

HEMIS MONASTERY
(and the art of losing one's nose)

Ladakh, India

“I consider myself a Hindu, Christian, Moslem,
Jew, Buddhist and Confucian.”

Gandhi

“Believe nothing. No matter where you read it,
or who said it, even if I have said it, unless it agrees
with your own reason and your own common sense.”

Buddha

To live in a Buddhist monastery? Hummmm.... I often wondered about this and felt drawn to the possibility and pursued the idea. After asking a few questions of monks I meet, I learn it is possible to do so here in this predominantly Buddhist northern Himalayan region of Ladakh, and take the steps to complete the arrangements. After visiting several monasteries I decide on Hemis monastery for various reasons although am convinced that certain other monasteries could have been good choices as well. Hemis monastery is probably the most famous and the largest Buddhist monastery in Ladakh and welcomes those who wish to do a spiritual retreat to come and do just that. A sign which can be seen as one approaches the entrance to the monastery gives something of an introduction to the history of Hemis:

‘It represents the Dukpa Kargyutpa School of the great Mahayana culture. His Holiness, Gyalwag Durgchen Rinpoche is the supreme head of this gonpa and school. A great sage Gonbo Dorjey established the Dugpa school in Ladakh in the 13th century. He meditated in a cave on the side of the mountain above the gonpa, which is known as Gotsang. Gotsang has assumed the significance of a shrine for devoted pilgrim. The gonpa was built in the 1630s by Kushok Shambhu Nath (1st Stagsang Raspa) An eminent scholar and the Raj guru of Gyalpo Singay Namgyal later after the year 1730.....’

I look forward to living in this environment with the monks, participating in their lives as permitted and be a part of their pujas - their chanting prayers and worship, and to have the opportunity to spend as much time in meditation as I wish. It is about one hour from the capital, Leh, so I have taken a bus with my trusty backpack, clown hat and nose included, to my destination. I'm not sure quite what to expect since I've not done this before but the experience, the potential to learn more about Buddhism, about the monks themselves, their daily way of life, their relationships with one another, how they attempt to live according to their views and understanding of the world, of existence, is an opportunity I don't wish to pass up. Who knows, I might even have my mind expanded, my thoughts, ideas and beliefs challenged! And I might even discover that a shift in perceptions or in paradigm is in order.

Over the years I have read a great deal about Buddhism and traveled in predominantly Buddhist countries such as Tibet, and so enter this experience with some general knowledge but still feel rather uninformed. Perhaps this experience will take me to an added level. It likely depends on my ability to empty my mind and be receptive! I must acknowledge that in my spirit and ways of seeing the universe and existence, I feel a kinship with Buddhism. If I were forced to choose one of the five major world religions, it would be Buddhism hands down. But choosing a religion no longer seems a necessity. External parent and authority figures, be they human or the written word, have had their say in the first half of my life and I suppose were useful for a time, given the conditioned environment in which I grew up with the need to belong and for love and acceptance. It's too fearful for most of us to go it alone at those young and tender ages. I am grateful for what this has taught me, and in the lingo of today I might say 'been there, done that, bought the teeshirt' and I'm done now. Even the teeshirt is getting thin! Nevertheless, I continue to have an interest in how the religions develop and their role in the lives of so many people.

All this is very unacceptable to my Amish/Mennonite protestant Christian religious heritage with some years participating in interdenominational charismatic churches which historically have wanted nothing to do with Eastern religions and thought and even warn against it. These are of the devil and are false religions and they as well worship false gods. And the farther to the right, the more conservative the beliefs, the more frightening this becomes. A pastor, in all seriousness and out of concern for my soul, once asked me why I dabbled in Eastern religions. His paradigm would not permit him to understand my response. I didn't have the heart to ask why he dabbled in his form of Christianity and I didn't see it as my mission to try to change him! What he believed was quite important to him. And if I could suddenly take his belief system away from him, I would not do so because it could be quite harmful. These changes generally happen slowly, often requiring various experiences and earthquakes. Had he been open to a discussion it could have been useful to us both in developing a more meaningful relationship and an ongoing dialogue.

Such dabbling in Eastern religions and thought might even require you to undergo special prayer to be delivered of evil forces that have entered your mind and body. This was and is done with great sincerity and earnestness. I understand this because there was a time in my own religious experience, the charismatic years, when I was a part of this, participated in it first hand, gave the workshops, and was quite sincere, too, trying very hard to make it work, to find some substance in it. There is nothing malicious intended. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The intention is to save you from an eternity in hell. And that is fearful stuff! And a fearful paradigm in which to live. It causes one to shrivel up considerably and knocks a hole in any healthy creativity. However, if you as a pastor or church leader do not take the initiative to speak to such a person, the belief and fear is you could be held personally responsible on the great day of judgment, the result of which could be for you, the pastor or church leader, to never again have to pay a heating bill!!

Hemis. Oh yes! Well, with this in mind I do bring a local bus to Hemis, as stated earlier, which is about 30 miles south of Leh. The gompa, or monastery, is also known as Lone Place of the Compassionate Person, a name I find rather intriguing and fitting for Buddhist monks and actually for the Buddhist people in general. It is quite a large monastery with some well-preserved frescoes as well as an impressive three-storey statue of the very important sage Padmasambhava who is credited for carrying Buddhism from India to Tibet. One will also find here a 36' thangka. That is four storeys high - the largest in Ladakh. The thangkas are intricately painted either with a figure or figures

important in the spiritual history of Buddhism, or a mandala of some sort representing, for example, something of Buddhist psychology or the wheel of life. There is a quite famous festival here each year, the Tse-Chu festival, and is a celebration of Padmasambhava's birth. Every 12th year during this event the thangka is unfurled. .

I discover there is a small outdoor restaurant here which serves very basic food and drink. It is contracted out for a three year period to a Ladakhi person. A young Brahmin Hindu man, Sharma, from eastern Nepal is hired to cook and be responsible for anyone such as myself who is staying in the monastery. There has been little work for him in Nepal in recent years because of the Maoist uprising and subsequent political turmoil so he, like many others, has come to India looking for work to support his extended family. His father, 63, is not able to work and his mother is no longer living. Sharma himself is married and has 3 children. The family all remain in eastern Nepal and are separated from him during this time. It is difficult to be away from his family but sacrifices such as this are understood, and Sharma most always seems to have a smile and warm greeting. He is the one who is responsible for showing me to my room in the gompa and for making sure that all my needs are met. He sleeps at the restaurant in a very simple tent-like structure. No wonder he later says as he shows me my room that it is a nice one! Somehow I was never able to get him to pipe in running water to my room! Or a shower! Or even a sink! Nevertheless, the smile was always there and that goes a long way!

