

## **Nepal-Tibet Story - Pilgrimage to the Roof of the World, May 7-21, 2006**

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This is how the trip tour was billed:  
“Traveling together with a group of  
some of our most knowledgeable authors  
and translators of Buddhist works, we  
will explore a range of Buddhist spiritual  
and cultural traditions. In addition to  
viewing the wonders of the Himalayan  
landscape and studying with our faculty,  
we will have the chance to practice the  
essential contemplative and meditative  
traditions of Buddhism.” The tour was  
sponsored by the Shambhala Mountain  
Center in Colorado. This website link  
tells about the tour and the sponsoring  
organization:

[http://www.shambhalamountain.org/sacred\\_journeys.html](http://www.shambhalamountain.org/sacred_journeys.html)

Our group’s experts on Buddhism were  
Frank Berliner and Judith Simler-Brown,  
both of whom have been professors for  
many years at Naropa University, the  
principal Buddhist University in the  
United States. Each morning in Nepal  
and Tibet they led an hour meditation  
session at 7am, and gave a lecture in the  
evening. In each country we also had a  
local guide who could serve as  
translator, etc. There were 11 of us in the  
“pilgrimage” group including our two  
leaders.

My main motivations for the trip were to  
understand Buddhism better and to talk  
to American Buddhists about their  
meditation practices. Of course the  
scenery would be remarkable and I  
intended to get a lot of good pictures,  
including pictures of the Tibetan people.

Most of the tour group started out at Los  
Angeles airport on Japan Air Lines,  
arriving in Bangkok nearly 24 hours  
later. After a quick sleep at the Amari  
Airport Hotel, we boarded Thai Air for  
Kathmandu.

### **Kathmandu, Nepal**

Stepping off the plane in Nepal was  
much like arriving in India. The Nepal  
people look and dress very much like the  
people of India. And the garbage-lined  
streets reminded me a lot of India. The  
neighborhood surrounding our hotel  
consisted largely of Tibetans. In the  
1950s when China invaded Tibet, over  
100,000 Tibetans fled to Nepal. Also, in  
many later years thousands of Tibet  
refugees migrated to Kathmandu. Our  
hotel was only a 10 minute walk by a  
muddy path to this community and to the  
Boudhnath Stupa.

### **Boudhnath Stupa**



The Great Stupa of Boudhnath (above),  
one of the world’s largest stupas, which  
are dome-shaped, round shrines usually  
containing relics or remains from  
Buddha or other religious figures.  
Built on an octagonal base of about 120  
meters in diameter, this colossal  
structure is said to contain the relics of  
the “Mahakashyapa Buddha.” Each day  
after dawn and just before dusk,  
hundreds of Tibetans circumambulate

the stupa, always walking in a clockwise direction. As they slowly walk they sometimes chant and many turn prayer wheels, either the kind that you carry in your hand or the over-500 prayer drums that are inset in the wall of the stupa. The Stupa contains a shrine to the goddess of smallpox, but no one seemed concerned about smallpox.

All around the stupa walkway are small Tibetan shops of all kinds. There were three or four CD shops and generally each one was playing a recording of “Om mani padme hum,” the most famous Buddhist mantra that essentially says that through dedicated practice that it is possible to transform an impure body or mind into a pure one. Because of these CD shops it is possible to hear this simple musical phrase for hours on end as you walk around the Stupa. The Tibetans don’t seem to get tired of it.

One day at this Great Stupa we saw a most remarkable community spirit in action. The cement on one of the Stupa terraces was being replaced, and all the work was being done by hand. The cement had to be hauled about 150 feet, and about 100 people had lined up as a human chain to move the cement, a bucket at a time, to those laying cement. The people who had volunteered for this job were of all ages and both genders. Monks were scattered among laity, and often all were singing or chanting. Most appeared to be happy and content – the joy of giving comes to mind.

### **The Urgyen Choling Monastery**

One early morning I was taking pictures at the Boudhnath Stupa of a row of monks sitting and chanting. I thought I would be generous and gave them what I

thought was a 20 rupee bill. A few minutes later the monks caught up to me and asked what the bill was and where it came from. Then I realized that it was in Thailand Baht. I took it back and gave them some American dollars. One of the monks spoke English somewhat, and so we struck up a conversation. He asked me if I wanted to see their monastery, and I said yes, thinking it was just a block away. He took me through winding little streets and about a half mile later proudly showed me their monastery building.

