

KASHMIR TO LADAKH

(And then some)

The deepest form of devotion
is not to perform religious rites.
The best rule of conduct is to laugh at everything.

Chuang Tzu

Two months or more trekking across the high mountain passes of the Himalayas and down through the deep valleys fording rushing streams, sleeping in tents and dealing with unpredictable weather changes, trudging through snow, getting sunburned, taking layers off in the valleys and putting them back on as one ascends the next pass. That is one way of getting from Kashmir to Ladakh - for about \$200 a day, I am told by a gentleman in the business. No, I didn't travel that way, but it would have made a rather interesting story, I imagine. Sorry about that! Maybe another time. Another way to make the journey is by deluxe bus which takes two days. Don't misunderstand me. Deluxe is not deluxe! But it does go straight through except for an overnight stop in Kargil. It is cold here, and the accommodation are questionable. I won't mention the food! Kargil is not a tourist destination but a stop off point between the two regions and it is just about on the border of the disputed territory fought over between India and Pakistan. A conflict which has taken place at the highest elevation in history. More soldiers die from issues related to altitude than to the conflict itself! Sometimes the road around Kargil is closed because of shelling. Nevertheless, it is a stunning ride from Srinagar to Leh, from the verdant green Switzerland-like terrain to crossing a particular mountain pass, and suddenly one enters the absolute barrenness of Ladakh - equally beautiful and striking.

One can also fly between the two cities and get a glimpse of the two regions, the mountainous contrasts of green and barren brown, both with snow covered peaks. It is a short flight and then you are there! No hassle! So which do I choose to do, brave and adventurous soul that I am. No, I didn't trek. No, I didn't take the bus. I wimped out and flew! Ah, well, it was a great flight with amazing views of the Himalayas. Actually, I had booked this flight with India Air while in Dharamasala, the headquarters of the Dalai Lama and the location of the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual and political government in exile. When I enquired about a flight, the agent checked his computer and told me that all seats were already booked. Then he went on to say he could get me a seat but there would be an extra charge that amounted to about \$10. I began to suspect that this is the other side of India in action! So I ask how, if all the seats are booked, by some miraculous act he just might be able to confirm a seat for me for an extra \$10. Does the airline quickly build an addition onto the plane or what? After all, this is India Air and all things are surprisingly possible if not understandable! He smiles and gives an illogical and evasive answer. I ask if this is a standby ticket of which he speaks. You have to ask these questions and take nothing for granted. The agent telling you he can get you a seat does not automatically mean it is a confirmed seat. It could mean it is a standby ticket and he assumes someone will not show or will cancel. In fact, he will almost swear by it! 'It happens all the time,' he says. All this he will not necessarily tell you unless you ask point blank, and then you best check your ticket once you get it - as well as the dates.

So I go ahead and buy the ticket and when it is time to leave Srinagar, Kashmir, to fly to Leh, I arrive at the airport in plenty of time and get in line to check my bags and get a seat assignment. The ticket agent looks at my ticket and says the plane is full and my ticket is standby. I need to see the ticket man at the next counter, he says. I explained that when purchasing the ticket I was assured the seat was confirmed and he responds by saying the other man will handle the problem. So I go to the next counter and he rather brusquely says the plane is full and there is no chance of getting a seat today. I'm becoming a little irritated and insist the agent told me the seat is confirmed, that there is in fact a seat on the plane, that he knows this to be true and so do I. Now, I'd like my seat assignment. I'm taking the risk of calling his bluff, and do not yet insist on speaking with the manager - which might be of little use anyway because he likely is also in on this scheme! He says again it is not possible and why do I listen to what the ticket agent says anyway! I reply by saying that I would assume, perhaps stupidly, that folks in the Indian airline industry, including him, operate with some standard of honesty and integrity (which, in fact, I do not assume, but it sounds like a good line!). I ask him what was I supposed to do, tell the travel agent he is a liar? That would go over real well! He shuffles papers around, makes a few unidentifiable noises with his mouth, grunts and huffs and puffs a few times while refusing to look at me. I'm not feeling very kind at the moment but also realize that loud expressions of anger do not go very far in this country so am speaking in a well modulated firm voice while looking him directly in the face and eyes. Without looking at me he points and tells me to stand a bit off to the side and he'll call me back in about 20 minutes. I feel quite certain he is waiting for a little baksheesh, some rupees between the pages of my passport, which he will then divide between him and the guy at the next counter who first sent me to him. Sorry, Dude, I'll go to the airline office and get a refund on my ticket and take the bus if necessary! Options are always nice to have!

I stand off to the side and give him time to understand more fully that no bribe is in the pipeline, and to miraculously find one available seat, or perhaps someone has suddenly canceled - or died! Then again he might not budge. That's part of the risk of this game. In about 10 minutes he motions for me and tells me to take my ticket and see the first agent I had seen. He gave no further explanation and I observed had said nothing to the other agent. Sure enough, without batting an eye the agent had a seat for me. Surprise! A little later I board the plane and as it taxis to take off I look around and count about 20 empty seats! Not a chance of an empty seat, huh? All my suspicions are confirmed! Turkey! What did you say, Buddha? Pesky sort! Just let me have my moments here. This does remind me of a cartoon of two monks walking along a mountain path. One looks at the other and says: 'I know it is better to light a candle in the darkness, but it is much more emotionally gratifying to curse the darkness!'