I'm in room 504 on the second level. There is no electricity at this time which is usually quite unpredictable anyway, so we walk down a long bare dimly lit hallway with a cement floor and walls. The word clean according to my Western understanding doesn't seem to exist for the moment or for the rest of my time here! On the way to the room he shows me the state-of-the-art bathroom! It is the typical Ladakhi compost toilet which is in this case a small room with a dirt floor and a hole in the middle. No toilet paper. You either supply your own or use the common Indian method - a large cup of water to pour with your right hand and clean yourself with your left. Just keep short fingernails! Actually it is quite sanitary, arguably more so than the Western approach. However, it does take some getting used to. You've got to work on your balance and coordination. Otherwise the situation could become rather precarious and hilarious. Well, I guess that depends on one's perspective. But it all makes good compost for the fields. And you must remember to carry out any transaction with your right hand. It is inconsiderate to give or receive any object with the left hand.

We make a left into another unlit dusty hallway and arrive at my room. I can tell that Sharma is very proud of this room and pleased to give it to me. He tells me that it is one of the better rooms. One might say the room is very basic! There are two single beds, a night stand between them, a chair, a window with a great view, and a carpet covering most of the cement floor which appears not to have been cleaned in a very, very long time. It is important to understand, however, that this is Ladakh, a land of huge, barren, snow capped mountains. The only green is in the valleys into which the water from the melting snow runs. So dust and dirt are your constant companions lightly covering everything. It is in the air even though not really noticeable. You get used to it or go home! The other rooms are smaller, he says, and the mattresses lie on the floor. Sharma tells me the price is \$4.00 per night and the money goes to the monastery. I know that I could haggle a bit and probably get it for about half that price. But the room service is hard to beat and I wish to be supportive of what the Buddhists are doing here so I accept. He still can't be convinced to pipe in running water!

Well, actually there is running water. You just have to walk down to the stream nearby! I guess that counts and it brings plenty of cold clear melted snow from the mountain peaks. There are no rooms designated as places to bathe yourself or the 'little' things like brushing your teeth. Many of the monks have their own room and will bathe there or down by the stream. You adapt to what is available and complaining doesn't help! Neither does threatening a law suit! It's not likely that a lawyer could survive here anyway. He might get his suit dirty! And suits and ties simply wouldn't impress anyone, but they could provide for some humor. Given this is the situation here, you just have to remind yourself that flexibility is one of the important indicators of sound mental health. I accept that my room is not the cleanest spot on the planet and that is quite acceptable. I am here to be stretched, to learn, to enjoy myself, and nothing will deter me from that. That is an unalterable decision. My thoughts and perceptions create my reality so it is always up to me and no one else.

I had planned on coming here yesterday but was treated to a bout of the 'Delhi Belly' so I delayed my arrival till today and drank plenty of oral re-hydration salts. It's just one of those little annoyances that will greet travelers once in a while if you are here for a good period of time - or even if you are here for a short while. This type of thing is quite treatable and usually nothing to get alarmed about. However, it can become serious if not properly treated and one becomes dehydrated. Just last week a young woman ended up in the hospital from not keeping herself properly hydrated. Plenty of oral re-hydration salts need to be kept on hand, and perhaps something like norflaxicin. All of which are available across the counter at any street chemist shop, and for a pittance.

Hemis can not be seen from the main road and is about seven kilometers from it on winding roads that gradually climb higher and higher through wheat and barley fields. A long mani wall is part of the greeting. The mani walls vary in width and height but are often as much as 6' or 8' in width and 5' or more in height. These Tibetan stone walls are covered with mani stones which have the sacred mantra beautifully carved on them: 'Om mani padme hum' and is translated as 'Hail the Jewel in the Lotus.' These walls can be found scattered all across Ladakh. The wall here is so long that the bus passes through an opening several times. Eventually we pass through a relatively small opening between two converging mountains and once through it, the very small village of Hemis is before us with the monastery just beyond it and at a higher elevation.

Apparently there are 500 resident monks here but during my stay there are only 30 to 40 present at any one time. The others are out in the villages, usually the home village, to be available to the people for teaching and support. Often they are considered the spiritual advisor of the village. Most of them do return if there is a visit by the head Lama or some other important dignitary. There is a wide age range of monks from about 6 to around 80 all dressed the same in their red robes. Some do not know their precise age and it is not a particular concern to them. Age is mostly a Western concern! Surprise, surprise! Historically, there apparently has been a tradition that one male child from each family will enter the monkhood. Young boys come for other reasons as well. Sometimes a child is orphaned or a family can not financially support all their children so one or more are taken in by a monastery.

Before coming to Ladakh, I had done some reading to give me some familiarity of the region and came across a book, *Jesus Lived in India*, written by a German scholar which states that Hemis monastery housed some very old manuscripts which gave evidence of Jesus spending time in the region studying with some of the masters. At one point, as a monk is showing me around the differ-

ent temples, I mention this to him and he says that it is true but the manuscripts are no longer kept here. They have been moved to another location.

The monks here are friendly and easily strike up a conversation. This makes it interesting and relatively easy to come to know some of them a bit better. It isn't long before I meet Konchok, a monk from the Lamayuru monastery quite some distance away, who has been here for a year teaching elementary school up to grade 5. In his case he is paid by the state while other monks are supported by various gifts and donations to the monastery from such sources as the home villages and from people like myself who are staying here. The state pays him approximately \$100 (RS 5,000) a month. On this he supports himself and generously pays for the education of about five relatives as well as takes care of another relative, Stanzin, an 11 year old boy whose father died. When not in school, Stanzin lives with Konchok. This quickly puts my 'generosity' in perspective and I won't say anymore about that!

Konchok is 25 and says he was 11 or 12 when he became a monk. He says that for reasons he didn't go into detail about, all was not well in his home and eventually he left and entered the monkhood. He is warm and has a genuine welcoming smile. He invites me to his room which is very simple with a mat and two mattresses on the floor on which to sit and on which to sleep as well. As I look around I see some cooking utensils, one gas burner attached to a propane tank, and some veggies on a bunk bed type set up. He has two bunk bed frames and they serve as shelves and storage space for his cooking utensils and school books. Konchok tells me that the monks are responsible to do their own cooking and there is not a 'mess hall' where they all gather for communal meals. He asks if I would come for dinner later this evening. He would like to talk and prepare some food for us. Now I of course accept knowing that I will be treated to some delicious and nourishing Ladakhi food. This is something that will be repeated many times during my stay here and I am quite happy about this.

Later, on my way to Konchok's for dinner, I meet up with several young monks who know me by now as the Westerner with the clown hat and red nose. They are fun and love to clown and with some shyness as well as self conscious eagerness are willing to put on the hat and nose. Being monks does not make these boys sober and boring going around saying 'Om' all day long in an inaccessible spaced out state of bliss! Rather they are here now, very human, fun loving, laughing and interactive. I have my digital camera and the monks pose in imaginative positions and love the immediate feedback of the pictures. This brings more gales of laughter, pointing at one another making comments that for the most part I do not understand but can only guess. The clown hat, the nose and this digital camera, I discover as I travel, become wonderful ways of breaking the ice, making contact, getting conversation going (or gestures as the situation might require). These guys are such clowns. Soon they are joined by several more boys who are eager to get in on the fun. But dinner awaits!