The building was the size of a duplex in the USA and housed about 12 monks and two very young boys. I was shown through the whole building and allowed to take pictures of their sleeping and meeting rooms. Then I was introduced to the senior lama, a Tibetan of about 55 years of age. He made a phone call and his young niece came in and translated for us. Before I could go they insisted on serving tea and presenting me with a kata, a white or yellow silk scarf that is draped over the back of one’s neck and down the front side. The kata symbolizes greeting or respect and emphasizes that the giver lacks ulterior motives.

None-the-less, before I left they said they would appreciate more donations as they wanted to provide training for many more young boys. I was left with the impression that it was a worthwhile cause. After leaving the monastery I hurried back through the city streets, not really knowing where I was going. After quite a few dead-end turns I finally made it back to the hotel. All I missed was breakfast, and fortunately did not hold up the group for the day’s tour.

### **Shechen Monastery**

One morning from the Stupa we walked to the nearby Shechen Tennyi Dargyeling, a Buddhist Monastery built in the 1980s by a famous lama, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. Shechen also is the home base of Matthieu Ricard, a well known author and photographer. The monastery still flourishes with nearly 200 monks, a monastic college, an arts and painting school, and a contemplative atmosphere. In the art school we watched some monks painting intricate thangkas (cloth tapestries with Buddhist symbolism) as well as other objects. For examples of thangkas see: <http://www.sacredpaint.com/avalokiteshvara-mandala.html>



### **Bhaktapur**

At lunchtime our bus departed for Bhaktapur, the third largest city in the Kathmandu valley. The city has been extensively restored as the result of a massive aid project funded by the government of Germany. At lunch we sat on the balcony of Nyatapola Restaurant and watched the people walking and resting in Durbar Square. (Note that there are two other Durbar Squares in Kathmandu.) After walking by several temples and ancient statues, we strolled into Potter's Square. In this

square hundreds, if not thousands, of clay pots sat in the sun to dry. We also watched as pots were made while spinning on manually operated potter's wheels.

### **Parpheng**

The next day we took a long drive south through the countryside to Parpheng, a small town high in the small mountains surrounding Kathmandu. In and around the little town are several popular pilgrimage sites. First we went to the Ganesh Sarihwati Temple and then to Gorakhnath also known as Guru Rinpoche's cave. The cave was tiny but at least 10 or 15 people squeezed into it. The cave was several hundred feet up a steep incline, giving us great views of the fertile farms of the Parpheng valley and the Bagmati River.

Taking stairs back down we came to the Vajra Yogini Temple and then a Sakya Monastery. For some of us the most special discovery at this Monastery was a small boy about 3 or 4 years old who was being treated like a king. He apparently was a Tulku, the reincarnation of a prior Buddha master and destined to be a Rinpoche, which means "precious teacher." Like the Dali Lama, he will be raised and taught by monks until adulthood, with little or no contact with his family or peers.

### **Dakshinkali**

The Dakshinkali Temple, infamous for regular Hindu sacrificing of animals to appease the Goddess Kali, was our next stop. The temple is one of the most important Hindu sites in Nepal. We did not see the actual killing, but observed someone hauling away the head of a

huge goat. And we saw people dipping branches into blood and then shaking it on and around religious statues. Fresh and dried blood were everywhere and the atmosphere was tense and harsh, not at all conducive to what we would normally associate with worship.



Offering Blood, Etc. to Spirits

### **Swayambhunath Temple**

The next morning we visited the Buddhist Swayambhunath Temple and Stupa, often called the “monkey temple” because of the large band of somewhat friendly monkeys living there. To get to the stupa it is necessary to climb a long stairway, and at the top is not only the stupa but great views of the valley and Kathmandu City. The following web site has beautiful pictures and a description of this special place, which is worshiped by both Buddhists and Hindus:  
[http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/nepal/swayambhunath\\_stupa.html](http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/nepal/swayambhunath_stupa.html)

Nearby the stupa is a small shrine devoted to Saraswati, the goddess of learning. At exam time it is crowded with students hoping to improve their performance. Perhaps she also helps tourists like me who become overloaded with travel facts and can't remember much of anything when they sit down to write a travel story.

