Dinner was accompanied by very old standards from an Indian pianist seated at the back of the room.

And each room 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 seen 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

## Rumtek Monastery

we could leave. We were waiting for Ngodup, who had gone ahead to Mirik, because Michael Andrew was too sick to travel, and who would be returning to go with 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, much less that far.



### **Hindu Practitioner**

We waited, from meal to meal, wandering through the many empty sitting rooms of the Windemere, this being the 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



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peering over the roof edge at us. We idled about and hoped 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 mountain, to head 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 lack of wide thoroughfares. In fact, the traffic was incredible, a not-quite two-lane road packed with cars and trucks, all moving at a snails pace.



**Kalu Rinpoche's Main Shrine Room**

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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, inched forward, like interlocking parts in a Chinese puzzle, one car giving way, temporarily, to another. In itself, this was not great, but what really upped the ante were the clouds of black smoke that belched from every car and truck and hung in the air, trapped in the valley formed by the buildings on both sides. There was nothing to do about it, except wait to creep forward. Try holding your breath.

At last we reached the outskirts of Darjeeling and picked up a little speed on the 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. Several remarkable stupas appeared, enclosed by long sloping walls. Kalu Rinpoche was one lama I always wanted to meet, but somehow this never happened. Then, before I knew it, he had left this world, 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 dance hall than a shrine. Ngodrup explained that Kalu Rinpoche never was much into elaboration, but that all the other lamas would come here and the most incredible

## Rumtek Monastery

empowerments and ceremonies took 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,

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peering out of the upper window was none other than the body of Kalu Rinpoche himself. Somehow, he had been embalmed, his face gold plated, and his body entombed right in the stupa itself, with his head and face looking out the window at you. It was unnerving. It was so lifelike and 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. In fact, we began the 8,000 foot descent from the Darjeeling area, back to the hot, dusty, plains of India. It was a comforting experience to finally reach flat land again, after so many days clinging to mountain roads. You could let your peripheral vision relax again.

### Driving in the Third World

I should mention here what driving on any Nepalese roads really is like. First of all, the Nepalese roads (except maybe in downtown KTM) are just too small. Most are about the size of an average driveway in the U.S., black topped and with no shoulders. On these, 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 and, if used, used only as a last resort, a danger call or a sign of irritation. Not so in Nepal and India. The horn is used there, constantly. Just like we use the steering wheel to drive, in a very real sense, the Nepalese use the horn to steer with or to guide the flow of traffic. It is used all the time and not just for warnings. It is also used to acknowledge and thank. But it is disturbing to those of us trained to hear the horn as a last-ditch, emergency measure.

## Third World Driving



### **Roads Lines with Shops**

Moving right along, let's discuss the Nepalese method of playing chicken, over-steering to 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 does not give way, even if it means a head-on crash. If you are driving a big truck, it is assumed that all 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 getting off the road or half on the road and half off, every time, every few hundred yards.

And you might think that in these Third World countries, there is less congestion. Wrong. There is more congestion and each driver

## Third World Driving

makes it a point to stray farther over the middle line in order to have to give up less 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 from America, give you the recipe for a headache. There you are (in the passenger seat), on the wrong side of the road, but in what would be the driver's seat in America. In other words, you are hurtling toward oncoming traffic, but have no way to steer the vehicle. It is like an amusement park ride gone mad. In all the weeks that I was in these countries, I never managed to fall asleep, no matter how long the ride (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 Third World: things in the road!

In America, with the exception of vehicles, our roads are empty. It has never occurred to us that there could be any other way. In the Third World, the roads are filled full with people, animals, and endless smaller vehicles. It is this fact that makes driving so difficult there and sleep impossible for me. It is a remarkable fact that the main congregation point for the entire community, animals and man, is in the road. There is no doubt about it: in the Third World, they do it in the road.

## Third World Driving



### **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, but right in the very middle. Mothers leave their babies sitting 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 for the lie-downers.

A lot more activity happens walking on the road. Groups of people and single people walk in the middle and edge of the road, both day and night. People carrying things, large things, often on their heads or backs, people weighed down with huge packs, bales of straw, bricks, raw vegetation. Cows, all of which are sacred in much of this area, stand crosswise in the road, at all angles. They do not move or move in ways that cannot always be anticipated. If you kill a cow on a road in Nepal, it is



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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. Groups of goats and sheep, herds of sheep, with or without a master. And we are just getting to vehicles.



### **The Big Bully “Circus” Trucks**

Bicycles galore and three-wheelers carrying loads. Rickshaws and motor scooters, three-wheeled-motor scooter cabs that wrap their passengers in darkness, motorcycles. Tiny cars and microvans that drive like mad. Larger cars, jeeps, land cruisers, and land rovers. Larger vans and small buses, filled to overflowing (every time) with people. And at the top of the food chain are what we like to call the circus trucks, which have to be seen to be believed. These are large, Mack-truck sized vehicles that have like a crown of lights and

## Third World Driving

decorations above their cabs. Undoubtedly of Indian design, these gaudy things have about every Hindu protector deity imaginable painted on their front to protect their journey. They are huge and they are garish and they rule the road. And there are thousands of them plus 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, so that you pass them all day and all night, or rather, they pass you.

### **The Mountain Roads**

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



### **The Road is “The Place”**

In my little bit of geographical training, when I read of far-away places like Darjeeling, I (without thinking) always assumed that they are famous places you could just get to, like you can get to Chicago or Cleveland. I mean, you drive down the road and you get to the place, right? Wrong. You travel to them. You don't just get to a place like Darjeeling, though you may get there, if you are lucky and I mean lucky! For, there is no easy way to get to a place like, for instance, 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 one car wide that, switching back and forth, give you painfully slow access to that city. The fact that you have frequent areas where there is a sheer drop-off of who-knows-how-many-hundreds-of-feet, we will ignore for now. The fact that the turns and the switchbacks mean that every corner is a blind curve is more serious. We should note that. You couple this with the fact that the so-called circus trucks roar up and down these asphalt driveways and you begin to see the problem. And last, you add the propensity for humans and animals to congregate in the middle of the road and you have the general picture.

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### **Ngopdup and Michael Andrew in Mountains**

Now, the suggested method for dealing with this is to use your horn at every curve. You find signs to this effect at each turn in the road. In equal abundance are signs in English along the side of the road that carry some inane aphorism like “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 and try to read them from the roadside. There are hundreds (thousands) of these unsolicited aphorisms, most of which could have been written by a school child or the philosophically impaired.

Now, combine all of these elements together and you have a mountain ride that rivals any theme park or 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, but just explaining what I

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found somewhat amazing. Even the suggested "honk at every turn" was not failsafe and many times we found our vehicle screeching to a halt, just inches from something 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 our vehicle up (along a cliff) far enough to let the other (larger) vehicle take over most of the road and creep past.

And on any of these trips, there is endless stopping and backing up enough to allow that big truck to 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 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 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 there, I could never close my eyes, not even for an instant. And that is saying something important to you.

So, my point is that there are places in the world (like Darjeeling) that are large enough for us to recognize by name, but to which we

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cannot just "go." In fact, we must travel to them.

### **Strike: Bhadrapur to Biratnagar**

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

We arose 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 Nepal border. Even in the pre-dawn darkness there was heavy people-traffic on the road, probably because the day was some sort of Hindu holy day. Everywhere were small tent shrines with glaring lights, in which were brightly-painted statues and loud music. In many places along the road, bare four-foot fluorescent 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, giving an eerie and carnival like effect. The sacred music boomed out of the darkness

## The Strike

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, heading toward the Indian-Nepal 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 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 slowly put us through the long form-filling process, while we eyed the clock and the coming of dawn, which meant possibly more danger for us once 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, they had to have each member of my family personally come into the office and sign the forms, even my 11-year old son.

At last we were done and had crossed from Karkavitta into Nepal. Unfortunately, it was now light as we headed for the airport. Groups of Nepalese were gathering 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 so well thus far and that we were already at the airport. Now all we had to do was wait for the plane. Little did we know.