Upon arrival at the Leh airport I find my way into Leh in a shared taxi. Leh sits at about 12,000' (3503 meters) elevation and altitude sickness is a concern for anyone arriving here. For many it is less of a problem coming by road and gradually acclimating as they climb to higher and higher elevations, but coming by air one is suddenly 'on top of the mountain.' The advice is to take it easy for a few days, don't over exert yourself, and drink lots of water. That sounds like the way I live my life anyway so I am hoping the adjustment will be rather painless. As time goes on I am fortunate and experience no side effects of altitude sickness. However, this can hit anyone of any age, in any physical condition and at any time so not having symptoms is not something to get cocky about but to feel gratitude for because tomorrow you might well be the next victim.

I have no lodging reservations, which I usually don't, so I begin looking around and check out a few places in my Lonely Planet Travel Guide. Eventually, I meet another traveler on the street and ask if she has any recommendations. I check one out, Saiman Guest House. They have one room left and I take it. It is a lovely guesthouse owned and run by a Muslim family in this predominantly Buddhist region. There is a somewhat small population of Muslims as well as Christians here in Leh. A mosque and a Buddhist temple are just across the street from each other. People who follow the different religions appear to get along well. Saiman Guest House is named after the daughter of the owners. Shahida, the mother, is a busy woman and obviously carries most of the responsibilities here. Not only is she the business head of the guest house, she also teaches school. I'm not quite clear what the husband does except sometimes start the wood fire to give us Westerners a hot shower. Ahhhh.....it is appreciated!

The family has a son and a daughter and I am surprised to learn that both children are sent to private Christian schools even though that means the son must board at a school in another regions. I ask Shahida about this and she says she wants her children to get the best education possible and at this time the best alternative is found in the Christian schools. Shahida and her family are moderate Muslims which is evident in their more relaxed manner of dress and their larger global perspectives. Their faith is important to them and they do practice it. At the same time, she and her husband have an understanding of the larger world, something of the direction it is moving and what it is likely to take not only to survive but to make a contribution. In this respect they impress me as an admirable model for any religious person to emulate. Becoming too attached to any religion, any social or political position often brings with it a rather fearful myopic approach to life generally causing misunderstandings, family and community conflicts and even international conflicts. One doesn't have to look far to see this. Of course, we as humans are quite talented in our unconsciousness life style of rationalizing our behaviors and choices even if it means the emotional or physical death of others! I am always encouraged and hopeful when I meet a family such as Shahida's who practices their religion, which is personally important to them, and yet is able to move beyond it, to honor and respect the position of others.

I stay with this family on and off for two months and take great pleasure in sitting in the front garden which is a mixture of grass on the one side with tables and chairs for breakfast, reading, writing or just musing. Shahida has planted many flowers which grace the garden and provide music of great joy. Sometimes I am quite happy doing nothing other than sitting here watching them gather in the light and warmth of the morning sun, listening closely to the music of the different colors spreading across the garden, filling the air and joining with more vegetables and flowers on the lower level stretched out in front of me. In India it is rather unusual to find such a display of flowers but it seems to be a little more prevalent in Ladakh, I discover. I wonder about this. On the other side of the walkway is a vegetable garden. The growing season is short and the most is made of it. At certain times of the day water flows through the canals and Shahida or her husband direct the flow into storage tanks and through the canals leading to the vegetable gardens.

For those who want it, breakfast is served on the lawn under an umbrella to protect one from the bright sun. This is another of my great joys in being here. An omelet, tasty Tibetan bread and a flask of hot drink of your choice - coffee or tea. I request mint tea which is readily available. It's not long that when I come to the table in the morning, Shahida appears with the flask of tea and confirms the rest of my breakfast. She does this for all the guests up to a certain time and then must get ready to

leave to teach school. Lunch and dinner are not served here but if she is home, she is happy to prepare an afternoon tea for you.

Shahida runs an efficient and tight guest house. She is sensitive to noise of one guest affecting another and keeps this to a minimum, and to the safety of all. She is not beyond asking a guest to find other lodging but the one time I witnessed her doing this, it was done sensitively, fairly and firmly.

The city of Leh itself, with around 30,000 inhabitants, has a couple of main streets where most of the shops and vendors are, and where most of the tourists hang out. This part of Leh is not particularly attractive but it is interesting to be among the locals who bring their fruits and vegetables and line the streets to transact business. Main Bazaar road and Fort road are the primary streets where both locals and tourists buy and sell. There are larger markets and shopping areas located around these two roads that are very interesting to explore. Leh is in a rather stunning location north of the Indus River, nestled in a valley surrounded by the high Himalayan mountains with many canals running through it to bring water for irrigation, drinking, washing, bathing and pure pleasure. I wander a lot through the old part of town which is filled with twisting alleyways, old substantial homes, stacks of wood and dung used for cooking and warmth. Probably the most impressive and unavoidable structure in Leh is the nine-story Leh Palace which is the former home of the royal family of Ladakh. It is no more, however, since around 1830 when they were sent off to Stok. In other words exiled!