### **Patan/ Jawalakhel**

Our next stop was Patan, the second-largest city in the Valley, although it seemed just like a suburb of Kathmandu. Patan was once an independent kingdom, whose origins date back two thousand years. The city houses the twelfth-century Buddhist monastery, Hiranya Varna Mahavihar, which is among the finest in the country with its gold-plated roof, courtyard with many prayer wheels, and richly decorated three-story temple.

We enjoyed lunch in a garden restaurant and then stopped by Jawalakhel, a busy handicraft center where we watched Tibetan (refugee) woman making their famous carpets. Their skill and speed were amazing. Upstairs was a carpet display room and a number of our tour group bought carpets to fly with (not on) all the way home. Some even bought more than one. They were very beautiful, the carpets that is. You can see and read about these carpets at <http://www.travel-nepal.com/craft/jhc/index.html>.

### **Pashupatinath Temple**

Pashupatinath is one of the most famous and important Hindu temples in Nepal. It is well known for its outdoor, public cremations that go on all day long. Over the years it has drawn hundreds of thousands of family and friends of the deceased, Hindu devotees, tourists, peddlers and sadhus, wandering ascetic holy men. Adjacent to the Pashupatinath temple are concrete platforms called ghats for cremation fires. On the other side of the ghats is a very murky river where the cremation handlers push the ashes and cinders. A cremation fire

burns for a couple of hours before the remaining material is shoved into the river.



**Public Cremation**

Just up the river from there I saw a man dump a couple of large garbage cans into the river and below him a few yards was a woman washing some bowls for eating. Unfortunately our ancestors didn't grow up drinking such river water, so then we could travel in Nepal and similar countries without worrying about the food and water.

We visited the Pashupatinath in the evening just at the end of a heavy rain and yet there were quite a few people milling around; some were just quietly watching the cremations. The Hindus believe that a dying person must be cremated within minutes of their physical death in order for the spirit of the deceased to fare well in the afterlife. Thus the family will rush their dying loved one to the temple several minutes or hours before they are likely to die. If they were to start the cremation a little early, it would probably not be a serious issue, but in this country I imagine that someone would get sued or be set to jail for euthanasia.

### **Flying to Tibet**

The route from Kathmandu to Lhasa is an exciting one because the plane passes by some 5 or 6 of the world's highest mountains including Mount Everest. Normally jet airliners fly about the height of these mountains, so they don't fly directly over the peaks. We flew Air China and the plane was packed. It was mostly cloudy but once in awhile we could see mountain peaks. It reminded me of flying between Anchorage and Minneapolis where the white mountains and giant glaciers are visible continuously for at least an hour.

The tallest mountains pretty much follow the border between Nepal and Tibet. The main difference between the two sides of the mountains is that the Nepal countryside tends to be green but the Tibet landscape is mostly brown. This difference is mainly a consequence of altitude; Tibet tends to be at least twice as high. At about 12,000 feet and higher, Tibet does not make it easy for trees and other green things to grow. About the only trees we saw were willow trees. They didn't allow the willow trees to get very tall, but kept cutting them down so that they could use the branches to stick in the ground and start new trees. In the river valleys were huge groves of new, young willow trees, which presumably are intended to protect against soil erosion from rain and winter snows.

### **Tsedang, Tibet**

Our plane landed at Gongkar Airport, which is about 80 miles from Lhasa the capital of Tibet. Before going to Lhasa we stayed in a little town called Tsedang for two nights. Almost the entire town has been built by the Chinese for government and military operations. The

city has a surreal appearance with wide boulevards, new concrete buildings, and bright, mostly bright red, decorations. We stayed at the Tsedang Hotel, the best hotel in town, but the rooms had no heat and the staff spoke no English.

### **Samye Monastery**

During our first full day in Tibet we took a trip to Tibet's first Buddhist monastery, Samye Monastery, founded in the eighth century by King Trisong Detsen. Guru Rinpoche also played a major role in its early development. Our little bus had to bump over about 15 miles of dusty gravel between dry fields despite snow-capped mountains on most sides.

Samye sits inside a large, round, walled compound intended to architecturally represent the round Buddhist wheel of life and the sacred mandala. Except for the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, Samye is considered the most sacred place in Tibet. Many important murals and statues are contained within the walls of Samye. Many of these date back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. So many pilgrims visit Samye that they rent rooms for visitors and have a restaurant of sorts.