## The Strike

It was early and no one was around. Our conversation managed to wake a few people who had been sleeping somewhere in the open building. Our driver had an animated dialogue with one and then turned to face us, a little wide-eyed. I thought he was telling me that the plane had been cancelled, that the plane would not be coming here 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 that served as the runway. He was telling me that!

I was in shock and refused to accept this information. They were happy to repeat it and 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 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 and my protestations soon produced an airline official on a motorcycle. A Brahmin, who spoke English, he assured me that we could stay here locally as long as we wanted and 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



## The Strike

allow no planes to land here today and that was that. Then the airline official said he would appeal that decision and 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 that we go to this local restaurant and wait and he gestured toward a building that was little more than a hovel. "No!," said I.

By now we had quite a group of people gathered around to enjoy the show, watching me freak out. The nearest city was Biratnagar, almost a three-hour overland journey from where we were, but there was the strike to consider. A call to the owner of the jeep we had been riding (and paying for) for the last week brought only the response that he would not allow us to use his vehicle. There was too much danger of damage from the strikers. We were stuck.



## The Strike

### **Driver, Guard, and Michael Andrew**

All of this was made worse by the fact that my son had been quite sick 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 that 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 that 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., etc.

I pleaded with the different folks there for help and asked if there was an ambulance that we could hire to drive to Biratnagar. Surely, people would not stone that. I pointed out that my son was sick and he hacked and coughed for them on cue. There was also this off-duty policeman who was standing around. Perhaps he could ride with us up front in the ambulance and make us look official.

They liked the ambulance idea and began to call around looking for one. We found one, but it would not be available until the afternoon. "Better than nothing," was my response. Upon hearing of the advent of the ambulance, the owner of the jeep (who had refused our use of it today) came down to the airport and dickered himself with us. He was also a Brahman and we had a Brahmin war between the airline official (who really was trying to help us) and this man, who did not like to see us spending money on an ambulance when he might get some. We suggested that the policeman ride in

## The Strike

his jeep, of course, for a stiff fee. He saw dollars and said, "Yes." We were willing to chance it and 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 at the other end.

After a stop to bless the jeep (to protect it from harm) and lay some garlands of flowers on the front bumper, with our uniformed policeman sitting up front, we headed out 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, head for the airport instead. My son, Michael Andrew lay across our laps in the back and hacked and coughed when we were stopped. He looked the part. Skinny anyway, he had lost weight in Tibet and India. He did not look well.

And so began about a three-hour trip across Southern Nepal. We did stop at different checkpoints and we passed many groups of men with stones, but none really were thrown. Perhaps I heard 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 (as a policeman should), surveying the endless throngs of people along the road eyeballing him. The fact that the strike was on meant that the roads were empty of cars, but even more full of people and animals.

The short of it is that we made it to the airport and through the armed guards that had

## The Strike

congregated there. Once inside, we had the extreme good luck of catching a plane to Kathmandu that was leaving within the next 30 minutes. Now this was luck! We said goodbye to our driver and the police guard, gave them some extra cash, checked our pile of baggage, and were ushered to one of those small propeller planes and given cotton for our ears, candy for the swallowing. We soon were on our way back to Kathmandu. And a funny thing happened in 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 I don't like to fly. I don't normally even like to travel at all. Here I am, flying across Nepal, in a prop-driven plane, with cotton in my ears. And the flight attendant holds an in-flight drawing, based on your seat number. And, they select my son, Michael Andrew, to pick the winning ticket. And you guessed right. I won the contest and my reward: a free ticket on the same airlines 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 there, the strike being still on, we paid through the nose for a taxi willing to brave the Kathmandu streets and were driven safely back to the Boudnath Stupa area and the Happy Valley Hotel, where we were eventually reunited with our two daughters. We were so glad to arrive and everyone was glad to see us too, for they worried about us when our plane from Bhadrapur never arrived. By mid-

## The Strike

afternoon we were all sitting high on the terrace in the Stupa View restaurant enjoying a quiet (and eatable) vegetarian meal, when only hours before it had looked like there was little hope to reach Kathmandu for days. What a switch.

### Pullahari

On another of those infamous Nepali strike days (when there are no cars allowed), we decided we would not be stopped from making our sacred rounds and would instead 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 the houses subsided and the rice paddies and fields took their place. And 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 that and up the mountain we went.



**Nepal Countryside from Pullahari**

## 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 for those of you reading this who are familiar with the Karma Kagyu Lineage and with the work of His Eminence Jomgon Kongtul, Rinpoche.



## Pullahari

I had received empowerments from Jamgon, Rinpoche, including the 10-day Kalachakra, and had even met 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 that 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

## Pullahari

many. His handiwork was everywhere, in particular at Rumtek, and, of course, at Pullahari. Only during this trip did I realize what a huge loss his death was to the lineage.



### **The Grounds of Pullahari**

And Pullahari was an amazing place, much larger than I had expected. This is not your

## Pullahari

typical Kathmandu monastery. The whole complex is spacious, modern, and everywhere neat and clean. Wherever you look are flowerbeds and trees, walkways, staircases and patios. We were able to see the 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 and is surrounded on three sides by exquisite statues of the previous Jamgon tulkus and other lineage figures. There is even a small wire that comes from inside the stupa (from the heart of His Eminence), outside to a tiny gold dorje. Pilgrims like myself often place it to our foreheads. This shrine is very special. We also visited the lay retreat center, which is almost like a resort hotel, with a restaurant on the lower floor and outdoor patio – lovely. Pullahari, in its entirety, is something to be seen, a place you really must visit. And I had a surprise 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 three-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



Pullahari

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 three-year retreat and come out quite a different person. I had heard about him and how retreat had

## Pullahari

changed him, how well he had done in retreat. And here he was, now Khenpo Lodro Namgyal. I was gassed. What a trip this put me through and how inspiring to see someone you know take serious steps toward enlightenment and to be at the point where he was really helping others in an important way. We had some good laughs at all of this. It remains one of my most important memories of the 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 the remaining time we did have. Suddenly we had a long list of places we had to see, things we ought to find, people we should see, and so on. For one, there were the thangkas.



### Giant Dorje (Vajra) at Swayambu Stupa

Thangkas are those lovely hand-painted Tibetan sacred scrolls that are often mounted in rich brocade. In Kathmandu, there are many thangkas, but few really fine images. When we had left for our trip to Sikkim and India, the young monk (who would accompany us back to the states) and his friend, an artist (and thangka painter) had promised to comb the area for some really good thangkas while we were gone. Of course, we were interested in what they found, which was: not a lot.

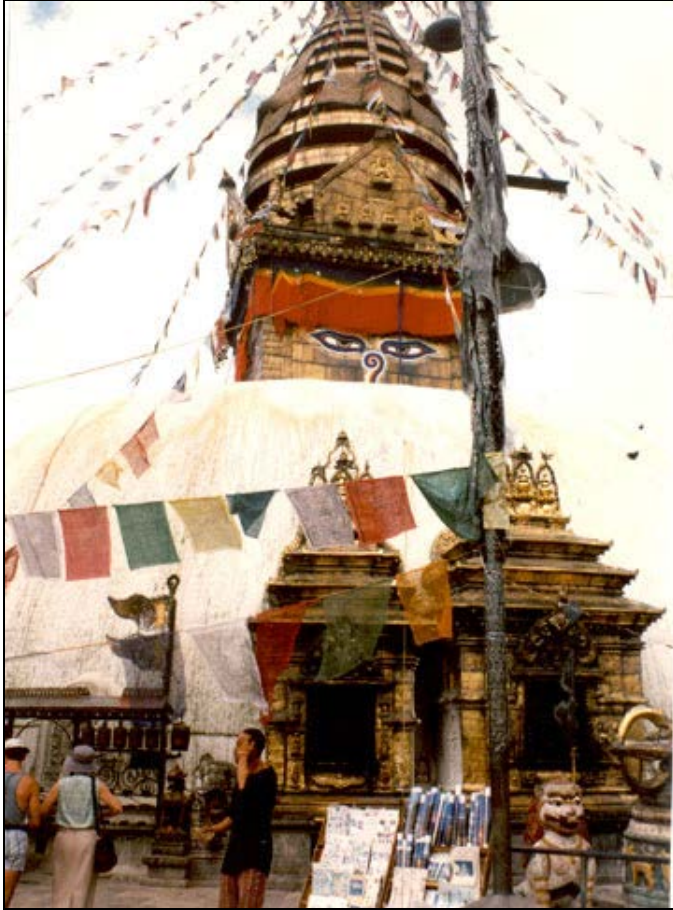
They had looked, but not found. We did trek to one small apartment, where a Kagyu thangka

## The Last **Days**

painter showed us the few thangkas he had on hand. Interesting, but no magic, at least not enough to inspire purchase. Well, that was that, or so I thought.

