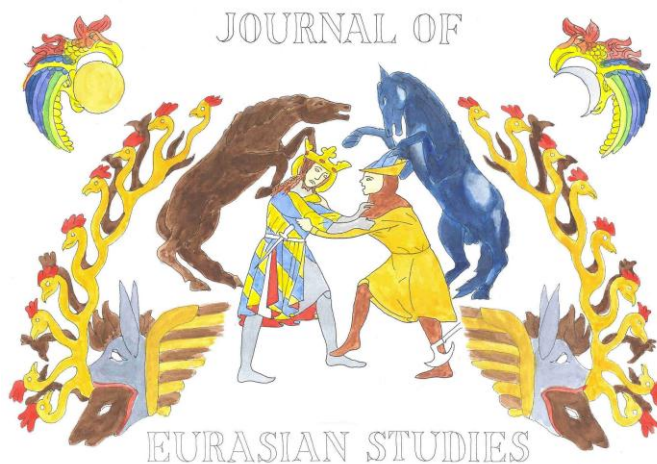


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Journey on Foot through the Western Himalayas and Retreat in Phuktal



*«The traveller has to knock at every alien
door to come to his own, and one has to
wander through all the outer worlds to reach
the innermost shrine at the end.»*

Tagore

Paul Mirabile

1996

Introduction

Buddhism, its writings and iconography, its monasteries and chants; the Himalyas, their smells of Deodar and of Juniper, their cobalt snow-coiffed peaks and lapis azuli valleys; and the solitary voyager, pilgrim or wayfarer are inextricably entwined: attempting to excise the parts from the Whole only plunges the curious-minded into a quagmire of cliché, of beguiled erring. No Experience is fragmented, parenthetical...the Whole must be encompassed before any reality transforms into an Experience, or the Experience, at an ontological level, transforms into reality...

For ontology is the Experience in which Art is perceived as a religious synthesis, be it iconographic or scriptural. Images and sounds transform daily foot-shuffling into a lighter, bouncier step! Art and Poetry transfigure the 'little man' into a pilgrim; his daily commerce into legend...into an odyssey. The Poet is he who creates his own life...

But this must be willed! To seek Without is equipoised in Time and Space as to seek Within: they are complementary. This dual movement constitutes the Art of Exposure. It also discards, with uncurbed violence, parasites, both professional and amateur.

For the experiencing of the Whole is a life-long Way of piecing each Event into and out of one's Self. It requires absolute Exposure; and this demands total sincerity without which Exposure can have no effect upon the Voyager.

And the Way is on foot! It is the stride that permeates the body, from the foot upwards and not the contrary. The inhaling and exhaling that absorbs, the ambulatory exercise of observation amasses the fragments into that Whole.

The Experience of the Whole may begin in a museum, with a book, or at times in idle, lounge-chair conversation; however, it truly begins with a gust of hot or cold wind upon the exposed face, with the naked foot touching soft soil or veiny marble. What then is the experimental triad? Imagination-Will-Exposure! And from this triad all legends are wrought. For it is the legend that is Art, it scoffs at the pious lies of historians.

It may just be that this chronicle has been written as a panegyric to the Hungarian philologist and Voyager Alexandre Csoma de Kőrös. Undoubtedly, the author of these pages sought to emulate the great Hungarian orientalist. Him, and indeed sundry others of the same stalwart and adventurous breed. And yet, there may be another reason: to delect in the simple and primordial things of life is not a

sound reason to heave anchor and set sail? Must one really err from one prison to another? This author certainly thinks not...

To retrace an Experience consists not of piecing together fragments of reminiscences, memories and sensations?..

'Il y avait peut-être sous ces signes quelque chose de tout autre que je devais tâcher de découvrir, une pensée qu'ils traduisent à la façon des caractères hiéroglyphiques.'

M. Proust

Part I

The Mountain Journey to Phuktal

*«Over the snowy peaks of the Himalays burns a bright
glow, brighter than stars and the fantastic flashes
of lightning. Who has kindled those pillars of light,
which march across the heavens?»*

Nicholas Roerich

The Outset

At Lamayura, five or six hours by bus from Leh, the capital of Ladakh, the Singge sanctuary lay steeped in darkness. The small prayer hall, located in a maze of mud-baked adobe homes of a complicated network of low, narrow corridors, crumbling stairways, unceremonious entries and dilapidated walls is an iconographic gem for the contemplative: the oozing walls, one of which was cleaved from top to bottom, revealed an array of colour, tone and motif reminiscent of Alchi. Hundreds of tiny seated Buddhas nudged neatly in their red niches, other pastel-like figures such as Tara (the green and white ones), Heruka, the bodhisattvas, dancing skeletons or the *turdak*, those mail-coated warriors, were all either ensconced in their ruddy recesses in seated position, or lodged in larger dwellings, fully upright. Although the paint had flaked considerably, punctuating the frescoes with ugly chasms and fissured breaches, the variegated Buddhas could be discerned in all their refined contours and intense colours: notably Amitabha, in *Dayana-asana* leg-posture, his fine hands fashioned in the mudra-position nestled between a woman figure and an elderly man; he glowed a lusty red, encased within a guild-edged greenish shadow of himself. Here, the wrathful Buddhas and the milder ones blended into a harmonious One, reconciling thus the two extremes of opposing forces. All the *Dhyani-Buddhas*, one of whom is the statue of Vairochana, the transmuted of hate, expose him to the ruthless onslaught of non-duality; the relentless quest of Harmony...Mahakala glares at the contemplator as he steps into the dank second chamber, there where Paldan Llamo and a host of dancing skeletons pin the unexpected pilgrim to his place. To penetrate the intensity of the colours and the soundness of the curves means to leap out in order to leap back in! To be passive only as a passage towards activity.



Photo 1: Lamayuru

And there the Lord of Compassion: Adalokiteshvara, four-armed, pure white (but not of hate!), radiates in joy in his large niche, peopled with bodhisattvas and flying Dakini, some of whom are playing flutes. He extends his thousand arms to those who suffer a thousand circumstances of suffering, whose souls lie exposed to a thousand pinings of mundane demeure. Milarepa had been a terrible tyrant, slaughtering at will, purging and pillaging, offering his extradordianry services to the Power of Hate. His conversion transformed the Power of Hate into one of Love...of Creation! Poetry and Art...like Mahakala, that once puissant demon who crushed even the strongest of gods, but who, yielding to Manjushri and Avalokiteshvara, joined forces with Poetry and Art in the eternal cycle of Creation...



Photo 2: Adalokiteshava: the Lord of Compassion

Contemplation: penetration of colour and motif. Milarepa was no Saint Bernard or Saint Augustine. Saint Bernard refused to reconcile hate and love; he never experienced the harmony of contrasts. On some occasions he would speak of love, and on others of hate. He would pray to God for the souls of the tortured, lead screaming warriors against internal reformers and external infidels. As to Augustine, in

spite of his conversion, he remained ontologically manichean: one does not evangelize with a soul overflowing with *ressentiment*...

Few Western saints had been free of hate: Saint Francis of Assis. He spoke to animals, slept in grottoes, sang in harmony to Nature's cyclic songs. For he was a Poet...Saint John of the Cross, too; a Poet who in his long Night arose from the dead...

Saint Francis: that doughty warrior 'truly' converted to love, his Warriorhood becoming Arthood, his 'togetherness' put to the test when he sought out the Other, Sultan al-Kamil during the siege of Damiette! Saint Francis practiced what others, then and today, would never dare think, much less attempt to do. The fierce deities no longer haunted the walls: they appeared to roam and err in search of an Other...

I stepped out into the shadows of an obscured sun. A mountain sun which the gigantic monastery at Lamayura, dominating the village from its lofty crest, refused to bathe the 11th century chapel in warmth. It lay forlorn, lost in its decaying labyrinth. I snaked in and out of the cold dank mud-made corridors and choppy orifices, up and down a maze of lanes and alleys, passing homes covered in chipping, blackening roughcast, *in pisé*, some windowless, others displaying brand-new frames of sparkling rose wood, all of whose roofs, however, were smothered over with faggots and hayrick. Above me to the left, a natural cavity hollowed out the whole flank of a bluff. Saffron-coloured tuff pillars shouldered the crenellated eaves of the enormous opening. Was it in there that Naropa had meditated, or the hermit who predicted the building of the monastery by throwing seeds into the air, only to observe them settle on the earth in the form of a swastika? Was not the name of the monastery Yundrung Tharpaling? I listened for a few seconds: from the fallen seeds no echo trailed...

There were very few villagers wandering about: many of them were at the spring washing clothes or fetching water. They were all dressed very warmly, the women wearing pink scarves and winy maroon *gonchas*. It was indeed cold! And it would get much colder...Yet the sun brightened the cobalt blue sky, so clean and shiny, so unpolluted. So clear, in fact, that even at the gloaming it still retained her mild, mellow welkin complexion.

The prior of the monastery provided me a cell that was no more than an earth-beaten, low-ceiling square box, windowless, furnished with one straw mat, a *choksey*-table of peeling paint on which had been placed a candle within its tiny holder. Rainwater had severely damaged one of the walls. I lit the candle and sat down. Diner was quickly brought: *skieu* with spinach and bits of cabbage and *chappatti*. The young monks tried to speak to me but communication proved difficult: I knew very little Ladakhi and the monks little or no Hindi or English. They were rough-faced chaps who seemed to be waiting for a hand-out! They got none. The bill would be settled in the morning with the prior. Indeed, if you give to one you give to all. I was neither philanthropist nor altruist in nature. In the East all commerce is a cycle of give and take and take and give. Why distribute French 'bonbon' and German-made pens? The first rots the teeth, the second a mere toy for the illiterate. Only the guilty-conscious Consumer gives without expecting anything in return...except...except that sudden burst of relief, of *soulagement* that fills his pride with an unction of self-importance.

The following morning, after a somewhat stifled sleep, I settled my accounts with the prior and set out on the grassy path that would lead to the village of Wanla. Grassy at first, as I ascended the rock-strewn way, the luxuriant green, however, disappeared, leaving barren-faced stone and mounds of pebbles or glacier debris. It was the third of June and although only at 3,800 metres the earth bore the scars of thick glacier sediment. Enormous white bands streaked the lees of granite, peppered palisades of vitreous rock, enameled by the floe of long, hard winters. The path snaked upwards, narrow and sinewy: it was my first pass...

I carried 25 kilos: books with some writing paraphernalia, 50 packages of Maggi (a sort of Macaroni soup), dried apricots, warm clothing, a light stove with two small gas cylinders, a sleeping bag, a tent and my Pentax. In Leh, I had also purchased a small pot and frying pan. I had borrowed the pup-tent from a friend in Leh. It would certainly bail me out if no village, monastery or shepherd's hovel were to be found.

Huffing up a dried river bed which serpentine in and out of valleys and narrow glens, I took a rest on a flat-surfaced boulder atop Prinket La, a 3,750 metre mountain pass. Despite the blazing sun, the briskness of the air chilled my exposed cheeks. I pulled my bonnet further down over my ears. The sky, a pure indigo, clashed against the whiteness of recently fallen snow that crowned the crenellated crests of the mountain ridges. I checked my books: the *Dhammapada*, the *Tibetain Book of the Dead*, the *Superhuman Life of Gesur of Ling*, translated by Alexandre David-Néel, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, my Sanskrit grammar and dictionary, Tagore's *Gitanjali* and my own make-shift glossary of Ladakhi and Tibetan words with English and French equivalents. These were fine companions for mountain solitude...

The meeting point between the indigo sky and the snow-capped ridges defined a line of perfect contrast. To the right the entire plateau of the mountain top lay robed in a coat of fleecy snow. And the silence...the silence of that cobalt blue sky and snow-white ridge clash! I hadn't heard such silence since my last mountain retreats in Sikkim at Rumtek and in the Himachal Pradesh at Keylong. That eloquent Silence to which few lend an ear, and still less endure...

At the very top no vegetation grew, even the variegated *nurji* moss which cuddle up under boulders of slab lay withered and damaged. Not a soul in sight. Not one...until I began to descend the pass from whose high angle villagers tilling their carpet-green fields dotted with denuded trees gradually came into focus. The village of Shilla loomed just above the busy peasants, and to the right of Shilla lay Wanla at the convergence of the rivers Shirlakong and Yapola. Here and there, further on, wading knee-deep in the grassy colza fields of sparkling yellow flowers, men and women bent over their rudimentary hoes, irrigating or tilling. Children carried amphors on their scarved heads or gamboled about the grass. As I inched along the foot-trodden ledges of furrowed fields, keeping the mighty Chuchiksal Monastery of Wanla in sight, the rought-cast faces of peasants offered no cheery welcome; they were too hard at work, unaccustomed to the common face of mass tourism of the North Indian plains that had transformed many an Indian into a miserable haranguer, a spouting nuisance, a wretched parasite, either in guise of a flunkey guide or some stretched out 'Moghul' on a make-shift divan in his sordid 'Travel shop'. These misfits were not of peasant stock: they represented the deformities of an evolving, urban society. For

peasants, despite tough daily chores and climatic hardships, maintain what most urban slaves have lost : dignity!

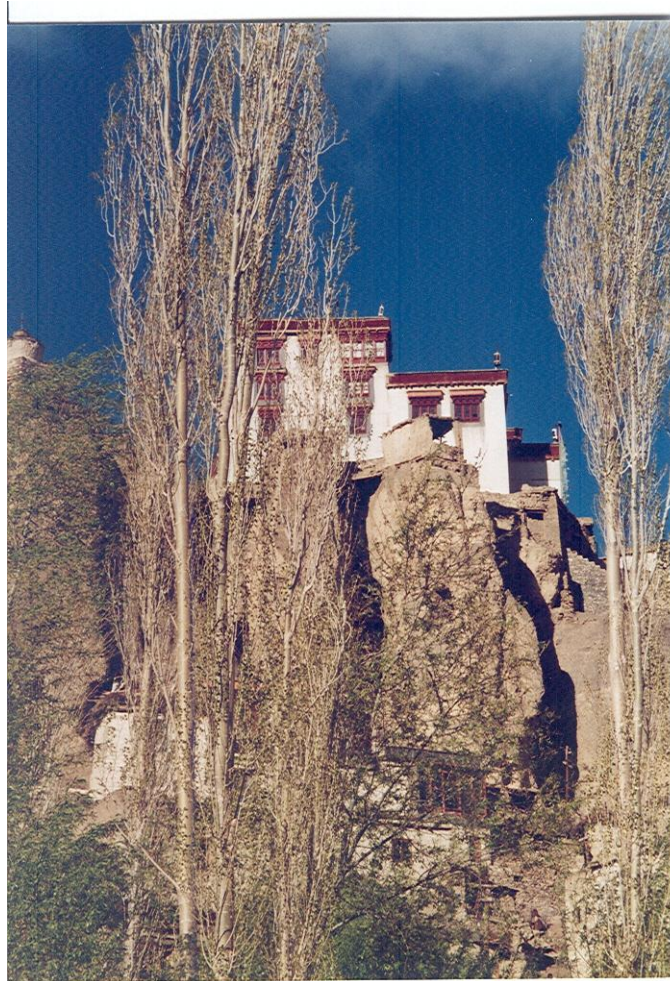


Photo 3: Monastery of Chuchiksal at Wanla

Rounding small plots of alfalfa, embroidered carpets of white and blue, I made camp at the river's edge. Clear water trickled down from a hummock spring which I discovered by crossing a bridge to the village street. Near the spring several villagers were busy replastering a fissured *chorten*. They hardly paid attention to the smiling traveller.

Filling my gourd (the one I had bought twenty-five years ago in Spain), I returned to camp and cooked two packages of Maggie. I added curry sauce powder and diced ginger to flavour the unsavoury noodles. And this would be my stable diet in the afternoon, to which I would add rice at night and *chapatti* in the morning, topped off with dried apricots. I had no vegetables, besides five or six potatoes and a half kilo of onions (the last item had cost me 23 rupies in Leh!) or fruit. I would have to rely on the

villagers for vegetables, flour and sugar. I had enough tea for twenty or so days but only a half kilo of sugar. The road between Leh and Srinagar still being closed, commodities were hard to come by and very very expensive. A kilo of potatoes was almost thirty rupies, whilst in south India they could be bought for five or six!

Ladakh, cut from the world during nine long months, suffered from a lack of fresh food. Peasants and city-dwellers stocked what they could, praying that the Kashmir road would be cleared by the military at the end of May, which unfortunately was rarely achieved. As to the new road through to Manali, built by the military for the military (opened to civilians and tourists in 1977 up to Keylong in Lahaul, then in 1989 through to Leh), this was never cleared before the end of July! Thus I counted on the villagers of Ladakh and Zaskar, knowing perfectly well, however, that they too would not have much to offer, and if they did, there would be much negotiating...Yak meat, cheese, yoghurt and curd they surely had, yet unlike the villagers of the Sahara whose lips curled in anger whenever one dared to offer them money for the tea and biscuits shared with them: here everything had a price!

After having eaten and rested, I crossed Wanla (it took about half a minute) and carried on towards the next village, Phanijala, along a wide dirt road big enough for a lorry. The going was monotonous: the road, straight as an arrow, dominated the muddy Yapola to the right whilst to the left granite rock, from whose face tree roots dangled and conglomerate bulged, served as a psychological barrier: the precipice fell sharply and straight down to the river banks. I saw no one, nor did the villagers, washing or playing on the other side of the river make any signs to me. Four hours of solitary stride finally got me to Phanijala. The wind quite suddenly picked up, the skies grew grey and threatening. Thick layers of silver-lined Cumulus settled over the hamlet, which in fact counted no more than six or seven stone-made homes clustered together on a mossless hill; it waxed an odd Gothic aura...or so I figured.

As I stood in speculation two peasant girls strolled up to me, coiffed in their traditional *perak* (a cobra-shaped head gear which could weigh up to two kilos, decorated with silver or coral), a goat-skin thrown over their backs (called a *lokpa*), and dangling from their wrists, bracelets made of shells which resembled North American Indian sistrums. The girls, wreathed in smiles, sported straw baskets on their backs filled with hay, their hands thrust deep into the thick wool of their *gonchas* of winy maroon. They knew no Hindi or English. However, my Ladakhi proved suitable enough to understand that their father's copse of silver poplar and drooping weeping-willow had always served as the wayfarer's camping ground. So I let myself be led past the hamlet down towards a streamlet which branched off from the Yapola on to a grassy plot of land which indeed possessed that picturesque allure of a woodsy campsite. The silver-lined leaves of the weeping-willow seemed to tinkle in the cooling winds, sweeping the surface of the rushing streamlet. The girls indicated a spot where I could settle down and make a fire for the night. They sped off in a chorus of giggles. And there, in the distance I heard the tinkling of a yak-bell...

I pitched my pup-tent then took a walk along the streamlet. The Cumulus rolled silently overhead, huge fleecy white fluffs limned against an indigo blue. The sun's rays, dying, filtering to a soft orange, made scintillate the silvery leaves, made them chime to the melodious surgings of the water flow. At the far end of the streamlet, where it converged with the Yapola, immense snow-coiffed mountains

commanded the valley: solid guardians of hamlets, villages, monasteries...of bold races whose faces reflected the veiny granite to whom they paid reverence. For these mountains possessed a soul, each and every configuration ignited in animation, both hostile and amical. They rumbled in ire or stretched forth in placid greeting. This was indeed the land of Roerich: the mountains...his home!

Through the narrow valley had been carved the path to Honupatta, a long day's walk along the steep and dangerous acclivities of the valley's buttresses. An old villager in Lamayuru had spoken to me about a short-cut through the mountains to Ascuta which by-passed Honupatta, the 4,0805 metre pass of Sirsir, and the towering pass of Bumiktse. Nonetheless, the old man made me understand that in June the snows began to melt, swelling the streams and rivers with icy water. The short-cut through Ascuta entailed fording at least four or five of these bulging affluents. He did add, notwithstanding, that the winter had been very severe and that perhaps the snows of the lower lees had not yet begun to melt in great quantities. One had to be cautious, and of course bring along some rope: I had none...

I gave it much thought that night in front of the little fire I had managed to make with some faggots and dried cow dung, chewing on boiled rice, potatoes and dried apricots. (The villagers had not much to offer.) True, I had no experience fording dangerous rivers, no Himalayan ones anyway. But I had experienced the touch of freezing water on the naked foot. I would save one day's journey by taking a short-cut, and that meant one day's food supply. Besides, by weaving West of Sirsir and Bumikste La, I would conserve my energy for the Sengge La climb, the 5,000 metre monster which, as the old man in Lamayuru had stressed, still lay blanketed in waist-deep snow! Only the locals had been able to cross her, most of whom were monks carrying not more than two kilos on their backs. Apparently, I was the first Westerner of the year to cross the great peaks of Ladakh and Zanskar towards Padum, the capital of Zanskar.

The wintry winds and snow had beaten and thrashed these mountain kingdoms terribly: reports as far south as Kulu described the mass destruction caused by avalanches, unexpected snow-storms, overflowed rivers. Homes had been literally swept away, roads chopped up and fallen into bits, villagers and tourists killed under heavy snow falls. The old man in Lamayuru had explained that all treks into the Spiti Valley had been cancelled. I had spent months trekking in those devastated regions last year.

Darkness settled over the mountains very quickly. I warmed my hands over the weak flames of my make-shift campfire; the russet flames sent orange flickerings into the cold, black air. And to think, last year that now desolate region lay wide and beautiful!

The clouds, which had converged as if in battle array, slowly dispersed: over the blackening rim of a ridge the dim light of the crescent moon illumined various parts of the valley in an eerie ply of convex and concave forms...

'...when one meditates on any body of water it gradually becomes part of you. Would you then pollute a part of yourself?' a fey whisper trailed off into the crispy air...

At five thirty I was up and there outside my dewy tent the two young girls were waiting with wide smiles: I deposited thirty rupies in their calloused hands. Extraordinary: the dawning light was a meld of the fantastic and the marvelous...

After breakfast of tea, honey and *chapatti* I resolutely made up his mind to trek the Aksuta road. This would not require me to follow the Yapola River for very long which would save much psychological strain, for I had been told that the path weaved in and out of a vast canyon, at times so narrow that it became barely visible. The thought of constantly keeping a shoulder to the mountain wall in order to avoid the drop was hardly any comfort. Some English trekkers had lost three horses on that trail...had they lost any trekkers?

Aksuta and Sengge La

The nervy path arched upwards and downwards following the erratic rhythm of a veiny granite and limestone mountain flank, plunging headlong into deep ravines, then charging high above the foamy river again only to repeat the same movement. I felt like I was on the back of that Nilgiri jungle elephant, contracting and decontracting to each descent and ascent. But there the elephant did all the work, I on the *howdah*, the *mahout* shouting « hut!hut!hut! » followed by the crack of the stick on the beast's leathery ear or jowl. Here my legs cringed under a weighty pack, buckled when lifting a kilo of boots, trembled when crouching or slithering under low granite ledges in which (or through which) the path seemed to vanish, only to appear suddenly again some two or three metres ahead! There were some vicious bends where I hugged the gummy bulwark like a child its mother's breast, inching along the igneous filament. That day was one of stamina and nerve.

