

Buddhist Women on the Roof of the World

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo

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Buddhist women live in many remote corners of the earth, but there is hardly a place as remote as the Zanskar valley of Ladakh. Zanskar, located in the desert of Central Asia along the Western reaches of the Himalayas, is a long way from Hawai'i and as geographically different as the mind can imagine. Once back in India, though, I was determined to visit the school for young nuns we had established there five years before.

Traveling with an American friend from Dharamsala to Chandigarh in a rickety bus for twelve hours of intense heat and acute thirst was the easy part. The bus only broke down twice. There were some tense moments at Chandigarh airport, though. After all, my luggage was 43 kilos overweight, due 180 meters of maroon and yellow cloth my Vietnamese friend, Madame Lieng Nhan, had sent for the nuns from Bangkok. But once the clerk relented ("We are lenient with tourists"), the flight over the snow mountains was magnificent, like floating through Shangrila.

Ladakh is like being on another planet. The altitude, the rarified air, and the extraterrestrial terrain create an unearthly atmosphere. The people, having preserved their distinctive dress and way of life, combine to transport the traveller to another world. The army guards in the airport at Leh, part of many divisions posted along the strategic border with Chinese-occupied Tibet, abruptly brought us back to our senses.

Next day, in the late afternoon, along the main bazaar street of Leh, a crowd gathers around with keen bemusement: "Why is the foreign nun buying 30 pair of identical red socks?" Quality ascertained and fair value agreed upon, the seller seriously deposits the purchase in an ancient crumbling plastic bag. As I arise amidst the sea of friendly, smiling Ladakhis, I come face to face with a rosy-cheeked nun. "Ah! Where are you from?" I ask in Tibetan. "From Karcha," she replies, mentioning the name of a monastery for women high in the mountains of Zanskar. The name is familiar; the monastery wrote to me several times wanting to start a school for the study of Buddhism. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funds at the time and an unpleasant run-in with a viper, the project had been delayed.

The nun gives me her name - Lobsang Drolma, "Noble-minded Tara" - and soon realizes my connection with the school for women in Zangla, a village a day's walk from her own. She cordially invites us to visit her monastery at Karcha. "I'd love to," I said, "When do we start?" We agree to wait a few days for our companions, in hopes that the snows will melt and the road will open up.

By next week, the snows still have not melted. It has been a record cold winter, with avalanches galore. Time is precious: an invitation to a conference is making the whole trip possible, but it starts in just three weeks. In desperation, the roads still blocked, we set out on the greatest adventure of our very adventuresome lives. Aware that we might have to trek over a 14,000 foot pass in the snow carrying everything on our back, we take along only the necessities: warm clothes, sleeping bag, granola lugged in from America, powdered milk, medical supplies for the nuns, a camera to record their lives, and off we go....

The first leg of the journey was a piece of cake, except that the bus, destined for Srinagar, left an hour ahead of schedule, leaving the unawakened in a huge cloud of exhaust fumes behind us. Luckily, our two advisor monks had clued us in to this possibility, gotten our tickets, and saved us some seats. For twelve hours we careen through a panorama of snowy peaks, golden valleys, moonscapes, fantasy monasteries, hoary cliffs, army convoys, gaping chasms, and idyllic threading rivers.

At last, we reach the dreaded Kargil, legendary home of filth and bedbugs. Even in the comparative ease of the Jammu and Kashmir Government Tourist Bungalow, Kargil lives up to its dubious reputation. We immediately set about trying to arrange transport to Zanskar for the following day.

In a tiny hutch off the rutted main street, we drink tea with Zanskari college students, Lobsang Dolma's

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friends. They pledge to help us line up a ride, but return later, crestfallen, to report that the snow from a huge avalanche still has not been cleared away. The road is still unpassable.

The Zaskar valley is open to motor vehicles for only three months a year, even in the best of times. Supplies of food, kerosene, and other essential commodities are rare and expensive. This year, due to unusually heavy snowfall, the summer season will be even shorter, limiting the number of potential trekkers, who have become a valuable source of livelihood in the valley.

