

## *LADAKH, INDIA*

### *ANG TO LAMAYURU*

It's better to be a traveling fool  
Than to be a sitting wise man

Nomadic Proverb

Leaving! Who really likes to leave a place or a people they love? Well, I am finding leaving can be a difficult thing to do. When I'm at a location for awhile relationships begin to develop which eventually brings the feelings of leaving with reluctance, but that is part of the way I travel. In fact, it is happening continuously in our lives one way or another, but some 'leavings' are more difficult than others. Buddhism teaches non-attachment while at the same time developing love and compassion toward all of life, a delicate balance with most every moment providing the opportunity to become aware of and develop this way of walking through our time in this body. Even at the most basic level there is the attachment to thoughts, beliefs, rules and ideas.

But leave Ang I do, at least physically. Pictures of Ang, the green terraced barley fields constantly bowing to the breeze that shoots down through the valley, the sounds of water running through the many channels and streams, the sight of women silently directing the channeled water to the right field at the right time, drinking a cup of tea and sitting in the early morning sun while it warms my body, watching the changing colors on the distant mountain peaks and Laskit making chapatis with her cow looking on, all these memories and pictures will go with me indelibly printed on my psyche.

When I arise early enough in the morning to catch the 8am bus down to Temisgam to then catch another bus toward Lamayuru, mother Laskit is up and about as usual but I notice she is getting dressed up in newer even more striking clothes. Yesterday in the garden in front of the house among the flowers and vegetables, Laskit washed her long, beautiful, dark hair and put it in an attractive bun. This involved undoing the braids which takes a fair amount of work putting together in the first place, washing her hair from water in a large dishpan while sitting on the ground, then letting it dry in the warm rays of the sun and running her fingers through it to separate it and speed the drying process. Really, I'm not sitting here staring at her. Well, not too much! I am sitting outside the front door in the warm sun drinking my mint tea and keeping an eye on Laskit out of the corner of my eye. This morning I notice how she combs and braids it. Her fingers and hair dance with each other having formed a bond and get along real well, one caressing the other. Laskit has become comfortable with my presence and is not self conscious.

This is another of those cultural considerations which arise frequently. Some we catch before deftly executing a faux pas and other times we learn after the fact - and still other times we just don't seem to learn at all! Then it likely is time to go home! Well, I don't wish to go home, and recall living with a Muslim family in the Great Thar Desert of Rajasthan. One afternoon, the mother, Vilayee, was also washing her hair from a dish pan outside the kitchen while sitting on the earth. No doubt this would make an excellent photo, one that the women in particular in the States might appreciate, and the convenience of their shower even more. I did not propose taking one. It felt particularly personal in that setting, intrusive, while also considering the Muslim faith of this family. Later I spoke about

this with her son Salim and he confirmed my thoughts. He said his mother would be quite shy about that kind of photo and would be afraid the women in the West would laugh at her and think of her as being primitive and of less value rather than the photo creating a bond between women in the West and here in the desert.

Laskit indicates she is going with me, saying the word Alchi, the village which she is traveling to, and we walk to the bus together. Along the way she pauses to chat briefly with neighbors and waves goodbye. The bus finishes its run here from Leh in the afternoon each day and stays until morning leaving then for Leh on the return trip. I must admit that I sometimes wonder about the safety of these buses, hoping against hope the brakes are in a good state of repair. Or that angels are willing to work overtime and do extra duty! Hopefully appearances are not everything or some of these chariots I would not risk boarding except on days when I might be feeling particularly suicidal! Upon boarding the bus, I notice several other familiar faces from the village and soon realize, as more and more women board, that a whole group of women are going to Alchi for the day, all dressed in their finest.