There are many gompas, or monasteries, in the Leh valley and all over Ladakh. Absolutely fascinating. I soon meet a German couple who are staying at the guest house too, Jorge and Corinna, as well as Anne from Australia. I don't think anyone is left in Australia and New Zealand. They are all traveling some other place in the world! Compare that to the 10% of folks from the U.S. who have passports which means 90% of us do not. It gives me more pause for thought about what appears to me to be our rather distorted and limited world view and the results thereof, our attempts to export our particular flavor of democracy, for example, and then wonder why it isn't real successful! It doesn't mean democracy is not a wonderful idea but imposing my brand onto another culture generally isn't real thoughtful or considerate. Another culture might actually have a more workable way of establishing their own form of democracy. I wonder how keen we Americans would be if another country tried to put their form of government on us. The answer to that one isn't too difficult! It is interesting how interacting with folks from other countries and cultures presents the opportunity to look a bit more openly and expansively at one's own country and certainly at one's self. Not always a real comfortable way to pass time!

The four of us hire a taxi to visit several of the gompas. One can take local buses which are very inexpensive but you have to coordinate bus schedules to make sure you can get there and back in the same day - unless you stay overnight somewhere close by. So we do a quick visit in a day to Hemis, Thiksey and Shey gompas. I know that I will be back to spend more time at each of them but this brief exposure helps me to decide where I will likely spend the most time. There is no real hurry since I will be in Ladakh for two months or so with Leh as my base.

Following our visit to the gompas, Jorge, Corinna and I arrange to do a short several day trek to Langtang and back to Alchi village where we will catch a bus back to Leh. To get to our starting point for the trek, we take a taxi. On the way, we pass through Nimmu, but just before arriving at

Nimmu we pull over to the side of the road and have a look at the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar Rivers. Two beautiful gorges bring them together and it is fascinating to note and watch the different colored waters merging, gradually mix and eventually become one color again. I think I am watching an artist take different colored acrylic or oil paints that have been liquified and pouring them on this magnificent canvas before us, then standing back and watching the beauty of the mixing process, perhaps periodically tilting the canvas a bit here and a bit there. How can something so simple, so natural be so transfixing? I stand here and can not easily peel my eyes away! But we all do and travel on to Basgo. Earlier in the history of this region, Ladakh was divided into upper and lower Ladakh with Basgo being the capital of lower Ladakh. Eventually the two regions were united into one kingdom with Leh as capital. Basgo is quite interesting and the gompa here is listed as an endangered World Heritage site. The gompa is made of mud bricks and is 400 years old while the citadel is 500 years old and is in a state of disrepair. The temple has a very large gold and copper statue of Maitreya, the future Buddha.

We are headed to the start of our trekking point which is Likir. Before beginning our trek we check out the gompa which is apparently the first gompa built by Tibetan monks in Ladakh. It dates from the 11th century. I stand back to look at another Maitreya Statue, this one 75' in height. Amazing and impressive. But we are ready to get on the trail and trekking any place in Ladakh is one you will not forget. I repeat myself and make no apologies for doing so, but any trek here presents a kind of stark colorful beauty that sometimes makes it difficult to trek. Why? Because it is sometimes difficult to walk and look at the same time. One's safety can be a factor. But if you are not going to look there is no sense in being out here. This isn't primarily about getting from point A to point B in X amount of time. As we walk along we are surrounded by high mountains, deep gorges, rocks, sand, dirt, landslides, lizards and partridges. At the moment the path is narrow and slippery, loose stones and gravel with dirt called scree, and I know I must stop to look at my surroundings, to breathe deeply and take it all in without the risk of a disastrous misstep. A lizard scampers across the path by my feet. The sun is bright and hot and I am grateful for my sunglasses. It's not difficult to understand why the locals seem to have a fixated squint. At the moment the river is far below. How long would it take to get tired of this beauty or to take it for granted? I suspect this happens only to those whose minds go to sleep as they choose to live in time rather than Now. And sadly that likely is most everyone of us! Thus, the kingdom of heaven is missed! Time, the great thief that I permit to take me out of the Now to live in the past and future and miss that which at the deepest level I am convinced we all seek. This kind of inner 'trek' is a long one passing through many sleep states, detours, slippery paths, the crossing of raging rivers until the earthquakes are frequent enough and of great enough magnitude to make it impossible any longer to sleep.

Standing here, breathing, drinking in as much as I can, it all flashes through my mind and I wonder when the final earthquake will come. Or will it simply be a soft breeze caressing my cheek that brings the pearl of great price to be the constant living force of every cell? The trek goes on. This trek. That trek. The inner and the outer trek. This land is alive and speaking. Can I, will I, be quiet enough to hear it?

