

## LEAVING BEHIND, AND COMING TO FIND

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It's hard to say "No thank you," when they swarm like ferocious bees; beautiful, but relentless in their desire to push a product. "You need?" the woman with jars filled with fresh cut flowers, asks as I walk by. I pause to take a look and breathe in the unfamiliar scents bursting from the flora. She takes a green stem with multiple fuchsia orchids attached to it and juts it out for me to take hold. Each petal, in the shape of an oblique starfish, quakes as she entices the cash from my pocket. In the center of each bloom a gnome-like face stares back at me with a mildly interested smile. "You take. Very pretty." She says thrusting it toward me. I shake my head and continue to walk with our group. We are all Americans, with the exception of our local guide, Amit, who was born to barter, as he grew up in these congested streets of New Delhi. Around another corner of the market a group of women sit behind a mesmerizing stack of saris. The cheerful dazzle of color brings me closer. "Lady you like? Name your price lady. Good quality. Very beauuutiful." The saleswoman draws out this last word and she caresses my hand with the delicate cloth.

Under my hands I can feel the time and care woven into each design, but I just came to look today and assess my options. This is our second day of the two-week trip and I have budgeted in only so much. The saleswoman coaxes another sari into my hands, and I am stunned by the shimmering-iridescent light that catches the ever-present sun. In a flash I see the street beggar with no hands and no teeth who we passed along the highway to get here. The stubs of his hands upraised supplicating for a meager allotment to extend the misery of his existence. Arms upraised without the means to clasp them in prayer. I hold the fabric as it flows through my fingers like water. I want to buy this garment to support these women, because I do not want to feel guilty for looking away from the beggar. "Beautiful, yes?"

I ask the women how much and they give me a price in rupees, but I have only American dollars. Dazed by the exhaustion of travel I cannot remember the exchange equivalent of rupees to dollars. "Do you

want?” another saleswomen asks. I am doing the math, and chastising myself for studying words in school instead of numbers, as the aromatic and pungent smells of the Paharganj Bazaar alert me to the unfamiliarity of my surrounding. I look around me only to realize that between this hounding and my own remorse, I have separated from the group, which has guaranteed my protection and familiarity. Realizing that I have no guide or interpreter I kindly decline and walk quickly past the spectacular spectrum of color and sound that is an Indian bazaar. On the Navajo reservation where I grew up we had flea markets and craft fairs, but these bazaars are louder and less docile. In India they target you for business and lock on to their target to the point of walking a block down the street and lowering the price with every step.

In a booth filled with maps, I see something that I like. “Very nice.” I say pointing to the large display of maps, covering all the parts of India, Asia and the world. I linger staring at the names and land formations, imagining the places I might see soon, and others reserved for another day. I am back to a comfortable range of my group and have them in my sight. I find my way back into the safe bubble and we move in unison to the other side of the market, just as bustling and frantic as the one left behind. Our American guide, Galen, suggests that we go to the exchange office to trade out our American cash. We agree and slowly make a path through the curious shoppers and pleading shopkeepers. On the way to the exchange office I am bumped on the arm by the child I have left working at the map stand. “Look lady, not cheap. Very nice.” The product now is a laminate map the kind you see rolled up in classrooms. He knows my weakness. Can he see my room back in Colorado covered with places I’ve been to and the destinations that I need to see? “Look lady see?” As this child and I continue to barter my group moves further away and the crowd keeps bumping me closer to the seller.

Yes. I see. I see that my group is getting further from my grasp and the western thread is tight enough to snap. I see that if given another hour of this alone, I would be bent down in a corner, rocking without a jolt of self-recognition. I can see that my group is waiting and this child has followed me to the end of the market. “Please lady, you buy.” The boy’s determination and pleading is noticed by our guide. They fire back and forth finding a compromise. Galen hands me the correct currency and I buy the map for 250 rupees, paying so little to know where I am, knowing

that this map would do me no good in finding my way back home.

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The pungent colossus of stagnant refuse hits me like the pile of bricks found every few feet, littered on the capital streets of Agra, mixed with the piss of humans and sacred cattle alike. India is being rebuilt and torn down in a single. My cash is an open hand economy that brings wealth and cultural destruction with each exchange. My American waste, its dung heap, crowded with flies. I am the boil of beggars and the sore of century's old exploitation. The decay of progress is seen as Agra's mongrel monkeys watch like derelict sentinels over children shitting into a Folgers can on top of a heap of waste, as the towering billboard reads, "Progress Needs a Power Stroke."

In the narrowing streets, men unashamedly piss on walls that house a shine to Kali – black goddess of revenge. A Hindu pantheon of death and destruction glares back from the temple walls. A sweaty wad of cash bruises my thigh as beggar after beggar without limbs, teeth, or nourishment, enough to hide the skeletal protrusions under their skin, plead for one wrinkled rag. Mere pennies paid to ride a camel's back. Slow plod of burden and mange. We drive away packed like sardines from the ransacked Taj, pillaged of its opulent jewels and meaning. Postcards haggled from those casted for nothing better, lay forgotten at the bottom of my bag, unsent, never to show the truth of what I see here.