I reached a recently well-built bridge which, according to the map, designated the bifurcation Honumatta/Aksuta. I swung down, crossed the sturdy structure, then kept to the opposite side of the steep canyon. I had been walking for six hours...

The path got worse! More and more serpentine, meandrous; it now transformed into a soft sandstone debris whose unsteady deposit offered no sure foothold, crumbling into pieces and sliding into the river at a foot's touch, at present twisting into natural cavities, low and jagged, wide enough indeed for two boots but under which I had to crawl. During that whole day I hadn't met one trekker...

From the 4,000 metre ledge I dizzily observed scattered *dzo* (not to be mistaken for yaks) grazing on *nurji* and other variegated moss along the river bank. Although some *dzo* were undomesticated, this type of yak displayed no aggressivity towards the mountain interloper. If they happened to be roaming on the path at my approach, they would simply slide down the slope and there, motionless on the abrupt acclivity, maintain perfect stability. The shaggy-furred creatures would look at me with their sad eyes, shake their thick necks, then waddle down to the river's edge.

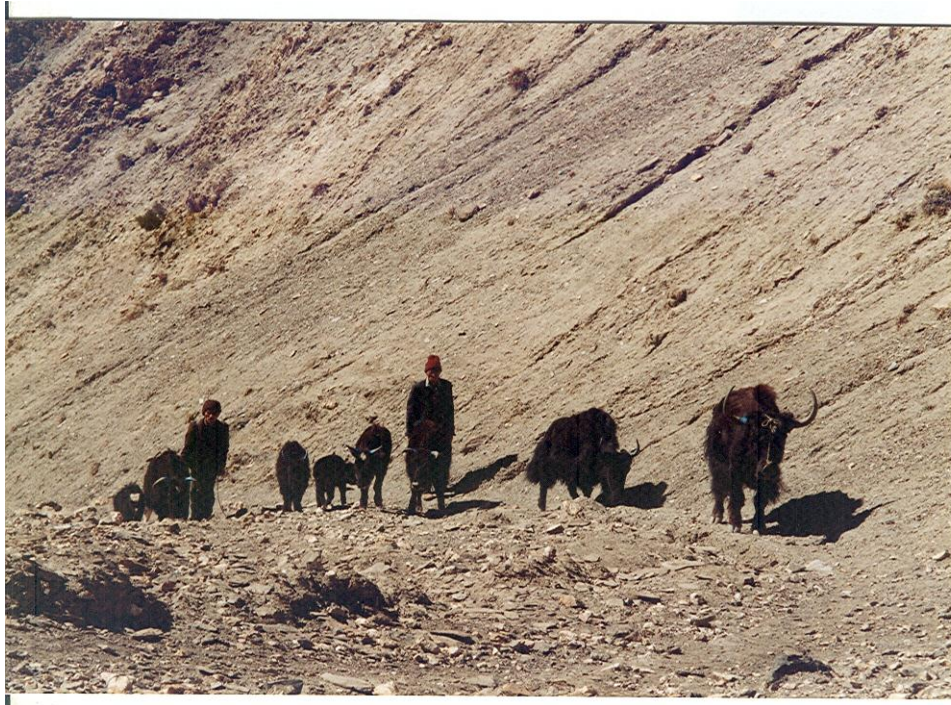


Photo 4: Yaks and their Shepherds

The sun's rays drove through adamant clouds, and as they did the whole canyon glowed limestone, shimmered micashist. Hiking lower and lower, patches of conglomerate punctured the fierce veiny light with ugly somberness, with unrefined hybridity, with an unsuccessful marriage of alloys. For some uncanny reason contrasts were here unreconciled.

There was no snow or signs of glacier floe. I crossed two wooden bridges, both well-built, before reaching Aksuta where, at the fork of the river, on an undulating grassy plateau of silver birch and weeping-willow, I made camp. It was terribly cold. The sun again had disappeared behind a thick blanket of grey clouds. I walked briskly to keep warm: Aksuta consisted of three stone huts around each fields of barley, alfalfa and buckwheat had been recently tilled. There was not a soul in sight! Hedged in between two adjacent walls some goats and a sheep butted each other; three kids gamboled about their mothers. There were no chickens. I craved for an egg! How I longed to devour one fried egg. In Lamayuru, I did catch sight of three little eggs behind a window, and the thought of those three little eggs obsessed me during the two days spent there; and they would obsess me for the long weeks ahead.

Towards dusk the temperature dropped dramatically. Since no faggots were to be found, I gave up the idea of making a fire. Besides, I was too tired to eat. Thus into the pup-tent I crept, and snuggled into my sleeping-bag where, within a short while, slumbered off.

The next morning no one came to see me: perhaps the hamlet-dwellers had gone off to the villages. The place appeared to be some temporary residence for shepherds or peasants in the summer. I quickly packed and set off, for indeed the cold had settled in. Snowflakes tumbled down gently from the dark sky. It was freezing. I had forgotten to buy gloves in Leh, and now, of course, began to regret it. Luckily my bonnet and boots kept the extremities of my body warm. I walked in quick, springy steps, making the blood race through my sleepy limbs. The bleakness of the day grew bleaker and bleaker as I ascended: the clouds thickening, sinking lower and lower.

I descended into a narrow gorge at the bottom of which flowed the first of the five rivers that I would have to ford. She was wide and swift but with no massive floe. And at this time (six thirty), however, she would be singeing cold. Before I removed my boots and rolled up my trousers, I checked up and down the river for any make-shift bridges: there was none! Neither did I come across any rock or boulder in the river that could have served as a lithic passage, or a temporary halt. I would just have to ford it in one go...

Yet the old villager was right: the waters, although terribly cold, were not too deep; even in the middle where the current was the strongest they didn't exceed my knee-caps. On the other hand, they ran swiftly, nearly sweeping me off my feet; I staggered, my legs so numb from the coldness of the water that my whole body trembled and convulsed. My teeth began to chatter and continued to do so until gaining the other side, where I wrapped my glowing red legs in a towel. The sun suddenly came out, helping me dry my shivering limbs.

The next two rivers posed no real difficulty save the frostiness of the current. As to the third, I found that peasants had rolled boulders into the gushing flow which permitted a facile crossing.

The lonely route now ran through a mammoth canyon exposed to whipping winds and sleet. The snowflakes grew bigger and thicker. I began to crunch across glistening glaciers which snaked down from the acclivities, twisted through cleaved and fissured rock, swept down into the canyon, there embracing it. This land was terrifying! Forboding, awesome, dangerous; the old man had told me not to strike out on my own in such wilderness at so early a date. I hadn't taken his advice very seriously for after all this wasn't the Yukon Territory out of whose ruggedness Jack London had written many a story and novel. I was neither ill-equipped nor absolutely alone: hamlets, villages and monasteries marked my map.

The cold numbed my exposed face, and the grey clouds percipitated the advent of darkness. Tiny bullets of hail played tick-tack against the petrified stone mass. Sengge Base Camp still lay many hours ahead, too far to be reached before nightfall. Above to the right, perched on a crag, a shepherd's hut jutted out from the pasty sky: it was too far and too high. A rather deep streamlet suddenly barred my way. Instead of wading across it, I stupidly tried to make the jump: I missed and now my feet stung with cold. Where would I dry my socks and boots in this weather? The canyon began to annoy me: the endless turns, the dismal streak of horizon, the obsessional crunching of rolling glaciers. Each new bend brought hope of the end; alas, it only accentuated the length of the valley...

Now and then roan-coloured mammals, resembling otters, darted across the snowy path, disappearing into underground apertures. They were called *piha*. I wondered whether the Ladakhi hunted them; I had never seen a peasant shouldering a rifle.

I took a rest behind a block of rock accumulation which appeared to be the prolongation of the granite cant. There, protected from the icy wind, I used my gas stove to warm up some tea into which I tossed fist-fulls of *tsampa*. I had a kilo of this precious barley: energetic, eaten by the monks and peasants of the cold mountainous regions of the Himalayas, it could be mixed with yoghurt, curd, butter-tea or milk. Although it had no 'distinguishing' taste (in fact it was tasteless), *tsampa* was light to carry and essential for the journey into the mountains.

Soon the whole valley lay under a mantle of shifting darkness, and yet it was only late afternoon. From time to time the mobile shroud rumbled and raged, allowing the sun a few seconds of timid rays to touch the earth; they offered no lasting warmth or illumination. From afar, through the descending mist, I discerned the thundering precipice of another river: it shook my soul! She must have been a powerful flow...the very soil under my feet shook.

And indeed she was powerfully awesome, her churning rush spitting up white foam onto shiny vitreous boulders. Luckily, a wooden span of silver-birch wood without, however, any suspension rigging, connected the two sides. It hung limply over the ravine flow. The gorge was not wide, but the narrow bridge without any barrier ropes or suspension rigging was dangerous to cross.

Up till now I had come across wooden bridges of a sturdy character, constructed with cable or wooden rigging. There were, too, the more make-shift spans which the peasants had done on their own by merely heaping up stone upon stone in an oblique manner on each bank, then throwing a board across the current on which had been aligned slabs of stone so that the animals could walk over without the risk of slipping on the wood. Sometimes these primitive spans were barred on each side with dried branches or hay in order to prevent stray animals from crossing or falling into the river. I had been advised to close these barriers properly after having crossed the bridge. However, the bridge I now came face to face with offered no comparison to the other types previously crossed...nor would it be comparable to the others that I would cross...

Silver-birch being flexible and pliable, and neither cable nor rope steadying the span, the moment I stepped on to the bridge the whole structure gave up and swayed under my weight. As I made my way tentatively across her *horizontally*, little by little I found myself steadily sloping down her *vertically!* Without any rope-barrier, a dreadful sensation of emptiness overwhelmed me. The pliant structure, rolling to and fro, rocked in perfect harmony to the rushing winds of the narrow gorge. It tossed and pitched to the drumming resonance of the pounding flow. Once in the middle, I realized that I was closer to the river than to the other side of the gorge! And so, with the deafening roar of the river in my ears, I inched awkwardly upwards, the birch wood giving in to each nervous step, the weight of the pack arching me now to the left now to the right. Once gaining sure ground I retrieved my Pentax and photographed her. It had suddenly occurred to me that a monograph on 'Bridges of the Western Himalayas' might stir enthusiasm in the editorial rooms of Europe. But in fact it never did...

The wind picked up, howling through the huge corridor, whining across tessellated canyon flanks of variegated sandstone and tuft-like rock whose colours, like stained-glass windows without the illuminating presence of the sun, lay dormant, craving for the Font of Life. I dragged on painfully through weed and dead, rigid thistle, up and down muddy hillocks, broke through swampy bramble, jumped over one streamlet after another. Finally, on the other side of the now widening river I spotted a low and squatty shepherd's hut and decided that it would be excellent shelter from the icy wind and the ominous threat of snow. My flimsy pup-tent was no match for these mountain climes.

Before crossing the river I rested for a few minutes. According to the map it was an hour's hike to Sengge Base Camp. At dusk the sun made a last desperate attempt to transfix her billowy adversaries. Through those final russet rays I decried the twin-capped coiffe of Sengge La, completely mantled in snow, whose omnipresent shrouds of mist rose and fell to each and every gust of frosty wind. The thought of huffing up that hill under such conditions filled me with a false illusion of grandeur: I saw himself already at the sommet, lofty and mighty like, for example, a Sir Richard Burton, struck dumbfounded by the vision of strange, African tribes that he encountered en route to the source of the Nile, or by the forbidden beauty of the Ka'ba as he circumambulated it, or certainly by the depth and breadth of the Persian and Arabic poetry that he perused and translated. But all this was mere phantasy and high-altitude exhaustion...



Photo 5: Sengge La: Tooth-like Crests

Reaching the other side offered no difficulty despite the ever dimming light. I quickly cleared out the shepherd's stone shelter as best as possible, my pup-tent serving as the roof which I securely fastened to the low sturdy stone walls with fallen rock debris. The dung floor was far from dry, so I stretched a piece

of plastic over it. At least I would be out of the wind. In a corner of the diminutive hut (*doksar* in Ladakhi) I was able to make a fire. I folded back a corner of the pup-tent roof which allowed the thin column of smoke to escape: the golden-hole of the Turkic yurts? Niches in the walls served as excellent ledges for placing lit candles. After a dinner of rice and dried apricots I crawled outside. It was freezing, but the nocturnal vault arched black and deeply beautiful, alive with a myriad myriad stars. This was not Aristotle's mechanical vault, it was Bruno's: infinite, animated, ever-changing, ever-recycling. Dawn indeed would be promising...

I boiled myself some tea with *tsampa*, then by the dying embers of the thin flames and the two waxing candles nestled in their niches, procured the *Dhammapada*, and therein read this verse:

'...As a rock that is a single mass is not moved by the wind, in the same way, a learned man is not shaken in censure and in praise...'

And with this verse-ringing in the Night I soon retired into my sleeping bag...

The morning skies, at first greyish white, soon gave hope of an unhindered climb: a marine blue, both limpid and sensual, gradually transformed, after an hour's walk or so, into an oily indigo whose depth brought into greater relief the tooth-like crests of Sengge La. There to the left I detected human footprints: villagers had already crossed! It was five in the morning...At first they zigzagged up a gentle slope, vast and shrouded in pure white, but then, mid-way, suddenly arched painstakingly to the left, vaulting upwards, the 'gentleness' rapidly diminishing and terminating in a hundred-metre perpendicular stretch which, from where I stood, appeared only achievable on one's hands and knees.



Photo 6: Sengge La: At the Top

The old villager had advised me to climb Sengge very early in the morning when the solidity of the snow would not give way under my weight. If I waited too long I would find myself battling through waist-deep snow at 5,000 metres! And so, just as the rim of the peeping disc rose, I struggled up the coated slopes of the glistening white, the new soft rays making sparkle the caps of the icy, undulating wavelets. Although I did plunge knee-deep into pockets of crusty snow the old man had given wise counsel: the freezing air of the morning maintained the compactness of its surface. And yet, in spite of this advantage the climb all but wasted me: age does not lie. At 43, one's stamina and endurance lack the fresh robustness of an eighteen or twenty year old's, no matter how strong the will. Indeed, those cross-country days, those twenty-kilometre days had widened and thrown out my chest, had obliged me to open my stride to keep pace with the 'taller guys', to draw deep breaths when breathing became uncontrollable: half-way up the inclining slope I couldn't catch my breath! I heaved, panted and coughed...even long periods of rest proved insufficient. I decided to practice yogic respiratory exercises: ten seconds of inhaling, of retention, of exhaling, of retention and so on, whilst thumping one leaden foot in front of the other. I felt nauseous and somewhat disorientated. At least the rhythmic breathing would occupy my chilled thoughts. Csoma, dressed in Tibetan garb, hands tucked under his armpits suddenly flashed across my mind. And then another colourful image slid into view: the Hungarian's tombstone in Darjeeling, weeded regularly by the long-haired gardener.

With the white sun now full in the sky I found himself at the top, next to the flapping prayer flag, panting and coughing, my back against a make-shift *chorten* of heaped up flat stones. I felt weak but not ill. I placed a flat stone at the top of the cairn against the prayer flag, and silently offered a thanksgiving. Then my thoughts steered away from the height of the cairn and the toil of the climb towards the might and grandeur that lay below: I was atop God's kingdom! Rippled crests, snow-capped or barren of ochre and russet, spread out in all horizons, an ocean of swirly vanishing lines and points stretching into a cloudless sky of nelumbo blue. Here and there, valleys ripped through the granite bulwarks, whose spiky cants of salt and pepper shone iron-grey. A sudden wind stirred and gathered a few distant cloudlets concealed behind sparkling sommets, rushing them speedily through the lithic crenels, some trailing within the blue, others disappearing into the fissures and crevices, dashing into particles. The prayer flag flapped to the rhythm of the spectacle! This majestic sight engraved in my mind, I procured *Zarathustra*, my eyes falling on this bold phrase: '*..He who climbs upon the highest mountains laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary...*' I lifted a booted foot and examined it: light feet? Light feet? Could I dance atop Sengge La with those booty brogans? Ah! And there was still the 'going down' to accomplish...

My breathing had now become regular: no vomiting, no vertige, no uncanny visions despite all the horror stories that Western travellers had gleefully recounted to me in Leh about 'mountain sickness'. And yet, it was a serious subject, albeit few took it very seriously...

Many a gung ho, happy-go-lucky globe-trotter arriving to the Himalayas set out immediately to conquer Siva's sacred abode: some, both physically and mentally unfit for such exerting exploits, scramble down as quickly as they scramble up slopes on their first day, either bleeding from the nose or vomiting from their mouths; others, more fit and intelligent, although unconscious of the effects, do, when the nauseous sensation overtakes them, sit down or walk slowly back, twenty metres or so. It is reported that some individuals, in a state of frenzy, rip off their clothes and attempt to jump from

mountain tops! These are, and this goes without saying, extreme cases. The versed wayfarer will acclimatise him or herself two or three days before struggling up slopes. For this very reason I had sojourned in Leh for some three weeks, hiking from village to village, monastery to monastery. I even undertook a 14-hour trek from the village of Nurla, on the Indus, to Alchi, a miserable day spent wandering crazily in hamlet-oases, relocating trails that had magically disappeared over ridges and into ravines, or had branched off into three or four directions. In sum, I had gained Alchi in the most forlorn state and disgusted mood. To change these unsavoury thoughts, I read aloud a few more passages from his *Zarathustra*. A new thought drifted into my mind:

'...the silence of the mountain top can be deafening: the ears throb and drum to their own frenetic beat. Could there be any 'real' silence?' I think Lampadusa had posed that question.

I checked the map: Yulchung. I chose to reach it before dusk.

Going down proved to be as difficult as going up! There was no path, only a slippery slope which permitted me to race down, clopping uncontrollably through layers of the softening snow. It needed two more dreary hours of running, abrupt halts, jogging, faltering and staggering before touching russet granite: there the path appeared, wide and well-defined, creeping round the tessellated valley, humping up hill-tops, racing down into ravines. I reached Yulchang as the last embers of the sun illumined the plains and plateaus of this very cultivated countryside. For a fleeting moment the whole scene appeared reminiscent of North Italy...



Photo 7: Yulchang

Yulchang was dominated by a huge fortress-like house which again made me think of North Italy, this time of Tuscany and her house-fortresses. From afar, this particular house, and those that straggled behind it, blended nicely into the dun coloured backdrop of granite and tuft. However, as I drew nearer to them, and on closer inspection, I realized that the white roughcast and red-painted framework of the casements distinctly demarcated them from the ever-changing natural colours of the surrounding area, a playful ply between the light of the sun and the darkness of earthy soil and stooping blades of buckwheat and alfalfa. A few children came running to greet me (this had never happened before), and pointed chubby fingers to the first house. They, in fact, led me round the back of it, to the left of three enormous *chortens*, and up again right in front of the dwelling where they halted in a small courtyard in which a pen and a stables had been sturdily constructed. The façade of the house, imposing in height and width, contained no less than twelve perforated casements. A double staircase made of wood led to a majestic door framed in unpainted planks. This was no miserable little village: to all sides lay carpets of green fields, and rising by degrees to the left of the house, the rest of the village with its monastery neatly aligned on the crest of the wide ridge like beads on a rosary.

From the doorway the owner of the house, a tall thin man, waved. I quickened to greet him, and in an admixture of Lakakhi, Hindi and English made me understand that for thirty rupies I could sleep in one of the many rooms of his house, and for another thirty enjoy a solid dinner and breakfast with the family. The owner also hinted that the sixty rupies would include their village *chang* of excellent quality. The owner, all smiles, took me by the arm and we went inside whilst the boys carried my backpack.

The lower section of the house was steeped in darkness. We trudged up a ladder to the first storey of the inner courtyard from which radiated six or seven rooms. Ducking low, I entered a squat dusty unlit cell over whose casement a silken green sash had been fixed. A candle was brought and the owner pulled back the sash which, whilst stirring clouds of insects, revealed the still illumined fields and mountains. What a spectacle! A thud behind me: my pack was dropped at the foot of the *ka*; that is, the central pillar which supports the ceiling of birch rods and joists packed with mud. Before I could sit down on the beaten earth the owner had taken me by the arm, rushed me past the small monastery through a labyrinth of tapered lanes, down into an underground corridor (or so I believed!), and finally into a well-lit cellar where dozens of barrels had been piled high, and where, too, there on the earthen floor, a company of elderly villagers were seated in a large circle. A dozen or so leathery faces peered up, apathetic but unhostile. The circle broke and expanded as the owner and 'foreign traveller' joined the perimeter.

All the men were heavily dressed, sullen, gloomy, talking in whispers. In front of each a brick had been placed upon which a wooden bowl lay filled with a thick creamy liquid. An old man whose beard glowed as creamy and white as the thick brew he savoured, presided the gathering; he was doing most of the talking whilst a younger man, seated directly opposite the 'foreigner', ladled out the *chang* in a very ceremonious fashion: only when a villager had taken one sip from the *chang*-bowl would he ladle out one more. This 'one sip' ritualized the solemn assembly, as the conversation passed from one man to another, each taking his sip, the ladled chant acting as the hubbed axle of a wheel that rolled on and on in a slow deliberate manner...along its ladled rut, the arm of the ladler, a mere spoke of the ancient Wheel. It rolled on and on, sluggishly, leisurely but never hesitatingly: tradition never hesitates! One sip

at a time, one turn of the Wheel! One tirade at a time, one turn of the Wheel! One ladle at a time, one turn of the Wheel! *Chang* is a light alcoholic beverage fermented from barley. From what I had learned, the barley is first dried then boiled for several hours. The boiled barley is put into a sack for two or three days after which it is poured, in its liquid form, into kegs against which the 'foreigner' now reposed his aching back. Sometimes the *chang* is distilled in order to brew *rakshi*, a stronger spirit in the same way that *le marc* is distilled from the naked stems of the grape-bunch in Burgundy.

The conversation, as the Wheel churned and churned, grew somewhat livier. I picked up pieces of phrases, mumbled words, laughing vowels or grounded consonants. This *chang* was certainly no sooty swill that one downed like a bar-brawler: the old villager had stated that it was a veritable institution, especially during marriage ceremonies at which time the groom's family enters the future fiancée's house with the *request-chang*. The groom's family returns a second time to the future fiancée's house and there negotiations begin for the marriage, during which the *fiancée-chang* is copiously served. However, it is only when the 'serious marriage negotiations' begin that the *listening-chang* is ladled out to both households in its usual circulatory manner. Finally, the last visit to the future fiancée's kith and kin is crowned by the offering of the *solution-chang*, the circulating of which seals the marriage negotiations...