The bus slowly makes its way down the winding narrow road to Temisgam. The driver probably could have put the bus in neutral and coasted the entire way except when we have to stop, back up and go forward again to negotiate a sharp turn. It's all down hill! We stop along the way and pick up more folks and the bus fills about three quarters full and it soon sounds like old home day with lively conversations, 'juley' here and 'juley' there, laughing, chatting endlessly. This is quintessential Ang, a rather isolated community and spread out, so everyone knows everyone else, they stick together and help each other out in times of need. One old woman from Ang, the one with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, motions to sit beside me. There are plenty of empty seats at this point but I feel honored. I noticed that as my week in Ang progressed, she became more open and friendly, joking and laughing. No common language. Just lots of gestures, the meaning of which was very clear. I happily took my pack off the other seat and she slid in. It is somewhat difficult to tell the actual age of the Ladakhis here because the climate is extreme and harsh. Laskit, for example, is 42 but in appearance is an attractive 60.

At Temisgam I get off the bus and have about an hour's wait till the next bus comes that will take me on toward my destination. After the bus leaves I remember that I forgot to pay! About 9:30 the next bus comes and is already packed full with people, propane tanks and a few animals. While waiting for the bus I meet two young guys who are Sikhs and are headed to Khalsi as well. Khalsi is the last stop for the bus. It is hitch hiking from there or take a rather expensive taxi on to Lamayuru. These two guys thought I ought to get inside the bus where it would be more comfortable instead of on top where it would be less comfortable and more risky, an example of Indian thoughtfulness and kindness. But I take a look inside the bus and decide the view from the top and the air would be much preferable. The Sikhs and I climb on top - already occupied by several others - and I work out a seat along the edge where I can hold onto a rail with one hand to give some stability. I'm sitting on, or straddling, three logs of Poplar trees which do not give me the sense of sitting in a Lazy Boy recliner! On my right side are several propane gas cylinders which are sitting or propped in rather precarious positions ready at the first curve going down this mountain to roll over on top of me or push me off and down the mountain side to an untimely release from this body!

Forget being too comfortable straddling these logs with my bones rolling across them as we proceed down the winding road amidst these high, rugged barren mountains with the rushing powerful stream

below, way below. The sky is blue and the sun bright. My left foot is hanging over the side, I am hanging onto the rail with my left hand and onto my pack in front of me with my right one. The propane tanks rattle and threaten me, but the views are stupendous making it difficult at times to focus on holding on. I gawk at the landscape, the moonscape, and at the same time am real aware of the sudden sharp turns that are everywhere, all of which do a certain amount to keep me at least a bit focused so I won't accidentally get thrown over the side with a sudden lurch to the left! I am unable to forget the propane tanks and am never certain how well they will hold their position. I recall more than once when riding inside these buses hearing these tanks roll around on top. But I am where I want to be and will take my chances. It is an unforgettable ride arriving in Khalsi where we arrive about an hour or so later. I get off the top with the two Sikhs and have to figure out how to catch my next ride the remainder of the way to Lamayuru. The two Sikhs say they are going to the bank down the street and that would be a better place to catch a ride so I follow them when I realize that I once again forgot to pay my fare. I go back to look for the conductor but he is no where to be found so I go on. A loss of .10 cents to the bus and a gain of .10 to me! It won't pay for my room tonight!

Khalsi is a one street town basically with a few small restaurants catering to people traveling through to other destinations. You can catch a bus here to Kargil on your way to the green Switzerland of Kashmir, but you can not find a bus to Lamayuru, about 20 miles farther up another winding road which snakes its way along side the mountains. The Sikhs stop off at the bank and I walk on down the street closer to where the road divides. Generally, there are quite a few pollution belching trucks and half full taxis which ply this road to Lamayuru because it is one of the two routes that go on to Kargil and Srinagar. Just as I approach the point where the two roads divide, I stick out my thumb, or more accurately wave my hand palm down, and flag down a car occupied only by the driver. It is an empty taxi that fortunately is going to Lamayuru to pick up some tourists that had previously booked him to then take them back to Leh. He is more than happy to take me for \$1.00 instead of the usual \$10.00 booked rate from Khalsi. It is pocket money for him and a cheap ride for me. As I think about it, I realize I'm making this journey to Lamayuru for the grand total of \$1.00 and am rather pleased with myself - until I realize that I forgot to pay the fare for two of the buses and then I am not quite so pleased with myself!