The main building contains the principal temple with a large room for monks to congregate, and around this building are several large stupas within the circular wall. The large stupas and many other buildings were destroyed by the Chinese during the cultural revolution but recently most have been rebuilt. While before the Chinese invasion Samye had 600 monks, with the destruction most monks had to leave. Many have returned and over 135 monks are now in residence. We walked around their living

quarters, which for the most part were little rooms on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor above the main assembly.

Fifty or even twenty-five years ago China, fearing the power of the Buddhist religion on the Tibet people, destroyed most religious artifacts and killed or humiliated the monks. Now China is committed to a limited return of the monasteries. Now they see the economic potential of these monasteries in attracting tourism and revenue, so they have given funds to the Tibetans to rebuild some of the monasteries. Tibetans are largely free to practice religion, but they are still forbidden to have any pictures or icons of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dali Lama, because he is seen as a political threat as well as a religious leader.

### **Sang-ngag Zimche Nunnery**

On the edge of Tsedang and a few hundred feet up the foot hills of the older, Tibetan sector of town rests a small nunnery, the Sang-ngag Zimche Nunnery. Surprisingly this nunnery, although formerly a monastery, dates back to a slightly earlier time in the 8<sup>th</sup> century than Samye. Now it has only 20 nuns. The abbot, who administers a monastery or nunnery, by tradition, must be male. Apparently nunneries receive only a tiny fraction of the donations that monasteries do. This little nunnery was no exception as it was run down and quite stark. While we were there a few women pilgrims came by but that was all.

As we first entered a 70-year-old nun met us and sat us down to serve some very salty tea. Later she took us to the abbot who showed us the assembly hall

for meditation and study. Adjacent to this hall was a large set of shelves with hundreds of little slots, each one containing a cloth bag. We asked what they were, and we were told that the bags contained books for study purposes. They probably contained mantras for chants also.

As we were leaving we saw in a courtyard an interesting solar stove. A metal tea pot sat on a stand between two concave, shiny metal panels. These panels did a remarkable job of collecting heat and within 20 minutes a large water pot could be boiling, just from solar heat. Later in the week we saw several more of these devices in monasteries.

### **Mindroling Monastery**

On the next day we departed for Lhasa but on the way stopped at Mindroling Monastery. Mindroling is the largest and most important Nyingmapa monastery. At one time it had 400 monks but now has only 89. During the cultural revolution all of the insides were destroyed but the buildings were left standing.

Upon entering the monastery we immediately encountered loud music coming out of several different types of horns operated by young monks. In one section were a half dozen boys playing gyalings, metal instruments that look like oboes from a distance but had big mouth pieces played like a tuba. The monks seemed to be playing them without ever breathing, but they had perfected the technique of keeping the sound going even as they inhaled. About 200 yards away, and out of sight, were several young monks playing the huge, 15-foot long bass horns. And in a third

corner of the musical triangle was the percussion section, made up mostly of several drummers and a cymbals player. While the sounds they produced were not particularly relaxing, they sounded serious and sacred.

Mindroling's main assembly hall displays statues of Guru Rinpoche and Sakyamuni Buddha. One small side room had over 1,000 Buddhas only 4 to 18 inches high. All were made of clay and painted with gold. This was just a tiny sampling of the tremendously costly gold and precious stones decorating the many statues and other icons used for worship in monasteries throughout Tibet. Many of these valuable materials were confiscated by the Chinese 50 years ago and shipped to Beijing.

One remarkable highlight of Mindroling was a huge gold Buddha statue well over 20-feet tall with bright blue hair. There were a few ironies as well. One was a sacred figure playing a guitar with a little tiger by his side. Another was a Buddha with a faint pink face and stomach in the middle of a large number of gold-faced sacred characters. Apparently the pink face was intended to avoid discriminating against the white race.

### **Entering Lhasa**

Along the road to Lhasa we come upon a family prostrating their way to the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. Two people pulled a small wagon with provisions while the remaining three family members prostrated at the side the road. Each prostrating person would take three steps, clap hand-blocks 3-times in the air while saying a brief mantra, and then fall flat to the ground. They wore a long,

thick leather apron and used wood blocks on their hands to break the fall and avoid injury. The degree of their devotion to worship in this way for some 300 miles is difficult to imagine.

Driving into Lhasa, the capital of Tibet was a bit disappointing because it seemed like the modern part of any large city in China. However, as we rounded the bend and the gigantic Potala Palace filled the sky, almost everyone in our bus gasped. It truly is magnificent.



