

The Spiritual Generosity of Tibetans

I first visited Tibet in 2001. I was not particularly interested in checking out the monasteries and the culture, I was on my way to Mount Kailash, the crown chakra of the world and we had an enforced acclimatization stop for four days in Lhasa, Tibet's capital. I spent the first two days in bed mainly due to altitude but also because of the chronic fatigue I was still in the phase of banishing. On the third day I managed to venture out to visit Drepung and Sera monasteries; Tibet's equivalent of Oxford and Cambridge with only one faculty, that of spirit. In their heyday they were home to over 15,000 monks between them, now the number is less than a thousand. I had a beautiful experience at each monastery. At Drepung the young monks were chanting in the main hall. It was a great atmosphere with the few dozen novice monks chanting, it would have been truly awesome full to the rafters in the pre-communist days. I sidled up as close as I could without impinging on their area. I had little experience of temples and sacred ceremonies, bar a few pious Catholic masses and Church of England ceremonies I had attended. So I puckered my cheeks and looked serious – what I thought to be the proper demeanour. The monks started giggling between their lines of Tibetan/Sanskrit and pointed over my shoulder. I looked around to see what was so funny then realised it was me and my serious face. I couldn't help but smile and gave a big red blush. They ushered me closer and taught me to sway with the tones. The way they laughed you would have thought I was Charlie Chaplin. Then they were served tea to keep then nourished and grounded while they chanted – one monk spied my interest in their big doughy momos (a Tibetan delicacy half dumpling half steamed bread roll, often filled with vegetables or meat, these were plain). “Donk,” one landed on the cushion alongside me, followed by hurried arm gestures to get me to taste. All this was happening under the gaze of a Lama (Tibetan Buddhist teacher) who would often tut in feigned disapproval yet the joy just flowed on. I really felt a part of it, my indiscretions and faux pas were welcomed and enjoyed. This was very different from the previous religious institutions I had visited in Europe with all hushed tones and puckered sphincters (don't tread there, kneel like this, bow like that). I mean can you imagine the St Paul's boy's choir tossing bagels out to the crowd? I loved it in that chanting and felt really welcomed into Tibet by its people.

We journeyed on to Kailash. My whole being was focused on completing the Kora (sacred clockwise circle of a shrine; statue, temple or sacred mountain) and the blessings it would bring me – I was selfish I really wanted this for myself, although beneath the surface I knew I would put my talents to service. Here it was even more amazing, pilgrims had saved up for their whole life, for some it had taken generations to realise this dream. Such devotion and such camaraderie I have seldom seen. The circuit is 53 kilometres and crosses a 6,400 metre pass and takes most westerners 3 or 4 days to complete, Tibetans of all ages with cardigans on their backs and penny loafers on their feet skip through the snow covered mountain passes in a day. On the first day we passed a man who was prostrating his way around – lying body length to body length on the frosty gravel ground like a salute to the sun, he

was in his early twenties, not much over five feet and planned to take 2 months to complete the circuit (about 700 prostration each day). He relied on the scant passers by to offer him food and had not eaten for several days. We rested on the North Face for a day looking up at the jewel like violet facet of Mount Kailash and on the following day we left camp early to cross several frozen rivers and the high Drom-la Pass. A family of Tibetans charged across the river as I gingerly poked my way through it – there were three generations, old men and women and children who looked as young as five. The old man saw me struggling across the river as I tried to grip the ice and kept slipping over – he crossed back over the river to take my hand and guide me across. I looked down at the sheer plastic soles on his worn down business shoes as compared to my modern heavily contoured boots. I smiled in humility as he raced up the steep path to catch his grandson. I stood and caught my breath; at this altitude oxygen is reduced by 40%. I was the fourth in our group to reach the top of the Pass, an Irish nurse who had set out at the crack of dawn had arrived a few moments before me. She was excited at her achievement yet a little stressed that she had accidentally left her spare backpack behind. A person who appeared to be the father of the family, whom I had noticed poking gentle fun at the amount of luggage and equipment us Westerners were carrying, understood or intuited what had happened. He spoke rapidly and excitedly, borrowed a water bottle from one of his crew and headed back to where we had camped the night before. That day he would walk an extra 12 kilometres on top of the normal 53 and the toughest part by far of the whole kora twice. When he caught up with us a couple of hours later with the backpack slung across his shoulder and a beaming smile on his face he point blank refused any payment. Just the sheer joy of assisting a fellow pilgrim, plus any positive karma accumulated were more than enough.