Then a German guest, a comedy writer and nice guy, who was staying at the same hotel told us of a thangka painter that he had visited and from whom he had ordered at least one thangka. And amazingly enough, the 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. For one, he had done all of the painting at two of the major Kagyu monasteries in the Swayambu Stupa area. His thangkas were just superb, better than any I had seen in Kathmandu or 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 Swayambu Stupa, seeing

## The Last **Days**

in person his wall murals, and visiting various rinpoches. It was fun. We ended up purchasing three really fine thangkas: Mahakala (Bernagchen), Green Tara, and Guru Rinpoche, 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 that he had bonded with during the trip and one that had echoes all the way back to his babyhood, where some of his first words were "dee dee," the sound of Manjushri. He had taken great care to observe and often prostrate before Manjushri statues all through Tibet, to the amazement of us all. I had told him that we would find him a statue for him to take back with us for his personal shrine.



### **Dharma Goods Shops**

However, my promise had not anticipated the Nepalese strike and now we were down to the last day, with no vehicle to travel to Patan, where the best statues are made. We were limited to the Bodha area, where there were

## The Last **Days**

also many small shops that carried statues, not always of the best kind and 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 today.

In those last two days, we did what we could, given that we could have no vehicle. We braved the strike at times, taking the cabs who dared to take fares (at high prices), trying to sort out still unresolved airline ticket problems. Just for the readers sake, Nepal Airlines treated us really badly, refusing to honor our tickets (that they had booked) and charging us all over again for that part of the journey. No amount of appealing or discussion did any good. It was all about money, ours. I cannot recommend that airline to anyone, but they have a virtual monopoly on the local market.

## Boudha

### **Boudha**

I want to write something about Boudha, 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 by the stupa area 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 others being Swayambu and Namobuddha. Boudha is by far the most trafficked of the group. The stupa itself, a huge dome that rises out of the city, is visible for miles. A large spire marks its top and Buddha eyes stare in the 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 a clock-wise motion. From the crack of dawn until the last twilight, hundreds and thousands of devout Buddhist, many of them pilgrims, are doing Khora, and at a fast pace. The most activity is at dawn and dusk.

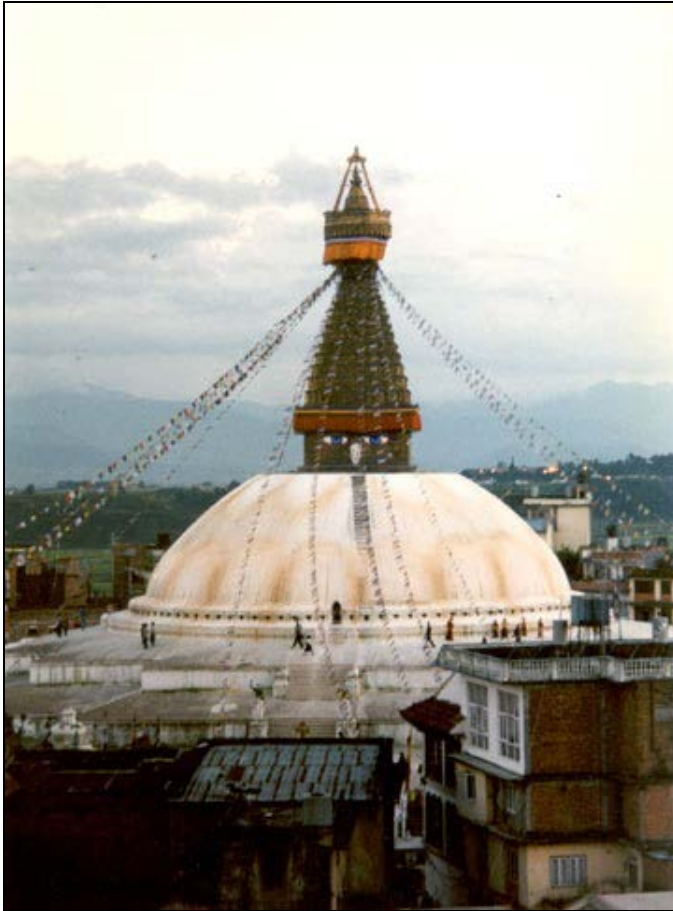
With their 108-bead malas (rosaries) clasped in their left hands and hanging down below their waists, they circumambulate the great stupa saying mantras out loud. So fast do they walk, that I would have to time my jumping onto the walk with them. Monks and lay persons all walk together. And dogs. Everywhere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

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 sanitation department and every kind of garbage and refuse is kind of just 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 on a street (there being few sidewalks). You have to watch where you step, all the time, 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 many persons with short broom-like whisks sweeping their portion of the sidewalk

## Boudha

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, but one totally foreign to most of us in the West. It takes some getting used to.



### **The Boudha Stupa**

And beggars – some lepers and the crippled, but mostly children and mothers with children – everywhere begging. The really severely

## Boudha

crippled are just there, with their hands out or bowing before you, with no expectations. To these, I always tried to give at once or gave after several times around the stupa, when I could sort them out from the next level of beggars, the proactive ones. These also had some deformity or disease, but they also are methodical and their methods always involve making eye and verbal contact with you. They make it hard for you to ignore them. I would vacillate on giving to them. Sometimes I did and sometimes I did not.

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 you. 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 child. 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 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. And they would follow you with their hands out, sometimes for a long way.

And there are the children. What to do? Some were in need, but most were just scamming you. Or, yes they needed money, but perhaps they could get 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. But my daughters had this group down cold and they would look or laugh at them in such a

## Boudha

way that they gave up their pleading looks and burst out into laughter. They made friends with them. I could not master that.

All around the circumference of the stupa were shops of all kinds, but mostly filled with various dharma goods. The prices were high (by Kathmandu standards) and you could get better quality and bargains elsewhere in Kathmandu, but it was hard not to look and there were good things here 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 to stain a transaction with bargaining, which in my case amounts to bickering. But in these shops, bargaining is expected. And I had lessons from the master. In Darjeeling, when I had found a meditation shawl (extra long to wrap around your legs) that I thought I really wanted, my Tibetan friend Ngodup volunteered to accompany and act as bargainer with/for me.

The elderly gentlemen who managed the shop already had my number. He could see from the first that I wanted that shawl and 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 some, walking out abruptly, etc. Ngodup wanted to take the hard stand of always walking out and, if need be, giving up on it altogether.

## Boudha

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 just lowered 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 to it, willing to walk out if it was not accepted. Sometimes that resulted in a lower price. I had to be willing to not have it in order to have it at a reasonable price. Some dharma items I just did not want to bargain over, so I would 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 and everywhere (for that matter) are unclean. 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 build (and smell). Smoke and fumes and smells of all kinds are what air is in Nepalese cities. You get used to it, because you have no choice.