Over tea, the students, all young men still in their teens, explain that Zaskaris must go either to Kargil, Srinagar, or as far abroad as Delhi for education beyond tenth grade. Together they display an engaging combination of sincerity, intelligence, and punk-rock cynicism. Soon they foray to some mysterious location in search of an erstwhile vehicle: a police jeep is rumored to be setting off to Zaskar tomorrow. An eternity later, they return to report, "No luck. The police will not take foreigners." Beyond Rangdom, after the last checkpoint, it would be possible, for a price. But before that point, there are too many guards and cavorting with "injis," as foreigners are known, would not be countenanced.

"What are the other possibilities?" I query. "Taxis, but they are expensive. Or you could wait around for a few days for a truck," they reply. Nothing could be less appealing than a few days in Kargil waiting for a mythical truck! "How much is expensive?" I ask. "We'll find out," they say, and go off into the night on another foray. Endless ages later, one of the guys appears with an apologetic smile to report an amount equivalent to highway robbery. "Since the road is not open, they can charge what they like. They've got you in a spot, you see." Indeed.

Next morning, after extensive searching, bargaining, and interminable posturing on both sides, we settle on a sum only slightly less than extortion. In view of our anxiety to get under way, the next hour's detour in the opposite direction in search of petrol seems interminable. If only we could reach Rangdom before the police vehicle, we could hitch a ride in their jeep, at least as far as the avalanche.

Everything starts out well enough. After the first of many future meals of bread and tea, we scurry through Muslim villages at a respectable pace, enjoying the children and wild roses along the way. It is just after noon that the jeep gives an ominous sputter and breaks down for the first time. The gas pedal, attached by a string, refuses to connect with whatever presumably presses the beast into motion. The driver and his practiced assistant tinker with everything under the hood in hopes of some miracle. "Lousy contaminated petrol," they fume. An hour's detour in the wrong direction to buy contaminated petrol? Such are the profound mysteries of the East.

This pathetic scene is repeated no less than six times before we finally reach the fabled Rangdom. Myriad random wires hang in decorative loops below the instrument panel. At one point, in wonderment at the driver's stringing of cloth strips, assuming he earnestly intends to bind the ignition together with them, I offer my roll of Indian cellophane tape, which he gratefully accepts. Mind you, not every trekker in the middle of nowhere comes equipped with this magical tape. But after some time on the Indian subcontinent, since glue on Indian envelopes is a mere formality, tape begins to qualify as an essential item of life. In the end, we manage to reach Rangdom just after sunset, just in time to see the police jeep pull off in a cloud of dust before us. We are literally minutes too late.

The journey is alternately blessed by miracles and cursed by obstacles. The road is long and treacherous, and will take more than ordinary determination to complete. But hoping to bring opportunities for education to a new generation of Zankari women, we feel no effort can be spared to achieve our goal.

So with unwavering (well, only slightly wavering) resolution, we settle down in the dirt guest room of Lobsang Drolma's auntie. Two lovely small girls with matted hair and clothed in a single layer shyly came to greet us. We, bundled up in as many layers as will fit, to ward off the freezing cold (in June, mind you), settle down for the inevitable, but welcome, meal of granola. The auntie kindly offers us butter tea, but how can we reduce her precious store of provisions? The baby, cuddled and trundled about by all visiting neighbors and monks in turn, has nothing on but a shirt.

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Immense compassion floods from our hearts for these people who have next to nothing and eke out, by some miracle, a precarious existence. Their lives are so harsh, yet their faces are beaming and radiant. A picture of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is the most precious possession in every household. His radiant presence on the altar gives them solace and hope.

Only later did Lobsang Drolma reveal that her auntie's husband, a popular figure in this desolate valley, was killed with six others in an avalanche in the mountains just a few months before. Now the woman, alone except for a few neighbors, must fend for her children with no visible source of support. Only later, too, do we realize that her house, desperately poor as it is, is the biggest and most comfortable in the village. What karma has resulted in a rebirth in this bleak, icy place?