When I arrive at Konchok's room, the young boy he cares for is there too. Stanzin Norbou is there and it doesn't take long to discover that the two of them freely join in the clowning as well. Konchok goes about all this in a very relaxed and joyful way and soon begins preparing the evening meal of vegetarian momos. He lays his cutting board on the floor and sits in front of it crosslegged and begins chopping the fresh vegetables, making the momos from scratch. I can see this is going to take some time. This is not going to be a freezer meal from Costco or any kind of previously prepared meal! He is also making a first course of vegetable broth soup and some chutney. The smell of the soup wafts through the air against the sound of the knife hitting the cutting board and cutting the

veggies just right. Clearly, you just can't be in a hurry so the three of us sit together, talk and laugh while Konchok prepares the evening meal all the while continuing to stimulate my olfactory senses and causing me to salivate! I can't help but notice Konchok's natural smile which suggests how much he is enjoying what he is doing. Years ago I came to enjoy momos and often buy them from a street vendor for my lunch. Half a dozen momos for .25 and I am satisfied for the time being. One can buy either vegetable momos or meat momos, either fried or steamed.

As I eat more momos than I need to, Konchok tells me that his teaching contract with the state this year is temporary and he hopes to be given a permanent contract for the next school year. It would offer more security, and the salary would double. Stanzin is not a monk so his expenses must be paid for from another source. It is interesting to hear Konchok speak of this. Monks too do have concerns about money and a sense of security. It is not all enlightened bliss. Although while being cognizant of these necessities, I think I could safely say that he is not unhappy, worried or anxious, neither is he stupid, and appears to be rather relaxed and blissful about the whole thing. I wonder if he knows how much of a teacher he is being to me in these moments.

Well, the food is delicious and Konchok is thoughtful enough not to put really hot spices in any of the food thus saving my stomach unnecessary turmoil, my nose from dripping into my soup adding flavor to my momos, and my eyes from watering profusely therefore making it easier to hit my mouth - a task which my brothers would say ought never be a problem given the size of it! Brothers! Later, as I prepare to leave, Konchok says he would very much like for me to come for breakfast tomorrow morning. It is difficult not to accept such invitations so I'll be here after the morning chanting in the main temple.

This morning I happily find my way to the main temple and delight in absorbing the sounds and sights of chanting. In front of me is a tea cup which a young monk makes sure is full of yak butter and salt tea. I notice that puja is a relaxed experience. At times I see a couple of monks not chanting but talking with each other. Or a monk chants and picks his nose. One young monk bops another on the head with the 'holy scriptures,' the script from which they are chanting and they laugh quietly. Boys are boys and kids are kids. There is no correction or stern looks from elder monks. The boys return to their chanting. I suspect the monks all know the limits, just common sense limits, as opposed to a harsh set of rules and laws. It is a pleasant religious atmosphere to participate in and I look forward to coming here each day and, in fact, look for other times of chanting in some of the other temples here that take place at different times during the day. Sometimes only one monk is chanting in a smaller temple. It is inviting and peaceful. I reflect on my early church experience and being required to attend services three times a week like it or not. There was no choice. Frankly, I was bored to tears and never really felt at home there but nevertheless did what was required against my natural inclination. Being out in the forest would have been much more to my liking. Interesting that here and at other monasteries it is quite the opposite experience.

While this chanting is taking place, there is also chanting in another much smaller temple upstairs. After a while I leave the main temple, go upstairs and sit in the small room with Jigmat and another monk as they chant. This room is much more intimate - only about 8' x 10'. The chanting seems to fill the entire room easily resonating off the walls. In this puja, the monks also use drums, bells, a

cymbal and a horn. I like the effect and close my eyes, sinking into the variety of sounds and letting them vibrate through my body. It has a gradual mind altering affect, a peaceful, centering affect. When the puja ends we speak briefly and I express my appreciation for their gift to my life. I have been getting to know Jigmat a little more each day and he willingly takes me around the monastery to the different temples explaining their use as well as the meaning of the different frescoes on the walls, who the different Buddhas are and what they represent. It is quite helpful and a lot of information to absorb.

Breakfast this morning with Konchok is excellent and nutritious consisting of a familiar Indian bread, chapatis, and a delicious thick vegetable soup. Then Konchok must teach between 10 and 4. I offer to pay him for the breakfast but he won't hear of it, but instead says the door is always unlocked and I am welcome to come and use his room to relax, to read, or whatever I would like anytime I wish. He says he would like me to come and eat with him as often as possible. It would make him happy and would also be a great benefit to his learning more English.

From Konchok's I walk 2k back up through the mountains along a path following a clear, cold stream rushing down from the mountain peaks. The path is taking me to Gotsang, a hermitage which is a part of Hemis and which was there long before Hemis. Monks who are further enough along on their spiritual journey, with the agreement of their teacher, are permitted to come here to do a three year retreat in solitude. Actually it is 3 years, 3 months and 3 days. They do not leave during this time and are followed closely by their teacher. This is a very advanced retreat and, as implied a moment ago, is not undertaken lightly but only after having advanced in the teachings and practices of Buddhism to a point where the monk and master both agree that the time is right. There are certain practices that are prescribed for the retreatant during this time. When and if this three year retreat is completed successfully, I am told that the monk is then ready to be given some of the deepest, more secret, and most powerful teachings and practices of Buddhism which are not available to monks otherwise. If they were given before being mentally and spiritually ready, they could at best be confusing and at worst quite harmful. In some ways it would be similar to giving a high school senior advanced placement quantum physics or laboratory chemistry class to a second grade elementary student.

The walk there is lovely as one goes higher and higher into these barren mountains. It is silent except for the gurgling of the stream, the song of a bird from time to time, the sound of my sandals and my breathing. At the moment no one else is on this path. It is a treasured solitary walk with the hermitage in the distance against a deep blue sky. The air is thin. As I get closer I hear chanting and music and on arriving I discover there is a special two day puja taking place in one of the temples. There are two smaller ones here too. The three year meditation rooms are located separately across the gorge about a hundred meters. I and others are not permitted to walk there. It and the monks in retreat at this time are protected, in this sense. Even the monks there do not interact. It is truly a solitary three years. At this hermitage is also where the cave is located in which the sage, Gonbo Dorje, meditated prior to the establishment of Hemis Monastery.

