

*On the Way to Mount Kailash, with Charles Genoud*

Lhasa

All along the round of it the Barkor was thronged with pilgrims. They came from the provinces of Kham, Amdo, Golok, Ngari, Tsang, and U; they came from everywhere in Tibet to be in the ancient temple at the Barkor's center, the Jokhang. The holy statue of Shakyamuni Buddha, the Jowo Rinpoche, was inside. Do they see themselves reflected in it, I wondered.

Pilgrims arrived daily in Lhasa by truck, bus, motor cart, horse-drawn cart, and by foot, and many had already begun their circumambulations around the temple in the rich dark before dawn. I joined their flow. A few students from our group had already scattered amid the crowds; others were still dreaming in their beds in the hotel. I had no notion of Charles.

Some pilgrims had prostrated themselves the whole length of their journey, up and down, over and again for hundreds of miles, touching the crown of their head, throat, and heart with their hands cupped as a lotus bud before laying themselves face down, their arms and legs stretching full out. Any trace of them upon the earth was soon brushed away by the wind: their path was an invisible path. And it was steadfast, which astonished me.

They came on like that, mile after mile, through whatever kind of weather. They came on through valleys, packs of wild dogs, deserts, military checkpoints, ravines and streams. They crossed mountains. They ferried rivers in yak skin boats or wooden barges with old oil-spattered engines. Smoke trailed from the wooden crafts into the sky. It would be easy to romanticize, to somehow judge such practitioners. It would be easy

to set them at a distance from oneself. Such resolve seemed possible to me only through an opening heart. When one is present, in each instant. How else could Sisyphus shoulder his labor? An old man precisely lowered himself to the ground. His eyes were barely open; the refuge prayer streamed from his body like water.

More and more pilgrims came on, fast or slow, walking or prostrating, intoning mantras aloud or to themselves. They were worn by open country. Suddenly, I wanted to know whether the palms of all those who had prostrated their way to Lhasa were still lined with stories. Maybe the stories were fading. Maybe the stories were fading from all of us, each and each, however we found ourselves beside the Jokhang. Desire and aversion, hope and fear—all that can circumscribe a life—maybe all that was giving way to the trust that there is something through and beyond such things. Trust through and beyond conditioning, beyond substance habit mind, beyond deficiency. Trust beyond attachment to notions of self. Trust in the truth that one is Buddha nature.

Whether engaged in prostrations or not the pilgrims in the shadowy light of the Barkor seemed to believe that there is something more than the sorrow of parting at death from family, friends, and possessions, the known and palpable world, stories so deep they are inscribed even on the hands.

The sun was rising above the mountains. A young couple passed by me quickly, and I felt the breeze of them as they made their way to the Jokhang. The woman had a little turquoise woven into her hair. Her husband was long-striding, tall, and she had to hurry to keep up with him. Their thick belted jackets were smeared with the dust and breadth of their journey.

There was so much color going by, it was like a parade. And I was just another one of the floats, a gleaming congeries of thoughts, emotions, attachments. I felt the recognition of this through my body. I felt it in the air along my open hands. I couldn't hold to anyone or anything no matter how hard I tried. Soon, this experience passed away, like mist.

Dirt covered the pilgrims. Their hair was matted, maybe wound with red cloth if they were Khampa men, or threaded with turquoise and coral if they were Khampa women. They wore malas and relic-filled gaus tucked beneath their shirts. A few women belted their dresses and chubas, striped apron-like overskirts, with intricately worked silver buckles. Some wore sturdy felt hats adorned with a bit of ribbon. Young children were slung in blankets and carried on the backs of their parents. Nearly all the pilgrims wore tennis shoes made in China, or thin leather shoes, or yak skin boots. The women's hair was dark and long and sometimes plaited. One woman was so beautiful and so unaware of this fact that I wondered what a man in love would try to offer her.

The pilgrims smelled of dirty cloth, of dust and incense and the yak butter they poured into the offering lamps; they wore the iron scent of mountains, and the scent of nettles and milky tea. They smelled of sweat, diesel fuel, and yaks, and the hard sweet rub of children for those who had children. The pilgrims smelled of each other and the world, not least the lovers among them. Those who had stopped to dip their hands in the Kyichu River which flows by the town wore the cool trace of nothing.

Wind set the prayer flags in motion. They were all the colors of a rainbow, and could be seen everywhere in the old quarter of Lhasa. They were tied to branches fastened on rooftops, and to tall poles that marked the clockwise circumambulation route

around the Barkor. Currents of air carried their essential meaning across towns and villages and mountains, across countries and oceans and continents, the whole earth itself and the universe in which it spins. Some flags were printed with images of Guru Padmasambhava, who said in an Aspiration Prayer as translated by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche:

*Whatever the Buddha taught,  
Effortlessly may it enter my being, and  
Effortlessly may I understand it.*

The fragrance of Dharma was everywhere. Smoke billowed from juniper branches burning in two giant urns set outside the courtyard of the Jokhang. It permeated all beings, the faithful and faithless alike: pilgrims, children, tourists, and Chinese soldiers. It enlivened the senses; it seeped into the clothes and skin of nuns and monks and anyone passing through. It was easy to lose for a moment any sense of direction in the thick smoke. In such a moment, notions of time, notions of place may begin to wear away. The magic display of mind may become transparent.

One woman leaving the temple began to laugh. Perhaps she was remembering some great joke her lama had told her before she left home. It suddenly came to her now in the bright morning air, and she began to laugh so hard that she opened her arms wide and gave herself to the sky. Waves of laughter swept through her body and through the narrow streets and boulevards of Lhasa, laughter illumining its nunneries and monasteries and houses, its restaurants and tantric colleges, its gardens and Potala and Lukhang; laughter illumining the townspeople, the young and old, Buddhists and non-Buddhists

alike; laughter illuminating the mountains that rimmed the town, and the clouds as ephemeral as the beards of ageless yogis.

The moment was such that it was easy to lose track of whomever one imagined oneself to be. I heard the woman laugh and laugh and felt myself at home.

—*Camille Hykes*