**Potala Palace in Lhasa**

We drove about another kilometer until we came to our hotel, which was right on the boundary dividing the Chinese and the Tibetan sectors of the city. It was only two long blocks to Barkhor Square and the Jokhang temple, which mark the center of that which the Tibetans feel is most sacred in the city.

### **Barkhor/Jokhang**

The Jokhang dates back to the 7th century and was built by King Songtsen Gampo over a mythical lake in order to house the image of Akshobya Buddha offered to the king by his Nepalese wife, Bhrikuti. The Jokhang is not a particularly large temple, but a huge number of Tibetans circumambulate around it every day, especially at dawn and dusk. The path around it has been narrowed considerably by the hundreds

of little shops and tables with items for sale to both locals and tourists.

At just about any time of the day there will be dozens of people prostrating in front of the Jokhang. The prostrating area and the front entrance to the Jokhang face a large open square called the Barkhor Square. The entire area encompassing these sacred and commercial activities is called the Barkhor. The Barkhor Square also is a popular place for Tibetans to just stand around and talk.

### **Ganden Monastery**

Ganden Monastery is arguably the most spectacular religious site in Tibet, but it has had a tragic past also. It rests at the top of a steep-sloped mountain 14,000 feet high. The rough, gravel road to the top consists largely of hair-pin turns. At the top it seems like the village 2,000 feet below is almost straight down.

The history of Ganden Monastery dates back to Tsongkhapa in the fourteenth century. Tsongkhapa spent most of his life traveling from place to place but eventually chose to build the monastery “Ganden” which is the Tibetan name for pure land of Tushita. Ganden grew into a secluded center of learning and contemplation and at one time housed more than five thousand monks. During the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards destroyed most of the monastery with dynamite. In recent years a large part of the monastery has been restored to its original form. Now about 400 monks have been able to move back into the monastery.

The trail to circumambulate the monastery winds for a mile or two



around the crest of the mountain. The breathtaking views were extraordinary. We were not alone; several monks with laity at their sides also were walking the trail as it went up and down along the steep edges of the mountain. Many prayer flags were caught in the brush along the trail. The monks stopped at sites with special sacred meaning to chant or say a silent prayer.



Near the trail was an area where they celebrate “sky burials,” however, such areas are not open to tourists from other countries. In these sky burials the dead are carried by family to the top of a mountain and left for the vultures to enjoy the bodies. Sometimes the bodies are dismembered and the pieces given to the vultures. This would not appeal to most Westerners, but it does dramatically symbolize the oneness of man and nature. The Tibetans believe that the spirit leaves the body immediately upon death and the feeding of hungry vultures is viewed as one’s last act of charity. Not all Tibetans are buried this way, but it is still quite common.

While we were touring the temples and shrines of the Ganden Monastery we had the unusual treat of being about to watch the 400 monks at lunch, which is actually their last meal of the day. Unfortunately they would not allow

photographs, so I will have to give a word picture. The lunch room and the temple assembly room were one and the same. The monks all sat on the rows of cushions as if in meditation, except that some of the time they were talking. Two of the monks were perched on short tables above the rest. One was the abbot and the other the attendance keeper. The entire room was dimly lit.

They would chant in sing-song voices for a few minutes and then stop to eat something. A few monks served the food to each monk or group of monks, so they did not have to pass much food around. All that we saw them eat was a flat bread and tsampa with tea. Tsampa is finely ground roasted-barley. It looks like gray flour and tastes like gray flour. Sometimes it is mixed with a liquid and rolled into dough-like balls. This is a favorite food for traveling, but only a Tibetan can eat it every day and still look forward to the next meal.

Hardly anything nutritious except barley grows in Tibet, so it is difficult to get a well balanced diet. Fish are very rare as are chicken and beef. Yaks are plentiful but their meat is quite tough, even more so than buffalo. Not all Tibetans eat meat. Their main staples appear to be barley and yak butter. Without them they might not survive.

The principal other Tibetan dishes are tsampa-with-noodles and momos, which are essentially Chinese dumplings without much taste. The monks did not get either of these for lunch; however, it appeared like they were going to get a special yak-cheese for dessert. As we left some monks were bringing in some huge blocks of cheese covered with bright red paint or wax. It appeared like

they would use it first in a religious ritual before eating it. It did not look anything like Wisconsin cheese, except the kind that Wisconsin football lovers wear on their heads.