I follow the sounds of the chanting. The possibility of sitting with the monks and absorbing more of their intoxicating chanting is a strong pull to my spirit. Sometimes I wonder if there is anything more important to do than just be with, in a sense to join with, the chanting and the prayer for the world that it is. I climb up some stone stairs, listen again for the direction of the chanting, go around the

corner, down more stairs and around to my left through a low door and there I see the temple from which the chanting is coming. I realize I'm sort of like a kid following the pied piper! The two doors are open and I have a respectful look inside, not wanting to interrupt what might be a private ceremony. There are about 10 monks in two rows facing each other. They see me looking and, while they are chanting, motion for me to come in. I step inside the door and sit on the floor, putting my day pack by my side. Later I learn that the monks are doing an all day puja for two days. It is a special celebration which takes place here generally just for the monks and is not something that draws Westerners as does the annual festival at Hemis. So I am absolutely delighted to have stumbled upon this, close my eyes and take in the chanting, the blowing of the conch shell, two horns, a drum and bells. Every so often two younger monks go up on the roof and bellow through the long horns while standing with the far ends resting on the roof top. About the second time, when I realize where they are going and what they are about to do, I follow them. We are about three-quarters of the way up the mountain. The monks are looking down the gorge between the mountains and what a view. Prayers and music from the top of the mountain to the world below. I listen to the echoing down through the valley and among the mountains and it goes without saying that I am transported somewhere that I have no ability to describe. Wouldn't it be just fine never to leave here, except when it is time to leave this body? But why even leave the body? Is there anything more fine than this moment?

In moments like these I wonder what it is with the rest of the world. What is all the craziness, the wars, the killing, the hate, rationalized greed, wanting to control others, grasping for power, wanting to accumulate whatever and establish my personal security usually at your expense, and on and on? Oh, I see, there would be no progress, would there? Perhaps we would not have the medical knowledge to perform such procedures as complicated heart transplants, wonderful as this is. The thought occurs that we might rarely need heart transplants, for example, if we lived more with this kind of presence in the world. What do we do with our mind set, our way of living and walking in the world that creates the condition of needing heart transplants in the first place? What do we do to ourselves that we damage the ability of our hearts to function in the way they were designed to function? Heart transplants. At this moment the idea seems to be such a paradox. The thought that we might need a transplant before we have lived a full healthy life and come to the end of our time in this body impresses me at this moment as an anomaly. We evidently did some kind of a gradual psychological transplant as we made many choices throughout our lifetime to eventually need the medical transplant. Fascinating! This is not a diatribe against medical advances but more of a consideration of a lifestyle that necessitates such advancements.

I follow the two monks back to the temple and sit there cross legged for the next two hours, and after awhile find it necessary to work with the pain in my legs and back. I've never seemed to have the flexibility that I notice with Easterners. My natural inclination is to want to adjust my posture, move around, do this and do that to alleviate some of the discomfort, but a decision is made not to do so. I'll just let the Buddha be a pest! The pain is still pain even as I watch it and tell myself that pain is just in the brain, but it is interesting as I notice it move around. When the pain appears in one part of my body it doesn't necessarily stay there but lets go and moves somewhere else or dissolves all together. It reminds me of what the Buddha taught: that everything, including the sounds, the chanting, the moving figures, is transient, dissolving and impermanent. Thus it is not wise or useful to become attached to anything but to be with it while it is there and know that eventually it will pass, it will move on.

During the chanting, the monks appear relaxed and not concerned about getting everything perfect, sitting straight and 'behaving!' I laugh to myself remembering the more than a few times sitting in church as a young boy and being clearly reminded, or should I say reprimanded, to sit up straight and behave! I could never figure out why I would be asked to do something so unnatural! There was no getting up and moving around, coming and going as the monks do here so easily. Maybe I was born in the wrong culture and religion!! Or maybe I needed to be born into a Christian culture, a Christian family, and embrace it to understand this perspective as well!

There is a pause in the chanting. A monk brings around a plate of cookies and a small glass of wine which can be used symbolically on very special occasions as part of the celebration. Alcohol is otherwise not part of the life of a monk. I am included in this 'communion.' One of the monks, Norbou, who speaks excellent English, asks me if I have seen the temple upstairs. I say that I haven't so he seems pleased to take me up the stairs during this break to a very old temple, which if my memory serves me right, he says is about 1000 years old. It is small with a number of very old thangkas. I always notice the energy as I enter a building or a room, and these temples are no exception. The energy is inviting and intimate and I feel welcomed and embraced by the many monks who have passed through this temple, who have sat here and chanted prayers for the peace and well being of all the world.

A few months ago in the United States I had a brief conversation with a kind and intelligent Christian couple who had the opportunity to visit a Buddhist temple in their travels. She was somewhat disturbed by what appeared to her to be an evil influence. It was dark and cold in the temple and there were lots of 'idols' on the walls, the thangkas, as well as various statues. For some reason it didn't occur to her that there was no electricity or heating so the temple was not well lit and it was cool. As we talked it became clear that she also had little or no accurate information about Buddhist spirituality or Buddhist psychology and simply drew conclusions based on conditioning and incorrect information. This can happen in any religious, political or social context. It is not peculiar to only one religion or country. To her credit, she was quite surprised and receptive to considering the information that I shared with her. But it is easy to see how such misunderstandings can soon become judgmental, become offensive, cause disagreements, and if we follow the continuum we can end up with a middle east ongoing tragedy.

Norbou knows of my interest in Buddhism, its tenets and ways of moving through life. I know that Buddhism is non-theistic and he confirms it, going on to say that they have no belief in a conceptual God outside of oneself and that happiness and inner peace will no come from outside of you, from an external Deity. That is your responsibility. When Norbou made that statement I was immediately catapulted back to a message that appeared while meditating a few years ago and was in an alpha brain wave state. The mind was empty and silent. Suddenly and quietly the words appeared: "Your happiness and joy do not and will not come from God. They will come from within you." My immediate reaction was to reject these words. Does not God give you everything good that comes to you? They were contrary to my conditioning and therefore incorrect. My charismatic days might say that I had opened my mind and it was entered by an evil spirit. Have nothing to do with it. Put it out of your mind and get back to the inerrant word of God (of course according to the charismatic interpretation!) No elements of fear or control here! But I have learned not to throw such happenings out the window but to sit with them, or at least write them down and put them away if I am not ready to seriously take them in and consider them. In this moment Norbou is making almost the exact state-

ment and it rings true. There is no doubt in my mind that we must eventually come to a place where we take the risk of completely trusting that inner voice whatever the cost. At first perhaps scary because it goes against most all our conditioning but the final freedom will never come otherwise.

Norbou goes on to say that Buddha did not use the word God in his teachings. He knew the confusion that resulted from such usage. If you use the word God with a group of people most all will have a different interpretation of what this means, the definition, and therefore filter everything you say through their personal filter. So Buddha wisely avoided it. One is responsible to work out his own salvation, Norbou says. The identical words can be found in the Christian New Testament. Salvation will not come from some external deity in the sky. We have to do the work.