## Boudha



### **Goodbye Picture at Happy Valley**

Everywhere, everything is dirty and damp, dirty beyond our American imagination. Any kind of water product is just thrown in the streets and sidewalks and walking involves constant vigilance. There are animals everywhere. At night, it seems that all of the sleeping dogs you see all day form gangs and run the streets. Dogs fighting and barking fill the night air and this goes on until dawn. There being no streetlights, you don't go out much at night in Kathmandu. So much for 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) . It was such a good experience for us. Perhaps most important to us, 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

## Boudha

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 to the high rooftop terrace 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 what is essentially a suite of two rooms with a large walk-out balcony. Air-conditioning is there, if you need it too. The bathrooms are tiled and modern. Another plus is that you can sleep in the beds, between the sheets, without worrying about getting lice or something. All this and for less than most small room in any American hotel.

I came into Kathmandu intrigued by the idea of how cheap rooms and food could be there, but I soon found out that those rooms and that food are not what I want to be having. I was happy to pay a little (or a lot) more for clean rooms and decent food. It was still cheaper than anything back home. For example, I could take my whole family of five and a guest or two out to a fine rooftop-terrace dinner at a place like the Stupa View for less than \$25, and that includes desert.

And the staff at Happy Valley was always ready to help us. They did tons of stuff for us like: helping us exchange money, find taxis, get to the airport, get us at the airport – anything. And what good people. Each morning, the father could be seen doing some form of Tai

## Boudha

Chi and meditation in the outer courtyard. The mother was always at the stupa at dawn doing khora (circumambulation). And the daughter, who must be around 21 or so and very bright, was always willing to help with whatever emergency was taking place, and we always had some desperate situation or another going. I gave up going anywhere else for breakfast, because the ones at Happy Valley were the best, served by people you came to consider your friends.



### **Thrangu Monastery School**

The hotel is right next to Thrangu Monastery and school, 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 the day started with the gong and their early morning chanting and music. The entire Bodnath area is filled with monastery sounds in the early morning and early evening, very lovely. Never mind that the young monks would shine



## Boudha

flashlights into our rooms (and faces) at night from across the courtyard or could be seen climbing along the high narrow ledges between rooms at any time of day, plus 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 into the practice of Buddhism and who live in the U.S., I must say something about monks. The main thing is that we don't have them here and they have them over there. It is that simple. In America, we might see a lama or even a Rinpoche now and again, but seldom just an ordinary monk. Yet, in many Asian societies, they 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 represent the position of what in this country rich people fill, someone to kind of look up to and respect.



**Monks at Thrangu Monastery**

## Monks

Having seen a lot of monks by now, I also am somewhat less in awe of them. They are just people, some really good and some just average or even not-so-good. Some are very dedicated, while others are more worldly. 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 also 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. Of course, we wanted to meet him. Moreover, 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 we could accompany him back to the States on our return.

And meet him we did, the next morning after we arrived in Kathmandu. It turns out that he was staying at Thrangu Monastery, the very folks who had picked us up at the airport the night before. He showed up at our hotel accompanied by other monks. Of course, we were happy to meet him and I believe it 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 very appealing. You can just tell by looking at him that here is a sincere monk. We became friends right off.

And we were to see Karma Dhundil many times as we came in and out of Kathmandu on

## Monks

our various journeys. We volunteered right off to have him accompany us back to the States and we were gratified when Khenpo Karthar, Rinpoche sent a message stating that he would like us to do just that, escort him 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 the arrangements for Rinpoche's nephew to return with us to America and always went out of her way to be helpful. I don't know how many times we met and conversed as best we could, but 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 Dhundhil's baggage, to make sure there would be no problems getting it on the airline. Sure enough, he had jury-rigged rope-wrapped bags that weighed a ton. I was not sure they would be easy to get through customs and onto the plane, so we went out and got two (maroon colored) duffel bags and showed him how to redistribute the weight, so that he had two bags of equivalent weight.

The next step was to get him through immigration and onto the plane. It 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 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

## Monks

of Nepalese trying to make the same plane. And 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 noise to the officials, who were wondering why I was in that line at all.

When we got to the front, they spread out Karma Dhundhil's passport and were pouring over it, trying to figure out what was going on here. That 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 began to move to question the monk, I would speak up, pointing to the name Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery right on his passport and proclaiming that I am here to take him with me, that I would be responsible for him.



**Karma Dhundhil (right) and Best Friend**

## Monks

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 Dhundhil 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 40 minutes in the place, nothing else eventful happened. We flew from Hong Kong to San Francisco with Karma Dhundhil like he was a member of my family. He is only 20 years old.

Every time we would reach any kind of checkpoint, we would surround the monk until people were very clear that, if they were going to hassle him, they had all of us to deal with as well. This worked very well and we at last passed through the final customs and immigration checkpoints at San Francisco. I informed Karma Dhundhil that he was now safely within the United States and we all went off to drink some American water and have an American sandwich. Karma Dhundhil looked around the San Francisco airport and declared to us, "No monks." That's right, there are very few monks here in the United States.

Karma Dhundhil returned with us to our center in Michigan, spent a few days, and then was flown on to New York, where he now lives at KTD Monastery. One last comment on Karma Dhundhil. I took him with me to visit a very well-known Sikkimese thangka painter, who now lives in Kathmandu. When he saw the young monk, he told me privately that he

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knows this monk. He sees him early every morning at the Boudha stupa, doing extensive practice, including not just the usual circumambulation, but 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 that subject and then a third specifically on Tibetan astrology. We also held a conference featuring Tibetan astrologer and translator John M. Reynolds. This was years before the current popularity of this topic.

In 1986, I brought Tibetan astrologer and Sanskrit scholar Sange Wangchuk to our center, where he remained for 2 ½ years. During that time, he translated from a number of astrology texts and we worked on that material, some of which was published this last year by Wieser in a book on Eastern astrology. I also programmed most of the Tibetan astrological techniques, and released that program (for Windows) in May, 1998.

In the summer of 1997, we brought Dr. 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), originating from His Holiness, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. Our recent goal has been to 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 the Karma Kagyu Lineage, His Holiness Urgyen Trinley Dorje, the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. I also



## Tibetan Astrology

traveled to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, the seat of His Holiness, Rigpe Dorje, the 16<sup>th</sup> 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, Gyalsap, Rinpoche. I continued to work with Dr. Drubjud Tendar through the fall of 1997 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 applying 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 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 brief yearly interview with Khenpo Rinpoche shortly thereafter. Among the many ideas and questions about our lives that we presented to Rinpoche, Michael mentioned, as an aside, his having awakened with this feeling. Rinpoche started to respond to our questions, then stopped, and said, smiling and chuckling a little, "Go and ask these questions to His Holiness." He seemed to feel this was the solution – the perfect one. How could I but feel the same? After all, this was Khenpo Rinpoche talking happily about us visiting His Holiness. Just that quickly I knew we were on our way.

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Still, after we returned to our home, I spent a week in shock. I could not imagine surviving a 14 hour plane trip, with an hour of previous flight, four hours of flight after that, plus the layovers – 24 hours spent in non-stop travel! That would only get us to Hong Kong. After a day's rest, there was a four hour plane trip to Kathmandu. I had never flown for more than four hours. I had images of our youngest child, eleven year old Michael Andrew, getting nauseous headaches, diarrhea, finding it difficult to eat, losing weight from his already too slight frame, and 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 me being exhausted, having stomach complaints, and getting motion sickness on the airplanes and the winding mountain roads of Sikkim and West Bengal. Thankfully I was wrong. I was unfamiliar with and very frightened of altitude sickness, with good reason. I did know all too well the special difficulties we would face traveling and relating for a month as an older family of five, under pressure, and in close proximity. Plus, as my family knows very well, getting ready for a trip is one of my least favorite things to do. This was far beyond any "getting ready" I had done before.

So, during that week of shock I could do little but sleep and read Carl Barks "Donald Duck," as I digested the fact that this huge undertaking was before us. I amused myself by

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imagining Uncle Scrooge, Donald, Huey, Duey, and Louie in Tibet. Meanwhile Michael 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 Tibetan from 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 had 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 took.