There in the cellar, however, no marriage negotiations were pending: the men merrily caused the Wheel to turn and turn and turn as it had always turned ever since the first sip had been sipped! My head, too, seemed to turn with the turning. The owner caught my eye and suddenly stood; it was time we were off to eat. We thanked the men, momentarily upsetting the perimeter, and dismissed ourselves. With a heavy head, speaking more Hindi and Ladakhi than I had ever imagined, we criss-crossed the maze, of lanes until the owner's house had been reached. Odd, I had always noted that when I wasn't 'quite myself' I spoke foreign languages with unusual fluency and accuracy! Perhaps this was why people or nations who cling unconditionally to themselves remain dull, lethargic, almost asinine as regards language acquisition. For indeed, they cling to themselves as the patriot clings to his country, an infant its mother's nurturing but possessive breast. To remain pitifully oneself translates the attitude of the unreaching and consequently the unreached...Mevlanâ's technique of *semâ*, the cosmic dance, certainly had been created with the design to turn the ego-Self into the Other's Self...And it succeeded...But one must turn like the Wheel...And wasn't it Nietzsche who once proclaimed high atop his mountain: '*...For one must be able to lose oneself occasionally if one wants to learn something from things different from oneself...*'?

The family dinner of *skieu*, butter-tea and *tsampa* lightened my head. I hardly understood a word that was addressed to me, but my unending noddings appeared to convey some sort of response which the whole family read as positive. So be it! They refused the six dried apricots that lay crushed at the bottom of my pack, so I gobbled them down once dinner had finished. Later, I sat alone at my window, staring into the dancing flame of the waxing candle on the sill. Before retiring, this verse from the *Dhammapada* retained my attention:

'...Those who have not amassed wealth, those who recognise the value of food, whose goal is liberated from this void without any special purpose, their movement is hard to trace like that of birds in the sky...'

Skiumpata to Anuma La

After settling the 'bill', a solid breakfast of *chapatti*, apricot jam and yak-cheese supplied me the necessary energy to hike over a snowless, yet strenuous pass which when covered, offered the mountaineer a striking spectacle of the surrounding area. A sea of peaks and summits formed an amphitheatre-like configuration around two hamlets which lay atop two very separate plateaus: these were Gongma (to the left) and Skiumpata (to the right). I dragged my boots to the right; I would spend the rest of the day at Skiumpata in quiet relaxation, and indeed an hour later I found myself in a mud-baked home where the owner, a toothless old man, accommodated me a suitable room equipped with two large *chokseys*, a weedy carpet, two or three mattresses and a newly framed window, exceptionally large, overlooking the bluff of the plateau.

The family, as is the custom, lodged on the second floor which was reached by a rickety ladder, whilst the ground floor was over-run by goats, sheep and *dzo*, one of which a female (*dzomo*)! From the rooftop I counted ten homes *in pisé*. The plateau seemed to float within the immense ovalness of the granite and slate amphitheatre, although to the northern end of it there rose a palisade of buff-coloured tuft whose abrupt lees connected the surface of the plateau. Three adobe homes of the same hues lay distant and forlorn against the imposing backdrop.



Photo 8: Skimpata

Soon one by one the villagers came by to see the 'foreigner', I being the first of the year! The owner's son, a monk from Phuktal, confirmed this distinction for the young acolyte had just arrived on foot from Phuktal where not one trekker had as yet visited the monastery from the Darcha side. He spoke excellent English, explaining that he had finished all his studies at the monastery where Tibetan, Mathematics and some Hindi were taught. Since the sun shone bright and hot, the monk suggested that I wash up in the runnel that ran through the village, and at the same time launder my clothes further down, for indeed near a tilled field some flat-surfaced rocks provided excellent beating surfaces. I did just that. Two hours later I was eating with the family in their kitchen...

First a big bowl of *chashul*; namely, *tsampa* with tea, then a bigger bowl of *changshul*, *chang* with tea! There must have been at least nine people around the black burning stove, all delighted to see the 'foreigner' gulping down the thick broth. The Ladakhi kitchen has intrigued many a traveller over the ages, and if this attraction might appear vacuous to some or vain to others, I found himself thoroughly transported to my life-long passion: the Middle Ages.

The Ladakhi kitchen is a lieu of sacredness! The hub of family and social life. All ceremonies and festive occasions take place in this remarkable space whose emptiness of miscellaneous items dissimulated the plenitude of the Sacred. The black iron stove in the middle of the room was rarely extinguished, continually fed with faggots by the women of the house, it being the very heart of the household for both cooking purposes and the welcomed heat it emitted during the brutal winter months. In order to kindle her, the housewoman would activate a little bellows which sent the flames dancing and the heat swirling. Now and then, she would throw in a faggot or some dried dung. A blackened pipe pushed through the smoke-hole (*yam-tong*, like the 'golden smoke-holes' of the Oghuz tents?) of the birch-rod ceiling which evacuated the fumes. In fact, the enclosure had no other outlet save this smoke-hole and the low squatty entrance of the room, generally covered by a thick curtain-like material. The mistress of the house rose from behind her stove and distributed *chapattis*, tossing them into the outstretched hands or plates of the children. In the dim light the 'foreigner' (who had eagerly accepted his third *chapatti*) noted that one of the kitchen walls bulged with copper cauldrons, pots, pans and other cooking utensils, all nicely placed on elongated niches, some of which were covered with newly cut wood, whilst others remained in their natural tamped state. The walls, too, like the floor, felt smooth to the touch, shone of well-polished clay, impeccably clean. However, the kitchen element that most fascinated me was the *ka*, that lone central pillar which bore the weight of the birch rods and the joists, all packed solidly with yak-grass and mud. For it is this pillar that once erected, symbolises the completion of the house, triggering thus *chang* celebrations and festivities galore! Symbolically, the *ka* is the Ladder that joins the house to the realm of the Sacred; at the same time, it acts as the Axis round which all fellies rotate. It is now the Nadir, now the Zenith! Connection is equipoise to separation. It is the Shaft of Light that illuminates the Darkness of the long wintry world, pulsating with warmth, invoking the Higher Order by the Lower, joining the Lower to the Higher...

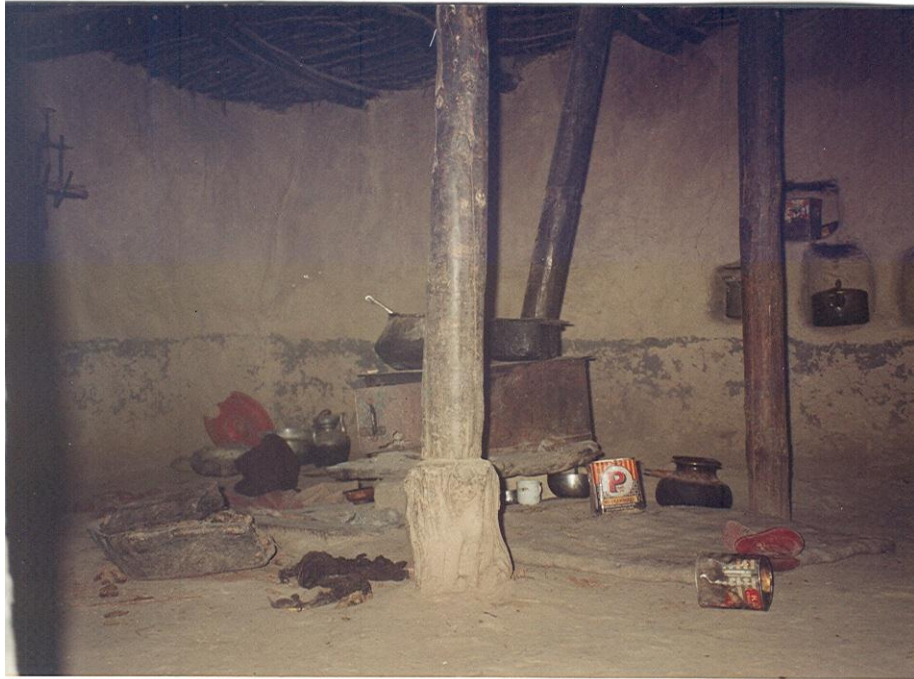


Photo 9: Lakahki kitchen: the 'Ka'

I excused himself and climbed to the rooftop: wisps of clouds, like smoke, rose over the snow-capped crests, dispersing...rising...dispersing. More followed, thicker, billowy, slipping along the iron-ore granite like the uncontrollable bellows of some conflagration. The monk interrupted my visions, caressing a silver offering-vessel called a *ting*, whose wisps of perfumed fumes smelt of Juniper. I knew this smell; it was the incense for the Pretans, those of the Buddhist underworld whose craving for food could only be assuaged by the sweet, odorous fumes of the nourishing plant. The monk had procured it from his father's *chotkhang*, the house prayer hall. He now mixed butter and *tsampa* with the Juniper at the altar, and holding it high offered Buddha's nurturing compassion to those who must effect another turn upon the Wheel of Life! Poor Pretans! A ripple of laughter escaped the lips of the monk: they would have another chance, why pity them? There was no pity in the East, only compassion...

That night in my comfortable room, seated next to the electric light charged by a solar-screen energy-captor installed on the roof, I meditated this passage from the *Dhammapada*:

'...He whose sins have faded, who is not absorbed in the matter of food, whose goal is liberation from this void without any special purpose, his position is difficult to trace like that of birds in the sky...'

The monastery of Lingshed, about a three-hour walk from Skiumkata, is a massive complex splayed in usual Buddhistic fashion: at the top level of the gradation lodge the lamas, at the second the monks and at the third the villagers, who, adjoined to the monastery, till the fields and go about their daily

chores in harmony with the work of the monks and lamas. At the foot of the monastery lay the village proper, elongated along a plateau of stratified iron-ore and zinc colours. There were no stone walls or *sīmā* demarcating the territory of the monastery. From my aerial position the *gompa* resembled a veritable stronghold of mediaeval stamp.

Three tracks led down into the complex: I chose the middle one ushering me under a *chorten* which crowned an adobe-made tunnel. Then the crunchy path straightened out and penetrated the roughcast walls of the citadel. Several inclining lanes led up to a series of ladders which further conducted me onto the wide terrace of the narthex whose polished walls glistened with freshly painted frescoes. The terrace of the monastery overlooked the entire valley: below I counted 70 homes, all of which descended, in gradual degrees, into the luxuriant green fields of the plateau, layer by layer like the tilled hilly or mountainous regions of Sikkim and Nepal. An echo lifted high, drifting towards the narthex, strong and melodious, the staves of the labouring. In the freshly furrowed fields, criss-crossed with runnels of irrigating waters, peasants scarfed and in *gonchas* sang as they hoed or ploughed. The men behind their yoked *dzos* drove them ever forwards; the women raked and raked and raked, singing so sweetly. Several men lifted their hatted heads and punctuated each verse, each stanza, each stave with a cry, a bucolic cry, rustic, hearty, healthy...

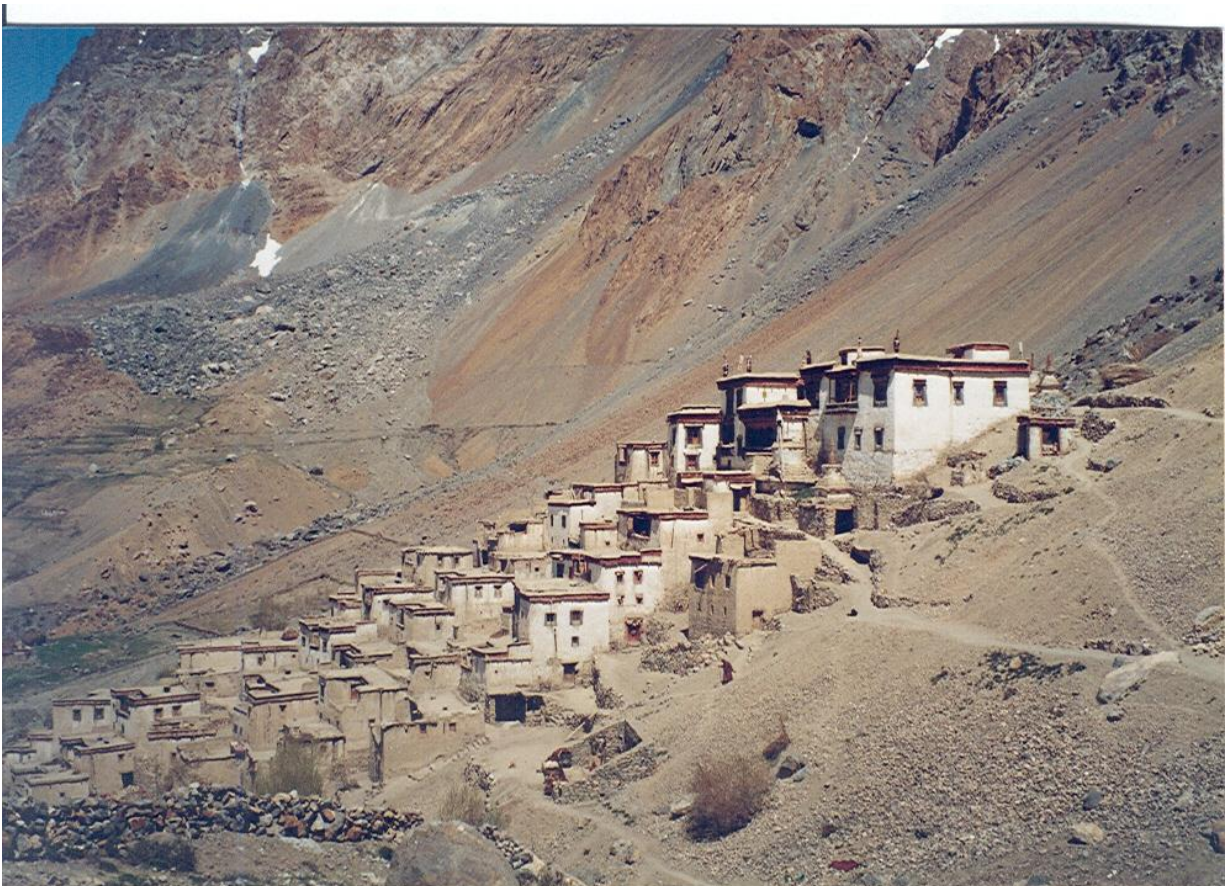


Photo 10: Monastery of Lingshed

A *dzong* reverberated low and lonely in the valley...once, twice, thrice...an elderly, bald-headed lama climbed up to the narthex to greet me in good English. He procured an enormous key from a deep, red robe pocket, opened the *gompa* door and motioned for me to enter, after I had, of course, removed my filthy boots. The prayer hall was freezing; the cement floor icy cold! As I let the lama guide me past the pealed and chipped frescoes, the four rows of cushioned benches and the sacred statue of the golden Buddha, the lama informed me that the monastery had been built some 420 years ago, and now lodged sixty or seventy lamas and monks. Their living conditions offered little respite: ten months out of the year they found themselves completely cut off from the rest of the world because the monastery was located between Sengge La and Anuman La! My eyes began to burn: there wasn't sufficient light to examine the wall paintings and the *thankas* which were draped over the dank, clammy walls on both sides of the Buddha.

The lama insisted that I lunch with him and the other monks. I accepted but first wished to investigate the frescoes on the outer walls of the narthex. Truly, the vividness of the colours, the freshness of the expression and the delicacy of the design bespoke an outstanding artist. These were no artless images! The Wheel of Life, jammed between Yama's teeth and claws dazzled in minute detail, especially the Titan warriors whose battle gestures, arms and raiment attested to a keen eye for minutiae. On the opposite wall an old sage on his deer (had I seen him at Tikse?) gleaned ochre colours, winy marrons and indigo blues. But my attention was soon arrested at the bottom of the fresco where a monk, attired in robes of fiery, flowing ochre, led a grey monkey and elephant along a looping road which, as the animals walked and danced up higher and higher transformed into a brilliant white which in turn metamorphosed the animals of that same pure whiteness! Midway up, both the road and the animals were half white, half grey, and at the very top the monk rode a white white elephant along a now four-coloured path which appeared to waver dreamily in the air. The whole scene shone in various tints of green, representing the acclivity of the magic mountain as it rose vertically in its mural encasement. An icy blue stream cut the mountain side in two. The monk now sat in a cave in the extreme upper left of the fresco from which flowed the rainbowish path. The passage of Time (the colour-change and figure-ascension) which was represented in one Space (the wall panel), created the theophanic Movement; provoked a theophanic Event that passed within Aion, that timeless Space? Perhaps they were concomitant: an Event being the sign of an ontic state...



Photo 11: Wheel of Life

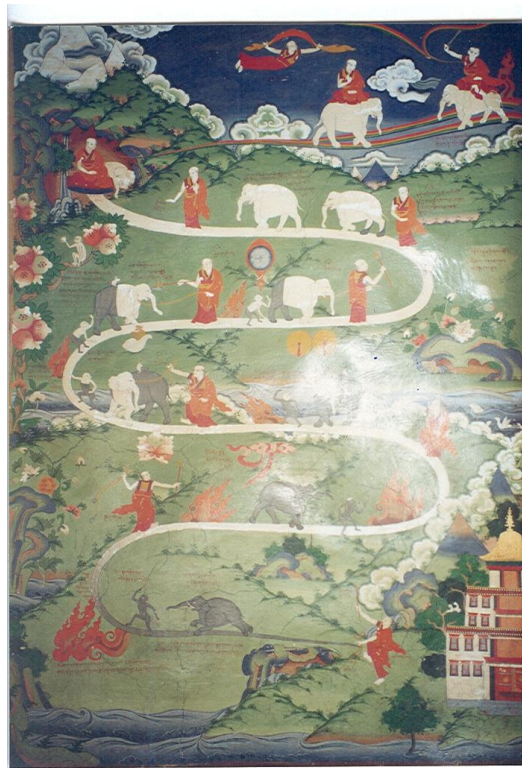


Photo 11 bis: Monastery of Lingshed: Ascension towards Purity

We left the prayer-hall and several minutes later, in a small visitor's room, the monks were plying me with salt butter-tea, yak-lassi (with bits of spinach) *chapatti* and conversation. When I asked who had painted the narthex frescoes, immediately the bald-headed lama indicated a young, strong-faced monk who had just poked his head above the last rung of the ladder which led to the guest room. He spoke good English and explained, with considerable modesty, that he had also robed the Karsha Gompa with frescoes only a year ago. Conversation turned to Anuman La, the artist insisting that in spite of the heavy snowfall that now mantled the pass with thick fresh snow, I should have no 'real' problem crossing her. The artist's English wasn't subtle enough to elucidate the meaning of 'real', but I more or less gathered that it would be no insurmountable obstacle.

After the copious lunch they inquired whether I would like to stay on a few months at the monastery to teach them English in their cenobitic school. I shook my head apologetically: my research in the Tamil and Sanskrit languages was more pressing at the moment. I thanked my hosts warmly, proffered a donation and set out to tackle Anuman La...

The particularity of Anuman La was its zig-zag track at the foot of the climb, traced rather accurately on the map. It worked its way upward like a snaky groove slithering out furrow after furrow, runnel after runnel in the soft earth. There was no trace of snow! The ferruginous soil offered ample foot support; I had no trouble winding back and forth towards the first bluff upon whose grassy flat surface I gasped at what had been accomplished, and what was to come.

Both perspectives were awesome...more awesome than Sengge La. I would have to inch along a narrow ledge of slippery snow for about 200 metres, whose brusque slopes, if one were not cautious, could send the hiker sliding down to his death. Surely there was no 'real' danger. Nonetheless, we come face to face with danger primarily due to our imprudence or ill-luck. I promised myself to be prudent. As to ill-luck, at least the morning provided excellent light and cold, dry air...

Anuman: 4,700 metres of verticality save that one respiring bluff. It demanded much will power and strength, a harmony of determination and 'loss of control' of one's Self in order to conjure up those untapped regions of untapped energy. Lower than Sengge La but much steeper in ascent, every step gained plunged me knee-, even waist-deep in snow. On hands and knees I sought the tiny patches of rocky iles that afforded sanctuary from the melting snows and fragile ice. However, these rocky projections, surrounded by a network of streamlets trickling down from the fast-melting glaciers above, proved to be more onerous than the snow itself. I floundered like a fish in that muddy ferruginous paste, grappling and crawling on pointy projectiles and on that thorny round red moss whose name I had never been able to learn. Long rests (fifteen to twenty minutes) could not stabilize my respiration, calm my pounding heart which beat like a pestle against my chest, alleviate that constant coughing. And yet, my eyes, clear and alert, beheld the most magnificent mountain scenery that I had ever seen in Ladakh: pinnacles rose and dropped like the pipes of a church organ, pointy, stabbing the realms of the God's creation in their lofty loft! Some in islands of three or four, others solitary, lonely, estranged from the ochre mass; and still others configured in jagged vaunt and swell, snow-clad, aglow. In the distance several escarpments dripping with snow and sleet, appeared to be hoary palimpsests, which with each gust of wind or ray of sun one eerie shape vanished replaced by yet another. Mosaic figures played and

danced on these vitreous palisades, drawing me away from my slopy struggle. I beheld what Roerich had beheld...his spiritual quests offered in guise of paintings and poetry to all of Humanity...

And below, as I crawled ever higher, the mighty river lay frozen over in floe! An unusual event which had rarely been seen in these parts of Ladakh. And there lay too Lingsheit Gompa over the ridge of the opposing mountain. How strange! Everything seemed so dry there. I cranked my neck upwards and spotted the flapping prayer flag; just above, although it was out of the question to reach it by simply walking straight up. I struck out to the left and furrowed the deep snow in a zig-zag fashion like a ploughman his field, back and forth, two hours of poetry, until I flopped down beside the *chorten*, heaving, huffing and hacking...

I lay back: the blues of the Himalayan skies inebriated me, lighty, like the *chang* at Yulchang. The powdery blue, by degrees, appeared to transform into a deeper, profounder marine...peacock...royal...sapphire blue. I then examined the narrow ledge of the mountain top. Here and there greyish patches of thawing snow blotched the russet glow of the soil. Further on the stone commemorations piled higher, indicating the very top of Anuman. I reached into my back-pack and procured *Zarathustra*:

'...There are a thousand paths that have never yet been trodden, a thousand forms of health and hidden islands of life. Man and man's earth are still unexhausted and undiscovered...'



Photo 12: Hanuman La: At the Top

For a half hour or so I breathed deeply, freely, grandly. Ennobled breaths...august, wholesome, healthy. The sun warmed my spirit for it was high in the sky; indeed, I had enough time to reach Snertze (the shepherd's hovel). And yet, as my eyes scanned the valley below; my heart began to sink: swells and swells of blackened glaciers streaked down from the fissured lees filling the wide river with floe, some of which had worked themselves over their own icy travail, creating bulging bridges of ten metre thick glaze. Where the opposite glaciers from both acclivities joined and clashed, the force of the conflict made surge lunar-like stalagmites, daubed with black and grey. The whole scene had the allure of the Fantastic, a sinister admixture of Poe and Byron: bleak, barren, yet enticing. I began, thus, to descend into the scene...