The ride is another jaw dropper, gradually climbing higher and higher, hugging the mountain side on narrow roads. No guard rails and often I see nothing but a roadless space out my side of the car with the ice cold river far below. At one point we round a turn and are confronted with a stalled truck smack in the middle of the road making it impossible to get around him. On the one side is the mountain and on the other a sheer drop off to you know where. About 30 meters behind him, back down the road a little farther, is a spot where the driver could pull off, could coast back and get out of the way so traffic could squeeze past. Why he doesn't do this I will never know, and even my driver doesn't know, except this is India and some questions are just unanswerable or perhaps don't warrant an answer. Eventually he gets his truck started and we are on our way soon approaching Lamayuru sitting high on the side of an eroded crag a good ways up the mountain side. We pass through what I would describe as a fantasy land, or a land of hobbits, another type of moonscape. It is different from anything I have seen in Ladakh or anywhere in India.

Lamayuru has the distinction of being the oldest known gompa in Ladakh, probably built sometime in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and was once a safehaven for criminals. Once they made it here they were welcomed and protected by the monks. Not a bad deal! Thus its former name, Tharpa Ling or 'Place of Free-

dom.’ The fantasy land we passed just below the monastery was likely once a large lake. One theory is that it was created by a glacial dam. From a distance it is a different color from the surrounding landscape, a creamy color, and has been eroded over time which gives it a moonscape, fantasy land appearance. Parts of the monastery itself, built into the side of the mountainous crag, have the appearance of a fantasy land with rooms carved out of the rock and walkways weaving in and out of the hill, disappearing here and reappearing there. The views are breathtaking from the rooftop. As I look across at the mountain on the other side of the gorge, I see quite a few mountain goats making their way to a higher elevation. From here they appear as specks and move slowly but I get a better view through my zoom lens.

Wandering through the rooms of these old monasteries is often full of little surprises. One never knows for sure what one will find. I hear the sound of a drum and know that puja is taking place nearby so I follow the sound, as usual, and soon am sitting quietly meditating with the one monk chanting and beating the drum rhythmically. A few other tourists come and go. I stay till the chanting stops and find that a young Frenchman and I are the only ones left. The monk and I strike up a conversation and he speaks of the inner energies the deities represent within the Buddhist cosmology and psychology. They are not gods to be worshiped but are the energies within each of us that help one understand, or map, the stages of one’s spiritual journey. It is interesting to note the very complete psychological system which is a vital part of the teachings of Buddhism. There seem to be quite a few parallels with the stages of moral development in Western psychology. The monk and I make a warm connection and as we walk out of the room he easily and naturally puts his arm around me and I around him. The room we enter is a large room and off to one side is the small entrance to a cave where the very famous and well known Tibetan Buddhist, Naropa, meditated during the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Entering this cave is not permitted. It is very small, almost like a hole in the wall, in contrast to the meditation cave at Hemis monastery.

Everything is sacred to the Buddhists. Living in such an environment as this and noticing how this sacredness is lived out, it can not but begin to have an effect on one. All of life is valued and respected and ‘ahimsa’, or non-violence, is practiced. Generally Buddhists are vegetarians and do not support the taking of life - human or otherwise. I don’t ask about the killing of vegetables and hearing their screams in the process! I’m being good! Such a curse! But it is difficult for a person with any sensitivity not to have a deep respect for the compassion expressed, for their mindful way of walking upon the earth from moment to moment. Having said all this, I remember a conversation with a lay Buddhist in Sri Lanka who, when he learned I am from the States, joyfully said he likes our president because he goes after the terrorist and kills them! I said, “But you are a Buddhist. How do you reconcile that?” He maintained his position and decided that his opinion at this point in history was more important than Buddhist teachings! It is a fine example of how it is human nature to take our particular sacred scriptures and make them fit what it is we most ardently want to believe. We seem to create the kind of God we need at any given point in our history, while denying doing so, of course. And, I might add for the record, in my year of travel it was the only statement I heard in support of our president and his administration. In any case, we both had a good laugh.