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

I began to read about the places we would go, and thrill to them and to thoughts of seeing His Holiness, Gyaltsap, Rinpoche, and 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 room for little else. (One word of advice: don't fill a bag too full or you

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will struggle the whole trip trying to close it.) Somehow we got the necessary items packed; others were left. I still didn't need 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 the first day of our journey because of a canceled flight, I was relieved, because I thought I could really pare down on the amount of stuff I was taking. I repacked everything and only managed to leave a few more items – not worth the effort. We really used or needed for emergencies everything else we took. We may have overdone the medicines. I carried homeopathic remedies, herbs, and vitamins. Michael carried allopathic medicines. Kate White, a doctor and fellow student traveling with us, generously made up a first aid kit for us. But one never knows what might occur. We were prepared for a variety of ailments.

We did survive the air trip. It was difficult, although not as terrible as I had imagined. Michael Andrew developed tiny bruises on the sides of his face and his ears were sore from throwing himself around in his seat, in annoyance at being unable to sleep. Babies were crying and kicking the back of Michael's seat all across the ocean. Over-stressed mothers were "losing it." The boring movies were endlessly rolling. The eagerly anticipated terrible airplane food and drink kept being wheeled down the narrow aisles by edgy flight attendants.

We kept popping, every two hours, a homeopathic remedy called "No Jet Lag." The

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whole tubular, orderly rows of humanity in various states of discomfort and activity were hurtling on, well above the clouds, chasing the sun through space, across time zones, and 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 would be going about 5,000 feet higher, but was imagining curvy mountain roads and steep ascents. Instead the incline was very gradual, the high plains broad, and the going slow. To reach Tsurpu took three hours, mostly over bumpy rocky two track trails, which at times actually became shallow streambeds. Elsewhere the water rushed down in many narrow deep streamlets – bubbling, rolling, gurgling, splashing – "the surging rivers of summer."

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How deeply I appreciated the beauty of the Tulung Valley with its clean, crisp, clear air, rocks, green grasses, small brightly colored flowers, fragrant herbs, plot after plot of terraced barley, the many small towers of stone made as offerings to the local spirits, the cows, yaks and dri (female yaks,) dzo (cross of cow and yak,) horses, goats, sheep, birds, dwellings, and its native people on the treeless landscape, all lit in psychedelic clarity by the brilliant sun. The houses were mostly white with maroon trim. The windows were usually single pane thickness and the type that are comprised of many smaller rectangles of glass with cross supports. There was usually a wall of dung patties near each house, stacked to use as fuel, a garden, and pots of brightly colored flowers. One of the houses was larger than the rest and particularly nice looking. We all laughed when we later discovered that many 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 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 met with amazing sights. The galaxy was incredibly bright in the clear night sky. On one of our necessary stops we closely studied with 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 – deep maroon in the distance on a mountainside. It seemed unreal we were there! We stopped the van and got out. Could this be true? We drove on to the gates and we were inside the walls! The seat of His Holiness the Seventeenth Gyalwa Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dudul Dorje – the seat of all the Karmapas! We were there – incredible, unbelievable! Tsurphu – the destruction still evident, the rebuilding strong, surrounded by a partly abandoned old village



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with a maze of walkways, the retreat high above on a steep cliff, a nunnery near that, across the river on an incline a huge 50 yard step-type area for displaying giant thangkas, the protector shrines with carcasses and heads of wild goats, yaks, and other wild animals hanging outside (for the protection of the species and the individual ones that were wrongfully killed) the beautiful and impressive palace of Gyalsap Rinpoche, a shrine to the Karmapas, and one to the Sharmapas, the main shrine or gompa, His Holiness' summer palace and his immense giant deer that lives there, the tent restaurant near the river, a small table in front selling candies, a little store selling more candies, smoke billowing, blowing, and filling the air from large offering vessels and cooking stoves, 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, sheep and their droppings – one with my footprint squarely in the middle.

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

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First we all went to see Drupon Dechun Rinpoche, who was responsible for most of the rebuilding of Tsurpu after the invasion destruction of the 50s. It was obvious he wasn't feeling well. We left Dr. Kate White, who was traveling with us, to attend him and 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 during one short period of time. While that is not unusual for Tibetans of any age, his manner then suggested youth. He looked different to me than the pictures I had seen of him. There is something very special going on about his forehead. It is so smooth, well formed, and luminous. His eyes seem to pounce forward when he is intent on something. He looked directly at me a few times, when I was near him, and warmly smiled; that was simply the best. It is a great pleasure just to look at him and his splendid features, and 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 the rainbows too seemed very natural, and 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 in his room, complete with horns, drums, bells,

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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, high in the mountains of Tibet. Never have my family looked more beautiful to me.

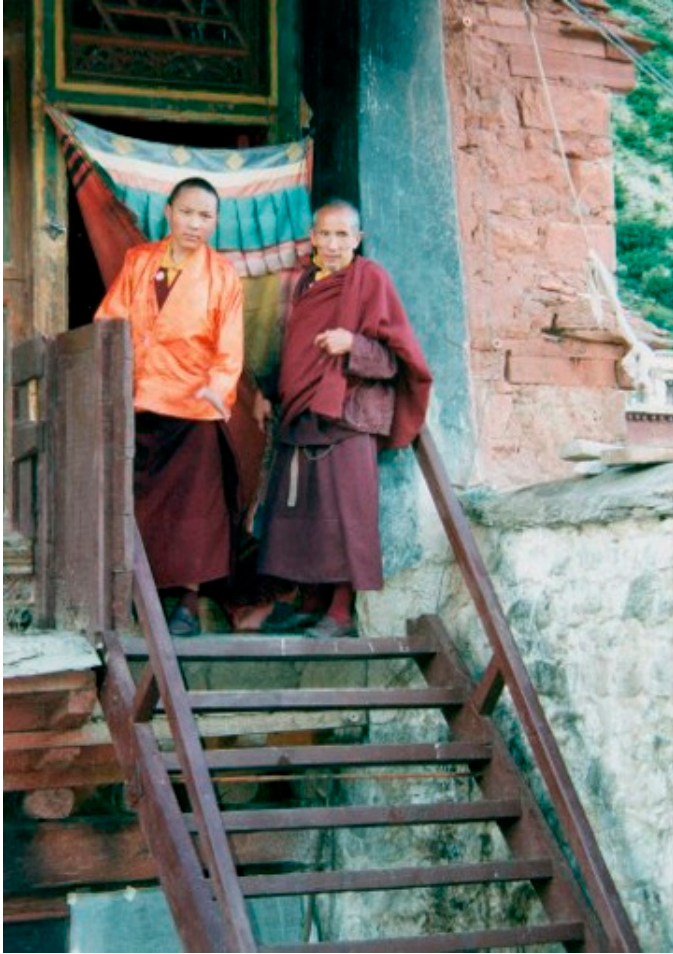


### **The Tsurphu Foundation**

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

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



### **After the Interviews**

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



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speaking. So on he returned. He kept slowly moving, smiling, interacting with us, and 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). Then he was gone for the day.

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

### **The Protector Shrine**

The second day we were at Tsurphu, after we were settled in, there was some time to spare. I had aspired to do my daily practice there and set about finding a place to do this. I asked (mostly by gestures) in one of the four protector shrines if it would be OK to practice there and understood that it would. 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), sat down, and took off my boots. The lama motioned for a young monk to bring a chogtse (small meditation table) over for me to put my text on. He did, and it, of course, was covered with soot and butter. I had been packing my text in a plastic bag. I put this down to prevent the cloth cover from being

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soiled. At the same time, the lama told the young monk something and he came over to spread a clean white katak (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, in fact everything there was well greased and soiled.

I began my practice and the lama and women kept on talking. It was a little difficult to concentrate, but I kept on and got somewhat use to their conversing. I could hear May, my 15 year old daughter, who was 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 too. Around this time, the two women left, and the shrine room was 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, and my heart filled with the honor of being referred to in this way.