As I venture out close to dark, only out of necessity, the village women beckon with welcoming voices. "Jullay!" they peal, issuing the standard Ladakhi greeting, "Where are you from?" "I come from America," I reply. "Are you a lama?" they ask, for in Ladakh every monk is called "lama." "I am a jomo," I tell them, for in Ladakh women renunciants are addressed as "jomo," meaning "reverend woman," a respectful term for a nun.

"What happened to your arm?" they inquire. "I was bitten by a snake," I answer. They shrink back and gasp, first with expressions of horror, then of merciful concern. "It is karma - the result of my own actions in the past." "For sure, what else could it be but the result of past actions, something like this? Now you are a jomo, and will create merit in this life, so things will certainly be better in the next life," they say. These four generations of women, unlettered and uneducated in the Western sense of the word, understand a profound truth. Even (or perhaps especially) the two older generations - toothless, clad in animal skins, their hair in dreadlocks - realize the essential principle of the Buddha's teachings with a simplicity and clarity rarely found in sophisticated Western society. We part reluctantly. A bond of understanding that transcends language and culture has been forged among us.

After washing the dirt from my face in a tiny stream, it throbs with pain from the intense cold. Retreating cautiously up the unlit mud staircase to the house, I sit round the fire with our hostess, her children, and two visiting monks. Like everyone along our route, their first question concerns the health and whereabouts of His Holiness. I am pleased to report that he is well and attending the international Earth Summit in Rio. How do you say "environmental protection" in Tibetan? I scratch my head and hastily devise a term - "protecting the trees and waters of the earth?" They nod in comprehension and wonder. The beneficial deeds of His Presence, the Wish Fulfilling Gem, are truly boundless.

Next morning, learning that the only available truck would charge three years of a Zanskar worker's wage to take us one hour up the pass, and not wishing to contribute to inflationary economics and expectations, we set out with our gear on foot. Three hours later, laboring along what would have taken a truck ten minutes, we pass Rangdom Monastery and almost pass out with exhaustion. As "luck" would have it, however, an uncle of Lobsang Drolma appears on the horizon and good-humoredly agrees to scout us a horse to carry the bags. His house, the best in this village, is also carpeted in mud. I enjoy a cup of hot water along with the warmth of the fire. With light hearts and light feet, prayers and expressions of gratitude, we set out an hour or two later toward the pass.

It's nearing dusk - what a bummer. The horse and its sweet-natured groom must return home. No amount of conjoling will change their minds. We continue uphill on our own, the bags growing heavier and the wind growing colder with each step. Oh, dear Buddha, where do we sleep tonight? The only living beings in sight are yaks and a mysterious animal called "pei," a marmot with a rich auburn coat that stands on its hind legs and squeals like a baby in pain. "Don't worry," says our companion, "I have friends just the other side of the pass. We can stay with them. See that horse over there: They live just the other side of that horse." Well...three hours later, trudging between huge drifts of snow five and six feet high, I still couldn't see that dastardly horse, much less any human habitat. This wouldn't be the first time I've slept in the open, but it could well be the coldest.

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We cross the 14,000-foot pass and a second pass as well, shouting "Lha gyalo! May the gods be victorious!" But where in the world shall we sleep tonight? A few hours later in dim twilight, we hurry down the side of a mountain and find ourselves in a nomad camp. The nomads close in immediately to examine us. "Who are they?" they ask. "They're my friends. They're foreigners," laughs Lobsang Drolma. "This one's a jomo." With satisfied expressions, they close in even tighter to continue their inspection from every angle. I have never seen so many yaks in my life. In fact, until yesterday, the only yak I'd ever seen was one tired specimen in the Darjeeling zoo who had certainly seen better days. The furry creature I saw in Amdo (northeastern Tibet) was actually a dri, the female of the species. Now in this makeshift camp, there are maybe two dozen people and several times that many yaks. The yaks seem to have occupied the better living quarters.

As we meander gingerly around the camp, skirting the clumps of lounging yaks, darkness increases. There are no houses, only a few heaps of stones. Finally, ushering us through a smoky, improvised campfire kitchen, to the center of some piles of stones, Lobsang Drolma announces, "Here! We can sleep here. The nomads just arrived yesterday. This is their summer camp, and they haven't had time to fix it up yet, but...Will this do?" At this point, after walking fourteen hours uphill at 14,000 feet, with nothing else in sight, we are not in a position to be particularly choosy! Anyplace to lay the body will be perfectly fine. "Great," I agree. Within minutes, with open sky and stars above, all the nomad girls join us in the 3' X 5' space.