So touched was I by the Tibetans and their leader that 9 months later I found myself in Bodhgaya to attend the Kalachakra empowerment given by His Holiness XIVth Dalai Lama. This tiny town where Lord Buddha attained enlightenment would host 250,000 people, mainly Tibetans, to receive the highest tantric teaching in the Tibetan Buddhist world. For many this was a once in a lifetime or indeed several lifetime opportunity. Many had saved the meagre earnings to travel from afar most had walked across the high Himalayan range smuggling themselves out of Tibet – a walk of many months. This included old women; taking on a trek all but the fittest of westerners would consider. Why? Simply to pour devotion on their leader and talisman, the Dalai Lama. One monk found out that a blind man had trekked with his mother all the way from the far North of Tibet over dangerous mountain passes – he offered him his eyes in a transplant operation. Now His Holiness was unwell and after a few days of deliberation he made a choice obviously incredibly tough for him, to call the empowerment off. When the announcement went up there was silence, not indignation or disappointment, not even a moment's instinctual care for self; in fact in a few moments the 150,000 odd people present as one started a mantra – I didn't need a translator to tell me this was for the long life of His Holiness. That night everybody gathered at the meditation ground for an all night prayer vigil for their leader and spiritual teacher's good health. It must have been the coldest and

longest night India had ever seen. More curious than Buddhist, touched by the previous day's events I had to stay for the whole night. By the witching hour the crowd was down to a 50,000 faithful – not a single monk no matter how frail or old had left, constantly droning out the same simple chant. Shivering in a heap I left the open air corral to purchase a blanket (I still have it, drenched in the fabric of devotion, a potent anchor to drive me to be more like these people). When I returned a few moments later a young Tibetan from a local boarding school whom I had chatted to earlier presented me with a yak wool beanie. He had seen me cold and returned to his dorm to get it. It was not a loan but a gift in recognition of my efforts to honour his leader – for someone of his wealth it was like giving a car.

And then we come to His Holiness XIVth Dalai Lama himself. I eventually got to attend a full Kalachakra the following autumn in Austria. There where people from all nations – many Tibetans in exile in Switzerland plus all the Russian and East European converts. When His Holiness first came into the room on the 3rd or 4th day he very humbly and with dignity took his high throne, shrugging off the bows from the other sect leaders. His first words came laughing out as he fumbled with the mike and plumped his cushions; “see this people more better Buddhist understanding than I,” as he gestured to the other high lamas, “my position just political leadership” followed by hearty chuckles. Then a few chants and wafts of the bell and dorje (ceremonial thunderbolt). His first words addressed the Chinese attendees and the hearts of all; with the deepest compassion that wafted over the hall like a cloud of treacle he thanked and welcomed this people above all and before his fellow Tibetans. In an instant my heart and admiration were won; I too had found my leader.

I could go on with story after story like this for I have found Tibetans to a person incredibly compassionate and generous of themselves, their county, its traditions and wisdom and genuinely humble with this. Foreigners are welcomed into their monasteries and to their teachings. Little is hidden or reserved for their own kind. They seem to understand that the Buddha's teaching, like oxygen, belongs to everyone. There is none of the superiority or covetousness I have found with other religions and countries. How much of this is due to the troubles they have faced I don't know – I do know other cultures have faced persecution and gone in the other direction. I put it down to their deep understanding and embodiment of the most simple and important spiritual truths of equality and interconnectedness and the understanding that compassion is the glue that binds us.

Thank you Tibet and your people for welcoming me and melting my heart.