### **Potala Palace**

The Potala is gigantic, beautiful and the principal symbol of both traditional and modern Tibet. Many Tibetans make their pilgrimages to this site as well as the Jokhang temple. The Potala sits on a hill dominating the city and it takes some time to walk up the hill to the back of the Palace where entrance is allowed.

Until 1959 when the 14<sup>th</sup> Dali Lama fled from the Chinese invaders, the Potala housed not only the Dali Lama but thousands of people including the entire Tibet government as well as many sacred chambers. Although only 3% of 1,000 rooms have been opened since then, it still seemed like a huge place inside.

Although the Potala dates back to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, construction of the present palace began in 17<sup>th</sup> century. As it was the official residence of the various Dali Lamas, not surprisingly there are shrines and statues for each one. There are numerous other shrines as well. The amount of gold and the number of precious stones in these chambers are incredible and must be weighed in tons, not pounds or kilos. With the tremendous wealth in the Potala, as well as other sacred places, it shows great devotion to principles (or naivety) for the Tibetans not to have had an army.

### **Sera Monastery**

On our last afternoon in Tibet, those of us who were not exhausted from sightseeing drove to the edge of Lhasa to visit the Sera Monastery. Sera is now home to about 600 monks but in its pre-Chinese day held 8,000. It is renowned for being the second largest monastery in Central Tibet and for its lively afternoon debate rituals. An ancient monastic custom, the debating is captivating even for those of us who don't understand a word of Tibetan. Each day the monks attend classes during the day and then in late afternoon move to the debating court yard.

Although some monks divide into larger groups, most pair off and take turns playing teacher and student. The student sits while the "teacher" stands and asks the student a review question. As soon as the student attempts to answer the question, the "teacher" winds up much like a baseball pitcher or judo instructor, shouts, and slaps his hands to signify that the answer was right or wrong.



**Debating Monks**

If the answer was particularly stupid, the "teacher" may slap the student on the head. The student may try to argue that his answer was correct, but the "teacher" has the upper hand, so to speak. At some point the students may switch roles. Meanwhile the teachers observe from

the sidelines. It seems to me like a great way to assess student performance.

We toured the Monastery but it seemed very dull compared to the lively debates outside. The debates last 2 to 3 hours each day and well over a 150 monks participated on the day we visited. I wish that I had a chance to learn debating skills in an environment like this when I went to school.

### **The Orphanage**

On the way back to the hotel we stopped at an orphanage, the Tendol Syalzur's Children's Charity in Lhasa Tibet. This was not an official visit but two members of our group were thinking about contributing to it. The principal benefactors of the orphanage are in Germany and Switzerland, and it has been in operation for about 13 years.

We did not spend a lot of time there, but were warmly greeted by the Director and many of the 40-some children residing there. The children living there attend either primary or secondary school just a few houses away. The school does not promote a particular religion or political position. We left feeling that it was very well run and definitely worthy of support.

### **The People of Nepal and Tibet**

The Nepalese facial features were very much like the people of India. However, the women of Nepal wore mostly red saris as opposed to India's saris of yellow, orange, and a variety of other colors. The Tibetans often wear colorful colors especially in their head decorations. The Tibetans, as compared to the Chinese, tend to have long but

large faces with less narrow eyes. But their most noticeable facial feature is their darker skin color. The high altitude gives little protection against burn. You may have noticed in some photos from Tibet the people have cheeks with darker pigments. Some of their faces look like their cheeks have charred from repeated burning. The sun at that altitude is cruel.

Nepal has a population of 23 million with only a million living in the Kathmandu Valley. Poverty is a major problem as the average annual income is only about \$225 (US). Tourism is a major industry and most visitors are there to hike in the mountains, which they call trekking. The same is true of Tibet. Nepal officially is a Hindu state, with the king having a special religious role. Buddhism is second most popular as a religion, although some claim that it is not a religion. Only 3% of the people are Moslems, which is much lower than that of India.

In Tibet there are about 2.7 people with about 400,000 of these residing in Lhasa. Official population statistics from China are not particularly reliable because they wish to minimize the image that China has taken over Tibet. Our guide told us that in Lhasa about half the people are Chinese, but proportionately fewer live in the countryside.