We trek on till about noon and can see a house just ahead of us across a good sized stream. There are quite a few streams shooting off the larger one and we cross the smaller one with relative ease. To cross the largest we get a chance to see how good our balance is and how strong our courage is. It is too wide and deep to ford so we must negotiate an old rickety wood foot bridge which is none

too stable. There are narrow wood slats which are thin and not attached well, or just lying there spaced at odd distances with little rhyme or reason. However, I suppose the local folks don't have a problem and figure no one else will either. I, the old one, am the guinea pig. It's kind of a fun challenge, really. I can't do much more than get good and wet, give my backpack and everything in it a good soaking. Well, that would be inconvenient now that I think about it but I don't dwell on that too long but rather visualize a successful crossing charting my way with perfect balance! Life is good and I do cross successfully. Corinna follows and has little problem as well. I extend my trekking pole to her for the last most crucial part.

Jorge is watching all this from the other side with some apprehension, tending to generally carry a bit of anxiety anyway. This ups the ante. Granted, Jorge is carrying a very expensive digital camera and understandably does not want to dump that in the water. He is quite a good photographer and is keen on taking some outstanding photos back to Germany with him, which he no doubt will. However, this increases the anxiety. And no valium in sight! Jorge gives it his first try, moving slowly, shaking like a leaf in a coming wind storm. He gives a delightful nervous giggle, stops and backs up. He tries again and almost takes a swim but catches himself and backs up. Corinna and I are shouting encouraging statements like 'What's the problem, Jorge? It's a piece of cake. Just do it!' For some odd reason this doesn't seem too helpful! He gives it another try, makes some progress and then slowly gets down on his hands and knees, shaking, and begins to move slowly. Now the bridge is shaking too! Slowly, slowly, he crawls. We keep encouraging him by suggesting he fall in because the water is clean and he needs a bath anyway! That would benefit us all! This doesn't appear to be encouraging either and we get a hint that if we don't desist from such encouragement, once he does get across by whatever means Corinna and I might find ourselves impaled on his trekking pole! Or at least find ourselves thrown in the water since Jorge is both bigger and stronger than either of us!

Jorge pulls it off successfully with a huge sigh of relief. He is a good sport and we all laugh gratefully that each of us made it and remain dry. As we approach the house we can hear chanting and soon see there are two old Ladakhi men sitting on the ground in front of the house. They are both deeply immersed in their chanting, and I notice one man is blind. One of them, obviously the man who can see, does nod to us as we approach. An old woman appears in the doorway of the house and says the word chai in the form of a question. Chai is the word used for tea in a number of Asian countries in this part of the world. Of course, we are all ready for some chai so we follow her into the house where she shows us into a small room with a low table in the middle of the room with cushions around it. After walking for a good while, the cushions are a welcome soft comfort. We can't speak each other's language but that doesn't get in the way. Soon hot chai appears along with plain white bread and jam. She leaves and returns again with a bowl of freshly picked peas in their pods - something like sugar peas - and sets them before us. It all goes down very well and will last us till we get to Langtang later today. I address the elderly woman as Abi, or grandmother in the local lingo, fold my hands and thank her for the food. She gestures and wonders if we would like to stay for the night. When we mention 'Langtang' she understands that we will walk on to Langtang and stay there for the night. There is a part of me that would like to stay here. Probably not too many trekkers do because Langtang is a larger village and the popular stopping off point on this trek. Staying here would give Abi a little more income, which I am sure she would welcome. But after thanking her and leaving a generous amount of rupees for food and chai, we go on.

I'll say nothing more about the trek to Langtang because I would simply be stumbling over superlatives and after awhile they too lose their impact. Langtang sits at about 11,000' and is quite remote, visually impressing me like an oasis surrounded by green fields of young barley in the early stages of growth, many terraces bathed in sunlight and all in the cradle of mountains. After finding a guesthouse, the Padmini guesthouse, and depositing my backpack in my room, I wander outside to drink in the beauty, perhaps meet some people and just 'be.' Looking out across the fields of grain slowly waving in the breeze and reflecting the brilliance and the kiss of the sun's rays, I again have the feeling that it would be easy to get lost here - purposely! Perhaps nothing more than a fantasy, especially after the harsh reality of winter blew around the corner and up through the gorges freezing everything in sight and out of sight! Of course I would be able to be inside huddled by a fire, a cow dung fire! Think of the fragrance!

It is late afternoon and the light is soft gradually lengthening the shadows. The barren mountains are rich in changing colors. How can plain brown barren mountains have so many different colors: lavender, pink, sienna, umber and more. Being able to see these colors is a gift I no longer take for granted. My memory returns to around the age of 40 when I walked through a rather earth shaking, mind shattering experience for several years. One of the many benefits of these years was to suddenly 'see' colors for the first time in my life, to actually see a flower. Oh, yes, before that I could say 'this is red, this is yellow,' but there is color and then there is color. There is red and then there is a red beyond red. If colors do not knock you off your feet, make you weep, keep you on your knees, make you quiver, I would suggest you haven't yet seen colors.

Basking in the glow of these colors, I see 8 or 10 people bent over working in the fields that are divide by water channels and stone walls. It is a perfect time of day for some pics with the richness of greens and the softness and shades of yellow light. The women working in the fields (there are a couple men but not many) are close enough to chatter and laugh. They see me walking toward them and smile, inviting me into the fields to work with them. When they see my digital, they playfully pose for some pics and then when looking at them poke each other, laughing and pointing at one another. One woman wants to take a pic of me and another woman together. So I give her the camera and point out how to use it. A most charming and lovely old woman with storied lines in her face, and I, crouch in the field next to each other and the picture is taken. I am delighted to see how well it turns out. As we all look at the pic, a couple of the women begin to point at my 'girl friend' and me, laughing and clearly indicating that we are husband and wife! Or should be! These Ladakhis keep trying to match me up with one another. Who needs Match dot Com? By now I already have an entire harem! I pull out my pictures of my wife Rose and of my 3 grandchildren and show them indicating our relationship. They pass them around excitedly, ohh-ing and ahh-ing.