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Soaked to the core in a humid 90 degrees plus Delhi day, sweat heaves against my face, sticking wet to clothing and burning skin. Feral Brahmas blend into medians, their worship ignored between congested lanes. Rickshaws, bikes and motors wait impatiently for the removal of a mangled mess. At night the rains come steady but do not cool. Filth flows down where children wash, marriages are united and the dead are set free.

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In the Ladakh region alone there are over 220 species of birds. Many of these natural pilots migrate to wetter regions of this land to take advantage of the higher elevations where glacial runoff fills crystalline lakes during the summer months. They flutter with the seasons, following the directions of earth's internal compass. I come to this land following my

own internal pull to explore, to experience the unknown, and to release the fear of being locked inside.

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In a tumbleweed desert, the color and consistency of a discarded lunch sack, I see my old reservation homes of Kayenta, Arizona and Cortez, Colorado. These places weathered my life like sandstone into the shape it holds now and taught me how to conserve my energy so that it could burst with action when needed. The open expanse of the land, with pockets of verdant life, reminds me of the swelling flash floods and the thirsty desire aching in the belly of the Southwest desert to suck moisture into every root and extending branch of anticipating life.

I am continents away from these familiar scenes, yet, I see it reflected in the sun etched people and places of the Ladakh region in India, where trees sprout from brown patches and inhabitants cultivate every last drop, twisted through ingenuity from the cloth of the skies. These same thirsty oases greedily hold every molecule of water, reserving them for use in a tense gamble of survival. From a hilltop advantage I can see how the deep depressions in the crumpled landscape have sprouted sporadic green clutters, where animals – all species, domesticated and wild along with our oldest ancestors, the flora, have gathered in an unspoken pact of symbiosis.

Our group arrived in Leh the night before. We flew over the great Himalayan range from New Delhi in a Boeing 737 that caused my sister to grip my hand at every unexpected bump and request the allotted amount of complimentary drinks. The guesthouse where we are staying is near the Women's Alliance of Ladakh on Sankar road. From the balcony view of our accommodations the Nyamgail Tsemo Gompa and Royal Palace can easily be seen. The way these buildings and sacred sites cling to the mountainside reminds me of the Ancestral Puebloan dwellings of Mesa Verde and other ancient sites. The hosts family welcomes us with an enticing spread of traditional Ladakhi cuisine such as thukpa and momos, a creamy vegetable soup with thick square noodles accompanied by steamy meat pouches that remind me of egg drop soup and pot stickers from the Hong Kong restaurant on the eastside of highway 491, but this mixture is more fresh and the flavors please my tongue. Along with the traditional chai tea, we are provided with chang, their barley brew to wash it all down.

While the rest of my group is sleeping off the flight and the dinner celebration the night before, I am restless. I'm on a 7 AM walk listening to

the birds singing in the tall poplars and the dogs barking in a distant dirt patch. I suppose the dogs work just as well as any rooster would to wake up the populace, rising like every sun-enslave society, to greet the new day. I take to a dirt trail that opens to more paths popping out of the land like voracious veins. I follow a path that runs parallel to the mani walls, built over centuries by smoothed stones inscribed with the prayer of “om, mani, padme, hum.” Alongside the mountain I find an isolated outcropping where I can sit and think before our group meeting at the Women’s Alliance center.

In the distance there’s the sound of young Ladakhi children playing and older men working while the women scold, chastising both groups when they get out of hand. The sun’s life infusing rays are arching over the mountains, spreading a blessing of light that our ancestors have prayed for since time beginning. The effulgence surrounding the mountains inside this village reflects off of the spectacular crisp white stupas that line the village the tombs. These mud plastered domes house relics and ancestral bones, holding their position as sentinels of the ancient Buddhist religion that dominates each step and thought of these people.

I am sitting next to a collection of three unpainted stupas facing the mountains with the sun at my right side. In this sacred desert unacquainted with my eyes I can detect east and west but not north and south. Back in the desert of southwest Colorado these mountains would not be out of place and I would know what was up and what was down. Despite the disorientation I feel comforted, as if I were home, but the mani walls whispering their incantations, and the stupas holding the lives and religious icons of the past like a crypt are a constant reminder to me that I am anywhere but home.

This area, where the Ladakhi people live, is known by the Indian government as Jammu and Kashmir. The capital city Leh, is a hub for trade where all faiths, ethnicities, and economic classes converge. It is hedged in on each side by scheming governments who seek to occupy more space. At the western head of its united body, India holds a tenuous foothold against the Pakistani government, which has fought unsuccessfully to over-step the Line of Control (LoC) and gain back the northern western areas in India. The Chinese government antagonizes from the east as they build roads into the Aksai Chin, hoping to cut away India’s protective hold on Dharamshala and its commitment to the Tibetan exiles, where they reside below Jammu and Kashmir in an area known as the Himachal Pradesh. It is here in the

city of Dharamshala that the Central Tibetan Administration maintains its government in exile and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama holds residence at the Norbulingka Institute.