I sometimes think this non-theism is a matter of semantics but I say nothing. I have noticed in my reading of Buddhist teaching that words such as Mind, Self and Emptiness are capitalized. Emptiness is what is left when all has dissolved and one has completely awakened. There is no 'one' left, nothing, just the heaven or bliss of Emptiness. This seems to have some similarity to the Hindu vedanta idea of Consciousness, that which underlies and upholds everything, the 'dream of life', creation, the universe, and is ultimate Bliss, heaven if you will. In other words God, or in the Hindu cosmology, Brahmin. In our Western Christian way of thinking, the word emptiness usually strikes a cord of fear which means one is vacant, no foot hold, no security, depression, misery, lostness. Or in a worst case scenario, it makes room for the entry of evil spirits. Not so with Buddhism in which it is a state of abiding in Bliss, our Original Face. It is a state which one can at times experience in meditation, and a state in which some very evolved and advanced sages reportedly live constantly. Or mostly so. Actually, I find no contradiction between this Buddhist perspective and many of the Christian mystics and the Sufi mystics. Perhaps only the different use of certain words of the different traditions.

As our conversation continues, Norbou says that Buddhism has no concept of original sin either, as Christianity does, but rather sees all as born good and worthy, an original blessing rather than being born into original sin. This strikes such a deep cord. The idea of original sin never made one iota of sense to me as coming from a perfectly loving God. I have to wonder what it might be like if those of us born into Christianity had been taught and treated this way from birth instead of being burdened with the curse of being 'bad' and flawed from the first breath, then further developing this theology based on fear, thrusting it into the tender minds of our children who subsequently have to struggle for years or throughout their lives to properly jump through all the silly hoops created by the early church and still perpetuated, to be redeemed, made righteous, find atonement and on and on and on. And we just keep following such ideas like robots seemingly without serious intelligent thought. On religion Mark M. Otoysao says 'Religion is the way we honor our ancestors' errors.' Perhaps he has something there - and perhaps not! It is at least worthy of some thought. Certainly some of our religious ideas sound like part of a well thought out business plan to control the market and make money! But, hey, this paradigm has gone a long way in creating a very successful psychotherapy practice so why should I complain! Perhaps it is, in reality, all about money and control anyway despite how one might rationalize or spiritualize it?

And, after all, despite some of the good that does at times come out of it (which has little to do with religion but is just good common sense), is it not big business? It isn't too difficult to understand why Buddhism is becoming more and more attractive to Westerners and is growing quite rapidly even though it is not evangelical. No force, no prime time TV evangelists pointing fingers and spreading

fear, no black ties and white shirts knocking on door to scare folks into preparing for the rapture and Armageddon! Just love and acceptance for the beautiful creation that you are. Hummmmm..... Harry Emerson Fosdick gives me further reason for pause when he states: 'Nothing in human life, least of all in religion, is ever right until it is beautiful.' While Buddhism has much of this beauty, is it also becoming big business - particularly in the West?

Later I look around a little more and walk over to another building where the cave is. A monk is there caring for it and welcomes me into a small room just before the cave itself. This too is often a place of chanting and worship. We walk through a low narrow door into the dimly lit cave. The room is about 20' long and varies in width from 6' to 8'. The ceiling is very low and the monk shows me what he says is the hand prints on the ceiling of the sage, Gonbo Dorjey. The legend is that he pushed the roof up to make more room. There is a distinct impression of a hand print which does not require much imagination. It brings back the memory of being in the cave of one of Tibet's most revered masters, Milarepa, which also showed the hand prints in the rock ceiling which he allegedly held up to keep from collapsing until someone installed the proper support. In this cave here there is a narrow flat space up off the floor about 4' and 2' from the ceiling where the monk slept at night. How he knew it was night in the darkness of this cave I fail to ask! Continuing to look around at the black solid stone walls, there are deteriorating paintings of various animals and people along with other designs. I see a deer-like figure and a whale with mouth open, a figure with a bow and arrow drawn and pointed at the central meditating figure. Higher up is a woman with arms up fixing her hair. It is fascinating and beautiful as well as stimulating. When I return to the states, an oil painting or two will come out of this! With the rain we've been having, a good bit of the floor is wet.

When I visit this cave again the next day, Mickael, the Buddhist French film maker is seated cross legged in the center of the cave facing the alter and meditating. Many people would like to do this but it is rare to be permitted to do so unless one is a committed Buddhist. This is a very sacred space and the monks understandably revere it and want to preserve its integrity and sacredness. The monk also takes me outside, at my request, and shows me the footprint of Gonbo Dorjey in a stone which is part of a stone wall. For the life of me I can't figure out what the footprint is doing in this very strange position. Perhaps the sage was practicing his Spider Man moves! The monk is unable to answer my query regarding this which seems quite strange to me. And, actually, contrary to the clarity of the hand print inside the cave, I have to really use my imagination to make out a footprint in this stone!

When I leave the cave, and walk back toward the steps that will take me to the path to Hemis, I pass by the kitchen and two monks stick their heads out the window, say hello and invite me in. They are in the midst of preparing food for all the monks who are here for this special occasion. Usually, as I've already mentioned, the monks cook for themselves, but because of the two day puja, these two are assigned the task of cooking. They are delighted to show me their kitchen which, I notice, is not exactly state of the art! A couple individual gas burners, a wood stove, huge blackened pots chuck full of a vegetable stew. 'Than tak' it is called. Jigmat, and I am quickly leaning that Jigmat is a very popular name, practically insists that I accept a big bowl of this fine Ladakhi stew and I don't hesitate too long in accepting. At the same time I am aware of what they have to go through to carry all this food the 2k to the hermitage. But first it has to come from the capital, Leh. Actually, each monk is responsible for arranging to get his food to Hemis. So it is not a matter of going to the grocery store around the corner. There is quite a bit of effort involved and I am aware of this as I dip into the

delicious stew. When I am finished, Jigmat definitely wishes for me to have another bowl but I decline.

These guys have a good sense of humor and they comment on my clown hat which I am wearing. I pull out my nose and put it on, do a two step and they dissolve in gales of laughter. It isn't long before I persuade both to try on the hat and nose. They pull out a mirror to see how they look as a clown and again dissolve in laughter. While they are doing all this I am getting some good shots with the digital camera. Jigmat poses, gestures for me to give him a moment, materializes a pair of sun glasses, and poses with a smile, giving the high sign. Hams they are, and full of good fun and laughter. I leave the hermitage but will be back tomorrow for the second day of chanting.