The Padmini is a family guesthouse and at dinner this evening I am joined by two guys from Ireland and one from Spain. Come to remote Langtang and sit down to dinner with an international community! One never know who one might meet but it is pretty much guaranteed that it will be a rich time. Dinner and breakfast are included in the price of \$4.50. The rice, dahl and veggies for dinner are welcome, a meal I have yet to get tired of, and one I prepare for us in the States when home. Breakfast is chapatis with butter, jam and of course chai. Moving right along to my bedroom - this is an experience! It is small with a foam mattress on the floor covered with a sheet and a blanket that I don't think have been washed in a long time but I must remember that dirt and dust are ubiquitous here. Then there is the question of what other living creatures might inhabit this bed. They don't

always come only two by two but sometimes, I am certain, community by community! And I'm not quite sure how to describe the cleanliness of the room except to say that it isn't! But I am prepared for such occasions. There are entrepreneurial folks in the West who make a business out of supplying travel products that might be useful when in a situation like mine so in anticipation of such occurrences I made the purchase of a silk sheet shaped like a duffle sleeping bag. When not used it folds up into a neat little 4"x6" stuff sack. It is just the thing for my present circumstances and I make good use of it. It doesn't save me from all the creepy crawly things that I have yet to befriend, but it does keep the alligators out and most of the dirt off me!

The room has a window with a view. And this is for real - an amazing view out across the mountains and gorges. However, there is also a view just below the window where there is an area large enough to keep two or three cows with attendant odors! Just like down on the farm! Yes, just like there are universal laws that regulate the universe, there are universal smells, or should I say fragrances, that are available in the various regions of this earth! Down the hall is the compost toilet. No running water, no electricity but there is one light in the kitchen/dining room which is solar powered. You go to the stream to wash.

Night comes and I do my best to befriend my brothers and sisters of smaller stature and many legs, but am not entirely successful. Well, after all they were here before me so it is their territory, is it not? Eventually, I do get some shut eye and am awakened very early not by the 3am Muslim call to prayer like in Leh or Kashmir but by the wild braying of a donkey at 4:30am outside my window. I am certain he took it upon himself to be fully responsible to assist me in greeting the day. He certainly sounded like he was in severe distress, or was in the midst of an early morning delight! It is cold, I turn over a few times and watch my little brothers and sisters make a hasty retreat and then hear pounding on the roof above me. Remember, this is 4:30 in the morning way up here in the boondocks. No city traffic, no rush hour, no horns, sirens, pollution, no National Public Radio or, God forbid, Fox news! Only the distressed donkey and pounding on the roof directly above me! It doesn't stop there. Pieces of the ceiling come loose and drop on me. Small chunks. Larger chunks. I hear the rhythmic back and forth movement of a saw making its way through a yielding piece of wood precious to this region. As if there isn't already enough dirt! Now I have to dodge chunks of dried mud and sticks! Thud! A chunk of mud hits my stomach! And as quickly another thud - a chunk that hits the bed next to my ear just missing my head! Guess what. I move! Get up! I gather the night and time for sleep is over.

After getting dressed, I decide to do a little exploring and find out what in the name of Allah, Buddha, Krishna and Jesus is going on above me, and walk cautiously up the stairs to the roof. There are three men unapologetically in the process of building more rooms. These rooms will have an incredible view totally unobstructed. I think I will make a reservation!

After breakfast, Jorge, Corinna and I trek on toward Rizong gompa, another remote monastery built on the side of the mountain in a natural amphitheater. It has about 30 young monks between the ages of 5 and 13. We arrive and walk into a central courtyard surrounded by a fairly new school building. There are a few of the monks wandering around with whom we exchange greetings. I am getting the impression that this is a fairly serious place and the monks are less outgoing or friendly than other gompas I have visited. A class is over and many more young monks come into the courtyard and try as I may, it is difficult to get a smile out of them so I decide to see what I can do about this. My

clown hat goes on my head and the nose sits where it belongs. Now a few smiles grace their faces and the youngest monks are most inquisitive. One lets me try to put the nose on him but it is difficult because his nose is much flatter than the Western nose, and it falls off several times, but finally, with persistence, we get the nose to stay on and he lets go with a delightful giggle. A couple other boys follow suit, but older ones remain a little more distant. Before we leave we have a cup of tea and the monks fill our bottles with filtered water.

It is about an hour's walk from Rizong back to a point where we can catch a ride. But on the walk we stop along the road at Julichen Nunnery. We come at a good time. The nuns are mostly adolescent and are having a picnic under some trees, lots of music, food and dancing. They are not shy and are really getting into the rhythm. No one has to teach them how to shake their tush. They welcome us and insist we have food and something to drink. It isn't long before they have us up off our seats on the ground and joining them in dancing. What fun. There is none of the seriousness of Rizong just up the road, but much laughter and playfulness. Perhaps the monks up there could learn something from their sisters down the road! We leave with folded hands, many expressions of goodby and a little food for the trek onwards.