Here in the city of Leh, at the northern tip of India, I wake up early to find my place in an unfamiliar land. I have been in India less than a week. Introduced at first by the fast paced clamor and depressive congestion of New Delhi, this desert oasis is quickly becoming a favored environment where I can breathe and piece together my thoughts. The intended purpose of this journey is to find my voice as a writer and to learn from the Buddhist traditions and teachings that flow down from the headwaters of the Indus River in Tibet, miles and many mountain passes away from the home of the original Buddha, Prince Siddhartha in Kapilavatsu, India (now part of the southern border of Nepal).

What strikes me the most is the joy that emanates from the hearts of these Ladakhi people. I don't know if it has anything to do with their religious ties to the impermanence of living. Whatever the source, they are unfaltering in their friendliness and will say "juley" waving a hello with their hand vertical to the sky touching thumb to nose. This phrase is as universal in its meaning as the Hawaiian "Aloha," but its main intention is to induce good digestion. I will learn only later how important this is. The openness and welcoming spirit of these people is contrasted by my own American upbringing. Back in the States I've never passed an unknown person and said a simple "hello." Most times a conciliatory smile would cross my face and then I would give them the America courtesy of getting out of their way.

So far I have been passed by five men. Each one shows the sign and declares the "juley" greeting, recognizing my existence as I mimic likewise. Even though I am alone, I do not worry about my own safety as I did in New Delhi. The key distinction is the expanse of space that allows me to maintain my own distance from them, instead of being forced by the sheer volume of bodies to huddle closer. The space allotted by the rugged topography allows us to maneuver without interference, because of that I'm not troubled by their presence and they are not troubled by mine.

At dinner our guide Namgial asked me if I knew about the Buddhist concept of "emptiness." I told him that all I knew of the idea is that emptiness is the lack of intrinsic reality or better yet, the intrinsic identity of all phenomenon. He laughed a little, showing a wide smile that I would forever associate with all Buddhists, and clarified for me that

emptiness could not kill emptiness. All things are emptiness, including fears; therefore your fears cannot harm you if you recognize their emptiness. I told him that what I gathered from this is that emptiness is letting go of the notion of reality and seeing that it is different for everyone, yet the same for all of us, both living and not living. He gave me another smile and a look that suggested that I was close enough. During this reflection I use the skills of meditation to find my voice and face my demons. After our discussion, I write down this reminder in my journal:

Emptiness cannot kill emptiness.

You are the emptiness and your monsters are emptiness.

Your fears cannot kill you.

For this writing journey I have been reading the Tibetan book of the dead known as the Bardo Thödol. The idea of the bardo is described as the intermediary stage or gap in life when the consciousness is freed from the limitations of the body. The samsarah is representative of one's memory of suffering. The goal of Buddhist practitioners is to reach enlightenment. In order to achieve this, one must recognize the illusions of their fears and subdue the samsarah. In Buddhism the individual is responsible for everything in their life including their illusions.

My illusion this morning, the one that wakes me once again and beckons me back to the mani wall, is the fear that I have not been honest with myself. I have kept hidden my desires because I did not want to harm the image that my loved ones had of me. As I reach further to the heart of emptiness and the home of my samsarah, I struggle to let go of one self-image in order to claim the heart and soul that was born to me. I seek honesty, knowing that a lie is the highest form of disrespect because it takes truth away from the one it is told to. I was taught this truth from the lips of the Dali Lama himself, when I was given two tickets to see him speak at the Pepsi Stadium in Denver. Of all the things he spoke of, the words that penetrated my heart were his declaration that "honesty is the truest form of compassion." It is in this recognition of my own deception, that I gain the courage for honesty.

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Outside the open courtyard inside the Likir monastery, an aged amala (among the Ladakhi, all revered women are called mother) takes the

bone white mani beads given to me by Namgail, which I had blessed by His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Karmapa at the Gyuto Tantric Monastery in Dharamshala. She rubs them between her thumb and pointer finger. The softness of her flesh like taffy envelops each bead as it moves along in prayer. Om, mani, padme, hum. Om, mani, padme hum. She uses the supple pad of her thumb to pull down the next bead after each complete prayer. The prayer is spoken 108 times. One prayer for each bead. Remember the Dharma and the sacred jewel. This is a loose translation given to me by Namgail to explain a lifetime of teaching contained in six syllables. The wisdom of the Buddha, teaching us that life is suffering, and happiness, letting go.

The amala uses this incantation is to invoke the spirit of Chenrezig, the Buddha representation of compassion. She hands me back the beads and encourages me with a smile to pray. I say each sound the way I see it spelt out in my notes. Om, mani, padme, hum. She repeats her prayer using the beads wrapped around her wrist. My eye catches the six individually distinct beads added to replace the lost or broken ones. 108. Complete. Om, mani, padme, hum. The emphasis lands on the last two syllables and she draws out the pronunciation with exaggerated lips. I mimic poorly. Om, mani, padme, hum. She pulls my arm closer to her. I am to listen this time. Om, mani, peme, hung. I repeat, but she shakes her head and dismisses me like an uncompliant student. Six syllables. The teachings of the Buddha contained in one prayer that will take me a lifetime to understand.