Snertze to Padum

In the dying glimmers of twilight, I battled up a spur on whose flat surfaced top Snertze, or the shepherd's stone hovel, was situated. I arrived precisely the moment in which the shepherd was leading his fifteen or twenty *dzo* up from the valley into the numerous low, stone wall enclosures that surrounded his abode. Instead of greeting the old shepherd at once, I crouched down and observed the penning of the animals. My tired thoughts drifted back to the twelve exasperating hours of jumping, hopping, skipping and sliding over glaciers and muddy debris. My hands bulged blistery red: the gradual contrast of the hot sun and the freezing snow had swelled my fingers to monstrous proportions. There were moments when I couldn't feel my fingertips. The shepherd jerked his head as if he were calling to me. I jumped up and made a bee-line for the *dzo*-pens.

Although the shepherd spoke no Hindi, we managed, nevertheless, to communicate simply because the essentials of mountain life were contained in about fifty words, all of which I now knew by heart. The good shepherd invited me to pitch my tent adjacent the stone wall hovel, a safe distance from the *dzos*. Moreover, as I busily erected my flimsy annex, the stalwart man brought forth from his humble abode yak-lassi and yoghurt. Once settled in, we shared this excellent food to which were added three packages of Maggi cooked over a fire that the *dzo*-herder had expertly built with dried twigs and *dzo*-dung. For this unexpected gesture of hospitality, I offered my host twenty rupies. We conversed (this word, of course, should be understood in its broadest sense) until the *dzo*-herder's son, a strapping young lad, strode up the dark slope, followed by three baby *dzos* who had apparently erred from the herd. He greeted us from afar then disappeared in the hovel. The shepherd shook my hand and he too vanished within the entrance of the sturdy *doksar*, bending low in order to do so.



Photo 13: Snerze: Shepherd's Hovel

Alone before the dancing flames of the fire I ruminated this verset from the *Dhammapada*:

*'...It may be in the village, it may be in the forest; it may be in a hollow, it may be in the dry land;
where the venerable persons delight in living, that place is attractive...'*

A delightful night of silence I spent, whose attractiveness was made possible by the recurring bellows of the *dzos*, like rests on a music score...

Parsi La rose 3,900 metres: a snowless peak, this pass, and the confluence of the Zaskar and the Oma Rivers marked the natural boundaries of Ladakh and Zaskar. One needed a half hour to reach the Oma from Snerze and cross the solid wooden bridge that connected the two regions, and another three or four hours to huff up Parsi La, zig-zagging on endless linear grooves, ploughing through bramble and thistle, scampering along the broken paths of the mountainside, finally jerking straight up again, steeper and steeper until the top had been gained. Zaskar lay ahead, green and flat, wedged in by tremendous mountains to the North and to the South (the Karakorum), to the East and to the West (Prensi La: 4,440 metres). The Zaskar River, majestic in her foamy flow, cut the plain in two.

Mediaeval Zaskar had enjoyed political autonomy; however, after many sieges and futile attempts to defend itself, her lands became enfeoffed to the kingdom of Ladakh, and remained in a state of infeudation until British occupation, then Indian sovereignty.

The province of Zanskar, isolated ten months out of twelve, has remained imbued in the joyous light of the Middle Ages! And is this not precisely the reason for which I, well-versed in mediaeval mind and lore, decided to traverse and sojourn in this untimely *Now*? In this utopian *Here* of Middle Earth? I inhaled the mediaeval ambiance and slowly descended into the harrowing gorge of the legendary land, the path of which serpentine along glimmering lees, whilst the Zanskar River herself thundered dizzily below, huge, metamorphosing into other forms both known and unknown...the echoes of her roarings bouncing off the tessellated bulwarks. There under a monstrous crag I rested. To the right, ensconced within a crevice, a cascade crashed onto the glass-like path, ringing up and over it, then down and down back onto the ruffled cant. I brushed my teeth and washed.

The gorge seemed endless. And yet, in that winding intestine I felt human again. My vision filled with Roerich's Himalayan Series: a vertiginous phantasmagoria of two realities, which slowly transpired into a meld of one clear Reality! How long had I been treated like a herd-animal, my private life and very soul assaulted by ugly consumerism and sickening patriotism? To savour the essence of what human is (and humane!) man must sojourn in the land of the Sacred, of the petrified forests and mighty mountains of that real world. It is not a question of *anomie*, Durkheim's term for an individual divorced from society; not that at all! Every human being is chained to a society, to an époque, to a prejudice or a value judgement. And it would be callously incorrect to interpret these 'breaks from the common rut' as an escape from history. For the Events that I succumb to are those very ones that flow or will eventually flow into the mainstream of world history. As all brooks and riverlets stream into the roaring rivers of the world, so too our individual stories, our encounters and Events...

An hour later I had reached a flat plain and was strolling in long comfortable strides along a smooth straight path, which at times touched the banks of the Zanskar River. No prudence was required here, as I joyfully sauntered over clumps of lush green grass. Even my weighty boots could not prevent me from a skip or two: would I dance like Siva...like Zarathustra? Suddenly a voice hailed to me from the right across an immense lush pasture, peppered here and there with bramble and brush. A distant voice atop gigantic boulders at the foot of a cordillera. It appeared to be a shepherd, calling out from a *doksar*. I waved and walked briskly towards the arm-flaying child, who taking note that the foreigner had answered his beck, jumped down from a well-kneaded wall of mud and willow boughs, and met him half-way across the pasture. The shepherd, dressed in a shirt and trousers much too big for him, and whose face was caked with soot, gestured for the foreigner to enter the *doksar*, which he did without further ado.

Inside, a nun, young, wreathed in smiles, attired in her buff robe, bade me sit down near the crackling fire. She spoke excellent Hindi. The boy (perhaps her brother?) also sat down, then a petite girl poked her head in and shyly pressed against the smiling boy. The nun, meanwhile, was swirling a large ladle round and round in a big black cauldron. She took hold of a large bowl and poured yak-lassi into it. All three faces, sooty and sun-marked, glowed in joy. She handed me a bowl and two smaller ones for the children. Again she began to stir the thick liquid, punctuating her hoary gestures with the word *zho!* The boy jumped up and scrambled from the *doksar*; he reappeared seconds later with a vessel of yoghurt, solid, compact, creamy white. It was the very best that I had eaten thus far. And whilst we all enjoyed the yak-yoghurt, the nun and the foreigner did their best to communicate: the Dalai Lama would be in

Spiti soon, when...who knew...perhaps on the 17th of July...Pilgrims had already taken to the road, traversing the snowy passes and deep valleys. Rothang Pass still lay in metres of snow, and at Darcha the swelling waters and floe of the river had carried away both the bridge and the market! The only way to get to Keylong was over a glacier which, at present, connected both sides of the river some ten kilometres north of Darcha. All this was bad news. This meant that no bus would be able to connect Manali and Keylong for at least two or three months! And what would happen when the glacier-span melted. How long would I then have to remain at Phuktal? I could hardly afford a lengthy stay there, and no Westerner, however immersed in Oriental lore, could sojourn at Phuktal free of charge ! Even Western Buddhists were made to pay to get into the Buddhist shrines in Tibet, Nepal and North India : is a *real* Buddhist then Oriental ? But wasn't Alexandre Csoma of Kőrös a Bodhisattva in the eyes of those same Oriental Buddhists? Did he pay for his two year sojourn at Phuktal? I think he did, but how he did so I cannot say...

I gave the kind nun ten rupies, strode briskly across the rocky plain and took up the wide path that hugged the Zanskar River. According to the map, two broad bodies of water streamed down from the cordillera: the first I managed to ford without much toil, although the waters were glacial; the second, reached two or three hours later, however, raced along at tremendous speed. It was late afternoon and the waters had swollen considerably. I had no idea how deep the river actually was, nor whether I would be strong enough to ford her, even at the point where the crossing seemed to be the shallowest. I procured a long supple stick, took off my boots and trousers and attached them to my back-pack. Cautiously I advanced into the swirling spume, prodding the bed of the river with the stick, leaning on it when necessary, inching step by step through the freezing flow. I soon perceived that I depended entirely on that stick, it being my only salvation from the deafening gush, from the burning sensation that traversed my half-naked body. An old man with his trusty cane must experience the same sentiment! The baby on four legs, the adult on two and the old man on three...an old enigma indeed here in this wild kingdom of mountain and river. Yet, I had not spent an entire lifetime crawling up icy mountainsides like the babes of the Himalayas, nor did I ever struggle across raging rivers...now I no longer felt my feet! There was no 'real' pain, just a discomforting sensation like a dentist doing root-canal work on a tooth that had been numbed. I slid along the clammy, smooth rock bed. The vortex! The pounding whirling waters rose in height and pitch. Was Csoma Sándor a match for these Himalayan rides? He had walked 30 kilometres to go to school, and then set off for the East on foot. He who left no trace of himself except one twenty-page report to the British in North India. I experienced an uncanny nervousness and excitement; a state of seething ferment...what was the German word so difficult to translate: *Unheimlich*? No! It began with 's'...ah! I had forgotten that word...it would all come back to me later...I was sure of it. And now? Yes now...the only discernable sound was the thundering of the flow: it deafened, disorientated my concentration, triggered queer relapses into some primitive or infantile state under whose droning image I caught glimpses of something unhealthy...something far far away. And this primitive 'scene', erotic or grotesque, made me laugh...yes, the German word...something to do with laughing...and erotic? Something that desired to prevent me from 'crossing the river'? It suddenly seemed so obvious to me that this desire had been so unconscious, laying upon my soul like a tombstone upon freshly tamped earth. I clutched that stick like a drowning man a welcomed hand...or a straw? It was all I had...all I had...surely it didn't want my Death? I felt its pliant strength circulating through me,

awakening me to the crashing vortex whose sheer weight and might brought me screaming back to the Present! The Present, where all past Events vibrate, where progress reaches a climax of human suffering and ends in a heap of corpses...Aswarm with the Present, defying the drowning sensation of consolation in the memories of the past, I plunged forward, the stick no longer that vital crutch, that unanswered scream in the Night...After a slight jar in which a terrible scream flashed across my mind, I found myself wading through ankle-deep water...the stick had vanished! And the German word shot through a sexually saturated mind: *Schadenfreude!* Yes, that it was...*Schadenfreude!*



Photo 14: The Zanskar River

Why hadn't a bridge been built? Why hadn't I brought rope, wouldn't that have been easier? Why hadn't a peasant on his donkey appear miraculously at the bank of the river? But a bridge hadn't been built, nor had I brought rope, and a donkey-riding peasant hadn't miraculously appeared on the river-bank! So why all these vain rebukes? I quickly made a fire, warmed myself and dressed.

The map clearly indicated an enormous bend in the river, followed shortly by the hamlet Hanumil. I wound round a bend and true enough I soon trod upon a beautiful pastureland filled with copses of silver birch: this was Hanumil; that is, a paradisiacal crag overlooking the Zanskar River, consisting of three stone-homes and a *doksar*, some intact others completely in ruins. The pastureland had been used as a campment by organized trekkers with their caravans of horses, guides, carriers, food, tents, tables, portable toilets, chairs and so on. Their gastronomical debaucheries could be easily attested either by the labels of the packages and tins that lay strewn over the pastureland, or the heaps of human excrement that ornamented it...

The problem of keeping Zanskar clean during the heavy trekking season, during which time this solitary region was transformed into an Interstate for Westerner trekkers, posed insoluble problems. Four people would need seven to eight horses, all of which carried forty to fifty kilos of necessities. Larger groups of ten to fifteen people would require double or triple that amount, according to their organizing agents in Europe or in Manali. It goes without saying that during July, August and September, Zanskar found itself invaded by these miniature armies, who because they did not live off the fat of the land, disfigured it with their own! Contact with the peasants was discouraged; the armies bivouacking a 'safe' distance from the villages and hamlets. The 'safe' distance, however, did not prevent them from plying little children with 'bonbons' or 'Geschenk', linguistically learnt and articulated by screaming toddlers who, spoilt by Western demagoguery, transformed these simple children into bothersome beggars. The principles of guilty conscious were indeed here at work; pity replaced compassion; that is, human contact. Moral slavery and false piety had laid the foundation stone of mentor unctuousity, those pillars of colonialism, of the superior race...

A peasant approached; he had a shovel thrown over his shoulder with which, upon reaching the standing foreigner, he indicated the pastureland. A gesture that permitted me to make camp there for the night. Ten rupies sealed the bargain which, strangely enough, the peasant chose to collect in the morning. And so under the birch I pitched my tent. That night no wind whistled through the canyon, not one sound disturbed the flickering candlelight as I ruminated this verset from the *Dhammapada*:

'...And he who may conquer in battle men in thousands and thousands, conquering his one self he indeed becomes the greatest of conquerors in battles...'

A rosy Dawn tessellated the gramineous tableland whose colours alternated between soft orange, verdant greens and golden ochres. Without fatigue or strain I strode conqueringly across this fairy-tale land surrounded by towering snow-capped mountains whose skirts, lava-red, inched down and down from under sheets of pure snow, making the contrast so much the brighter. The road to Padum lay wide, flat and open! It was by way of three mammoth *chortens* that I entered the village of Pidmo: red, white and grey in that order. Goblin red, divine white, demonic grey? Perhaps. The colour scheme of the

chortens did appear recurrent, although the symbolic meaning always remained a mystery to me. The *chortens* surged out of the rocky saffron and burnt sienna of the dusty soil. I stopped to examine them from afar: yes...they reminded me of the Armenian drum rising in rhythmic measure from within deep forests, or out of the crags of black mountains. Reminded me, too, of the Sekjuk *kümbets* which spiralled up from the lunar-like landscape of Anatolia...The reminiscence thrilled me, and I found myself becoming nostalgic, a sentiment which seldom occurred and whose sentimental afterthoughts I abhorred. Shaking my head, I kept a shoulder to the left, this being the custom when passing *chortens* or circumambulating Hindu temples, a rite called *pradaksina*. Darting out from the confines of Pidmo, little children cried in raucous voices: 'bonbons'... 'Geschenk'...'bonbons'...and so on. Their accents were excellent! Stamped by the throngs, I hurried through the small settlement. A few lethargic men gazed up from a low wall that they were repairing. The complexion of each man and house resembled the colour of the earth. Pidmo had a sort of neat, finalized aspect to it: the box-like structures of roughly hewn shist, sun-baked mud bricks and clay stood proud in their concluded forms: refined, graceful, plenary, although so lonely in the expansiveness of this plateau, to the back of which rugged mountains bulged and swelled, shapely lees serving as plinths for the many fairy chimneys of variegated colours. After a ten-minute rest, I ambled out on to the dusty path in the direction of Pishu. There I arrived without mishap towards Dusk, quite fit but very hungry.



Photo 15: Pishu

The villagers greeted me in a very particular manner: ten or fifteen women, giggling and guffawing, asked me to be seated against a crumbling mud wall. Two or three ran off whilst the more roguish and uninhibited began pulling cantankerously at my very long beard! One or two even stroked it! Needless to say, the red-faced foreigner felt somewhat awkward: were they all drunk? *Chang?* I did play up to the women's mischief by pulling savagely at my whitening beard. They all laughed and clapped. At that moment the women returned with three young boys. The beard-tugging Karlemagne 'à la barbe chenué' was literally pulled up and ushered into an imposing three-storey house, where the house-owners insisted I spend the night for a mere twenty rupies. The affair was settled in a wink of an eye.

Inside the dark house a pretty young woman pulled up her *goncha* and climbed the ladder-stairway. She gestured for me to follow. We paused under a low-arched corridor and again up one or two ladders whose rattling rungs smelt of dung, then through a low dank hallway, whose interminable length was measured in the minutes I spent groping my way along the polished earthen walls. There I crept, before ascending still another ladder which shepherded me through low door-frames of newly cut wood. This amazing fortress had no electricity; the kind woman, clutching a flashlight, illumed one chamber after another on both sides of yet another endless corridor. Here and there, the tiny flickerings of candles threw dancing shadows on rough-hewn leathery faces; sullen, grim, peering out from their haloes of glowing light, exactly like those Kurdish faces in Eastern Turkey whose tough stamp revealed no easy life either for them or for others. Finally we halted. We were in the kitchen where a group of peasants sat conversing, sipping butter tea or eating *tupha*. At first no one bothered to look up from his or her smoking bowls, but little by little, when they discovered, due to the young woman's loquacity, that I was travelling alone, knew some Ladakhi, and would be leaving very early in the morning, bade me join their intimate circle to partake of their food. I, relieved at their candidness, their we-would-like-to-know-who-is-sitting-at-our-table rustic philosophy, pulled out the rest of my dried apricots shouting 'chuli! Chuli!' And so everyone had at least one dried apricot.

Rounds of butter tea were served. As twilight crept over the tiny village the young woman quite suddenly reappeared to escort her tired foreigner to his room: an exiguous cell which contained the usual *choksey*, straw-mat, candle-holder with a half-consumed candle, and a small window on whose mud-baked sill the candle-holder had been placed. She then conducted me to the toilet; that is, to a tiny room in which earth was heaped high round a hole through which one defecated or urinated, and next to which a shovel was placed in order to push the heaped earth onto the excrement which now lay on the tamped floor of a room just beneath the toilet-hole. The accumulated excrement below was destined for the alfalfa and buckwheat fields! It proved to be excellent fertilizer...There was no smell, the earthy scents of the soil absorbing the malodorous stench. No water was needed to flush away the filth because excrement offered a gratuitous gift to the farmers for their daily tilling. I relieved myself, and with the young woman who had been waiting for me outside the toilet, returned to the cell. She smiled and vanished into the darkness of the narrow hallway. A sudden erotic vision filled my sleepy mind, but evaporated as quickly as it had formed. I felt terribly lonely...until I bolted the creaky door and peered out of the window. The sky blazed orange. The mountains seemed to be afire. Afire, like Blake's rime:

'Great things are done when men and mountains meet

This is not done by jostling in the street.'

An eerie silence prevailed: the whole mountainous stronghold slumbered deeply beneath the descending Darkness. '...the mediaeval Gloaming...' Why did that line always haunt my evening musings? On the *choksey* the *Dhammpada* lay wide open:

*'...For one who is habituated to paying homage, who shows honour to the
elders, the four good qualities develop: life, appearance, happiness, power...'*

And I came back to my Self...

Another short day. Without trouble or strife, I arrived to Karsha at noon where the massive monastery dominated the town. For indeed Karsha could be classed a town: it had electricity, running water, and many grocery shops which, to some extent, were appropriately stocked. Padum lay below. An hour away on foot.

Karsha consisted of about a hundred homes, some strikingly modern, recently fitted out with huge windows like those found in the guest houses of Leh; others resembling those of any Zanskari hamlet or village. Many, however, lay abandoned, crumbling in ruins. That morning no Prussian-blue sky greeted my awakening: instead a murky mantle of grey hovered heavily above, now descending now ascending, it seemed, in rhythm to my untroubled stride as I hiked up to Karsha Gompa, where I was to deliver a message to the Abbot that some European had given me in Leh. Unfortunately the Abbot had left the day before his arrival to Sani Gompa (near Tetsa), with twenty or thirty lamas and monks to attend a general meeting. Notwithstanding, I handed the note over to the first monk I met, relieved to have accomplished this mission, took a cursory glance at the monastery frescoes in the narthex where, whilst doing so, was waylaid by a lama who presumedly was the acting Abbot. His English was very good, and he informed me that his monastery knew no peer in Zanskar, rivaling those of Tibet! It lodged over 140 monks and lamas of the Gelukpa Sect; that is, the Reformed Sect. The lama led me round the courtyard, pointed to the confluence of the Lungnak and Stot Rivers. I agreed that the view offered the monks basic food for their spiritual ascent. I reached into my pocket, procured twenty rupies and donated them to the Karsha Gompa.



Photo 16: The Land of Shiva

That night I slept in a 'modern' house of a wealthy village family. The food was delicious. I frowned, however, when the family informed me that no food was to be found in Padum due to the heavy snowfall that had left the Kargil road unpractical. The military hadn't even begun clearing it! Besides a few biscuits and soddily-wrapped cakes, hard and mouldy, nothing fresh nor substantial could be bought.

Padum, the 'capital' of Zaskar, looked like a ghost town! It had that run-down appearance so frequently found in Indian towns such as Ooty, Darjeeling, Kargil, even Leh; the first two being former British stations, the second, tourist havens that have decidedly lost any charm that they might have held. It had apparently been raided and looted by Hindus coming from the plains of North India in the early 1800's! Why would any army raid and loot this place: what would have they looted?

In Padum men 'hung-out' in front of locked doors or rusting iron gratings; darkly dressed, sullen...that dangerous look of boredom carved into their mountain-worn faces. There they waited for the opening of the road...for seasonal excitement.

I straggled in and out of the deserted steets and lanes. Nothing lay stocked in the shop windows and the restaurants served only Chinese noodles. Huge pot-holes filled with dirty stagnant water scarred the asphalt roads. In Leh I met a boy from Switzerland who had spent six months in this hole. Somewhat surprised, I inquired what he had done for six months in Padum. The husky lad, a shepherd, shrugged

his shoulders and said: « nothing! I didn't do nothing!» Indeed that word 'nothing' rang out true and clear: how could it have been otherwise? And why not? To do absolutely nothing but live! An unproductive nothing...a social zero...a slave to one's nothing and not to the social something...A No Thing...that is, a human who simply *is*. Not he who seeks the lesser evil but who seeks rather the greater good...

The whole town smelt of tedious thumb-twiddling or as the Tamils exhort, 'leg rocking'. Boredom was contagious here. Dangerous boredom because Padum relied solely on periodical injections of Westerndom; it had developed nothing of its own resources...Did it have any? Apparently because it had been raided and pillaged on sundry occasions! Ugly and forsaken, this wraithy weariness bespoke the impasse of many Oriental towns whose 'quick jump into Modernity' enrich few whilst impoverishing many. That modern sordidness so reminiscent of Western squalor, whose polluted cities and towns were cynically deemed the cost of progress, a cost dearly paid which spreads without respite, covering the entire planet with its historical inevitability !

Padum to Phuktal

I exerted no effort at all on the jeep-road. Effort is the Present, and this Present is *felt* by Effort, be it physical, intellectual, physiological or psychological. One senses the danger of fatigue, of possible injury or death, and one dwells in it, assimilates it, communicates it to his Other. This Effort is REAL: supreme and audacious, it snaps the nasty habits of life by extracting one's Self from one's ego, from one's image in the mirror. Discomforting at first, even dreadful, it is only this Experience that teaches us that Otherness cannot be attained unless by means of conflict within the real world, whose struggle will tear asunder those chains of nasty habits...those, daily, wearisome ruts of Man. It was once said by...by whom:

'...have more fear of habits than of enemies...'