We walk on and an hour later come to a little shop where we stop to rest and do our best to hitch a ride to another drop off point to walk on to Alchi. We are passed up by a number of tourist land rovers but eventually a local bus comes along, we successfully flag it down and take it to the drop off point. Alchi is still 4k further on. Right at the drop off point a mini bus comes along and turns toward Alchi. I motion for it to stop which it does. However, when we go to get on, the conductor does not open the door immediately and I can see there is some sort of conversation going on. As I step back and look at the passengers, I notice they are all older Westerners except for the driver and conductor and are of the 'tour group' genre. There is plenty of room in the bus but the result of the discussion is that there is no room for us. So the Indian conductor does what he is expected to do, says nothing by way of explanation, closes the door and the bus drives away. Interesting! The Indian driver did the typical Indian hospitable thing and stopped to pick us up but the Westerners had other ideas. Of course, the bus was arranged for this group and it is unusual for such to pick up others even if Westerners

It is a pleasant walk to Alchi and the gompa, is beautiful. Ringchen Zangpo founded this gompa in the 11th century on his return from what was then India. One will find here excellent examples of Indo-Tibetan art and Indian and Kashmiri influences. Ringchen is known as the Great Translator. So after a good look around and a bite to eat we are able to catch a bus from Alchi back to Ley. As we are returning the bus stops along the way picking up folks and dropping others off. At one stop the engine simply shuts off with no encouragement of the driver. Obviously we have developed some mechanical problems which is always a not unlikely possibility! No amount of coaxing is helpful. The engine obviously has overheated, from my limited perspective. Not knowing the time frame involved to repair the problem, if repairable on the spot, I walk down the road a bit and prepare to hitch the first ride I can get because this could be a very long wait! I do keep my eye on what is taking place back at the bus and notice that the driver/mechanic comes to the same conclusion as I have and sends someone running off down the mountainside to the stream with a gallon container to collect some water. A half hour later he returns, puts the water in, and the driver takes the bus down to the stream while the rest of us wait by the side of the road until he returns with a full radiator and several containers of water. We all are relieved and pile back in. Periodically the bus stops and more

water is added. A Ladakhi woman, probably about 30 years old, sitting beside me next to the window where she has a good perspective of how close we are to the edge of the road and how far it is to the bottom, is a little anxious each time we come to a stretch of road that is particularly precarious, narrow and drops off several thousand feet to the bottom of the gorge. At such times she quietly and unobtrusively folds her palms together, closes her eyes and sends off a prayer to her protector. I don't discourage her!

Upon returning to Leh, I am happy to find a room again at Saiman Guest house, to sit in the early morning sunshine in the garden of flowers while eating more of Shahida's Tibetan bread, drinking mint tea, musing and writing in my journal. Life is good. These next few days I'll do a number of random things here. This particular morning I am taking a long walk around the green valley of Leh, going up through Changspa and then take random paths to see where they will lead me. Many follow gurgling streams through small fields of flowers. Walking on further, I come to a run down stupa surrounded by a circular intact wall. For a while I climb around the ruins and pretty much at the top come upon a young Israeli guy sitting, looking down across Leh and reading about Buddhism. We speak briefly but I don't stay and talk but sense his solitude is important to him so go on.

On my travels this time it has been unusual to find a young Israeli alone or quietly contemplating. Most have just gotten out of serving with the military, have saved their money and are now traveling in groups to discharge the pain of what must have been three years of hell - not unsimilar, I suppose, to most any military yet I imagine there are likely some unique factors and influences related to being a part of the Israeli military. Many guest houses will not accept Israelis as guests because of the noise, chaos, drugs and disrespect for property. From time to time I am fortunate to be able to talk with older Israelis about this and why they seem not to mix with others. The older Israelis are usually rather embarrassed by their younger countrymen and do not make excuses for them but talk about their take on the behavior. With the younger ones, an arrogance and cocky self-assurance hiding many feelings on the opposite end of that spectrum are present and are drowned in drugs and various acting out behaviors. On the one hand it makes some sense and might be useful in alleviating the effects of PTSD, post traumatic stress disorder. It is a way of shaking it out of their bodies and nervous systems. Research has shown that wild animals do not get PTSD because when they experience a frightening or traumatic encounter they do not hold it in, repress it, but shake it out, run, growl or a variety of other behaviors. Domesticated animals, on the other hand, do get PTSD because they internalize such experiences, thanks to us human folk! It occurs to me that such 'shaking' behavior perhaps ought to be part of the training of all who enlist in the military. Or how about daily 'group shakes'!

In any case, there certainly are many reasons, and of course there is history, conditioning, mind sets, world views, belief systems that become distorted, perverted and are a part of us all. And so we are subsequently denied a life of living the truth but rather usually don't even know we have become part of massive group hallucinations and delusions all neatly rationalized and justified, too frequently wrapped up in the name of our particular version of God. Waking up is hard to do. This is life as it is. This is what is. Can I accept it without feeling I necessarily need to approve of it?