"We have seen His Holiness," they report. "We all, everybody here, attended the Kalachakra initiation with His Holiness. We have all taken refuge in the Three Precious Jewels. All of us!" they exclaim, tugging at the smallest shy girl. In fact, during our whole stay, we do not meet a single person who did not receive the Kalachakra empowerment with His Holiness when he gave it in Zanskar in 1988. This was undoubtedly the greatest event in recent Zanskari history. People still talk about it all the time, with tremendous joy on their faces. The pavilion specially erected for the Kalachakra is now a sacred place of pilgrimage.

To a person, with the exception of Muslim immigrant traders, the Zanskari people are devout Buddhists. They all follow the Tibetan tradition, and several schools are represented. Regardless of their monastic affiliation, all are totally devoted to the Dalai Lama. His photograph is on every altar in every home. In fact, the people are so poor, His Holiness's photo is often the only thing on the altar. Sometimes there will be six or seven photos, all of His Holiness, some exactly the same and some different, including some real classics. The people recite the "Om Mani Padme Hum" mantra and have erected mani walls, heaps of stones carved with the mantra, all along the road. We make many detours around these walls, animals in tow, circumambulating in a clockwise direction every time we come to one. No opportunity to create merit is wasted. It has become a way of life.

For four days we trudge along the valley floor, greeting occasional cheery villagers and nomads with their herds of yaks along the road. Lobsang Drolma, who has spent the winter taking care of her uncle in a hospital in Leh, is welcomed by everyone on the way. During the day, the heat of the sun is intense, due to the altitude and rarified atmosphere. There are no trees in this mountainous desert, so even with sunscreen, we fry. But by late afternoon when the winds start to howl, the temperatures drop to near freezing and we thank the sunburn for keeping us warm. At night, we stop at a sister or auntie's and occupy a space on the bare earthen floor. We play with the curious children, struggling to keep warm beside the kitchen hearth. Only one night do we provide a feast for bedbugs - hungry little critters!

The people's poverty is astonishing. They have no cars, no appliances, no furniture - just the clothes on their backs and the cherished photograph of His Holiness. Day in and day out, they eat roasted barley flour mixed with thin tea or flat bread or curd, surviving from one short growing season to the next. It is summer, before the harvest, and supplies of food are running low. Amazingly, poor as they are, Zanskaris are always joking and laughing. Except for the headmaster of a village school who loses his temper when a treasured basketball turns up missing, the people we meet are all gentle, peaceful, and calm.

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Their tolerance is being tested, though, as Muslim neighbors encroach upon their traditional culture and economy. In Padum, capital of Zanskar, we find a huge new mosque built right in the center of this Buddhist land. As Muslim prayers blast through the town five times a day, amplified at maximum volume, we question the blessings of electrical power. What will be the future of a Buddhist minority in a Muslim state in a Hindu country in an increasingly secular world? Who will protect Zanskar when its ancient calm is disturbed?

In a flurry of excitement, we are greeted by Lobsang Chozom, an old friend from Dharamsala. Tomorrow she will guide us to the school in Zangla. Sipping tea at her nephew's house, we catch up on years of news. The new classroom is built and many young nuns have moved from across the river to study. They anxiously wait our arrival - after all, it's only a short walk from here.

Next day, after walking ten hours in the blinding sun, Zangla is still "just over there." The valley floor, speckled with ancient stupas, earthen Buddhist reliquaries, stretches endlessly before us. An old man and a young boy approach with a very weird animal in a cage. It is very unusual, but "No, thank you. We don't want to buy it." By afternoon, even with a horse to carry our bags, we are close to exhaustion. The mind swings between exhilaration and alarm, wondering if we will ever arrive. Several hours pass between sighting Tongde monastery on a bluff ahead and watching it recede behind. A fierce wind comes up late in the day, sweeping dust and sand into every available pore of our bodies.