In 1950 before the Chinese invaded Tibet an estimated 20% of the men in Tibet were monks living in monasteries. Now that the Chinese have re-organized the country and killed or chased away many Tibetan monks, they are a much smaller group, perhaps one tenth as many as 60 years ago,

The devastation to Tibet by Communist China from 1950 on was not limited to monks and Monasteries. Systematic population counts were not made but estimates now range from 400,000 to 1.2 million Tibetans killed during the invasion, initial occupation, and the Cultural Revolution. An unfortunate tragedy indeed.

Both Tsedang and Lhasa are about 12,000 feet high and the surrounding mountains even higher. The bodies of people that live there awhile get adjusted, of course, but tourists and other travelers often suffer shortness of breath, headaches and nausea. In fact many tourists have to be hospitalized for altitude sickness. While we were there several people from another tour group had to be hospitalized with IVs because of altitude problems.

Because our itinerary focused mainly on Buddhist temples and monasteries, in retrospect Nepal sometimes seems like an extension of Tibet. But from the windows of our little bus, Nepal seemed like a province of India. Like India, poverty is pervasive and garbage can be seen piled high along the roads. And like India, cows, dogs, and monkeys are sometimes allowed to stroll in the streets along with people, cars, bicycles, and trucks.

In contrast the streets of Tibetan cities are swept clean, few animals wander the roads. And the local people tend to be well dressed. Part of the reason for greater order in Tibet is the Chinese occupation. While the Chinese have destroyed much of the Tibetan culture, they have contributed in small ways such as the building of roads, bridges, and hospitals.

The trip helped me experience how Hinduism, compared to Buddhism, is not only gaudier and less concerned with compassion; it is also much less gentle. In general I saw much more tension in the faces of Nepalese than Tibetans. In the Hindu temple where animals were being slaughtered as sacrifices to the gods, the people acted agitated as they worried about sprinkling blood and other parts of the ceremony. The Temple cremations did not appear peaceful either. Knowing that people were brought to the cremation sites before they were completely dead only added to the tension.

Buddhism as a whole is very complex because it has such divergent strands with unique customs in each. There are at least five major schools or denominations of Buddhism and these to some degree coincide with country boundaries. In addition, each country has its own set of folk religions that preceded Buddhism. In Tibet and Bhutan the Bon, an animistic folk religion, proceeded, and to some extent merged together with, Buddhism. The Bon accounts for many of the uniquenesses of Tibetan Buddhism: prayer flags, circumambulation of temples and monasteries, and so forth.



**Pilgrim and Prayer Wheel**

Tibetan Buddhists worship their teachers and their teachers' teachers, which they refer to as lineages. Not that they necessarily pray to the teachers or gods expecting things in return, but they show great thankfulness and devotion to the lineages of their teachers. Their temples and monasteries contain many gold-plated statues not only of deities and protector beings, but famous teachers or lamas, many of whom were selected as reincarnations of previous teachers. The Tibetan people pay homage to these teachers or spiritual leaders by pilgrimages to the monasteries, where they leave money, bow, light candles made from compressed yak butter, and otherwise express their devotion.

### **Personal Woes and Joys of the Spiritual Pilgrimage**

We knew from the beginning that this trip would not always be easy. The travel agent warned us of problems of altitude, temperature extremes, dust, and travel diseases. I have already alluded to some of these woes, but there were more. And there were some joys and special memories as well.

For me the challenges started with the plane from Los Angeles to Tokyo, before going on to Bangkok. I sat in a middle, center seat near the back of the plane, and fortunately 90% of the passengers were small Japanese and I didn't feel terribly crowded on the sides, but there was so little leg room that I couldn't bend over to get things out of my brief case. On the 11 hour trip to

Tokyo the people in my row played a game of "Who can go to the lavatory the least often?" The small Japanese woman sitting next to me won, and she didn't even know we were playing a game. She never got out of her seat the entire 11 hours, even though she ate two meals and had drinks.

On the first day in Nepal we received a lecture on how we should only drink bottled water and not eat any raw fruits and vegetables. Never-the-less, few of us could resist having a little fresh fruit because we were staying in an American brand hotel and it seemed very clean. Well, about the third day members of our group started getting sick and by the time we got to Tibet almost half of our group had suffered a stomach condition for at least a day or two. I suffered less than a day, but I knew from other travels that it was better not to eat vegetables even if they were cooked. I also lost five pounds on the trip.