I admit to myself that I must be aware of my attitude toward the Israelis as I travel and at this time realize my exposure is to a small part of the larger population. They are also my teachers on this journey because I am finding how they present themselves does a great disservice to the people and

nation of Israel. This bothers me. I don't like to see any people having this kind of affect. I note this is a very different internal response from what it was some years ago. But is this any different from the effect of the government and people of the United States on the world? (A bumper sticker I saw in the U.S.: "Be careful or we will bring democracy to your country too!) I have become real aware of the my reaction to the relationship of the United States with the Israeli government and the Middle East situation, as well as the attitudes and beliefs of the religious right. It seems rather insane and thoughtless. To be intelligent is one thing. To think intelligently is quite another! I think the Buddha is being a pest again! It is important to be pestered and traveling certainly has the capacity to do just that - fortunately!

All of this thanks to one lone Israeli! I wonder if he realizes the teacher he is being. All of this while walking through the fields around Leh. I am most grateful for these times and it is a major reason I travel. I can usually count on traveling to point out rather graphically how much waking up remains to be done, to take it all in, feel it in the body, as much as possible suspend personal judgment and allow it. This is the joy of living. There is no hurry and the important point is to be in this moment fully and allow the joy of gratefulness to be present. I stop by a stream and sit quietly, dozing off in the warm sun. When I awaken I lazily watch the butterflies dancing from flower to yellow flower, beautiful birds flying from tree to tree with long tails providing stability and hear the sound of the stream rushing by. Time isn't! I am overcome with tears and realize as never before how much I love this world. Many times in the past years I have asked myself the question: 'How best can I love this world?' But I have found it difficult to do with all the negativity, of suffering, greed, hatred, war, killing. It comes and it goes. At this moment these are not issues and I weep with love for this world with all its hatred, greed and war. There is no attachment to it but a realization that in some way, which I do not fully understand, everything is the Divine Source, Energy, Consciousness, full expressions of such, and I feel myself embracing it all with tenderness, gratefulness and thanksgiving. Such beautiful heresy! Ah, yes, I am coming to love heresy. There is so much truth in heresy! No wonder it is such a frightening thing. Such a no no!

Before going to bed this night, I do a meditation on the Buddha of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara. In the night I have a dream in which I am holding a baby boy close to me, wrapped in my arms. The baby is not new born but several months old. I feel such love and compassion for this child and don't want to ever leave it. It is a strong connection.

While in Kashmir I met an older German traveler who said that while in Leh he had met Abi Lhamo, a Tibetan oracle or traditional healer, a woman. For many years I've had an interest in persons who might be called shamans or oracles so I keep my ears open when in Leh. It just so happens that I meet Tundrup when I walk into his place of business to ask a question. Abi is his grandmother! Aren't coincidences fun? He says that she only does her healing work on specific days each month of the Tibetan calendar. The next day will be July 12 and today is July 7. Back at my guesthouse I ask Shahida, the Muslim woman who owns this guesthouse, if she knows Abi Lhamo. She says 'yes' but that the Muslim people don't believe in her. Yet, as our discussion progressed, she went on to say that some Muslims do go to her particularly if other medical treatment fails. I ask her if she has personally been to her and again she says yes. When she was a young girl, a relative went to Abi for treatment of a physical problem, unspecified, and was successfully healed. Abi also works with

animals and Shahida's family took a cow to her that apparently had developed a problem because of having swallowed a nail. Abi Lhamo 'sucked' the nail out of the cow and spit it on a plate for her and the family to see. According to Shahida, the treatment was successful and the cow recovered, but she said you have to believe for it to work.

I arranged to attend Abi's next ceremony and also to take a translator with me since, for some odd reason, the ceremony does not take place in English! Gyatso, my translator, is 22 years old and a student. He tells me that Abi is both blessed and supported by the Tibetan Buddhist lamas and that she spends time with them for further teaching and blessing. She also is blessed by the Dalai Lama. Gyatso and I hire a taxi and drive to Sabu, the general location where there are several houses, about 5k outside of Leh. The homes here are small unlike many of the more substantial multilevel houses that are quite common in Ladakh. We park and enter the home where the ceremony is to take place. Already there are several local people seated on the floor, some with small children and babies. A couple Westerners are present and a young woman from Austria has come with us who is doing some research for her university course on oracles. She has seen several oracles thus far but none for her own personal work.

One of the ways I learn best is by trusting enough to jump in with both feet and personally experience the work, in this case, of an oracle. I have been nursing a shoulder injury caused by slinging my backpack on and off like I'm much younger than I actually am and wish to ask the oracle about this. I have spoken about this with my translator and he is prepared. We sit on the carpeted floor against the wall. At this moment she is in the process of going into a trance and is chanting, ringing a bell, doing some ritual throwing of rice over her head and begins to bounce on her knees on the floor. She turns with a long sword in her hand, and I wonder what will happen next, hoping she doesn't start swinging that lethal looking weapon my direction! However, I suppose a beheading would permanently cure whatever the problem might be! Losing one's head is not always a bad idea. However, it does not strike me that this is the proper occasion, the time or place! I don't really suspect that she will get wild with this thing but am quietly delighted when she calmly lays it down. The sword, in Buddhist symbology, represents many things, including cutting through spiritual and physical distractions, whatever it is in the mind that might be causing the physical problem.