I couldn't recall...Even thinking, when habituated, turned stale and rotten; for without Effort one's thoughts drift into the nostalgic Past or the phantasmatic Future. So I dreamt diurnal dreams...like Lawrence, on the golden sands of Arabia soaked in Turkish, Arab and British blood. And Lawrence: did he not reach Damascus? Yes, but at the same token he failed to fulfil his most cherished dream : Arab independence...

Three hours later the monastery of Bardan could be seen from afar, overlooking the mighty Lungnak, perched aloft like an eyrie upon a protruding piton. A commanding peninsula, indeed, whose sheer drops on her three sides nicely illustrated the mediaeval Buddhist military stronghold.



Photo 17: Monastery of Bardan

During the first expansions of Buddhism outside of Northern India into Central Asia via the Himalayas, the monastery, in order to survive pillage and destruction, was annexed to fortresses built on high commanding hilltops. Gradually the fortress and monastery became one, a sort of religious military castle complex whose diverse functional chambers and temples fused into one massive administrative machine. Like mediaeval Europe, the religious fervour of the Himalayan Buddhists could not have advanced without the alliance of a powerful military disposition, whose shared expansionist impulses forged and moulded a mediaeval architecture. The Potala in Lhasa appeared to be the best example of this alliance. This architectural marriage, however, was not confined to Buddhism. In Eastern Turkey near Hakkari, where I was exploring the remaining Syriac churches, I had come across many rustic chapels whose exterior walls resembled the ramparts of some mediaeval stronghold. Even the last Nestorian patriarchy of Berdjelan Kotchannès, Mar Schimoun, a 14th century quadrangle monastery built atop a strategic vegetated knoll, could only be recognized after close inspection. Its imposing walls of massive stone, artlessly chiselled, towering, thick and compact, reflected a long history of isolated defense against Islamic foes or marauding nomads.

The present structure under which I now stood dated from the 16th century. It was reached by a winding footpath and a well-cemented stairway. As I mounted, a little boy clad in blazing yellow robes greeted me in Hindi, then signalled to the wide stairway. Smiling, he showed me the different chambers and prayer halls. The light was dim but sufficient: we ducked and surfaced in and out of dark cells from whose ceilings hung *thankas*, some ancient others relatively new; on whose walls frescoes, terribly

effaced and peeling, had been marvelously painted, revealing the historical Buddha as well as Vajrasattva, Padma Sambhava, Naropa and Tilopa, these last two of exceptional beauty since they represented the guiding light of the Karma Kagyupa of Buddhism, they being mystics long before the establishment of the Karmapas of the 12th century.

We climbed higher and higher until reaching a landing where a monk opened the Gonkhang door, I was ushered into the Chamber of Masks. On one side Mahakala, threatening yet benevolent, on the other Paldan Llamo, and above, dangling in stentorian silence the extraordinary dance masks of Cham : the festival during which Mahakala is sacrificed to the flames of Life after having performed the essential, the vital, the life-granting dances of Cham for ten days. Indeed, Nietzsche had reason to declaim that:

'...I should believe only in a God who understood how to dance...'

And how they did indeed dance at Rumtek monastery in Sikkim...and would at Phuktal...

Two particular masks drew my attention: grim-faced, unhappy, the thick red lips opening to a snarl exposed sharp teeth. Those poor fellows suffered the crushing torments of Mahakala's webbed feet upon their backs. Could their sorrowful misery be otherwise? Is it not the mask that smashes to many pieces? Or the broken spirit (and back) of the servile dwarf?



Photo 18: Monastery of Bardan: Masks of the Cham Dance

I left the solitary monk and carried on along the gorge path past Mune where I stopped to finish my Maggi and onions. I soon arrived at Reru. Unlike other hamlets and villages, Reru welcomed the foreigner with no warm acclaim...no horns or trumpets...no beard-caressing! In fact, no one wished to put me up for the night! They pointed to the empty lands of Zanskar which, I presumed, meant that I could get along quite well out there without their help! This advice I would have taken if it weren't for the skies, grey and pregnant; the wind, gusty and biting; the terrain, rocky and muddy. Finally, however, a young toothless lad waved to me from behind a battered stone wall. I grabbed my bag and hurried towards this toothless hope. After a brief, customary salutation, I was led into a maze of high adobe homes, *in pisé*, up two ladders sculptured out of thick knotty trees, down another tree-ladder and on to a square terrace of bumpy clay around which four cells had been constructed. They were ghastly holes! Would it not have been better to shiver in the tent out on the raw and cheerless tableland? Thirty rupies for that? I insisted a piece of plastic be brought to cover the unrecognizable debris that cluttered the beaten earth; he dared not shine any light on it...the stench entailed no tactile verification. The alert lad quickly returned, not only with the plastic, but also with a broom, a *choksey* and two candles. He bade me remain on the terrace whilst he busied himself cleaning up the place, after which he installed the various items. Finally he lit a handful of Juniper leaves, and fanned the scintillating fumes round and round and round the cell, the wonderful odour cleansing the wretched *ergastulum* (where had I learnt that word?). Fumigation or sanctification? Neither my Ladakhi nor my Hindi was fluent enough to inquire, so I stepped into the lingering scent, coniferous, pinging, causing my mind to race back to the Russian vespers I had attended for so long in Paris at rue Daru, that thurible-spreading nutrition for the hungry-souled...that veritable nectar of God...

I sat at the *choksey* (it suddenly reminded me, for some unknown reason, of the Muslim *rahle* on which masters and pupils study the Koran), and murmured this verse from the *Dhammapada*:

'...Indeed life is only what has death as its terminus...'

and a few versets down:

'...This is a castle made of bones, with flesh and blood for pastering, where old-age and death and conceit and hyprocrisy are stored...'

The incense dissipated, the melting wax hissed and sizzled, the orange flame leapt higher and higher. Where was that laughing skull? Was that laugh a means of not incurring the wrath of the gods?

I set out for Purni at five in the morning, the skies gloomy, dismal, dreary. The temperature had dropped considerably, which to a certain extent made walking much easier. Thirty-four kilometres lay ahead: impossible to be done in one journey. Yet, on the map I remarked that Ichar, Dorzon and Cha were situated on the opposite bank of the river, this last hamlet accessible by a rope-bridge. On this side of the river a tiny dot indicated Serle, but no one had spoken of that place.

The day wore on trudging up and down a rugged mountain path, following the river either along its eroded banks or high above her, striding in tune to the playful cadence of ridges and hollows; tune, at times, disrupted by fallen away glaciere debris, or by a narrow dangerous path. A tedious lone voice of

which no rest, however long, seemed to vary the monotony: shrill, treble, anguishing...And yet, it was this voice that accompanied me to Phuktal and would remain with me there...Ten hours of dreary ambulation through the echoless gorge, the sky settling in lower and lower, the voice piercing even the thick silence: the Otherness, His silent voice...

Exhausted and fed up, I arrived at a small abode to which a shop had recently been annexed. On the far side of the other bank I discerned what seemed to be Cha. This abode, however, was not indicated on the map. A tall man of clear complexion stepped out to greet me in broken Hindi. At that moment, too, three or four children, sporting hay and faggots on their bare heads, emerged from a watershed and sped in tiny steps towards the shop. Noting the extreme fatigue of the voyager, the kind man invited him to have tea and *tsampa* in his home. Minutes later he, with the whole family, was seated round the stove of the kitchen drinking and eating. Two of the three daughters spoke very good English. They explained that their father had been in the army, and now enjoyed his retirement here in the mountains. They lived alone, every now and then hiking to Padum for food-stuffs. Their vast gardens supplied them the necessary basic foods, their animals, milk, cheese and yoghurt. They called their dwelling Zambad, or something like that. The father stood and pointed to his garden, gesticulating that the way to Puri was long, and that for ten rupies I could pitch my tent in his garden. The weary voyager agreed without hesitation.

The whole family accompanied me to the best spot in the garden for pitching a tent: a smooth, sandy terrain where no roots or bramble would bulge through the thin, plastic bottom. They left me to my pitching. A few minutes later the youngest of the girls came darting back with two candles clutched in her hand. I forced five rupies in her tiny fist. She smiled such a wide, friendly smile, then raced back towards her father's humble home.

Now alone, I scanned the verdant gardens of vespere glint; they were well cared for with a fine network of runnels fed by an hydraulic pump built over the well higher up on a grassy knoll. As the sun set, shadows crept over the whispering grass and bramble ; my tent was soon engulfed in silent Night. The loneliness of this dwelling seemed not to disturb these people whose autonomy merited great respect. Was it a model to be considered? Their courage comforted my own loneliness, somewhat like those hallucinating hovels that I had discovered whilst traversing the Sahara Desert some twenty-two years ago; that unlonely loneliness! The Art of being alone and together (for was it not an Art?). With whom? The Other who reflects all others...the Art of Ambulation, of Possibilities of living Differences as an Art and not as a Neurosis...of being others so as to reveal one's Self...

And so I settled in for this last night on the mountain road before the arrival at Phuktal Gumpa. For now, though, by candlelight, I mused over these fragmented verses of the *Dhammapada*:

'...he illuminates this world, like the moon released from the cloud...'

and

'...to such a virtuous person with great intelligence, as the moon the path of the stars...'

Part II

Retreat at Phuktal Gompa

*'All my progress has been an attempting
and a questioning...'*

F. Nietzsche

Purni: A huge two-storey house, in front of which had been rapidly erected a stables for trekkers' horses, dominated this hamlet of five or six mud-baked homes, one of which sold biscuits, jam and peanut butter, and another, mutton! Behind the imposing wooden mansion four *chortens* kept vigil over the river that snaked sluggishly five kilometres towards Phuktal Monastery. The woman of the house informed me that the *gompa* could be easily reached within an hour, and invited me to have a bite to eat before undertaking the last leg of the journey. She had a rather cute face. Her Hindi was excellent and English solid. Purni being the nerve centre between Padum-Phuktal-Darcha and Lamayuru-Manali, the villagers, especially this woman, possessed all the subtle characteristics of 'dealing with tourists': a sound linguistic arsenal, compromising affability, charm and even a sprinkling of seduction. In fact, I felt a strange thrill when being ushered into the airy house, up the stairway and into a corridor which led to a wide verandah overlooking the rushing river. She tugged me by the sleeve and quickly pointed to some deer-like animals whose robes shone the same buff colours of the river banks. She called these leaping fairies *barasin*. Smaller than European deer or Saharian gazel, they scampered along the abrupt precipices, halting here and there to munch on some bramble and yellow flowering shrubs that peppered the bevels. The cute woman sailed away gracefully into the nearby kitchen, out of which the smells of steaming mutton and cabbage floated. I felt a ting of sexual excitement: this sensation seemed

so queer, and yet its suddenness came as no surprise. The smell of mutton was intoxicating: I hadn't eaten mutton in over a month. And sexual union?.. The boiling mutton stew made me think of Csoma: was he not a vegetarian? Yes! Did he suffer sexual excitement in those two years of solitude? Perhaps!

I removed my mud-clad boots. How my feet ached. In a few hours I would be able to move about in sandals or simply in the thick, woollen socks that I had purchased from a village woman at Keylong. They were indeed a pure work of Art: both useful and pleasant to the eye, and whose colour scheme and motifs symbolized the attachment of Man to both his Creator and Culture. A series of geometric motifs encased within bands of iridescent colours granted the keen-eyed many hours of quiet, invigorating meditation. Meditation which focused on the artisan as an artist! This inseparable tandem underlined Traditional Eastern Art; it reminisced the lost art of mediaeval Europe, modern Europe experiencing artless industrialisation, tasteless, bland, banal produce, useful indeed if not worn out, expended or depleted after several months. On the contrary, my purchased socks were no mere commodity goods, nor folklore trinkets for the ill-advised tourist, nor meant for disposal in abject showcases at municipal museums or State galleries to charm visitors or comfort the Western obsession of taxonimy! To preserve items before Progress annihilates them! To be both spectator and actor! Balzac's, Rembrandt's and Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire*: soil-less Art...soul-less Art...That was the triumph of the non-experience, of the museum experience, of the technocratic-consumer experience! One that has engulfed many a fine soul into the wallows of conventionalism and mediocrity...

Indeed, technocratic aloofness has replaced the 'touch', or the 'to be touched', for to Experience is to be touched! The technocrat is never 'touched' because he practices the 'objective distance' of 'scientific History'; he exercises the domination over the Object because he abhors the ontological Immersion of the Subject into that Object: to touch is to be touched...

I touched the gross wool of my socks, pressed the spongy silvery motifs in relief. I suddenly caught a side glimpse of the petite woman's *goncha*; that too was Art. People created artful objects and not artless ones; that is, they created; they did not produce! They created another kind of the same without reproducing the same. Artful objects made for the daily chores of Life!.. Here people lived free...toiled free...died free. The economic slaves of the technical world died in agony of losing a life un-lived, produced for them and not created by them. For unlike the Art that portrayed the artist's life, be it gloriful or miserable, their artless lives would not be acclaimed or beholden as such, and their place upon the productive line would be taken by yet another pair of hands for the future! A place replaced like any worn-out piece of machinery or industrialized item...

Traditional Eastern Art is not to be admired, it is to be penetrated...For it is an *epiphany* not a *speculation*. It is ontic in essence, and thus functional in existence...

A sudden racket broke the chain of my thoughts. Other guests seemed to be stomping into the house, plodding along with heavy boots on the wooden planks of the second floor. I moved into the corridor and distinctly heard the patent accents of French suburban drawl. It was a couple. They were rather young, and were having a row about their return from Phuktal. They stood awkwardly in the corridor, theatrically fluttering the cloth of the unmistakable tri-colour: *cynicism-scorn-arrogance*...

They swaggered into the kitchen, boots flung over the shoulders. The woman of the house, all in a flutter, sped from one guest to another in velvet steps until everyone had been seated around the *choksey*. She began to ladle out the thick broth that had so intoxicated me, albeit the sudden arrival of the two 'banlieusards' plunged me into a state of deeper inebriation: I hadn't heard French spoken since leaving Pondicherry last year.

When the 'banlieusards' learned that I spoke French 'il a eu droit' to all their Indian adventures: a gruesome concoction of Daniélou, that despiser of Tagor's 'université fantaisiste', Bruckner, 'le galopin', Guide du Routard, Lonely Planet (French edition), and worst of all, B. H. Lévy, plus an unsavoury sprinkling of experiential episodes which rang suspiciously of phrases, words and descriptions from those aforesaid 'autorités!' Their prejudices and vanity knew no bounds. Luckily the woman of the house and several other trekkers, whose language I couldn't recognize, understood nothing of their undisguised hostility, save perhaps the ugly anger chiselled on their faces. Phuktal 'ne valait pas un clou' in comparison with the other monasteries 'qu'ils avaient faits!' The boy, a typical product of 'le Français paumé', seemed to articulate out of the side of his mouth, smoking, eating, drinking and talking nervously all at once: «sept jours à pied pour voir ce truc-là...» he nasalized. «...je te dis, eh, une belle merde.» His 'nana', a sunken-eyed, bleached-faced computer operator, ostensibly an unwilling volunteer on this adventure, shoved food into her mouth like a famished animal, bobbing her head up and down like an apple in a barrel full of water. «Une galère!» she belched out, grabbing a cigarette from the torn shirt pocket of her 'mec'. «Soixante dollars par jour, tu comprends ça?» the 'mec' rejoined, throwing down a fork that he had brought with him so as not to catch any 'local' diseases. «Et la bouffe, je te le dis, c'est dégueulasse! Enfin, et toi?» Their eyes up until that point, staring blankly into some infinite point in space or cast angrily downwards into their cups of tea, turned to me rather abruptly. What rôle should I adopt? I sized them up for a few seconds then casually remarked that I had been living in Pondicherry and was presently 'en route' to Phuktal. I refrained from divulging any further information about my intended sojourn at the Gompa. On mention of Pondicherry, the boy's ears pricked up. The couple, who played with the idea of spending some time at the former French 'comptoir' for the winter months, plied me with questions whose unenthusiastic responses can be summed up as follows:

«...It seems to me that with the rising of liberal conservatism in France, and concomitantly to tax evaders, there has been an influx of entrepreneurial Frenchmen into Pondicherry, a sort of wave of nostalgic neo-colonialists eager to relive those 'hay days' of commercial exploitation and Aryan superiority, which translates a phylogenetic desire to impose Western scientific know-how on slow-witted Oriental natives, to relax under spreading palm trees, to indulge in the nababic life of the happy few! The uncanniness of the whole place is the way in which this motley crew of so many François Marin and Dupleix of yore intermingles quite nicely with the adventurous renegades of the Education Nationale, and the caste-minded pandits of the French Oriental School. Recently, published books by imminent authors and lackeys, who pay lip service to those authorities, have commemorated the spirit of Dupleix, that most uncoth and uncultured of all the French 'flibustiers'. The French officials of Pondicherry even suggested to fête his honourable name to whose invitation the 'petits sergents' Franco-Pondicherians were only too eager to flock. So there you have it: between the French 'planqué' and 'patriote', the Franco-Pondicherian 'lèche-botte' and the Tamil 'faux-cul', toadying from one to the other, playing each other off in the hope of gaining glory or a buck, the observer is never at a loss to note the

essence of 'la France profonde'. In spite of the lethargy and heat, the filth and the smell, the insufferable electricity cuts and tormenting mosquitoes, the 'boniches' who spoil the boeuf bourguignon and the 'boys' that let ladders fall, the motto of the French at Pondicherry has remained unflagging: «...sous les cocotiers, c'est le pied!»

When I had finished my succinct portrait of Pondicherry, the Frenchman shrugged his bony shoulders. He rose from his place and declaimed in a stentorian drawl: « où sont les chiottes? » And that was that...

On their way out they advised me to 'fais gaffe' at Phuktal «sinon tu vas te faire niquer par les moineaux, hein! Pire qu'à Mont Athos...» They departed for greater adventures, the Guide du Routard tucked firmly under their arms, 'les clopes aux becs'.

Outside I listened to the silent wind as it made the leaves of the silver birch shimmer. For a few moments my imagination ran riot: Pondicherry, where I had been working for five years, had, quite paradoxically been the starting point of this voyage to Phuktal! A chance meeting with a lad from Leh, a glance at his excellent satellite map, his finger running over the paths and passes from Lamayuru to Phuktal, his advice and encouragement; was this unforeseen Event not another contingency on the woof that weaves our narrative identity? Or had some 'hidden hand' guided me to Pondicherry in order to encounter the Ladakhi lad, to scrutinize his map, to follow his nimble finger, rejoice at the advice and encouragement? Had I been predestined to this voyage in the same way as the one over the Sahara to Tombuktu in 1972-73, and the one that would take me over the Mekong River to Northern Laos from Southern China? Or was a narrative identity a more complex process of will-power and hope? The meld of contingency and determinism struck me as the meaning behind the expression Royal Road; that Road that joins the Past to the Future via the Present...

My narrative identity may be a stretch of that Royal Road, and by shaping it perhaps I shall be able to understand it! Have I understood why my steps are now taking me to Phuktal? Have I fully comprehended this Himalayan halt? Could it be a nostalgic plunge into the golden past that I am sluggishly accomplishing in the Present because totally unconcerned with the Future?

A long, long voyage on the broken line of Life: And does this voyage imply a duty to posterity, an absolute enertia towards that posterity, or a prophetic vision of the Future? Am I the mere tourist or rather the earnest pilgrim? Are the lieu of worship in which I have prayed in Eurasia cold temples of stone, or rather the warmth of the hearts of Men? These thoughts tugged at me as I made my way to the monastery.

The walk, in effet, required no great exertion, although I did have to be on the alert against falling rocks caused by the gambolling *barasins*, who leapt back and forth along the ridges far above. Had anyone ever been killed by the falling rocks of a *barasin*?

At the newly built bridge, I caught sight of Yugar, a hamlet which lay opposite the monastery. I struggled up a path which wound round the gorge, and ten minutes later Phuktal Gompa, ensconced within the tuft of fairy chimneys, honey-combed spires, crags, bluffs, flat-nosed pilons, bulging white

and red against the background of sandy dazzling ash and cinerous tones of hemp, sprawled out ! From the old photos that I had seen nothing appeared to have changed: the immutable architecture betoken no poverty; here it bespoke rather of the nobility of the spirit...

From the jagged palisade a solitary tree emerged in full strength of its age, protecting the huge open maw of the 'Meditating Grotto', just like the cobra's hood protects the Buddha from the blazing sun, parasols the Jaina saints...I approached the layered edifice along a path traced by seventeen *chortens* : those gleaming translucent drops of the Buddha ; I had never seen so many chortens that escort the weary wayfarer to his monastery retreat...



Photo 19: The Chortens at Phuktal

Phuktal Gompa was no 'petit truc'! It represented an enormous effort of workmanship and artistry to wedge, inlay, insert and inset *gonghangs*, prayer halls, cells, stairways and ladders, corridors, lama quarters and *chotkhongs* onto and into the face of a mountain cliff. Phuktal, a tremendous fortress, required no *sima* (outer ramparts): the tapered-tuft spires and sheer drops would have kept any army at bay, albeit it was never attacked...

Phuktal or Phugtāl, however one spells it, was founded by Gangsem Sherap Sampo in the 12th century. It is at Phuktal, in the Meditation Grotto, that the spirit of the first Rimpoche continues to bear witness to the Events, both theophanic and historic, of Buddhism as practised in Zanskar. Continues to energize those spirits who toil and wane under the rugged solitude of their burdens, to endow them with the action and function of their life-purpose...

I entered the monastery by way of a narrow tunnel of laid granite stone upon which a monk's cell had been constructed. I noted that the tiny window of the cell had been barred. I carried on upwards along a clay path, then turned to the right where the passage widened. I had not seen one soul. The place seemed deserted! Then a slender young monk, robed in a carmine mantle hanging heavily over a blazing orange habit came down to greet me in broken Hindi, then in self-taught English. The boy seemed distraught at my being there, and probably at my rather rough appearance, for indeed who would arrive at Phuktal Gompa unaccompanied and alone? Wreathed in smiles, however, he took my arm and we speedily made our way up the slanting passage, deeper into the clay labyrinth, where strolling monks and lamas could be heard muttering their *mantras*. He introduced me to an aging monk who took my other arm, dismissed the young monk then hurried me to my cell, speaking both in Hindi and English as we carried on; but he seemed to speak more to himself than to me!