I was so happy to be actually doing practice at Tsurphu. I was remembering that Khenpo Rinpoche had mentioned at the 10 day teachings that this was the seat of all the Karmapas. Every one of them had lived here through the ages. The enormity of that statement began to hit home. I was overcome with devotion and the desire to be of use to this noble lineage, and 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, stood near me, leaned against a pillar, and tenderly, gently, peered over my shoulder at my text. Mentally he was right with me. I softly and shakily began to sing

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out loud in my poor Tibetan long life prayers for His Holiness, Khenpo Rinpoche, and the lineage holders. I just felt it was important that 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 this opportunity to practice here, and so extremely grateful.



## **Shel-Drak**

### **Guru Rinpoche's Crystal Cave on the Crystal Mountain**

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

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not missed out on the other important Guru Rinpoche sites.

So we began as early in the morning as we could get our guide to go, which was only about 9 a.m. Michael, May, myself, and Pemba, our guide, were the only ones attempting the climb. Michael Anne generously volunteered to stay behind with Michael Andrew who was still recovering. I'm not sure he would have done well on the climb in the best of health. I tried to take only the necessities and thought my pack was light enough. Our guide Pemba ask 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 the stupa was about five miles from the hotel! Was that a joke or something?

After leaving the city and winding our way in our van through the beautiful stone farming village of Kato, we were near the stupa. Pemba found a tractor and driver willing to take us up as far as he could. We were off chugging away in a small trailer, on the back of this loud Rototiller type tractor, hanging on for dear life, over rocky, gravely, grassy lands inclining up. 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, steep, and rocky to go on. We hadn't made it as far as we thought we would with the tractor, but were told it wasn't far to the village. So off we went – too fast for me. I got winded right away, and gave up early on trying to keep up

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with everyone else. They all slowed some too. After what seemed like a very long time we came to the village. It was abandoned. It looked like no one had been there for centuries. We sat for a while and rested. I was encouraged that I felt fine with resting, but 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 (Penba in distance)**

We resumed our climb. I don't think May stopped again. She just got into a breathing

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pattern and up she went. Ah youth! I was another story. Last again, I was struggling along. I began stopping more and more for longer and longer periods of times. Then finally each time I stopped I would sit down and just pant, catch my breath, let my heart rate slow down and then I would start again. It wasn't far maybe 20 or 30 feet and down I would sit again. Michael was worried about me. He slowed some to keep in sight of me. Pemba repeated often what his father, a nomad, had told him, "When you climb a mountain start slowly, slowly." Then he would walk off whistling!

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

A man was sitting above this area on the side of a hill. He said he was looking for his yaks. Michael offered to pay him if he would carry my pack. Michael was afraid I wasn't going to make it; I protested. I didn't think it would help that much, I felt embarrassed, and felt I should be responsible for my own pack. The man said he didn't need any money, was going up anyway, and didn't mind carrying the pack. Off he went walking with Pemba, May ahead of



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them, and Michael and I together. It did seem to help quite a bit not having the pack. It also helped that the man had told us that not too far ahead the path became much easier and leveled out. I seemed to feel better, like I had finally died all the climbing deaths I could and was just getting use to it. It also helped that Michael was beginning to lag now. I could just go slowly with him, and didn't have the extra stress of being last. (Misery loves company.) I could even take turns carrying his pack! We looked for May's footprints; we hadn't seen her for so long. We found some.

We climbed to a sky burial site that was on the pathway. There was a stupa there, a slab for cutting up bodies and cutting implements strewn around. (I remember wondering how these implements could just be left out in the elements and still be useful, but there they were.) Clothes of the deceased were scattered everywhere on the outside of the path around the stupa, as is the custom. We circumambulated the stupa several times. I began to collect some small rocks to take home and noticed that there were many small bone fragments among the rocks. We saw a hand under a bush. It was blackened and looked like a gorilla hand. Someone mentioned that the vultures weren't coming there of late, but it the area seemed clean. I marveled at the fact that people would somehow bring their dead to this high area. How would they get there? Where would they come from? Would there be a ceremony with many people?

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Later May told us that she had stopped alone to rest at the stupa and had lain down on the ground. After awhile she looked over and saw the hand lying there! She decided to move on, not knowing that 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. That was our final goal before the steeper incline to the Crystal Cave. She thought she might somehow be going in the wrong direction. 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 ask him how far then from the monastery to the cave he pointed down to the closest valley, a long, long way down, and said about that far. I silently groaned, my heart sank, and I really questioned if 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 just to be walking on level ground again. This lasted for a good while, but slowly the ground inclined up and 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, every upward step a strain. We climbed to the front gate, walked in, 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 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.

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

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the thought of taking His Holiness' image up to the cave. It felt like an important, significant mission. He also encouraged us that it was not too difficult a climb, and encouraged May to go telling her that she could do it. When we looked up the terrain was different than what we had been climbing. The Crystal Mountain was all steep craggy dark rock and 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 is the perfect way to go. Everything just falls far below.

Soon we crossed a rock bridge and a small steep waterfall-stream with beautiful fern-type plants growing out of the rocks along the water's edge. We were climbing this black rock staircase. The view was spectacular. All along there were wonderful natural rock chairs to sit on and 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 were everywhere. Michael and I kept marveling at everything. The closer I got to the cave the happier I felt. I was extremely exhilarated.

When finally we reached the cave during the last few feet all I could think was, "No more climbing!" There was a structure built up around the cave. We went in. There were three Tibetan pilgrims there and a lama doing a puja complete with tsok. We squeezed in, prostrated in a crunched up way, offered a katak, and sat on the stone floor. The puja was

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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 indeed was 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 that he was there at all and that we were able to enter in the first place, let alone that we were able to attend part of the puja and be sent away with a piece of tsok torma.

We looked in on the small stark gompa there with a beautiful Guru Rinpoche rupa. Then that too was locked. We started down the rocks back to the monastery, back, back, all the way back down. We only stopped briefly once or twice. My knees could have used more stops, but hey, this was a piece of cake compared to the climb up. We were down in two hours to the place where we had left the tractor. Miraculously the driver was waiting for us as he had said he would be. Another man had joined him. (I could never understand where people come from in the hills and valleys. It seems there is nothing for miles.)

## Margaret Erlewine's Notes

I had no blisters! The days of boot searching had paid off. (I would recommend a double sock system for such a climb however. I didn't use one, but carried them along and did develop 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 rode in the trailer on the back of the "Rototiller." We stood, hanging on again for dear life, happy with our accomplishment, bone tired, through the streets of Tsetang, and 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 woken up at 5:00 in the morning, ready for a fantastic journey, is not a usual thing in the Erlewine family. Mom & dad making sandwiches for the plane, me still groggy, but very excited. I drag myself to the sink and wash my face, so I could wake up! After washing up, mom tells me to wake up my older sister Michael Anne. I go outside and walk to her house in the dark night-like morning. I knock on her door. A faint "What?" comes out of the building. I told her that if she wants to go to Tibet, she will have to get up early! She laughed. I returned to the our house.

My mother gave me a bag of food. A short while later, it was time to go! Dad and our friend Forest loaded up the truck. I jumped in the car, waiting to go. We drove off waving to our good friend Drupjur. Michael Anne and May fell fast asleep in the back seat, with bags on top of them. It wasn't long until we got to the airport.

Dad told us to wait and look after our bags. Mom got the tags for our bags. She told Anne to get a cart for our luggage. I went with her. Two bucks for a cart -- that's cheap! Every thing was going along smoothly until my dad got to the flight desk, The flight was canceled. All that work for nothing! My dad struggled endlessly with the flight attendant to find a way to go. Finally said it was possible to rent a car to drive to Chicago four hours away we all agreed that that was a good idea. so we rented

## Margaret Erlewine's Notes

a car and waited for dad to confirm the tickets. A whole hour went by it turned out that the attendant made a mistake! Oh no! Now we had to go home. We hid out there until tomorrow.