I thoroughly enjoy the sense of humor that the monks here at Hemis, and at the other monasteries, seem to have, the sensible fun they have with each other. I will often ask a monk if he likes being a monk and the response has always been an unequivocal 'yes.' They seem to understand there is no scientific evidence that life is meant to be serious! They smile and joke with each other a lot. The older monks do not appear to use their age or position as a means of control or power over the younger ones. I notice how the older ones laugh and kid with the adolescent and younger ones and seem to take them under their wing and relate to them in such a way that gives them a sense of self-worth. It is a beautiful thing to see. Of course, I don't see them all the time but from what I read and am told, a positive sense of self is the norm and a negative sense of self is quite unusual. The Dalai Lama is reported to have been surprised and couldn't understand at first when meeting with a group of western psychologists why a negative self esteem was such a problem in the West when it is almost unheard of in Tibet.

It rained a lot last night and has tapered off to a drizzle this morning. Everything is wet. A rather rare occurrence here in this barren land where they might get 1 to 3 centimeters a year. I spend the morning in meditation in my room. During this time, many thoughts arise. Thoughts about anger, its origin, being with it, noticing it. Whether it is an expression of impatience, frustration or any of the many other ways it gets felt and expressed in the body. It is interesting how during silent times like these, a great deal of clarity can arise. One such bit of clarity is the obvious truth that truly celebrating another's journey in any given situation makes it almost impossible to become angry even if another person is expressing something negative about me. This is not about suppressing the anger or frustration because that doesn't allow the feeling to actually dissipate but just pushes it deeper in the cellular structure to eventually cause more physical and emotional symptoms. But somehow honoring another's journey, realizing this is exactly where this person needs to be at this moment on his path to awakening, to enlightenment, creates the space in my psyche to actually celebrate what is happening and to take none of it personally. Under such circumstances anger doesn't have a chance of being born much less being expressed destructively. Of course, it doesn't always work so neatly for me unfortunately!

This afternoon I wander through the monastery, up several flights of stone stairs to the roof noticing the thick plastered walls, the ancient feel and unique smell of this place. It is all very simple, practical and solidly built. The thick walls help protect against the frigid winters of the Himalayas. On the roof I meet an older man, a tourist from California. We chat for awhile and John hands me his card.

It reads: Friends of Ethnology Society

Member of Executive Committee

Treasurer and photographer

He is presently living in Austria and traveling with a group from there. Ulrika, a younger Austrian woman, is the guide for this group and is showing John around apart from the rest of the group. John wanders around the roof by himself so Ulrika and I strike up a rather lengthy conversation. Meeting people spontaneously like this is one of the joys of traveling. She is doing some academic study and does tour guiding part time to earn extra cash for school. Being a tour guide, she says, is really hard work and can be quite frustrating. She personally has spent a lot of time in non-western cultures and finds that often tour groups, such as this one, really have little sensitivity to the culture even after having gone over in detail with them about what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior in, for example, a temple or prayer room. There often appears to be an attitude that other cultures need to adjust to our particular Western culture even if we are in their culture. Clearly, she says with tongue in cheek, this goes a long way in bridging the gap of understanding between cultures and in world peace! Ulrika states that she usually chooses her tour groups rather carefully but this one 'slipped' through. Ah, well, it's money for school!

Ulrika enjoys John because he is the most easy going and open minded of the group. Of course, what could one expect from a Californian! She has a Bhutanese boyfriend and loves Bhutan - as well as her boyfriend! Her academic research is related to Bhutan. We speak about how expensive it is to travel there given the government restrictions and requirement which presently is about \$250 a day and includes a guide, accommodation and food. However, she says if I ever wish to go, she can arrange to get me a letter to bypass most of these requirements such as the \$250. It is about connections, as usual. She has a lama friend who is very well educated who would be happy to serve as our guide and wing it from there! Ulrika says she only does this for people she likes and feels good about, who seem to have some respectful understanding of and sensitivity to other cultures. Tell me, why do I love this woman? Amazingly insightful and perceptive!

The clouds of the afternoon skies have been building and bring beautiful drama and more rain. It is raining at the lower altitudes while snowing on the distant peaks, dark clouds behind and above them while the sun is bursting through behind me and bathing part of a barren mountain in an orange glow. Off to my left a rainbow rises up out of another mountain spreading its joyful color over the snow capped mountains against a backdrop of dark skies, and buries its pot of gold on another welcoming barren mountain to the right. It is all barrenness and all emptiness in a sense and yet in the emptiness there is a fullness that courses through the joy of this body. Emptiness and silence - the ultimate prayer! I stay on this roof and take in this drama far and near, breathing in and out, silent, absorbing the timelessness of it all. This is another of those moments when one knows it would be quite acceptable to die, to leave this body. It's a good day to die, and a good day to live as well. There just can't be anything more, really. This is it! I realize that on one level a death is actually happening in this moment. There is a letting go, a coming together, an integration. Silence, perhaps the most powerful prayer. Perhaps the only prayer. Unspoken. Felt. Known. Truly a transcendent moment.

In the past few days there has been abundant rain. It makes little difference that this is the monsoon season. Ladakh is not affected to any great extent by the monsoons. But one must remember that anything can happen in these majestic and powerful Himalayan mountains. One is at the mercy of

nature. It is a place when in the dead of winter one can get a sunburn on the face while getting frostbitten toes that are in the shade. Ladakh is a fabulous place to trek and be in a state of almost constant awe. My jaw has yet to recover from its dropped position. But these rains present a dilemma for trekkers with swollen rivers and some of the usual paths cut off and not accessible. I hear that many trekkers are presently stranded, unable to ford various flooded streams. In fact, one group lost some of its pack horses and supplies. The horses while trying to cross a river were unable to negotiate the power and force of the water thus being swept off their feet and washed downstream with supplies, and drowning. The road from Leh to Manali is closed due to mudslides as is the road to Nubra Valley and to two of the picturesque lakes frequently visited by trekkers and tourists. The rain has flattened barley and wheat fields putting the harvest at risk, and the usual clear water from the mountain snows are now dirty putting the population at risk for disease.

The roofs here are not built to withstand this amount of rain and so leak causing a multitude of other problems. I look at the stream running down past Hemis and it is over its banks, cloudy and rushing with a powerful force. At the monastery there has been no electricity almost from the day I arrived. This isn't a huge issue for the monastery, however. There are plenty of butter lamps and the people are used to finding ways to adapt to the changing conditions. But clearly living in this landscape is fragile and nature is in charge, the constant equalizer! It seems that here the one who does best is the one who knows how to bow to this force, and does so.