He pushed open the heavy, lumpen door; the little cell of stone was bursting with Juniper-leaf incense. The scent emanated a certain warmth which contrasted with the chilly dampness of the corridor. The whole cell in fact gave the impression of cosiness, due, I guess to the small square carpets that formed a quaint corner near the window, below which had been placed a straw mat and a *choksey*. At the sight of the thick, tweeded mat an image flashed through my mind of a text that Ngawang Tsering, an 18th century monk from Phuktal, had written about the mats that the monks sit upon whilst in meditation: they bore the consciousness or the awareness of the disadvantages of *samsara*, which are compared to the dying flame of a candle or a swirling whirlpool! This image suddenly vanished to be replaced by the sandy lees of the gorge, and in the far distance, a snow-clad mountain top as I peered out of the tiny window. I turned to the aging monk who had been observing me stoically. He stood upright in the centre of the cell where no carpet blanketed the tamped earthen floor because of the stove around which bundles of faggots had been neatly stacked, and along side of which a few tea pots, cups, bottles of sugar, tea and a poker lay strewn. The monk, who I learned later was the librarian of the gompa, asked me to keep the door locked whenever I was out or when I retired for the night. Joining his hands he left without another word. Strange really, due to the waning dimness of the evening light, the librarian's face was hardly visible, and it occurred to me that only his softly spoken words delineated his physical features...

I unpacked. Luckily I had my Kulu shawl of soft grey wool. It would serve as a blanket. I stroked the velvety material: it was a work of Art. Six bands of colourful geometric motifs ornamented the fringed edging, creating thus an empty centre full of pure ashen wool. The geometric patterns: arrow-heads, right angles encased in bigger right angles, lozenges, and a series of broken lines which rose and fell within the span of the bands, reminded me of the Turkish kilim-motifs of Anatolian stitch, and those North American Hopi Indian motifs weaved into their robust carpets. I scanned the cell: the upper half of the earthen walls was painted white (not roughcast) and the lower half grey, a colour scheme systematically used in the Ashram buildings at Pondicherry.

Night mantled the gorge with a bluish darkness, the colours of which recollected the Himalayan Series of Nicholas Roerich's paintings. I had to sit or crouch down in order to peer out of the tiny window, so low had it been encased. I had been told that some forty monks were actually residing at the monastery, and that the library contained rare books in Tibetan, Pali and Sanskrit, but also in some

Western languages, notably English. I assumed that Alexander Csoma's English-Tibetan dictionary, the first of its kind, was amongst those rare books.

I lay back on the mat; gradually the images of Ngawang Tsering rose before me: the Phuktal monks were fed upon mountain solitude, their robes, the misty clouds, their hats, caves...The waters of the Meditation Grotto were always of the same level, even during the monsoons when, thundering they spurted from the gigantic maw, cascading down into the deep gorge where the thunder joined the Lungauh River. I would drink these wondrous waters, cool and apparently curative, boil them upon my stove for tea. I filled my stove with faggots and dried dung...

The morning mist upon the mystical mountains: the sky, pale and blue, after a night of light rain. The Gelupka, a lamanist cult of the yellow bonnet was founded by Tsongkapa during the 16th century in defiance to the other lamanist sects at the time. Tsongkapa sought to re-abide by the ancient doctrine of the Buddha as preached in Northern India. This reformed denomination was quite powerful in Ladakh and in Zanskar. Why I awoke with this piece of information learned on the way to the gompa caused some confusion in my mind ; in fact, I felt light-headed, almost nauseous. I splashed some water on my face from an earthen wash-basin, then wandered up to the prayer room: dark, calm and droning, the monks sat on cushioned benches, their legs crossed in *vajra*, their hands in the *mudra* of meditation, their shoulders flung back like the wings of a vulture, their throats bent like hooks, their backbones straight like arrows, their eyes fixed into space, four fingers from the point of their noses, their teeth and lips in natural respite, their tongues glued to their palates. They all appeared quite comfortable...

No one stirred as I crept in and took my place in a corner to the left where a cushioned bench lay unoccupied. The low murmuring of the *mantras* is a continuous meditative woom, punctuated by the beating of dragon-painted drums (*rnga*), the jingling of triangles, the clashing of cymbals (*aghati*) and the braying of ox-horns (*glang-ru*) and conch shells (*chas-dung*). At the foot of the Buddha sat the High Priests in throne-like chairs, coiffed in yellow bonnets, reading the *pustuk*, the Sacred Book, whose pages are turned from the bottom up, exactly the way in which the *thankas* are rolled...and unrolled...

The prayer room, one of the three of the monastery, steeped in smoky shadows (there was no electricity, only rows of candles near and round the Maitreya Buddha), suffused with camphor and copal, was ice-cold. The younger monks slapped their 'vulture' sides and shoulders as they chanted, beating their carmine mantles as if ready to take to the wing! As to me, I had wrapped my Kulu shawl snugly round my shoulders and pulled my Keylong socks right up to my bony knee caps. I observed that all the monks were barefoot: Did they not here mantle themselves with the cloth of mindfulness? Did they not here chant to prompt the lamas to rule virtuously, or so all Buddhists, high or low, rich or poor, could receive the blessings of the Buddha? Liturgical rites and prayers energize the spirit...

Seven to eight hours a day of praying. I was, of course, free to leave the prayer hall; there was no liturgical constraint, no moral-binding pressure from the pulpits, no priestly finger weighing the consequences of Heaven and Hell, no Jesuitical harbinger hammering away the thickness of Hell's walls, those so identical to the Jesuit schools' themselves ! In this sense, I was free to remain! Man is free by nature, and thus responsible for each and every act he commits; yet, he pays a dear price for this

freedom: social obligation, duty to posterity, democratic participation...habits. Free to leave or to remain; to say yes or no; to bend the back or straighten it like an arrow! To be enslaved in one's freedom, is that not an existentialist phantasy? Better to be free of opinion, of mob thought, of warriors so spirited in combatting Evil that they overlook what is good in Man. Had I come to be free, or freer? Yes, to snap yet another nasty habit; that of considering one's Self free! And what if this monastery itself should become another nasty habit? But 'brief habits' are beneficial; had Nietzsche not abided by that Philosophy of Life?

From time to time I stood and went outside to stretch my aching legs. The prayer hall was just to the right of the 'Meditation Grotto', inside which, according to legend, had been the actual hall of the 11th century. Deep in the big fish's mouth (for it did appear to be Jonas' big fish: like the fresco at Sumela!) some monks hurried to and fro from a well, lugging huge pails of water for the monastery kitchen. The cave, an enormous natural cavity in the face of the mountain sheltered a few cells *in pisé* to the left. To the immediate right, the outer wall of the prayer hall, founded by Sherab Zangpo in the 15th century, and in which the prayers were still in session, transpired a gluey humidity that caused all the roughcast to dribble down to the cave floor. It was on that sticky wall that a shiny plaque commemorated Csomo Sándor of Kőrös' two year sojourn at Phuktal between 1825 and 1827. He unfortunately left no document to attest to this remarkable experience; to this truly ontological immersion with the Other. The plaque consecrated this grand gesture of reciprocity, this ultimate experience of 'togetherness'...

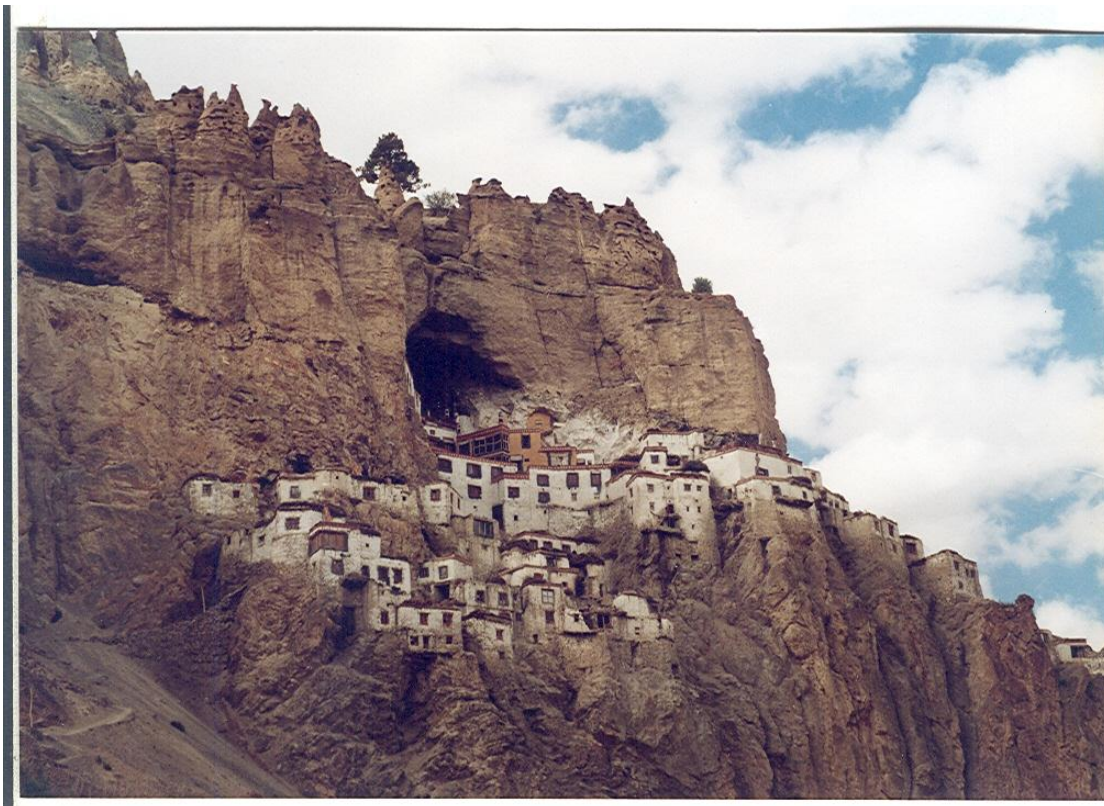


Photo 20: Phuktal: Meditation Grotto

This Hungarian who set out on foot to explore his Magyar origins stumbled across the greatest discovery of all: Life as a constant becoming...becoming what one is...becoming what one *must* become! And the intrepid explorers of today? Less doughty in deed, they prefer to 'inform' from afar, from behind computers and seek their origins by way of Internet and virtual libraries. This touch of the keyboard expresses the Touch of death, of Knowledge that does not touch but condemns the keyboard seeker to a nervous, frustrated vanity. Knowledge, in the hands of technocrats and 'pequenocrates', ensconced in morbid transparent security, round-table clichés, in their claustrophobic unsoundness to the vicissitudes of history; every meeting and colloque a scatological discharge of frustration ; a ritual which postpones the fear of Death; namely, of leaving no tangible Trace in Life. These docile routines the Hungarian voyager had not known: so much the better for him. Did not Jules Mohl say of the bodhisattva: 'un homme d'une singulière austérité de mœurs, d'une volonté de fer, d'un désintéressement complet...'? Who could have put it better?..

I returned to the prayers, my legs thoroughly relieved. At that moment young monks dashed about with big pots of steaming salt butter-tea and plastic bags of *tasmpa*. Our hungry pilgrim extended the wooden bowl with which he always travelled, and greedily drank. To pray within the aura of ceremony is no static formality: food and drink are continually fetched and distributed, the monks in the rear laugh and giggle, some nod off and are awakened quite brusquely either by a booming drum, a blaring ox-horn, or by a slap on the back of their head by a reprimanding lama, others dash out to beckon to nature's call. Elderly monks hobble up and down the alleys of the aligned benches, swinging heavy thuribles, pouring drops of holy water into the palms of the monks' outstretched hands, sounding the gongs which hang from ropes tied to puissant ceiling beams and parallel joists.

Every day, when the ceremony had finished, many of the monks gathered round me to ask questions; my Ladakhi was hardly adequate to understand, much less to answer those cheery-toned inquiries. I did, however, make an effort, whose grammatical and semantic inaccuracy doubled the delight of their Himalayan countenances: rough, rugged, coarse, as if carved out of the mountain granite like the monastery countenance carved out of this pulsating cliff...

A cenobitic existence is one in which every individual shares the same countenance: mountain solitude! But not the same Path towards Eternity. This chiasmus is what runs deep in Man, for it exposes him to an aporie: being his Being, he has thus the choice of being conscious of Being, filling it with insight and equanimity. Yet how many of us do? For this very reason the Buddhists, whilst celebrating Cham, wear the masks of their divinities: the mask that represents the Other, and consequently what we are...it is a direct means of communication with the Other; for being with the Other is Being *tout court*....

Silently I took my place inside the prayer room. Due to the insufficient light my eyes improperly examined the mural frescoes which, esthetically speaking, revealed an artless delicacy. However, as they grew accustomed to the thick darkness, I began to realize that the painted *thankas* were not at all hanging from the clammy walls but actually incrustated in them! Not in some niche, but simply 'set' there, the silk support and all, like a precious inlaid stone, or a 'pasting-work' of Picasso or Matisse. I got up and closely examined the three or four 'inlaid' *thankas*: the silk of the roll had not lost its soft and smooth texture. Alas, the paint had faded; some of the figures below the nimbed Buddha were unrecognizable. It

seemed that some of the frescoes, in theme and in style, resembled those that I had admired at the Alchi Monastery in Ladakh.

And the rains began to fall...to fall and to fall again. Would the waters of the Meditation Grotto come cascading out like a gargoyle that spurts flooding rain water?

At the tiny window of my little cell of stone I followed the shadows of Dusk replenishing the gorge. Another night of mountain Solitude. A knock drilled at the door, and without waiting for a response, the aging monk who had accompanied me to my cell stepped out of the corridor chill into the wavering warmth of my three candles. He strode immediately to the *choksey*, sat down opposite me and joined his hands: «Namaste, I am the assistant librarian at the gompa, » he began in Hindi, but then quickly slipped into English with a slight British accent: «I found a book in English by Herman Hesse; have you read him ? » I nodded in the affirmative. When I was seventeen or eighteen, Herman Hesse was one of my favourite writers, especially his *Die Stadt*, *Narcissus und Goldmund* and *Steppenwolf*. I did not, however, recognize the paperback book that the assistant librarian clutched in his hands. A visiting foreigner must have donated it to the library. «Look,» he continued, «I discovered this sentence,» which he read almost in a whisper:

«'...the desire to live for one's education free from politics, nationality, and newspapers...There must yet be circles as the monastic orders were, only with broader contents...Education through the State's education is to be scorned...'

You see, monastic teaching in your countries is not illegal», he blurted out, closing the book. He was all agog.

«No it isn't, we have religious and private schools, but monastic teaching for the public no longer exists. You know that some scholars believe Hesse to have been a solipsist marginal in a society he deemed no longer livable. He believed in a uniform activity which signified discipline, and discipline for Hesse meant knowledge. I think that monastic teaching is static; it belongs to the 19th century, because 19th century knowledge posits the achievement of the individual both within and without his society. The more a man thinks the more he drifts into a community, becomes a herd animal, more and more conscious of class appurtenance. These social individuals believe themselves cunning and clever, but in fact they remain the aimless harbingers of Infinite Progress...» The librarian placed the book in his mantle. The candlelight exposed a wrinkled, leathery face, tired, yet animated by long reflection, or so it seemed. The cell air grew colder and colder. Sándor refused to warm himself by the fire lest he damage his eyesight. Did the good father Georgi practice the same austerity when compiling his *Alphabetum Tibetanum* in the 18th century? My God, two years without a fire to warm his chilled bones. Did he wrap himself up in the cloth of mindfulness of karma to warm his bones? The librarian smiled:

«Nothing can be static, our world is in constant Becoming for we are in constant Becoming. Only the Creator is immutable. Only becoming the Buddha can one escape the cyclic of Becoming and lay quintessentially outside the movement of *samsara*, exposed to the radiate light of Him who awaits us all. The Creator must be outside the existences that He creates...»

« Our existences are both within and without Him. We are all companions of God,» I replied dreamily.

«Yes we are. But our roads are very different, so too our companions. Buddhists are not atheists as many Westerners think we are. If a Creator is not our Path of Perfection, for it is the Buddha who is, this Creator is not denied existence of or on that Path. Grace is a support for us as essential as it is for you Christians.» He paused for a moment then looked deeply into my eyes: 'But please explain to me why so many Westerners are experiencing Buddhism as a means of spiritual escapes?« The good librarian probably meant 'quest'? I fumbled with the candle for a few seconds, whose smell of wax infused a sort of warmth in my head, then I leaned over the *choksey*:

«They adhere to the Buddha, I guess, because they have rejected Christian values so depreciated and desecrated since the XVIII and XIX centuries, due to industrialization and secularism. They imagine that Buddhism is disengaged of ecclesiastical authority and moral-mongering. The convertees feel that they are 'free to choose'! Unfettered in their practice, they channel their unremitting obedience towards their *gurus*, delecting in the sweet delicacies of absolute unconvention. They may just believe that Buddhism comforts their mundane essence. Furthermore, the newly enlightened believe Buddhism to be a philosophy or a metaphysics, and not a religion proper! They choose to remain individuals, divorced from a society they deem corrupt and mediocre. They choose to practice a philosophical Buddhism and not one of community spirit, one that I have experienced here in the mountains of Northern India, where the climatic conditions weigh heavily upon the believer who indeed depends on others for both his spiritual and physical advancement. Does not this individualized, philosophicalized Buddhism touch the vital chords of Western atomism, cleft from any religious sentiment: the musical *mantras*, the charming forms of Sanskrit, Pali and Tibetan, the yearning *yantras* and orgiastic iconography? This all possesses that peregrin touch which entices those souls that yearn for a spiritual experience without the constraining ropes of Judeo-Christian convention and puritanism. Why carry Christ's cross when the Buddha's halo is lighter? Why fry in Dante's Inferno when Buddhism offers recurrent and multiple entries back and forth into Life and Death? Why stop at resurrection when the many reincarnations extend illimited Desire? Why tip-toe along a razor-sharp straight line when one can spin round and round in a Wheel?« The librarian cracked each and every one of his fingers in a very methodical and annoying way, then folded his hands:

«Perhaps these convertees understand Buddhism to be an alternative way of self-expression, practiced in perfect simplicity, a rest and retreat from unrestrained consumerism.»

«Perhaps. But monasteries do exist for that respite and retreat.»

«I know, but they are attached to the Church that the convertees despise.»

«Administratively attached, yes. Are you all not attached to the Dalai Lama? He is, after all, an administrator, if I may say so.

«True, we are all attached to him. Not only is he an administrator but also a politician.»

«Does that make you then less free in your Path? Or does it make you freer, knowing that wisdom and freedom are inseparable, a lighthouse for erring sailors, an icon illuminating the blackness of the Road, guiding you ever onwards in spite of the pitfalls, stumbling blocks and other dangers; enlightening every gesture and voice which inscribe yet another milestone?» My visitor suddenly looked hard at me:

«To be estranged from one's own culture is a grave and dangerous risk...»

«Not if one has decided to make the leap!» I ventured in a rather pathetic epic tone. «Either simultaneously back and forth between the original culture and the borrowed culture, or alternatively discarding the original to the sole advantage of the borrowed. However, the real danger lies in the volatile position of the In-Between...neither here nor there, the sordid hybridity of unintegrated and unassimilated communities, unconscious of their identity loss, their danger to themselves and to others, their puerile and naïve attempts to compromise two halves of the same soul without first labouring upon their own soul in an uncompromising way.»

«But these thoughts belong to intellectuals, to a certain Elite that reflect upon religion. How about the ordinary man?»

«The ordinary man must learn not to cower under the press of imposed, manufactured reality by decision-makers, both governmental and entrepreneurial; nor should he indulge in the comforting mediocrity of the consumer sick-house. » The librarian's lips twitched. I gazed dreamily at the pane...the pitter-patter at the window...Thunder, wind, rain...the celestial drums! He then added out of the blue :

«I have read that the Pope is at war against the practice of Yoga? » He eyed me strangely, then pursued : «Do the Christians of the West really believe that Buddhism is undermining youth by the practice of Yoga?» I straightened up; my back was killing me from so much cross-legged sitting positions. Instead of waiting for me to reply, he answered his own question:

«Yoga is the union of Man with his Creator, and it seems that Catholics and Protestants feel that this union can invariably only bring together a 'Buddhist Creator'. But don't you think that the worshipping of the Buddha in the West is far more enlightening for the European soul, and far more productive socially than any adherence to Neo-nazism or other forms of ideology?»

«Some would rather think that the best path for Westerners is their own religious culture,» I contested. «Many Europeans are strained between satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their respective societies. Some urge for radical changes whilst others remain listless, calling those who cry for changes terrorists or revolutionaries. Perhaps those who seek answers to their questions by adhering to Buddhism have concluded that Western society lacks creative imagination which must accompany reason in order to produce change. They are continually assaulted by piecemeal arrangements and occasional adjustments, but there is no fundamental change in the vision that policy-makers hold in Europe or America. Those who engineered the technological achievements in the West congratulate themselves because they are

proud of them, for it was these achievements that propelled their armies of soldiers and missionaries into the East, and for centuries overpowered and dominated huge Eastern populations. The convertees to Buddhism in the West participate, partially, to this technological pride, and for this reason they practice a Buddhism tainted with Western suspicion, even hate of religion as a whole, notably Catholicism. They may be totally unconscious of this sentiment, but it lies deep within each Westerner because it has been inculcated to us since childhood. Pride is a habit extremely difficult to overcome; many confuse it with reflection, others vehicule it as a means of persuasion. Under troubled circumstances it has even transformed neurosis into a national policy...» The librarian stood:

«I sing songs to enable the powerful to govern with the ten virtues so that all of us may dwell in dharmahood... » he chanted suavely, then joined hands and left me to my own thoughts.

I liked the librarian for his frankness, his experienced convictions, his reserved manners, and most of all for his knowledge of exterior matters which he must have obtained by reading the foreign books in the library, and by the bits and pieces of information carried over the peaks and ridges to the gompa. The monks who travelled from monastery to monastery probably brought back crumbs of conversations overheard at Rumtek or at Dharamsala. I stretched out onto the thick mat: the only aim of knowledge is that which transforms the seeker into the object of his seeking! To become both actor and spectator of one's life. On the *choksey* the *Dhammapada* was open at this verset:

*'...there is no time like desire; there is no ill-luck like hatred; there is no snare like delusion,
there is no river like thirst...'*

I awoke with a parched mouth and an odd phrase pulsating in my head; it went something like this: *'...greater the thirst, greater the Destiny which is linked to It...'* It always amused (and anguished) me how tiny morsels of propositions and phrases would pop up in my head either upon awakening or just before dropping off to sleep, as if the Hinterland were speaking to me through the Sense of the Past. And didn't Thomas Hobbs state that of our conceptions of the Past we make the Future?

The morning silence refreshed my aching temples. I sought the sanctuary of the prayer hall, now droning with chant and music. At first, purely vocal, then little by little sudden crescendoes of musical instruments announced the morning benediction. Tea and *tsampa* were served. A half-hour (incertum) of ox-horn blaring, of plying meditation. It woke up the dozing young monks in the back benches; and if that didn't wake them up a husky old monk did so by wacking them on back of the neck! I even detected some youngsters feigning sleep in order to be firmly wacked...In whatever fashion they wished to be tossed out of sleep, their round olivine faces always beamed those sunny smiles that illumined the chilly obscurity of the hall. Companionship amongst the monks and lamas appeared genuine: I felt no 'dirty' thoughts, stumbled over no 'lovers' nests', I encountered no illicit exchanges. Each strode forward towards the vision of action and function, yet each, methinks, followed quite distinct Paths. Odd really, in the West everyone was on the same contrived or preconceived path towards different things, although the majority believed themselves to be on different paths. Perhaps that is what some designate as the 'universelle banalité moderne'! In a perfect harmony of diverse scores the monks chant, beat their drums, blow their conches and ox-horns, murmur their versets with equal diligence...