Bright and early the next morning, we were not so rested as yesterday. Mother yelling, "Come on Michael get up!" Michael Anne, calling you're going have to get up early if you want to go to Tibet laughing at the bottom of the stairs. Finally I get up and go down stairs and wash up and get ready to go. Were off, going to the airport faster than yesterday morning.



## 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. The brand names mentioned below are only there because that's what 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 Beans tropic-weight cotton pants. I could have gotten by with two, provided laundry opportunities appeared. Probably 3 pair is the ideal amount.

**Shirts** – I took about 9-10 L.L Beans Chambray Sport Shirts. I rolled them up and stuffed them wherever they would go. Clean shirts were important and they get soaked fast in the heat. I do not feel I took too many and 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 taking cotton socks (they get wet fast), and, unless you are a real hiker, forget about double sock systems and all of that jazz. What worked best for me were 100% synthetic hiking socks. The brand name is something like "Thorlo." Forget about a combination of synthetic and wool ("Smartwool"), which they also make. They were OK, as a second sock

## Travel Guide: What to Take

for warmth, but they tend to scratch me and developed holes easily. These hiking socks are expensive (\$9-\$14 a pair), but they are very stretchy (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. In that 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 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. The combination of the three took care of all of the weather that 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 it is made out of a special woven nylon fabric (much lighter than cotton). It has a mesh lining inside for quick sweat drying. There are

## Travel Guide: What to Take

two inside vest pockets, one with a zipper and the second with a Velcro tab. The two outside vest pockets are for eyeglasses and that sized stuff. 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 bought all kinds of cotton vests and sent them back. This was the lightest, 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 most of the time. In it I had emergency medicine (aspirin, Imodium, etc.), my nylon shell and knit hat, essential papers, visas, and passport

## Travel Guide: What to Take

(when it was not in my vest), packs of money, notebook & pens, water purification tablets, nail clippers and 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 it with me every step of the way. I keep 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, is always there for night needs.

**Big Pack** – As mentioned elsewhere, I opted for a compromise large pack, which is a duffel-like bag that you can carry with a handle (or shoulder strap), that also has a built-in harness for backpacking the thing. 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 is just too small.

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

The point here is that when you exchange \$1,000 in U.S. currency for the equivalent in small bills in Nepalese rupees, Indian Rupees,

## Travel Guide: What to Take

or Chinese (Tibet) money, you are going to end up with a wad of money 5 inches thick! In fact, the Indians staple whole packs of money so tightly that you almost need a machine to open the pack.

There is no way you can cram this kind of wad 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 want to exchange some serious money (a thousand or more). Bring a bag to carry your money away. That is why I had to put much of this in my daypack and never let it off my back or out of my sight.

**Water** – Almost everywhere we went, there was bottled water, although I would 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 glad I had them in my day pack. But note 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 two days or longer, so take note. In Tibet, you can only find someone willing to do your laundry in the largest cities, like Lhasa and Tsetang. They charge by the piece, so one sock costs as much as a pair 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

## Travel Guide: What to Take

thought you should know. And having laundry done is a tad expensive too.

All in all, take plenty of essential items like 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 just water. You may not have time for it to dry, however. There is also a tendency for laundries to give you clothes back damp, so be sure to check for that. Fuel is scarce in Tibet and they use as little as possible.

**Medicine** – Better have the allopathic medicines you 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 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 a lot of very friendly smiling helpful people who have no idea what you are saying to them so urgently.

**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 paper, so bring your own. Or, if there is toilet paper, it tends to be the red 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

## Travel Guide: What to Take

unless you crouch low, which is the point. You don't want to go near them in stocking 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, your clothes) has a good chance of getting soaked. And hot water may take a very long time to appear or not be available at all. Or you may get a trickle of water, hot or cold. Many times you will be lucky to just 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 that water in your mouth! Many places don't provide soap or towels.

**Heat & Blankets** – There was no heat in any of the hotels we stayed in. Often there were so many thick blankets that it crushed your body. No joke, I have never seen such heavy bedclothes, anywhere. Use your sleeping bag

## Travel Guide: What to Take

(with a vinyl ground cloth under it) and sleep on the 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 get there and know what to do when you got there. Most of us find ourselves going to sleep with the Sun and rising when it gets light, like all of the other people in Tibet. In bed by 7:30 PM? You bet!

**Locks** – Keep your money on your person and all valuables in the daypack that you never let out of your sight. You cannot trust your room locks and most have no night lock on the inside of the room. I always left my bags locked in my room with those little combination locks, set to some number that I could not forget. Our whole family used the same combination, so that we could open each other's packs if the need arose.



## Trip Guidelines

### Quick Guidelines for Asia Trip

Pre-trip Comments: These notes have been compiled with the help of notes by Michael Doran, Lynn & Marty Marvet, and others, plus about 15 books on 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 consider each item in terms of your own needs and comfort.

Post-Trip Comments: After my trip, I have gone over the following list and commented on the items that are (1) Worthwhile and (2) Essential. I have added other comments, as needed. Please keep in mind that we went in late summer and 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 – 1 or 2 1-litre plastic water bottles that do not leak. Try to find one that does not taste like plastic. Nalgene bottles are good, with their Lexan version being one that does not taste like plastic. (did not use much)

## Trip Guidelines

Water container/thermos (They are everywhere there)

### **Money**

You will need to have some place to carry your passport, traveler's checks, cash, etc. You cannot leave them in your room, luggage, or even the day pack. They must be on your person and hidden. This means any of the following, or two, are 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 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 pouches a hassle.

Money belt (goes around waist on the inside)  
←

Money pouch (hangs from neck, inside shirt)  
←

Money loop – Belt passes through loops; 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) – instead of day pack.

### **Food**

A number of writers claim the best food they got in Tibet was the granola, nuts, etc. that they thought to bring with them, so consider

## Trip Guidelines

well. 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) & Batteries/bulbs ←  
(Essential)

    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)

ZipLoc Bags (all sizes) ← (Essential)

Gluestick

Insect repellent ← (did not use)

## Trip Guidelines

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, but should not be too bad) (did not use)

Notebooks (Worthwhile)

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

Offering – Envelopes ← (Worthwhile)

Offering -- Katakas ← (buy in Lhasa or KTM)

Rubber bands

Safety pins (Worthwhile)

Scissors ← (Essential)

Sewing kit

Sunblock ← (Essential)

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

Umbrella (can buy in Katmandu) (never used)

Whistle (alarm)

## Trip Guidelines

### **Sleeping**

Sleeping bag ← (Essential)

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

Pillowcase

Ground cloth – For under sleeping bag, in particular 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

### **Eyes**

Sunglasses ← (Essential)

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

## Trip Guidelines

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) (Worthwhile)

Washcloth (Worthwhile)

Ziplock bag to carry wet things in ← (Worthwhile)

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

Nail clippers ← (Essential)

Tweezers ← (Essential)

Toilet paper (2 rolls) ← (Worthwhile)

Tampons ← (Essential)

Condoms/birth control ← (Essential)

## Trip Guidelines

### **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 some inexpensive shoes. It is helpful to have ankle support, but not absolutely necessary. What is necessary is to have shoes or boots that you are comfortable in and that will not immediately blister. Most of the time, I wore my Tevas (sandals) everywhere. Spend your money on good socks. That is the weak link for most. I can't say about winter footwear. Sometimes I wore two pair of socks for warmth with my sandals.