Now we are following the bank of a mighty river that peaks and froths and roars down from the snowy peaks. A very long time later, battling raging winds all the way, we pass the new bridge linking Zangla with the village of Pishu. Last year at this spot Lobsang Chozom's nephew, a handsome young monk, plunged from a rope bridge that suddenly broke under his feet and drowned in the river below. Before a new bridge got built, three human sacrifices to the river had unintentionally been made. Plodding on, we wade over streams and pass the spring where the nuns come to fetch healthy drinking water. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a nomad family dashes up to the road in a ritual of greeting and offers us freezing cold curd decorated with butter. Only a few more miles and we should be there.

Dusk melts into dark and the relentless winds continue to howl, hurling us into the bluff. The poor packhorse has nothing to eat. Plants that are starting to look pretty good to us fail to tempt her. For the umpteenth day in a row, we drink the snow water, though warned of its ill effects. Later, after being diagnosed with pneumonia and bronchial infections, we gain a healthy regard for folk wisdom. After all, our informants exemplify generations of survivors.

By the time we finally arrive at Zangla, it is well after dark, but the warmth of the welcome offsets the cold of the night. In the pitch black, we make out shadows of the welcoming villagers along the path as we make our way beyond to Jangchub Choling Nunnery. At last we are ushered into the classroom and ensconced on three borrowed metal cots with rickety makeshift tea tables before them. Shy villagers and nuns, including many children, pile in to greet us with touching words of welcome. After they leave, we sink into our sleeping bags and the exquisite silence of the night.

At dawn next day, meditation is automatic. It is easy to see why the solitude of these mountains has produced centuries of saints. With no telephones or distractions, nothing hinders spiritual practice. On this very rock cliff, nuns have meditated for hundreds of years. Women of the village have given birth to three well-known tulkus, the recognized reincarnations of accomplished lamas. There is no monastery for monks nearby; only a dark, dungeon-like chapel that has existed on the site since time immemorial. There were no living quarters for the nuns until recently, so they stayed with relatives in the village. Cooking, caring for children, and working in the fields, their lives were far from the monastic ideal, but that is how they got their food. When the study program was established in 1988, the nuns made a big change in their lifestyle. They went on special alms rounds near and far to collect donations. With these, they built small stone and mud huts with their own hands, and began living together in community. They implored Geshe Tenpa Lundrup, a Tibetan lama living in retreat, to be their teacher and began studying the Buddhist texts.

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Historically speaking, in all religions, it is unusual for women to pursue the monastic curriculum in philosophy. Especially here in Zanskar, where women typically receive no formal education at all, such an endeavor is revolutionary. In such a harsh environment, the contrast for women between lives of household drudgery and full-time spiritual enrichment is stark. The nuns still help with planting and harvesting, but concentrate now on meditation and study. The villagers, appreciating the nuns and their spiritual practice, supply them with barley flour and tea. This symbiotic relationship, with goodwill and respect on both sides, is typical of traditional Buddhist societies.

We are invited to visit the young nuns' class, held in the ancient style with chanting in unison of memorized texts. Once the texts are learned by heart, the lama will explain the meaning. His compassion is tender and touching as he shows us his students' prowess. When the children lose their place in the text, the endearing expressions on their faces, mischievous and embarrassed, win our hearts.

One young girl, with big round eyes, is only ten years old. Though family ties are generally strong in the valley, she entered the monastery when her parents divorced. Polyandry occurs occasionally, with a woman married to brothers, but monogamy and the extended family system are the norm. Neighbors are practically family, too, cooperating harmoniously together. From a young age, children are an integral part of the economy, learning practical skills in kitchen and field by working along with their elders. They feel proud to wash cups or bring water and take their responsibilities seriously, with a grown-up air.

Now it is time for debate and the nuns gather in the courtyard to test their understanding of yesterday's lesson. Intelligence and concentration are keen as they enthusiastically examine the topic - the mind state of the arhat - from every possible angle. Before the lama arrived here, literacy was rare in Zangla. Today, due to his skillful method and confidence in women's power to learn, the mysteries of Buddhist philosophy are like jewels unfolding. Tomorrow, these women will be able to share the light of the Dharma with others.