Our group dealt with the health crisis and other issues very well. There were few complaints about inconveniences and hardships except to joke about them or to ask how to deal with a problem. Group members were very supportive, helping each other with all kinds of problems.

We discovered a commonality between the two countries: the beggars and hawkers (street vendors) were extremely tenacious. This caused great consternation among many of our group members. Being Buddhists mostly they tried to show compassion by giving beggars money or buying from the hawkers, but as soon as one street person received generosity, dozens or hundreds of others descended upon the giver. We

learned very quickly that survival of a foreigner requires establishing limits on enacting compassion. Even then it sometimes was extremely uncomfortable for us.

The insensitivity and persistence of the vendors was particularly stressful for Frank, one of our leaders. A vendor was trying to sell him a knife and he kept explaining why he had no use for a knife until he was blue in the face. Frank finally walked away but the next day the knife peddler continued to pester him. At our farewell dinner, we presented Frank with a thank you present – a knife just like the one he persistently rejected. Seeing Frank’s face and hearing his laugh was the highlight of the day.

The 12,000 feet altitude of Tibet was another challenge. Many prepared for it by taking Diamox before arriving. But nobody warned me that laptop hard drives are not likely to survive the altitude. When I started it up in Tibet, I could hear stuff grinding inside, a sign that I may have lost all my pictures taken in Nepal. Upon returning home I learned that most laptop hard drives depend upon air pressure and can not handle altitudes of over 10,000 feet. The drive was trashed but by paying a lot of money I was able to get most of my files recovered.

Some of we humans also had minor problems with the altitude. The night after our trek at 14,000 feet, I felt short of breath. It was exacerbated by having a cold and not being about to breath through my nose. It felt really good to get down to sea level in Hong Kong.

For me the greatest discomfort of the trip was the lack of heat at night in Tibet.

None of my rooms during the six nights had any heat and some nights it got down in the 40s. Fortunately I was able to pile on quite a few blankets and wear my clothes to bed. It made me really appreciate those who sleep in tents while climbing Mt. Everest or dog sledding in Alaska.

It took me two weeks to get over my jet lag from the trip, which is much longer than my usual recovery from trips to Asia. I think the adjustment was greater because not only were there physical challenges but mental ones. I was constantly trying to put what I learned into perspective and apply it to living a more meaningful life. Even now I am trying to make sense out of what I experienced.

Our group was a major comfort during the difficulties of the trip. It is hard to imagine a more supportive and caring collection of 11 people. Out of this emerged a group with high morale and warm ties. Compassion and kindness are supreme virtues in Buddhism and they must have contributed to the mood and style of the group.

We all agreed to stay in touch by email, which we have been doing. In addition, we set up a common site on the web for



**The Tour Group**

uploading our pictures. You can see these photographs at:  
<http://www.spiritual.smugmug.com>

In our group we had a larger than usual number of people with good senses of humor. Sometimes it seemed like the whole group could not stop laughing. I think we attracted a lot of attention at airports and other public places because somebody would say something funny and we would laugh very loudly.



**Judith & Frank, Tour Leaders**

Our tour leaders, especially Frank, were casual and joked a lot. Both Frank and Judith were very good speakers, charismatic and thought provoking. We could not help but acquire facts, ideas, insights, and new ways of practice from them. They also helped us by reminding us that Buddha's principle teachings were something like the following: suffering is caused by craving; suffering can be reduced by reducing craving; adversity is to be welcomed because it can reduce craving.

Another source of inspiration for me was the Tibetan people. In both Nepal and Tibet I purposely concentrated on taking pictures of peoples' faces. In Tibet it was remarkably easy to find faces that expressed serenity, peace and inner contentment. I felt grateful that in most cases they were willing for me to take

their picture without giving them anything in return. It was a joy to see so much joy. One of my most favorite pictures is the one (below) of a Tibetan man strolling through the square with his tiny daughter. He was dressed like most of the Tibetan men in Lhasa, but at six feet a little taller. In his walk and on his face were hints of self-confidence, caring, and peacefulness. What a role model! There were many like him in Tibet.



Our group was on a spiritual pilgrimage in that we each wanted to see places with sacred meaning that we had read about. We each wanted to improve our personal lives as a consequence of the activities of the trip. And some wanted to express devotion to their lineage of teachers and the symbols representing the things they hold dear. And finally, I think we each wanted a better understanding of the relationship between Buddhist ideas and the geography and culture of the places we visited.

We were richly rewarded.