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

## Trip Guidelines

Sweater (Worthwhile)

T-shirt

Underwear ←

Pajamas

Long underwear for Tibet nights ← (did not use)

Clothespins & Cord for drying

Poncho (or waterproof shell mentioned above)

Woolite (cold water soap) for hand laundering

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

### **Documentation**

Passport/Visas – Bring at least 4 extra

Passport photos ← (Essential)

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

Tickets – Airline tickets ← (Essential)

Vaccination certificate (copy of won't hurt) (did not use)

### **Printed Stuff**

Business Cards (Worthwhile)

Stationary & Envelopes

Phrasebook (Worthwhile)

Address book (Worthwhile)

Reading material (did not need)



## Trip Guidelines

### Luggage

#### Pack ← (Worthwhile)

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

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

### Cautions

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

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

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

### First-aid Kit

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

## Trip Guidelines

Antibiotic ointment

Antibiotics of some kind (if have)

Antihistamine (Benadryl) ←

Anti-itch for insect bites

Iodine

Antiseptic agent (Betadine lotion or swabs)

Hydrogen peroxide as antiseptic (can get gel)

←

Athletes Foot Cream

Bandages

Cottonballs & Q-tips

Band-aids or 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)

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

Drixal (cold/sinus medicine)

## Trip Guidelines

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

Pepto-bismol (lots of chewable ones)

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

Sudafed/cold medicines

Paracetamol (Panadol)

Lip balm (lips crack in Tibet) (Worthwhile)

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 the items are prescription only, so who knows what we are supposed to 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 – Dicolax Pills

Urinary Tract – Norfloxacin

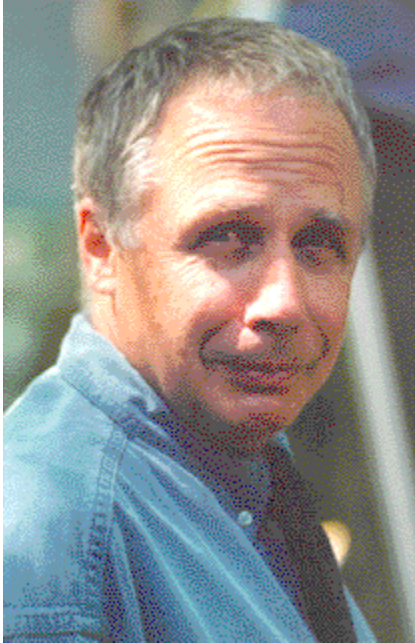
Vaginitis – Mycostatin vaginal tabs

Conjunctivitis – Sodium Sulamyd

Eye Drops

Internal Ear Infection – amoxicillin, cephalixin,  
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!”

## About Michael Erlewine

### **A Brief Bio of Michael Erlewine**

Michael Erlewine has studied and practiced astrology for over 40 years, as an author, teacher, lecturer, personal consultant, programmer, and conference producer.

Erlewine was the first astrologer to program astrology, on microcomputers and make those programs available to his fellow astrologers. This was in 1977. He founded Matrix Astrology in 1978, and his company, along with Microsoft, are the two oldest software companies still on the Internet.

Michael, soon joined by his astrologer-brother Stephen Erlewine, went on to revolutionize astrology by producing, for the new microcomputers, the first written astrological reports, first research system, first high resolution chart wheels, geographic and star maps, and on and on.

Along the way Matrix produced programs that spoke astrology (audio), personal astrological videos, infomercials, and many other pioneering feats.

Michael Erlewine has received major awards from UAC (United Astrological Conferences), AFA (American Federation of Astrologers), and the PIA (Professional Astrologers Incorporated), and scores of on online awards.

Michael and Stephen Erlewine have published a yearly calendar for almost 30 years, since 1969. Michael Erlewine has produced and put on more than 36 conferences in the areas of astrology and Buddhism.

## About Michael Erlewine



### Example Astro\*Image Card

Aside from his current work as a consultant for NBC's iVillage and Astrology.com, Erlewine has personally designed over 6,000 tarot-like astrology cards, making authentic astrology available to people with little or no experience in the topic. These Astro\*Image™ cards are available through a variety of small astrological programs and in eBooks. Some examples can be found at [WWW.StarTypes.com](http://WWW.StarTypes.com), where there is also a link to his astrological software.



## About Michael Erlewine

### **Personal Astrology Readings**

Michael Erlewine has been doing personal astrology readings for almost forty years and enjoys sharing his knowledge with others. However, his busy schedule makes it difficult to honor all requests. However, feel free to email ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net)) him if you wish a personal chart reading. He will let you know if his current schedule will allow him to work with you.

The sections that follow will give you more details about Michael Erlewine and his very active center.

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### **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 a home for a wide group of individuals, all united by their interest in spiritual or cultural ideas.

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### **Heart Center Library**

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

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

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### **The All-Music Guide / All-Movie Guide**

Michael Erlewine's devotion to studying and playing the music of Black Americans, in particular blues, led to his traveling to small blues clubs of Chicago and hearing live, blues greats like Little Walter, Magic Sam, Big Walter Horton, and many others. He went on to interview many dozens of performers. Much of this interviewing took place at the Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, in 1969 and 1970, the first electric blues festivals of any size ever held in North America, and than later at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals.

With their extensive knowledge of the blues music, Erlewine and his brother Daniel were asked to play host to the 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 in these early festivals, with an audio recorder, and later on with video.

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

Erlewine started from a one-room office, and 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, before the World Wide Web even existed—a database of popular music for all music lovers.

Over the years AMG grew, and the All-Movie Guide and All Game Guide were born, and also flourished. Later, Erlewine would create ClassicPosters.com, 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 like the "Rolling Stones Record Guide" were run by a few sophisticated reviewers, and the emphasis was on the expertise of the reviewer, and their point of view. Erlewine insisted on treating all artists equally, and not comparing artist to artist, what can be important, Michael points out, is to find the best music any artist has produced, not if the artist is better or worse than Jimmie Hendrix or Bob Dylan.

Erlewine sold AMG in 1996, at which time he had 150 fulltime employees, and 500 free-lance writers. He had edited and published any number of books and CD-ROMs on music and

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film. During the time he owned and ran AMG, there were no advertisements on the site and nothing for sale. As Erlewine writes, "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, numbering almost 500,000 CDs.



### **Heart Center Meditation Room**

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

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

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“It was not until I met the Tibetan lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in 1974 that I understood Buddhism as not just Philosophy, but also as path, 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 a 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.

“I had been trying to learn the basics of Tibetan Buddhism before I met Trungpa Rinpoche, but the spark that welded all of that together was missing. Trungpa provided that spark. I got to be his chauffer for a weekend, and to design a poster for his public talk.

“More 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 know was that I was learning about myself.

“After that meeting, I begin to understand a lot more of what I had read, but it was almost ten years later that I met my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. Meeting Rinpoche was life-changing.



### **Heart Center Symbol**

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

“We also established KTD Dharma Goods, a mail-order dharma goods business that helped practitioners find the meditation materials they might need. We published many sadhanas, the traditional Buddhist practice texts, plus other teachings, in print and on audio tape.

Years have gone by, and I am still working with Khenpo Rinpoche and the sangha at the Woodstock monastery. Some years ago, Rinpoche surprised my wife and I by telling us



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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 leave the house!

That trip, and a second trip that followed some years later, turned out to be pilgrimages that were also life changing. Our center in Big Rapids has a separate building as a shrine room and even a small Stupa.

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

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### **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 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 at that time. Like many other people his age, Erlewine traveled from college center to center across the nation: Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Cambridge, and Greenwich Village. There was a well-beaten track on which traveled the young folk musicians of the future.

Erlewine, who also played folk guitar, hitchhiked for a stint with a young Bob Dylan, and then more extensively with guitar virtuoso and instrumentalist Perry Lederman. Erlewine helped to put on Dylan's first concert in Ann

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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 were 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, and his stint in the band was how he got the name Iggy. This was the beginning of the hippie era. Michael was the band's lead singer, and played 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.

The Prime Movers became a seminal band throughout the Midwest, and even traveled as far as the West Coast, where the band spent 1967, the "summer of Love," playing at all of the famous clubs, for example, opening for Eric Clapton and Cream at the Fillmore Auditorium.

As the 60s 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 blues and the players, Michael and his brother Dan were invited to help host the first major electric blues festival in the United States, the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival. They got to wine and dine the performers, and generally look after them.

Michael interviewed (audio and video) most of the players at the first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, they included: Big Joe Turner, Luther

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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, Light-nin' 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.

### **Email:**

Michael Erlewine can be reached at  
[Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net)