In the afternoon we all meet together in the new classroom, built with donations from Western friends. The laypeople of the village are delighted with the new classroom; eighty of them crowded into it in January to receive two months of teachings on the Graduated Path to Enlightenment. Today's teachings are on the Perfection of Wisdom. The gathering becomes a ceremony of praise and giving as we distribute pens and encouragement to each. We wish them strength and happiness as they develop the understanding and skills to serve others and preserve their ancient and endangered heritage.

We wish them health and try to ensure it by giving provisions and instructions for a small dispensary. Eye infections, bronchial infections, and arthritis are rampant, especially in the winter. One nun is appointed as health care worker, or in Tibetan, "servant of the sick." She labels the remedies and dosages in Tibetan and learns the basics of primary health care. Ailments long ignored or endured beg for attention and healing. We also come up with a healthy communal meal plan.

By the time of departure, we have become close friends with the lama, the nuns, and the people around. The huge woolly mastiffs who ferociously guard the monastery have become sociable, too. Like all furry doggies of Zanskar, they are badly in need of a shampoo, but seem totally comfortable with their vegetarian diet as they laze in the warm summer sun.

Our next adventure is a visit to the village of Pishu. The villagers send us off on horseback with six nuns from Pishu as guides. Backtracking to the fateful bridge, we dismount to cross over the rapidly raging river and carry on across the sandy bank beyond. By midday, we are startled to catch sight of one nun's brother, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Toshiro Mifune, the gifted Japanese film star. In fact, I am riding his horse!

Soon we are greeted by a welcoming crowd and billows of incense from evergreen boughs. Twenty nuns reside in this monastery several centuries old. Leading us into their guestroom, they present tea, cookies,

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milk, and curd, and tell us about their lives. They receive instructions on meditation and ritual from a lama of the Nyingma tradition who visits a few months each year. "We are too old to study," they humbly contend. We have a good chuckle trying to guess each other's ages, and find that most of them are over sixty. The youngsters now go across the river to Zangla for classes. Each senior member of the community has a yak and a small field to till, passed down in the community from generation to generation. Though impoverished from a Western perspective, they are jolly and accept with fortitude the hardships of their lives. After all, they have time and freedom to practice the Dharma.

The next leg of our journey leads back down the valley from which we came, this time on the opposite bank of the rushing river. Across rock and riverlets, the path slopes and bends gently to the tune of the torrent. Tiny lizards dart behind stones as we approach, honing their survival skills. As we stop for a rest, the nuns pull out a teapot and cook up a warming brew over an improvised open fire. As usual, our destination is "just a short way from here."

Several hours later, we see signs of human habitation: fields demarcated by walls of stone, children on scouting expeditions coyly checking us out. Eventually, we catch the impressive sight of Karcha monastery, hewn in sheer cliffs before us. The monastery for monks, with 80 residents, is on this side of a steep chasm, while the monastery for nuns, with 26, is on the far side. A welcoming party is stationed along the far side of the mountain stream. Cheerful, rosy-cheeked women and children stand with flowers and incense along the path. Karcha Jujik Shelgon, the monastery for women, looms grandly against the cliff, straight up the mountain in the clouds above our heads. Huffing and puffing, we ascend persistently, reaching the whitewashed stone structure in the last light of dusk.

With the dark comes intense cold, and there is no central heating. Central heating is accomplished by liberal doses of hot butter tea. Paying respects to the Buddhas in the main shrine room, we savor the splendid religious wall paintings done in Tibetan style. The monk artist, it seems, made his transition to the next life as soon as the job was done.

Next day, I am invited to a formal gathering of the community. Surrounded by the late monk's timeless paintings, we sit together and discuss the Dharma. The nuns' beloved teacher, Geshe Ngawang Tarpa, is a Zanskari who spent 30 years studying in Tibet. He is as eager as the nuns to start a school. Now 82, he apologizes for not being able to walk over from the monks' monastery in the snow to teach the nuns, but happily agrees to receive them for classes over there. Modestly underrating his teaching abilities, he calls upon a nun to explain the paths and stages to enlightenment. A 20-minute synopsis follows - the nuns have been wasting no time in their studies. They dress me in the pointed yellow pandit's hat and toasty maroon jacket of a Zanskari jomo, and insist that I take them home with me. I shall certainly cut a figure in Honolulu in this ensemble.