Well, a cup of tea is in order so I walk to the open air restaurant. There is practically no one here because of the rains, I suspect. A young man is seated under an umbrella. We introduce ourselves and I join him at his invitation. Mickael is an independent French film maker and our conversation soon reveals that he, while Caucasian and born in India, is a practicing Buddhist and takes it very seriously. As we are talking, Anna, a young and attractive woman in her mid 30's from New Zealand joins us. I had actually briefly met her in Leh and learned that she is a physiotherapist by profession. More accurately, she strikes me as being a professional traveler and has been doing so for the past four years! After meeting her in Leh, I regretted not asking her about an injury to my right shoulder that I acquired recently while acting like I was 25 years old slinging my backpack on and off. I had emailed my friend and medical colleague John Glick back in the states and he suggested I see a physiotherapist when I get back

Physiotherapists are not generally floating around Ladakh but behold here Anna is again. She says she would be happy to do a treatment and later says she has decided to stay here at Hemis for a few days. It is interesting how these 'coincidences' develop. The shoulder has been giving me some pain and Anna kept appearing in my thoughts so for the last several days I have been quietly holding her image in my mind. Shazaam! Here she is! No matter how often this happens, I am always amazed. It is something we all experience if we pay attention to noticing it. Mickael, Anna and I talk about many things, one of which is none of us having taken a bath since being here and feeling like it really isn't that necessary. The air is very dry so we don't actually sweat and do feel very clean. Yet we all each are used to taking a bath every day. Mickael says twice a day. Anna wonders where she might at least wash her thick, long and dark curly hair. I tell her there is a pump just beyond the restaurant. She asks if I will pump for her and I agree. In doing so it takes Anna a little while to get through all that long thick beautiful hair, she straightens up and pushes her hair back with the fullness of her breasts and nipples pushed into the sunlight. I am married and deeply in love with an incredible woman and I have clear boundaries but all this never stops me from enjoying the art and lines of a

lovely female body! Where are my paint brushes? And, fortunately, Rose is not of the jealous type and is quite confident in the beautiful woman that she is. When Anna later gives me a treatment for my shoulder she goes about it professionally and I benefit greatly from her expertise.

I think about how this injury came about. It is quite informative to watch the power of our thoughts in creating our everyday reality. A concept sometimes difficult to understand, often reluctantly accepted and usually not accepted at all by the general populace. It certainly raises many tough questions not to be taken lightly. This means, of course, that I am responsible for injuring my shoulder! My body isn't. It has its limitations, much as I wish to deny it! The backpack isn't. The contents aren't. Another person is not. I made the choices not to pay proper attention to my body, to put the weight in the pack and to sling it on and off like I have! Accepting this is freeing, powerful and frightening because it means I am totally responsible for whatever comes into my life. Many of us do not want to accept this kind of responsibility for our lives but would rather delegate it to some external power and so live by default. In any case, Anna, thank you for being attuned.

Later, I join Konchok and Stanzin for dinner. We are also joined by Luis from Italy who has obviously met Konchok before. He comes in and takes a seat on the mattress across from me and leans against the wall. Luis is camping by himself somewhere up the stream in a wooded area. He has been camping around Ladakh for months. Sometimes under the trees by a stream and other times in the wide open meadows. He is a sensitive soul, loves nature and sleeping under the stars. At the moment Luis is glad to be here for some hot Ladakhi cooking because it is raining and it make it difficult for him to do his own cooking and to keep dry. He didn't anticipate all this rain either. Luis speaks easily, appears to be a gentle soul and says he doesn't ever want to go back to Europe. He recently came from spending some time in Kashmir and related some of his experiences with the Kashmiri police who, he said, wanted to hurt him. I listen closely, noticing his softness which also carries within it some intensity as he tells us his story. He tells of the police wanting to keep his passport for some reason which was unclear to him, so he grabbed it out of the policeman's hand and told them all they couldn't have it. It worked! This all happened during a time, he says, when he was hearing voices. I'm off therapist duty now, not making any more diagnoses and didn't ask what the voices were saying or where they were coming from - inside or outside of his head, but just listened which is much more connecting and effective in being with someone rather than slapping a diagnosis on a person.

As he talked on, I suppose one might conclude that he struggles some with people skills but usually with 'challenging' folks. He apparently does real well when with folks who are kind to him. Here, by all appearances, he is a real gentleman. When I left later that night, he made the effort to get up off the floor to shake my hand. Luis has a great deal of strength and has his measure of courageousness, yet is fragile and vulnerable. It is difficult not to like him. At one point in the evening he relates his experience of trekking by himself, as usual, and on his way to crossing a high mountain pass not knowing for sure what the weather would bring. As he ascended this mountain, he met a shepherd at a high altitude who warned him not to try to cross the pass by himself. It was already snowing and the shepherd said it would be much too dangerous. So he invited him into his very basic shelter of one room and a dirt floor, fed him and kept him there for the night. Luis was impressed by the kindness and generosity of this shepherd who also spent much of his life in a dance with nature.

All evening we have a warm exchange and I enjoy listening to how Luis finds his way through life.

He walks everywhere, he says, and carries his tent and backpack and does his own cooking when it is not raining. It seems he lives on the edge, often not using too much common sense judgement. This frequently brings him to a precipice of some potentially very serious trouble physically and mentally, but someone always seems to appear on the horizon just in time to save him from disaster and to give him some direction. I gather he accepts this direction gratefully and realizes that otherwise he could have found himself in a serious predicament.

Konchok sits here listening and at times laughing, making sure we have enough soup, momos and veggies. He is quite amazing, takes people in, feeds them, loves cooking for them and welcomes them to stay for the night. Last night two young women stayed in his room while he was in Leh for two days - probably stocking up on food to feed us all! He reminds me again that he wants me to come anytime even when he is not there. Luis and I are invited back for dinner tomorrow night to make Ladakhi skew. And as I said earlier, he refuses money. I have watched Konchok cook several meals by now and continue to be impressed that he appears supremely happy as he sits on the floor and rolls out the dough to make momos, chapatis or anything else. No matter where my attention is, whether with him or looking out the window, he is smiling genuinely as he puts his arms and shoulders into the rolling pin. Perhaps it is just my imagination, but one can almost see the love pouring from his face, down through his shoulders, arms and fingers into the rolling pin and on into the dough. Obviously he is doing what he wants to do in this moment and in his life. His presence, his movements, communicate a thankfulness for everything no matter what - even this overabundance of rain with its damaging effects. He is a marvel to watch. As I watch him from day to day, Buddha does his share of pestering in the most loving of ways encouraging me to possibly be open to some free instruction on how to better walk on this earth! I am blessed and grateful.