After putting the sword aside, Abi Lhamo begins treating the local people. One woman brings her small children, and other women come alone with concerns about themselves or their family. They tell the oracle their problem, she listens and responds according to the issue. Frequently she sucks the part of the body where the problems is, or another related spot, and then spits something into a pan. At this moment a woman point to her stomach and says something. The oracle goes through various motions with her hands and body, and with her bell. She moves another object around the person's body and head, then lifts the cloth covering the stomach and sucks, spitting into the pan what looks to me like saliva. I look closely, very curious and I suppose hoping to see something unusual. No solid objects or discolored matter. Working with a couple other women she wacks them real hard on the back.

Gyatso leans over to me and says our turn is coming soon so we move to the center part of the room a little closer to the oracle. In a few minutes, she motions for us to come to her. I, like the others, give her a soft white scarf in which I put rs100, or about \$2. This is the amount suggested by Gyatso. I am not sure what others put in the scarf but notice some give rupees to an older man who

is an assistant to the oracle. Gyatso explains to her about my shoulder and muscle pain and the restricted range of motion. She puts her fingers on my wrist, checks my pulse, listens closely and says it is a nerve problem. She is taking my arm in her hands, blows several times the length of it and sucks on my wrist spitting out what appears again to be nothing more than saliva. Through my translator she says she has done what she can and that I need to see an Amchi, a traditional medicine doctor, for his diagnosis and to use his prescribed medicines. If I don't see him, the pain will increase. She gives me a chant which is the mantra of the medicine Buddha, to repeat in my meditation. It is:

Teyata om Behkatso Behkatso
Raza Sumgadeh Sohha

translated it means:

We praise and honor the Medicine Buddha
We prostrate before the Medicine Buddha.

I move out of the way then and sit to the side so that others can also see her, but Gyatso says that in a few minutes she will again see me and will chant over me. Sure enough, she soon indicates for me to approach her. Between me and her there is a small container of coals giving off some smoke. She instructs me to put my face over this with the smoke wafting around my face and head, breathing it in while she does her chanting and goes through her ritual with the bell and another instrument over my head and body. Now she ties several different colored strings on the index finger of each of my hands for protection. This brings me to the end of my personal interaction with Abi Lhamo. Nothing scary, nothing all that strange and all rather low key.

We leave Abi Lhamo and go back to Leh where I make it a point to see an Amchi. Amchis are more formally trained and use medicines made from plants and herbs. They are part of a larger organization that does a lot of research on these plants used in various combinations to determine their efficacy. As I enter the office of the Amchi, I see three other local people there. Two are taken care of by the Amchi and the last one is a monk I recognize from Hemis monastery. The Amchi says I am next but I defer to the monk and motion for him to go next. After all he was here before me but even so, with all the kindnesses shown to me by the monks I am more than willing to let him go before me anyway. He smiles and sits there and the Amchi quickly says for me to come forward because the monk is a monk, he is in no hurry and can wait! I'm very uncomfortable with this attitude and insist again that the monk go first. So what if he is a monk and time for him doesn't exist. Is that a reason to treat him in a way that to me feels minimizing?

Reluctantly, I move to the chair next to the Amchi, describe my condition and don't tell him what Abi Lhamo said because I'm again curious what he will come up with. He too says it is a nerve issue. As an aside, I saw an M.D. when in Dharmasala who also gave the same diagnosis but his treatment was not helpful. At least there seems to be an agreement regarding the diagnosis. The Amchi gives me a couple different medicines that, I must admit, look a bit like something collected from sheep! Nevertheless, the shape or appearance should have nothing to do with results so I dutifully follow his instructions for the next 5 days and return to let him know of any progress or

results. There doesn't seem to be any improvement. He wants to give me a salve-like concoction to prepare on a stove but since I don't have access to one, he give me more of the 'sheep medicine!' Again this doesn't seem to help so I do not return. (I might add here that after returning to the States, I saw a physical therapist and the condition was very successfully taken care of in six weeks. No medicine was involved in this particular case.)

Thus ends my experiences with oracles and natural healers of Ladakh. I would not want to discount the effectiveness and place of local healers in the lives of the Ladakhi people. In my one very limited experience, it was not directly helpful but it is apparently to many others according to their personal accounts. And, admittedly, I did not spend much time repeating the mantra of the Medicine Buddha in my meditation. What does this say about my belief in the power of a mantra? It raises some very relevant questions of the role of belief in healing regardless of healing method or the ailment being treated. Medical research in the States shows that at least 80% of folks who appear at the offices of family physicians have conditions that are psychosomatic. This seems to have rather astounding ramifications for the choice and success of treatment. Placebo anyone? A good dose of belief therapy? A workshop on thought processes and the affect of mind set and thoughts on the health of one's body and mind?

Well, on to the next adventure. Perhaps a few days in the Nubra Valley across the highest motorable pass in the world. 18,300 feet. That I did, but that is another story.