As in Zangla, we compile histories on the young nuns, who will qualify for support from the Buddhist Children's Relief Fund in Honolulu. There are always looks of amazement and peals of laughter when we ask "Favorite subject in school?" "Why, Buddhist philosophy. Of course!" In this thoroughly religious culture, nothing besides Buddhism is of much importance. The social ideal is the monastery, the religious ideal is the Buddha. Everything else is auxiliary, even frivolous. Perhaps their desolate surroundings have taught these people the futility of worldly pursuits.

Since we are suffering from bronchial distress, a nun offers to fetch the local Zanskari doctor. Next day, the door flies open and in trots an indomitable character. He seats himself ceremoniously with a comic air and lights up right in our room. A Lhasa apso springs forth periodically from the folds of his robe during the course of the diagnosis. Trained locally in a system of Tibetan medical lore, he takes our pulse, pours powdered herbs into improvised paper packets, and confidently pronounces our imminent recovery. Quite pleased with himself, he refuses payment for consultation or herbs, and moments later departs. In terms of effectiveness (see references to pneumonia above), we cannot bear witness, but measured in terms of time and expense, this health care system has it all over American medicine.

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Our magical journey is drawing to a close and we begin to feel the pangs of approaching separation. Today, as we head for Padum, our escort is even larger. The nuns have checked and, by the blessings of the Buddhas and a snow plow, we should be able to catch a truck back to Kargil tomorrow and avoid several days of trekking over the pass. Toshiro Mifune's double comes to reclaim his horse as we struggle to warm frozen limbs. Our stash of tea and granola is running low, but neither has ever tasted so good. Tomorrow may be a very hungry day, but today we are very content.

Starting at dawn next day, the road back is like a movie in reverse, with some interesting new segments spliced in. The mountains appear the same, but the cast of characters has been replenished. Bouncing up and down, weaving to and fro, the decrepid vehicle manages to convey us steadily forward. Traversing the gash in the snowy avalanche, we applaud the wonders of Western technology. At the same time, a question nags: Why couldn't the snow plow have cut through the Indian bureaucracy a month earlier to relieve the people's difficulties?

This time, travelling in reverse, cultural differences are more apparent as we move into areas of Muslim influence. The absence of women is more striking when contrasted with the social freedom of their Zanskari sisters. The tones of the men's voices register a different way of life. After 18 hours of bumpy roads, over the pass to Rangdom and beyond, we finally arrive in Kargil just before midnight. Accommodations are at a premium now that the road is open. In resignation, we bed down at the nearest available filthy dive.

By comparison, the 12-hour bus ride back to Leh is luxurious. The vistas are majestic, but we almost take them for granted from our comfortable seats, "comfortable" being a geographically relative term, of course. The vastness of space and timelessness we felt travelling by foot, the sense of achievement borne of struggle, evaporates. Awareness coalesces with the petrol exhaust fumes.

Before noon, the bus stops at a huge statue of Maitreya Buddha fashioned, we are told, in the fourth century. Everyone piles out of the bus. Gazing skyward at the imposing figure two stories high, we are filled with awe. The Leh-Srinagar road has only been opened recently, revealing its treasures of nature and art. How did this masterpiece survive the centuries?

By evening, passing interminable army convoys and siting fairytale monasteries along the way, we eventually reach the emerald valley of Leh with its bustling bazaar. Our three ancient Zanskari nun companions, though agog at the commotion of the town, set forth resolutely into the fray. We, on the other hand, momentarily overwhelmed by the turmoil, must consciously restore our balance. Halting a moment in the swirling clamour and dust, we take stock. Not long ago, this valley was as secluded as Zanskar, serenely beyond the hubbub of the modern world. Now, it is poised on the verge of Western "civilization," with all its glamour and grief. With this sobering apprehension and a sadness beyond words, we recover the peace of the mountains to take with us into the town.