I spend the night here and decide to return to Leh in the morning. It means catching a bus passing through from Kashmir on its way to Leh, or hitching a ride with one of the fairly frequent trucks. The other option is to hitch a ride with a passenger car. After breakfast, I walk down the hill to a tea shop which is a stopping point for buses coming through. It’s 7:30am and there is not much action this

early. By 8:30 there are several other Westerners wanting to catch a ride as well. Apparently a bus comes through sometime between 9 or 9:30am. With this number of folks wanting to catch a ride, I think this could create problems in getting a seat, and the bus might already be full. But there is always the roof! I have no idea how long it will take to catch a ride so I sit down in a tea shop away from the road where other travelers are standing to flag down a vehicle. There are parents with young children who are needing a ride who in my mind take preference, and I am in no hurry any way. I've got from now on!

Eventually, I see a private car coming down the road and find it strange that no one is assertive enough to try to flag it down. And here I am being a good guy giving the others first shot! I'm still sitting on my chair, on the edge ready to sprint I might add, and notice that when the car approaches about where I am, it slows down and the driver looks my way so I put out my hand indicating my desire for a ride and he pulls off. Well, I'm outta my chair like a flash and by his window in no time. He says he is going to Leh and would be happy to give me a ride. If no one else wants it I'll certainly take it! He who hesitates.....! Sometimes being nice is such a burden! I throw my backpack in and we are off in this new chevy sedan. One doesn't see many of these in India. We immediately strike up a conversation and I learn his name is Khalid Faridi (S.K.M. Faridi). He hands me his card and tells me that he is general manager of General Motors for India and is coming from Kargil this morning on his way to Leh for a meeting. His card says K.C. Motors of Jammu so I wonder if he is general manager for GM in Jammu State, but he says all of India. More biography unfolds and Khalid is a Muslim whose home is in Calcutta and he does a lot of traveling for his business.

Khalid is quite an energetic and interesting man who is an entertaining conversationalist. He tells me he is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for being the first person to go over Kardung La Pass, the highest motorable pass in the world, on a two wheeler - a 100cc motorbike. I've been over that pass, it's 18,300', narrow, wet, with plenty of water, snow and ice and I can't imagine it being a Sunday afternoon pleasure ride on a 100cc moaning bike! He says it took him about eight months to get it all arranged with Guinness because of the slow mail. At that time the convenience and quickness of email was not available.

While we are talking, Khalid is driving on these roads like he owns them or is a first class fool. And then he tells me his passion is driving as we approach a sharp bend at a higher rate of speed than I, in my infinite wisdom and desire for life, would deem safe! He down shifts, hits the brakes momentarily, then puts the pedal to the metal getting some traction, spinning out of the turn, gravel flying everywhere and the rear end of the car precariously close to going over the edge. At least from where I sit and again look out into space! Perhaps the spaciousness of the ride is included in the price! I'm not quite clear if this is Indian bravado showing off to a Westerner or actually good driving. I would be inclined to say it is really very good driving but one mistake and we are over the edge, bouncing down the side of this mountain to the cold reception of Davy Jones below! So I would be just fine if he put his good driving in his pocket for the moment! There isn't an option here of sliding off the track and into the infield bouncing against some straw bales! This could be a cheap ride but to where? Ultimately to another dimension? While I hold my breath with Khalid gleefully sliding into and spinning out of more sharp bends, he tells me he has raced in road rallies in Australia and India with cars and motorcycles. His training has qualified him to race in up to Formula 3 races which he has done and in fact has won some of them. I hope he wins this one! That would make me a winner too, wouldn't it? I like the idea. It is difficult for me to enjoy this incredible scenery when I'm just

trying to hold onto my life! Attachments, attachments! Breathe in, breathe out!

Khalid has been around this world a bit to race, receive further training for his business and has degrees in engineering and also an MBA. His mind is always working and whatever he does he impresses me as being focused and goal oriented. Getting to Leh is a good one!

Well, happily we do arrive safely in Leh and Khalid will take no money for the ride. We did stop in Khalsi and had some tea and juice which I paid for. I'm thinking again that transportation for this whole journey from Ang to Lamayuru to Ley cost me all of \$1.00, I'm almost pleased with myself again, but then I remember forgetting to pay the conductor on two buses so I reconsider. Is this bad karma or divine providence? It's my choice. I can create the kind of God I want and interpret this the way I wish. Think I'll choose Divine Providence! It has a better feel to it!