The movement of the vocals and instruments incite various meditative and contemplative levels within and without us: a sort of ontological 'temps fort et temps faible', which contracts and decontracts Existence, which makes surge existential profundity through the extension of Being. Similarly, existential profundity may create ontological depth, or may have been created by it! It may, too, sprout sterile dichotomy: ontology/existentialism...form/matter...Essentia/Existentia...philosophy/theology...Here in the East, one proposition does not cancel out another, does not prove one proposition false, does not convince us of untruthfulness; they are both sound because they have been wrought from ontological and existential circumstances...they have been proved by and in Life...'Contrasts' are therefore not contradictory: they are a Harmony, a One whose emanated manifestations are all but that One, whatever form, matter or colour they may assume at one particular moment. This is not Pantheism or Monism, it is another way of loving and serving an expounding Creator and His Creation...It is a Philosophy of Life...

A frosty night: the rain transformed into illumined snow flakes drifting here and there in a vault of vair. Then, in a twinkling of the eye, the vault cleared, velvety, star-studded; suddenly tiny pasted dots swinging from the soft fabric bursted forth. Alas the stars, in turn, disappeared and the snow flakes tumbled down and down and down, tracing runnels on my pane on which the candle flame reflected, stabbing the cold air with ephemerally warmth, lightening the gravity, the seriousness of the circumstances, of my circumstances...encouraging the nocturnal reader to dance on...to think on...to live on... I filled my stove with faggots and dried dung. On the lectern this verset of the *Dhammapada* lay open:

'...All residual impressions are transient-when one sees this after realising it, then, one is liberated from suffering: this is the Path for supreme purity...'

A rustle from behind the door; the furtive steps vanished in the litless corridor. They left neither echo nor trace. Suddenly a queer phrase jumped into my mind, one that ruffled the placid waters of my lake-like thoughts:

'...le professeur juré, espèce de tyran mandarin, me fait toujours l'effet d'un impie qui se substitue à Dieu...'

My eyelids closed, heavier and heavier, closed of their own tacit accord: I could not shake the sleep out of my Self that night...

The High Priest, a yellow conical bonnet fixed proudly on his raised head, tapped the rim of a cymbal with the ring of his middle finger; it kept the time of extraordinary long silences punctuated on every fourth beat by the powerful intone of the monks' chanting: raising slowly from the bowels...of the Earth. The High Priest would simply let the ring 'bounce' off the razor-sharp rim, as if a marble had dropped onto a stone floor: bouncing...bouncing...bouncing...like the backwash of the sea: declining...declining...declining, only to return, sometimes accompanied by 'dying voices': from sharps to lows...and lower still to the bowels...of the Earth. The *dzongs*, which lay carefully on their carmine-cushioned tripod stools were lethargically lifted to the lips of four monks, listlessly, and sounded, a lull, a bellowing vibration, or rather a dull undulation, rolling in languid wavelets that caused the very foundations of the hall to pitch and toss...

The pounding rains had ceased, momentarily: every pitch claims a particular Time and Space because a sound signified nothing in particular outside of this Whole. Would I ever be seized by this auditive Time and Space? How long would it need to seize the listener in a precise moment of Time and Space? I had absolutely no intention of leading the hermit's life; my existence merely lay in the margins of the world narrative, out of which my own was being forged, *hic et nunc...*

...and that night the spiritual Dance of Mahakala began: six monks masked as Mahakala, strode out of the hall into the open Space in front of the doors, swords held high. They twirled and whorled in a slow deliberate drum beat from inside the prayer hall. A reflected beat, every three or four seconds...perhaps to each whorl (*incertum*). The six monks, gruesome in their colourful masks, huge and menacing, flaunted, paraded and exhibited them to all and sundry; for we are communicating, indirectly, with the Enlightened One. Around Buddha they danced, shaking their masks...a clash of cymbals was answered by a chorus of ox-horns and conchas. The silence...excruciating Silence. The six Mahakalas remained rooted to the floor, that ice-cold floor, petrified, like fossil wood. How long? The drum resounded: one foot moved then another. Another drum beat forth and the dance began anew, slowly, deliberately...druggedly. All six masked Mahakalas dashed from monk to monk, blessing them with holy water. I, too, was blessed; a terrible green mask lured at and over me...

I stepped out into the freezing night. The ox-horns blared, the monks resumed their murmuring. Tiny flakes cooled my burning face. In spite of the darkness, the contours of the mountains could be readily discerned, black against grey. A Roerich painting? Yes, I felt no desire, no 'real' desire to descend into the scorching plains, teeming with crowds of saffron and hemp colour; into the stuffy, stifling and claustrophobic Institutions, where stale discourses intermingle with crass self-esteem and tiny pleasures, where polite respect dissimulates great respect for oneself. And yet Sándor did indeed direct the Asian Society; did publish twenty-one articles in Calcutta; did work for those 'culs-de-plomb' who despise hermits, outsiders, marginals, renegades. That Hungarian was no 'érudit étriqué'...

Then I recalled these poignant words:

'...Dharma has mind as fore-runner becomes noble through mind, is mind itself...'

Did Sándor go native? Did he reject his poor family background and the majestic Carpathians of his fatherland to don the weeds of orgulous erring and haughty erudition? According to legend this poor adventurer returned to his native Transylvania carrying with him a small bag of gold! But I saw his tomb at Darjeeling! Alexandre Csoma of Kőrös became what he was: a bodhisattva...

Back in the icy room, the Kulu shawl thrown tightly round my shoulders, I lay the *Dhammapada* wide open at this verset:

'...knowing this two-fold Path for gain and loss, one shall employ one self in such a way that there will be the growth of knowledge...'

and further down:

'...Good people shine from afar, like the Himalaya Mountain. One who is not good is not seen here, like an arrow thrown at night...'

Night! I sat, my back straight as an arrow, in front of the tiny window dripping with humidity. Pitter-patter...pitter...patter...each drop ticked off a moment of Time that corresponded to no Time that I had ever been accustomed to, nor to any Space of familiar guise. For a fleeting moment I perceived my reflection in the window: my face had grown so thin and gaunt...

'When you gaze so intimately at a fresco or a statue...

Of the Buddha?

Or any other...what is the very first impression, not thought, impression that drifts into your mind?

Man! as he who animated the Gods, or God, Man! Because he dreads Death and God; he knows they are but one and remain *enigmatic* to him despite his enormous knowledge of things. Man! who has exorcized this Dread, touching God as an objectile, touching and visualizing Him.

Then God is Man's imagination?

Imagination, creative or active, in the sense that it is his inner regard which seeks our regard, and whose crossing of fused regards creates the Image of Him, to be likened to our known. Yet, and don't get me wrong, not exactly His own image, but a representation of it, with ours. You see, these statues, bronzes and frescoes must represent attributes of forms that are of an utterly human appearance, so that the unhuman, the super-human quality of hieratic Beings can be represented by Man's creative imagination. Man cannot represent what he cannot imagine to be. Not even his own image without that one of God. Tables and chairs are part of Man's existence, although they are not Beings! Objectile representation...that is the infinite quest; the reconciliation or the unconscious and material world of the *in-itself* and the conscious and free world of the *for-itself*. Not as self-deception, but as a Philosophy of Life.

I observed myself musing at the window...

'This then must be the reason why Buddha's eyelids are silently, gracefully lowered. They close out the dichotomic light in order to illumine reconciled irreconcilables...The Light that touches because it has been touched! It touches wood, rock or silk. Every sculptured rock in the Orient has been a communion with the Sacred, a communion guaranteed by this Light. In South India, bronze has been infused with the dancing spirit of Siva's Light through the divine talent of Cholian artists.

'Theirs are the *traces* and *echoes* of Enlightenment! One that combines the Forces of High and Low, not one that evacuates the first. Freedom measured as antagonistic Forces reconciled: yes, freedom weighed not as an obsession but rather as a *style*...like Traces upon stone.'

A misty morning. I awoke in a confused mood as if some voice had been communicating to me in my sleep. A knock at the door and the librarian stepped in. He looked haggard and seemed to be suffering from lumbago, for he had difficulty when sitting down on the straw mat. He propped himself against the wall then examined my puffy, sleepless eyes:

«The winters are very severe and long in Zanskar, » he began whilst helping himself to some tea that was boiling on the stove. «The villagers walk along the thick ice of the frozen Zanskar River from Padum to Ladakh.» Did this incipit remark act as a cue from him for me to leave before the long winter months set in?

«How do you all survive generation after generation?» I asked perfunctorily.

«How did Sándor survive?» came the other's shrewd replique.

«Yes, Sándor...that's probably why I've come...to know how he survived...» My voice trailed off like a thousand scenes of some phantasmagoria. It echoed so hollow in my head, that voice.

«The Hungarian philologist, Csoma Sándor of Kőrös, I mean to say,» continued the aging monk without taking notice of my distant regard. «What a tremendous spirit...to have journeyed on foot from Transylvania across Asia Minor to our Himalayas in quest of his Magyar origines! Remarkable! English, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Tibetan...20 languages, apparently. Have you seen his plaque here?» I nodded. In fact, every one of the forty or so monks showed me the plaque everytime I strolled from the prayer hall up to the Meditation Grotto...

«Twenty language-cultures,» I added. «I have meditated upon this great man, and I am certain he came to understand that all that is profound has its roots Elsewhere...Here perhaps, at this monastery, freed from the fetters of tribal mentality and patriotic jingoism, from the lands of the big lies, or if you like, of empty promises, Sándor accomplished his Self, his vision. What did he desire from Life: to voyage to the East to be spectator and actor of and to its great Events, to behold the customs of its diverse peoples. To learn its languages, and with all this wisdom, hoped to attain the goodwill of Mankind. And this he accomplished through the trails and tribulations of monastic life. For monastic life does contain a germ of Utopia, an enclosed Space where individuals who think do not lean more and more towards group or herd animal comportment, but envision their Selves as both the actor and spectator of their lives. Utopianism is not necessarily unmotivated optimism. For me, it is a Shambala where your dreams may become reality; I'm sure Sándor achieved this reality, besides of course his dictionary, which in fact was a pretext for that experience of dream reality. It took him two years to attain both his outer and inner mission: here was his Elsewhere.» I unfolded my aching legs and got up to fetch some water from the bucket, my mouth was so dry. The good librarian followed my gestures without moving his head; the whites of his eyeballs shone queerly in the silken wisps of the morning light streaming through the window. He raised his hand:

«We are all a community of monks; yet we remain individuals in spite of that community. A uniform activity amongst individuals who pursue the same goal, requires more individuality amongst them; that is, a more internal force than a society of so called free people whose purposes in Life are very different,

and thus need an adhering external force which will consolidate them into a society.» The aging librarian paused to sip his tea. He suddenly added:

«Did you know that Sándor almost died of hunger here? Only his inner force kept him to his chosen Path»

«What could he have eaten?» I countered interrogatively. «When a man strikes out to plumb the depths of both his origins and his soul, for they are identical in Sndor's case, he attempts to unveil the origins of Man in a *transversal* and a *cartographic* manner. That was surely his nourishment because it was his Path; and that is no idle attempt.»

«It is an impossible one; Life is too short for such an attainment»

«But one that at least opens all possibilities of existence, of becoming what one is. For it is the nomad thought, the thought of a Royal Road that traverses as many spirits as it does countries, that traverses as many civilizations as it does human faces, that sounds the depths of Existence in accord with Being: the Royal Road Itself...Being! Being is posited as a *moulder* of circumstances in favour of Being; Existence is the result of circumstances *moulded*...we are creatures of circumstance...*moulded*...»

«By whom are we moulded?»

«By enslaved freedom. Economic freedom. Sándor's act entailed the risk of absolute freedom; that is, one that demands the seeker to sacrifice slavery; slavery to Life itself. He chose or was guided by the possibility of Death as the medium of attaining Life. He was free to be. And it is precisely *this* freedom that he embraced. He did not, like many people, relish *choice*. To choose is merely to elect the better of the bunch! It serves as a good conscience for self-deceptors; a good deception for the conscientious...This is not enough: one must make the *leap*! Sándor did not choose anything: he made the *leap* and became, on the threshold of Death at Darjeeling, that Being to which he dedicated his entire life.»

«He has been commemorated as he who began all studies of the Tibetan language, both in the West and the East,» the librarian pursued eagerly.

«I would commemorate him more as a Man whose Being or Existence traversed the territories of Tibetology, of Indianology, of PHILOLOGY in order to reach the Essence of Mankind, the entelechy of Mankind: the perfection of Being! I suppose that he, sometime in his youth, must have reacted against the imprisonment of Race, yet, and this is certainly not a paradox, he achieved this entelechy thanks to his Hungarian descent.»

« Science applied to the service of Being?»

«Exactly! You've read, of course, Nietzsche and Kirkgaard; far from being men of philosophy, they were philosophers of Life in revolt against the academics of knowledge, the professorial philosophers who flip through yellowed pages, discourse on un-lived philosophy, peddle their pedantry, oftentimes politically tainted with party slogans, in the market-place, where it is heeded and bought. Today we

have our technical philosophers behind their safe screens; screened from Being, deprived of the 'touch'...of 'being touched', a virtual 'touch' transplanted in their virtual kindergardens, in their uninspired, unexperienced, inhuman knowledge. Sándor's dictionary was inspired from human contact and compassion for humanity. His knowledge was ontologically motivated, not career-orientated ! » My visitor grimaced, stroking his back slightly.

«Why would a Hungarian think his origins were Tibetan?».

«Because the Magyar tribes that invaded his country two centuries before the Christian era were of Eastern stock, but also because his professors of Oriental languages were all convinced that Hungarians were of Asian descent, and that there still survived in the heart of Central Asia a community of Hungarians! »

«That would mean that his quest was not only ontological but ethnological?»

«Why separate two Forces that derive from the same élan? Like the sacred scriptures that you chant and the natural barriers upon which you meditate, two indissoluble Forces springing from an identical Source.» Above us rumbled the lull of several *dzongs*. The aging librarian painfully stood up from the mat. He scrutinized me for a moment then said with a wry smile:

«I read somewhere that the origins of Man were to be found in East Africa.»

«A noble theory for baboons, I bloated out, thinking of the desk books of my early school days. «It is the white, civilized man who associates blackness or Negritud to the primitiveness out of which Man, namely the White Man, has 'progressively' evolved into a superior being. A comforting thought for the white race that has destroyed and exterminated more human beings than any other 'superior race'. The Chinese, too, have discovered the origins of the first Man: he is of course Chinese!»

«A noble race!» concluded the librarian who stood and excused himself.

'There seemed to be some irony in his tone but I couldn't be quite so sure...'

That night the temperatures dropped far below zero. The snow tumbled down thicker and thicker forming, outside my window, tiny rippled ridges and valleys similar to those that I had crossed. I experienced new sensations of coldness in spite of my Kulu shawl and Keylong socks. Did Sándor have a shawl and socks in 1827? I knew that the British had suspected the Hungarian of spying, but the British suspected everyone of spying: Roerich, Alexandre David-Néel! Be that as it may, in spite of this harassing and persecution, he completed his Tibetan dictionary, then left to work in Calcutta at the Asiatic Society. Some say that he died of hunger on his way to Leh in the Markka Valley, but all that was pure legend, although let me add that legends do have purpose and significance, and to refuse this purpose and significance is to deny Man an ontological value, essential when retracing his narratological identity ! Sándor died at Darjeeling in 1842 of cholera or maleria. Life in that Asiatic Society must have been too soft and stuffy for the likes of him: the smell of mouldy lounge chairs and the monotonous

turns of the ventilators might have piqued his sense of manlihood, like Sir Richard Burton, too large for sitting rooms and tiny screens...

And yet there was nothing to eat in Zanskar! How did he *not* die of hunger? Whilst crossing the green plateau I had stumbled upon peasant girls uprooting clumps of rough-edged green plants. I inquired about these plants, dirty and shrivelled, and all I got for an answer was a raucous: «kabra! Kabra!», the grim-faced girls motioning to their mouths. I learnt afterwards that this *kabra* was a seasoning for rice or *tsampa*, a garnish far from savoury whose taste, acrimonious and bitter would make even the heartiest wayfarer gag! Had this been the Hungarian's hiemal diet? Did it make him gag? Nevertheless, he had survived! He had survived because every hunger pang and frozen night awakened that will to accomplish his quest: indeed, the only medicine for pain and strife is the Desire for Life..

I lit a second candle and crossed my legs. The snow had ceased to fall and the hoarfrost on the window pane crept in through the sundry rifts. Flues of icy air blew in. Would I wait until the advent of a purple sunset? Ah! Where had those words sprung from: «...rustling of each purple curtain...» I lowered my eyes to the open pages of *Gitanjali* and murmured this passage:

'...where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit...'

Habitude: the untimely Death of the still living. Living Habitude: the untimely rituals of communion with the Sacred whatever the form of manifestation may be.

That afternoon (*incertum*) during prayers, the joyous monks brought me a bun, along with my salt butter-tea. One of the High Priests punctuated a slow movement by clearing his throat in a long, exasperated way, as if he were breathing his last breathe. This 'down-beat' was followed by a clash of a cymbal and the beat of a drum. The lenthitude lagged on and on: auh...om...clash...boom...auh...om...clash...boom...whilst I munched on my bun, mesmerized, drifting inertly, like the *dzong*, drifting in the bowels of the gorge, eddying on some clear stream of consciousness: the score of a musical piece, a note bobbing up to the cymbal, down to the drum. And that ring, yes, dancing on the rim of the cymbal. A delightful dancing tune, heark:

'The mist is moving over the hallowed mountains

Like some magical mystical monster,

Engulfing and devouring Man, Mountain and cloister;

Mahakala: has he not sprung from some foamy, flowing Fountain?'



Photo 21: Phuktal: Hanging upon the Cliff

With the waning of daylight the monks removed their rooster-like, conical bonnets and there on their cushioned benches stood for a full thirty minutes. No one coughed or cleared his throat; a deep, solemn silence set free the sluices and floods of the mind with fey waters, unfathomable. And the masks paraded sluggishly before the Buddha. Swords crossed silently. Footsteps thumped soundlessly. A pure epic tale of silent metonymy beyond the figures and tropes of Gesture: ...the eternal beat of the heavenly drum which vibrates within that eloquent Silence...

No! A solitary voyager would not look back for his mission was not the pursuit of knowledge but of Life itself. That night at my lectern, going about alone, unwearied, disciplining my Self alone, remarking the silver moonbeams illuminating the crêpe-like hoarfrost on the window pane and the acclivities of the gorge, I read from the *Dhammapada*:

'...Sitting alone, sleeping alone, going about alone, unwearied, disciplining one's self alone, one can remain rejoicing within a forest...'

Hand gestures or *mudras* are a salient feature of Buddhist mural painting: gradually my Self in forest-retreat, discovered their ritual importance during prayer. Graceful sweeps of the hands, long silvery fingernails combing the frosty air, like the Buddha Himself, the energetic index finger indicating the full, waxing moon. The word itself means 'seal', and symbolized Buddha's mental powers, His teachings, His meditation, His courage, His public testimony. Buddha's pointing finger intrigued me: a philosophical (metaphysical?) gesture of pure demonstration, of pure yes-saying, a Yes-Sayer, or the vital certitude of that which demonstrates and that which is demonstratable.

The chanting rose in harmony to the wafting vapors of camphor and copal: the entire 'scene' became strangely mediaeval...why hadn't I felt that before? And during those same instances of reverie...of reverie, perhaps...I saw himself wandering aimlessly in the Syriac monastery on the Turkish-Syrian border...sweating away in some grimy, fly-ridden room, aimlessly swatting the mosquitoes at night. I had ardently prayed in the vaulted chapel that had been the sacred lieu of the Zoroastrians, below where the hollow of the broken tiles traced the echoes of crackling fires; above, where the stench of burning flesh enchanted the eagles and vultures that circled the scented Towers of Silence.

The chanting grew and grew more frenetic. Eyes scanned the scriptures quicker than I could catch the vowels and consonants. The hall filled with fervour, an overwhelming sensation that I found difficult to control. The two thick wooden doors of the prayer hall had been left ajar for some unknown reason: wisps of chilly mist trailed in, circling above the bobbing heads, scanning the scriptures like a cluster of maddened fumes. Some heads welcomed the ticklish whiffs, others covered their tonsured pates, shiny to the touch, with carmine hoods or yellow bonnets. A sudden burst of rain swept in but no one appeared affected. Then a phrase of Tagor slipped into my mind quite unexpectedly:

'...The first essential of art is that it should communicate a vision never before expressed on the subject...'

Does this vision signify that man's personality, having saturated itself in self-preservation, now bursts asunder its surplus energy in order to accomplish Art? Is Art then only personalized surplus human energy, or is it just human energy: a bundle of nerves and tissue and muscles and cells and thick flowing blood? The very Act of self-preservation may be Art, but it is certainly man's penetration into his Self as the mechanical object, in relation to the Sacred, which triggers the Act of preserving the Self...this Self as the object of Art...Art as the object of Life...Life as the subject of the Self! And it was during these dreamy moments that I would feel so entirely *useless!* Yes, *useless* to the mundane world. Those critical moments comforted me, fortified my spirit, offered me the strength to carry on...The Royal Road. Yes, the *Pleasures of Uselessness*: never a cheque written, never a tax-form paid, never a penny given or taken from Society, but...but endless contributions to Humanity. Humanity! And there I suddenly descried bold words which flooded me with joy:

'...The value of a human being does not lie in his usefulness: for it would continue to exist even if there were nobody to whom he could be useful...'

Indeed, only a useless Dancer upon mountain tops could have stated that truism...Nietzsche. And Siva? He danced other dances. Yet I could not help but think that at one point Siva and Nietzsche must have danced the same Dance. A theophanic Dance: useful or useless?..

'...layers of muscle had long since been stuffed with the floes of Time, the tracts of Space. That armoured bulk had dissolved under the acid test of scriptural study, meditation and solitary travel. All that was left was that which he bore. And so he bore on...'