Since this is the most famous monastery in Ladakh, there are quite a few tourists (practically none from the United States!) who visit here. Sometimes I sit in the window of my room two floors up and watch them begin to arrive around 10 or 11am in taxis or chartered buses with cameras and camcorders strapped over their shoulders which too soon and too often get pushed into the face of a monk or local person ready or not. Some dress very ordinarily while some men wear ties and a few women wear hats out of a fashion magazine. I must confess to at times just wishing they would all go away - a rather snobby and selfish attitude. I want this place to myself! The silence, the quiet. It occurs to me that actually I don't own this place! However, that doesn't keep the attitude from creeping, or exploding, periodically into my consciousness. It isn't long till I am visited by the 'Pest' to encourage me to do a reevaluation of my rectal myopic perspective of life! It gradually gets through and I notice a shift happening. When I think about it, these tourists are really quite courageous to travel to Ladakh in the first place. It is not the easiest place to get around. These folks are not sitting at home or only traveling in the comfort of Western countries. They have made the choice to do some mind expansion in a setting that can be quite uncomfortable and unpredictable. And the money from their tickets helps defray some of the expenses in the upkeep of the monastery. Eventually I notice feelings of celebration and joy at their presence - and that is a shift. I even catch a smile on my face. Not just the monks, but these tourists become a positive force, teachers, in my time here. Odd how these things sneak up on you and slap you on your blind side! The Buddha really can be a pest in rather unforeseen ways!

This afternoon I sit with about 6 monks on the steps by the main entrance to the monastery watching the tourists come, buy their tickets and enter the courtyard of the monastery. An older monk whom I recognize in the usual reddish orange robe comes down the steps and stands there looking at the people. He has a kindly look on his face and I suddenly have an idea and proceed to pull from my pocket the clown nose and move toward the older monk. Younger monks generally don't hesitate much in putting the nose on but the older ones are a little more reluctant. I approach him with the nose. He has seen my clown nose before and I motion to suggest to him to put it on. He smiles and resists a bit but then does so and begins clowning with some of the tourists, laughing and obviously getting into this business! At one point he turns and goes back up the steps into the courtyard and I can see from a distance that he interacts a bit with a couple of monks. I sit and watch and assume he will return with my nose, but in fact he disappears! Nose and all. He doesn't come back! I asked another monk sitting beside me where he went and he said with a mischievous smile that he disappeared and I lost my nose. I find out later that he wanted to have some fun too and told the monk to walk off with it. So I lost my nose to a monk and the joke is on me! Who are the true clowns here? There must be a song or poem in that: losing my nose to a monk! I walk up the stairs into the courtyard looking for him but he is nowhere to be found. It appears that I've just given a gift to the monks of this monastery! Oh, well, if it brings them even more joy, laughter and playfulness, it will be worth it.. After all the Buddha did say "Laughter is the beginning of wisdom."

The next morning I go to the early morning chanting and see the monk there who walked off with my nose. He entered, did his three prostrations and began walking to his usual sitting place. He saw me as he glanced my way and began laughing, pointing to his nose making various gestures indicating it was gone and he had no idea where! A couple of times during the chanting we exchanged hand signals, laughing. He didn't miss a beat in his chanting during this distance communication! I'm enjoying this experience while in the memory bank of my brain I hear voices from my past which says: "Turn around, sit up straight, be quiet, pay attention and behave!" I smile and think I'll be a Buddhist!

After chanting, several young monks and I are playing around in the courtyard before the tourists begin to arrive, whistling, taking some pictures with my digital. They are a very curious bunch and are fascinated by this technology and the immediate feedback it gives. They pass the camera around, looking through the viewfinder. I show them how to take a picture, which they do, and are delighted with the result that pops up on the screen. The interchange is always rich - at least for me and I come away gratified from being with my many teachers here. The monks soon go off to their school classes for the day and I wonder over to the courtyard entrance and sit down with some older monks. After the standard Ladakhi 'jul-ley' greeting, which covers everything, I am attracted to the color and design of a red sweater one of them is wearing that reminds me of a Mandarin painting. I compliment him on it and ask him if he likes it. He says yes, so I ask him if he is attached to it, given that one of the Buddhist teachings is non-attachment which is necessary for liberation or enlightenment. Again he says yes so I rather playfully point out the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment and no clinging. He smiles, shrugs his shoulders and says: "Why not!" I can't help but laugh and enjoy his beautiful attitude. Like let's not get too serious about this enlightenment stuff. This religious stuff! I like this red sweater, it is practical, it keeps me warm and I intend to enjoy it! As another wise sage from the hills of West Virginia said: "What's the hurry. We've got from now on!" Enlightenment will come in its own time when it is good and ready!

Later in the morning I walk up to the entrance of the monastery again and sit there with a few other monks. We jostle with each other a bit and exchange some comments with tourists coming to see Hemis. 'The monk' appears and stands at the entrance. He doesn't see me so I take about three big steps and suddenly grab him from the front by both arms, laughing while pointing to his nose. He jumps in surprise and then bursts out in a huge laugh. He knows he has me! He speaks some English and sheepishly explains that when he walked off with the nose and was crossing the courtyard another monk snatched the nose from his nose and went off with it. He has no idea where it now is and continues with his laughter. Ya gotta love this monk! And ya gotta laugh as well! I said it is my gift to him and the monks here. However, I do not offer him my clown hat! But, darn it, I'm now out of noses! Gone! Already this morning I could have used one several times!

The time is near when I will be leaving Hemis and I do some reflecting over a cup of tea at the little restaurant. Before coming here I had arranged to meet up again with a Western psychiatrist back in Leh. Commitments even here! I will miss this place and these people. They have taught me much which I doubt they are aware of. Their way, their steady presence, their way of walking day to day, moment to moment, their joy, their love for Buddha, the path (dharma), the community (sangha), their playfulness and affection for each other, loving life yet not taking it all too seriously even while realizing the impermanence of everything, and the journey to Emptiness, have all made a mark in my life. Yes, they are human, and I imagine this community of Buddhists has its issues but I have not, in my time here, been privileged to get to see that level of the sangha.

While reflecting in these final moments, Jigmat comes to say goodbye. He has been a good friend and teacher during my stay. He has finished his monk studies and now must continue his meditation and studies basically on his own, but he does have a master that he sees several times a month. Jigmat says it is important for him to mature further and establish a more stable mind before he can do, for example, the intensive three year, three month, three day solitary meditation. He is not yet ready for it because his mind is still too unstable and unfocused to handle it. Along with the approval of his master, he will decide when he is ready. Jigmat gives me a little more information about the routine of such an intensive. Basically the monk is up at 2am and meditates from 12 to 16 hours a day. This included sitting meditation, doing many prostrations, repeating a mantra, chanting and other methods which he does not go into.

Sharma, the cook of this little outdoor restaurant here, also comes to my table to say a private goodbye. He just returned from being in Leh for two days to do a special personal Hindu puja which as a Brahmin he does every six years. At this time he meets with his guru who gives him a new string that is a distinguishing feature of a Brahmin. He makes sure I have his address in Nepal and asks me to please visit him there during my next visit to Nepal.

The next morning I leave with some reluctance and am aware that many more weeks and months could easily and profitably be spent here, but after a few more goodbyes with hugs and kisses to Mickael and Anna, I board the local bus back to Leh with my backpack slung over my shoulder and the monks in my heart. Life is rich and I weep silently with gratefulness and gratitude.