I walked out into the little sun-filled courtyard of the monastery complex. The clouds had been chased away by an intense sun. Some villagers from Yugar had crossed the bridge and joined the festive occasion. Old women, bent and leather-faced, spun diminutive spinning wheels (mani) whilst others, seated along the back wall of the hall, or just outside its door, clicked away the beads on preponderant, drooping rosaries (malam). The mist gamboled in and out of peak and gorge. The sun beat down upon the jagged pores of Phuktal's inlaid rocky abode. The distant image of a huge spinning wheel, a huge *mani* made of tough leather hide, suspended in mid-air by some thick knotty rope, whose bright yellow scriptures in Tibetan ran: *Om Mani Padme Hum* 'Hail, Jewel in the Lotust', pieced together in my mind like the pieces of a complex puzzle. The Buddha, that Jewel in Lotust position; the Illuminated One enshrouded in His halo of agate, that too nimbed in green...the colour of the cobra-dragon! The knot of His hair, a black point within the dragon-green nimbus, pointing to the cartoon moon pinned against its indigo-starless vault. A perfect Jewel in the Lotust...floating on an ocean of milky motifs...the Ocean of Humanity. These well-defined motifs represented no abstract geometrical concept of the Sacred. Like the Orthodox, they served as visual supports for meditation, for divine communion. Outbursts of mediaeval Catholic iconophobia, twice-contrived Byzantine iconoclasm and prudish Protestant puritanism demonstrated man's utter loathing to associate Beauty with God. They, the Ugly, express their indignity at such infantile, exotic, exaggerated and heathenish 'pictures': the Council of Elvira in 308 prohibited images of any kind in a church... In the 6th century, Bishop Serenus of Marscilles destroyed or had removed all images that he could get his hands on in the churches of his dioces. In 787, Charlemagne proposed to re-establish the iconoclastic decision of the Council of Nicea, proposal refused by Pope Hadrian. The Byzantine emperors Leon III and Constantin V reflected their insipid scorn for image-makers and their useless 'pictures' by claiming that cenobitic communities could not indulge in these unpractical, unproductive, unjustified pieces of wood. Was this not the self-indulgence of the Ugly? One might say that it is an ugly thought trumpeted by the Ugly. Beauty cannot be weighed by the Ugly...

For the Buddhist and the Hindu, the image is as fecund as any Catholic homily or canon, any Protestant tirade from the pulpit, any Byzantine mozaic. And yet the Word has no lesser place in the Easterner's constant striving for the Creator.

In my cold, little cell of stone, however, no icon blessed the naked, pasty, crumbling walls. I, notwithstanding, observed the many images of monasteries, grottoes, frescoes, temple figures: puissant, pulsating, germinating...the colours absorbed my attention. The forms devoured my gaze: a powerful, eurhythmic movement caused them to sway and throb, ones which I attempted to elucidate in words...in vain! Why elucidate in words what illumined the spirit in moving Forms? Yet scriptural nourishment

should neither be loathed nor scorned. On the contrary. Upon my *choksey*-lectern glowed this verse from the *Dhammapada*:

'...Pleasures kill a man of no intelligence, but not one who seeks the other shore. A man of weak intelligence kills himself through the thirst for pleasures as he does others...'

I gazed out of the tiny window: the sky was clear. The wax-like moon, round and golden, like the fourteenth day face of a monk, hung limply in the empty vault: that candle of the Night. I turned the crusty, spotty pages of his *Dhammapada*; my eyes, burning and itchy from the stove fumes settled on this verset:

'...That Monk, who being young, yokes himself to the Teachings of Buddha, will illumine this world, like the moon released from the cloud...'

And I thought of the Buddha's agate encasement, His dragon-green nimbus, His pointing index finger towards the full, waxing moon yoked to the indigo backdrop...

The following morning I took a long walk along the mountain footpaths that snaked up and down the valley: it was the first time I had stepped out of the monastery complex since my arrival a week ago? The Triad of Perfection: Nature-Culture-Spirit is a pure kernel of Being, the analogical tissue of Being. The dancing monks, in recreating the Origins of Humanity by the liberation of vital energies, had gathered a vast assembly of villagers and tourists. It was cold but clear. The Dance of Death as a means of revitalization, of rejuvenation...the 'primitive scene' of every Origin enacted, began. Like the dancing skeletons at Lamayuru, and all those others that I had so admired, they all danced before me, brilliant and bold against saffron walls, fissured and sweaty. All those skeletons smiled big red smiles, that exposed two rows of pearly white teeth. The cochineal ribs, thinning out towards the reedy waist, put into perspective the same cochineal loin-cloth that hung pitifully between two white lines of legs. Its arms, one akimbo and the other behind its head, nonetheless, danced and danced: danced to the chanting of God and His servants. The cadaver, indeed, appeared joyous...joyous, yes, like the Cham dancers at Rumtek, and the Dervish Turners in Istanbul, and those Syriac Fire-Dancers in the vault under which the Zoroastrians built their Fire, and Nataraja, which make spark His haloed flames on the peaks of Kailash, whose dying embers cast ghoulish shadows upon the eternal snows and ice. Ah! Those mountain *climes* offered no facile way without the complementary companionship of the spiritual *climbs*. Did the freezing cold of a barren Tibet stop Lanzo del Vasto? And a passage from *Gitanjali* echoed within:

'...I thought that my voyage had come to its end at the last limit of my power, that the path before me was closed, that provisions were exhausted and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

But I find that thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonder...'



Photo 22: The Dancing Skeleton

I recalled Mahakala at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim during the Cham Festival, his face unexposed, hidden by the silken cloth, sword ready to defend his mask (or face?), to slice through ignorance, Mahakala, brimming over with laughing skulls, those of Bhairava, filled with bloody (libations)! Remnants of Brahma's lay. He, too, in dancing position, Mahakala, skulls (unsmiling) clinging to a tiger's skin which garnished thick muscled thighs, robed in red and green, flowing penants and a beggar's bowl in hand, outstretched, crossing a bulging blue belly over whose enormous hump hung jewels of variegated colours. And again it suddenly dawned upon me:

'...was there any 'particular' reason for being Here and Now?..Was this being Here and Now a Mask, or the face of some infantile impulsion which contained a twisted mouth of unreality, of convulsed thoughts, of a grotesque regard upon the world in general?.. Another Desert, yet this time without Lawrence, without Burton, without the heroic crutch?..A phantasmatic escape from...from Responsibility?..'

I gazed at my grimy hands, unwashed since...since when? The dirt and filth had caked itself into the lines of my fingertips like some contagious fungi.

We had long since been sipping butter-tea, the librarian and I, without any verbal exchange, the *choksey*-lectern, as usual, set between us, a hyphen between two Cultures...or a barrier? This time he had brought his own wooden bowl decorated with tiny green dragons on the sides, and a *dorje* or *vajra* in the inside centre.

«Westerners believe that Tibetan Buddhists practice meditation and levitation, move mountains with their eyes and soar through the air from place to place upon their mantles? They believe us to be a very pacifist people. Am I correct?» he quiered quite suddenly.

«If you've read Alexandre David-Néel no Occidental or Oriental would ever believe Tibetans to be pacifists!» I commenced in a rougish manner. «I know that Buddhists in China or in Greater Tibet immolate themselves rather than have recourse to acts of terrorism against the Chinese. But are not Buddhists in Sri Lanka at war with Tamil Hindus, Christians and Muslims, and in Myanmar, are they not serrepticiously trying to push out the Muslim populations? Were not the Buddhists of the Tang Dynasty in China partially responsible for the proscriptions and bloodshed metted out by the Confucians?» My nocturnal visitor shrugged his shoulders; his eyes twinkled for a moment, like a mischievous child's:

«The Buddhist monks of the Theravada tradition of India, and the Chuan Fa tradition of China were, and some still are, well-versed in martial arts. The Buddha indeed rejected all types of violence, yet He recognized its necessity in the mundane, secular world, a world of violence absolutely forbidden to these monk warriors, nevertheless! It is an esoteric teaching. In fact, they are dances which can be used as a means of self-defense. We call these monks the bodhisattva warriors. Our gompa has never had any contact with this tradition. But again, we Himalayan Buddhists have no Church to defend.»

«But you have communities and relics to defend like any other religion of the world!» I shot out rather rudely. «Bardan Gompa is a veritable fortress, as all the other gompas of the Himalayas are because the smaller wooden ones have been burned down or desecrated by rampaging Hindus, Muslums or Communists. Look at the former Soviet Union and today's Bangladesh: war clouds gather when a religious community ceases to defend itself. This is called the Strategy of Dissuasion: the only one that throughout History fanatics, racists and bigots have unwillingly respected!» I was utterly exhausted, not by the conversation, but by this timeless Space in which I had been dwelling since leaving Lamayuru. The aging librarian seemed to be floating before me in some timeless Space. What were Wagner's words:

'Du Siehst, mien Sonn, zum Raum wird hier die Zeit...'

Perhaps. Space transforms all Beings. There may not be any Time, contrary to what Bergson so thought, only Space; the vast solitude of the Sahara, the endless confines of the Himalayas, the meandering muddy sluggishness of the Mekong: timeless Spaces over which the eternal pilgrim errs in his infinite quest of Selfhood. However, all these thoughts may be a bit too cavalierly, prompted by an

aging librarian whose lips appeared to be moving, but in fact were not...»Do Buddhists of all nations constitute a true fraternity amongst themselves?» I added. He looked hard at me:

«Do Muslims and Christian of all nations constitute a true fraternity amongst themselves?» I chuckled to myself: isn't the most precise answer to a question another question that responds to the first?

A sudden knock at the door: a monk stuck his bald head in and stammered something which I could not understand. The good librarian joined his palms and swept out of the cell.

I lingered down and down into the maze of courtyards, windy corridors and verandah-like ledges where no parapets protected one from the dizzy drop. At times I found myself on the roof of a cell without knowing it, a prayer-flag flapping in the cold wind, shrill whistling sounds filing through hayricks and bundles of neatly tied faggots. Below, villagers shuffled by, spinning their prayer wheels without taking their eyes off the narrow, winding path; eyes heavy with wrinkles, sagging under the strain of climatic hardship and daily toil. I noted that the prayer wheels, like those at Rumtek, were made of medium-size oatmeal tin-cans that had been discarded here and there by the trekkers. A thin strip of metal had been nailed over the still readable label and the words (in Tibetan) *Om Mani Padme Hum* painted in crimson on it. Any brute material is susceptible of being transformed into the Sacred, for it is the 'touch' that renders the object sacred, in the same way that any brute heart or soul, touched by the grace of the Creator, will transform that heart or soul into an ever-loving one... A group of tourists, probably English, stood in a circle around their guide, listening attentively to his instructions and observations. They had come up from Darcha, and were on their way towards Padum. There came a sudden burst of hysterical laughter, then they began to wander down, serpentine the roughcast edifices, disappearing under them into the corridors, reappearing several minutes later in Indian file to the right of the *chortens* as they made for the bridge in quick steps.

Had I been day-dreaming? The little prayer bell, the *relmo* awakened me. How long had I been sitting in the prayer hall? My legs ached from my *vajra* position. I remembered my dreams: flying so high over ridges and peaks, everything so misty! Then the *jalins* resounded and the ox-horns and conch shells. Silence...the *relmo* pierced the thick air like a melodious voice in a desolate street of a sleeping village: mellow, penetrating, ushering one towards the Between...only to escape!

An effigy of Mahakala was paraded in slow stride before the Buddha. A chorus of chant and instruments joined in, then silence...and the voice of *relmo*...

Many villagers had crowded before the large hall doors to witness the Procession. They spun their wheels; I heard the rhythmic creaking of the tin-cans on their make-shift axles. Strange hybrid indeed: industrialized Western matter transformed into Buddhist Art. Man is such a resourceful creature...the *dzongs* blared stronger and fiercer, my eyelids weighed so heavy; I could scarcely hear the tinkling of the triangle...

«...As you know, the same water flows along the same river bed, yet it is ever-changing. Fashions do not metamorphose the substance to which it is attracted, it merely skims the surface, the crust, if you prefer. The gardener weeds his garden to bring to the surface the beauty of his flowers, he has chosen

Beauty over stagnation. His flowers are immutable substances, yet metamorphized by the weeding. Fashion is a weed that suddenly sprouts up at an opportune moment, an ugly point on the infinite line of Tradition. For this very reason, its longevity is always curtailed at another opportune moment. But this you know, please don't stand on ceremony. Man, too, possesses a kernel of immutability: it is called Being. If not he would be no Man.» A young monk who had stole up to me in the crowd continued in the same monotonous cadence as I eyed him leerily:

«Of course the Gardeners of Tradition are intrepid fellows whose hands weed quicker than the evil plants menace the flowers. Tradition is the flower of an Individual, of a Nation. It is long in growing; relentless roots reach now deeper now wider, reach towards its destiny of full Bloom; that is, the source of its very Being and Existence. The Banyan Tree is the glory of Being and Existence.»

«And the Pippal?» I rallied somewhat off the cuff. He scoffed:

«If you prefer. Notwithstanding, that immutable kernel of Man, remember, is our Creator.» And the young monk vanished amongst the assembling crowd. I was abashed: he spoke B.B.C. English!

At times when on my long ambulations along the gorge paths, the sound of a *dzong* or a boast of *jalins* echoed from the great monastery enclosure. The lulling notes resounded off the tuft bulwarks and slipped downwards into the raging river where they were swiftly washed away into the Waterways of the World...

The heaped up faggots and logwood were aflame in the diminutive courtyard. The monks danced round the jumping flames. Masks were flown into the inferno, they crackled and cackled under the unbearable heat. Some faces glowed coquettishly, others in dread, as if pending a distant doom, although Mahakala had been devoured by the refreshing flames.

«Dharma has been gained.» came a voice aside me. I ventured a glimpse. A very thin monk towered above me, whose eyes, illumined by the burning Mahakala, resembled two tapering candles; the disadvantages of *samsara*? Water was welling up in my eyes due to the intense heat of the sacrifice. I thought the thin monk said in excellent English: «Fed as sons of mountain solitude we dressed in clouds and mist and wear as hats abandoned caves. Completely disinterested in the ways of the world and mundane joys we contemplate the transitory to create a sense of urgency in order to make the best use of our time on Earth. Meditation on the omnipresence of death serves as our pillows and we wrap ourselves up in the cloth of full awareness of *karma*. The straw mats which we spread out are the consciousness of the disadvantages of *samsara* which are whirlpools and tapering flames. We sing songs to enable kings to rule with the ten virtues so that all and sundry may jubilate in the Dharma. Dharma has been gained...» And the voice aside me trailed away into the vortex of the jostling crowd...

When I awoke I discovered that the prayer room was empty of murmurings and mutterings. The smell of butter tea and tsampa made me wretch for a moment. Two tapering candles flickered listlessly aside the Buddha. I touched the palms of my hands: a heavy sweat broke out. I worked painfully out of my cross-legged position and limped towards the fresco of Chemchok Heruka, stretched out in blazing orange and winy maroons against the peeling wall. Laughing skulls formed his crown, flames emanated

from his enormous body. His eyes harboured no kind sentiment, no good tidings for those who dared transgress his realm. Was his beggar bowl not filled to the brim with the blood of his victims? He dances, too, upon the naked bodies of transgressors: is he not Siva, manifested in another of his myriad forms?

'To suffer...' I mumbled. I peered deeply into Chemchok, then let my eyes drift to Vajarabhairva of the yak's head. 'Was Chemchok Heruka Mahakala? Was suffering not the Path of the freed? Did not Saint Paul render suffering a method of proclaiming Christianity? Christ inspired Christianity but Paul expounded it; who then was the founder of this new religion? Was the Buddha the founder of Buddhism?..'

I stepped out of the hall into the freezing night. Why hadn't a monk awakened me? I meandered down to the *dukhang*: it was bolted from the outside. Everyone seemed to be asleep. Further on too, the *Ithankhang nyingoa* had been bolted securely: against what or whom? Were the priests suspicious of the monks? True, I had known certain monks at Rumtek to be thieving little cads. Had I left my door open? Hadn't the good librarian warned me? I listened: to what, the secret alcoves of love? Nothing. A queer sort of disorientation or distraction stole up to me as if I had lost my Way...The blackness made me uneasy, although I did notice wavy candle flames dance behind several window panes. The scenes before me appeared to have been filmed by candlelight: pastel, creamy, pale, pasty...I suddenly felt aroused.

It required three or four hours (incertum) before I finally reached my cell: a groping fool in the dark! I locked the door and stared out of the tiny window: a hundred words darted through my cold, congested mind, all different in sound, form and structure. A confusion of cloven tongues? The other, the Hungarian, knew twenty languages. My fatigued eyes fell on this verset from the *Dhammapada*:

'...Empty the boat; emptied, this will move easier for you. Cutting off attachment and enmity, thereby you will reach Nirvana...'

I closed the sacred text. Must one sail on unchartered seas; limit the hours of attachment; empty the mind for it to refill?..

And in the mind, as the hush crept in serrepticiously, a brand new form had been germinating: the Cakra, the roundness of which bespoke of those graceful faces of the South Indian bronzes I had so admired and loved; those beautiful immobile masks of pure beauty...pure, uninhibited, uninstitutionalized. A primitive beauty fashioned like the ancient Richis fashioned their lives without ecclesiastical mould, without the stamp of institutional sanctity. I had spent sundry hours meditating upon this Wheel of Life: ever turnless...ever turning. The Lord of Death, Yama, upholds it like the Law itself: greedily. It was indeed recomforting to know that we (they?) have six slices to choose from in this Wheel of Life, contrary to Dante's Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. Six varying scenes of the same spin: the lower in the boiling vats, scream and squirm under the blows of Yama's delightful mignons. A smoky world of hatred and deformation similar to Bosch's pictorial deliriums. To the left of this piece are the unfortunate Pretans and to the right the animals (sumjen) whose sort may fare somewhat better than the poor fellows in hell, but whose lower conditions of greed and delusion, nevertheless, promise no

immediate compensation. And the Wheel turns and turns and turns...to those yellowish, naked bodies of the Pretans, stomachs bulging from over-eating, sniffing with bloated nostrils those wafts of Juniper that float down from the offerings that are reserved for them. And the Wheel turns and turns and turns...to the slice reserved for the Men(mi), a lusty lot indeed who earnestly desire to move on to higher realms, gain steeper heights (but are there mountains to climb?). Yet, for the moment they must sit patiently, in academic order, and *listen...yes listen* to the voice of Silence outside the rim of roaming monkeys, elephants and coracles. And the Wheel turns and turns and turns...to the territory of the doughty Titans (la) of perpetual struggle and conflict (but everything in this Wheel is transitory!), endless and ruthless battles for absolute power round trees and edifices. Their ruddy leather battle weeds blaze the blood they spill. Their envious desire is for Power...Man is their obstacle, the Buddha their buckler! And the Wheel turns and turns and turns...to the highest realms of sheer Desire (but all parts of the Wheel are assuredly equal?): *Buddhalokam!* (konçok), the Land of Immortality, of immobile forms, of statue-like Forces. However, proud of its purity of white, the gods have a long path of labour before them...before they slip out of the turn of the Wheel and reside with the Buddha Himself in the 'open space', outside the rim of erring monkeys, elephants and coracles, standing or sitting, haloed, compassionate, waiting...waiting for him or her to emerge as the accomplished Self.

Was I too spinning in that spinning Wheel? I did experience a sort of inkling for those poor Pretans (idex), not because of their bloated bellies -that goes without saying-, but they did have the pleasure of filling their flaring nostrils with the perfumed odours of Juniper every morning! I touched my belly: had I not been, when a small child, anorexic? Always satisfied by the Desire of being satisfied...by the Dread of being fed on no thing...

The night air grew colder and colder. I had already replaced one thick candle with a smaller, stockier one. I filled my stove with faggots and dried dung. Delusion, greed and hatred were all metaphysical states, realized as such in worldly guise, according to each one's tastes: to taste the Pig in Man, and the Cock and the Snake! Into which space would I be hurtled? Scenes filmed by candlelight: so unreal that unreality surges up through the layers of screens to emerge to the surface as Reality? The sizzling of the burning wax now sharpened now tapered my thoughts; now drove them upwards as the candle burned downwards, the hardening wax below the dregs of the Past, fossilized. No, the Wheel was more compromising than Dante's cathedral of horrors and delights! And Bosch's *Garden of Delights*? Ah! An earthly opus of a celestial maniac. Were not his Seven Deadly Sins reminiscent of those found on the Wheel's outer rim! Gluttony, pride, debauchery, anger, greed, sadness, hopelessness and vainglory? Ah! the universal nature of Man; greed was the zenith of his Nature...his Existence ! But somehow Man had no Nature, only History. And his Being? All those 'dramatic scenes' that transformed into universal religions. Didn't Christ's drama become the greatest Christian value? And Bosch's drama? Did he not depict a 'deviated' humanity in gay tones? Dante, Bosch, and their mediaeval friends and foes drew from the wells of the Imagination (creative or active?): the *hortus conclusus* in which *spiritualia sub specie corporalium*. Could Man's kernel of immutability, then, be unsparingly rotten? Like the stinking corpse of Father Zossima?

All these iconographic mediums of Truth sought to exploit an individual's subjectivity first by the object painted, then by the subject who reveals his own vision of the Truth, and finally by the

contemplator who re-discovers the painted object of Truth as expressed in its subjective colours, curves and tones within the material support.

The Seven Deadly Sins and the seven objects of Buddhist royalty: the Cakra, the Gem, the Queen, the Minister, the Horse, the Elephant and the Warrior; there must be some connexion here...between East and West both every-changing...unchanging; caught in the mesh of unfelt Discourse. The Silence of Posture and Gesture in a frenetic world of Colour and Form. Is this not Poetry! Yes...it must be Poetry. Is it not the Poet who weaves his own legend?..

There was some thing exhilarating in my loneliness: the more I spoke to the monks and especially to the librarian the lonelier I felt. On the other hand, the utter banality of daily Exposure to Existence appeared to make rise the multi-folds of Being. And this is exactly what fascinated me: this Experience wrought through daily exposure to sounds...a multitude of sounds...phonemes, and morphemes so vast and rare that I compiled this modest list of honourific terms that the monks had nonchalantly taught me:

FAMILAR	RESPECTFUL	ENGLISH
taki	donker	bread
chaa	solja	tea
zho	<u>skumzho</u>	yoghurt
kamba	zimshanna	house
chu	<u>skumchu</u>	water
ajang	ajangle <u>y</u>	man
ane	ane <u>ley</u>	woman
choksey	<u>solchok</u>	table
tap	<u>soltap</u>	stove
korey	donskek	cup
skodi	<u>sansko</u>	door
lam	<u>peflam</u>	road/path
mar	<u>solmar</u>	butter

A dull thud! The tough-hide *gna* beaten with a curved stick vibrated a dead thump. Thump...the frame rattled, the painted dragons rattled their scaly tails, and from their open mouths red-tongued orange flames lashed out these solemn words which I happened to overhear:

'...the eternal beat of the heavenly drum which vibrates in the world as life and death vibrate...expounding and transmitting of the Truth on the wave-length of universe...'

Gna-Cham continued slower and slower: the solid sound of the triangle made appear, or so I believed, a vision so clear, so limpid of a primitive *chaitya*, three-naved, at the end of which a giant Buddha, seated on His throne, sat before a bigger *stupa*, both monuments situated in a vaulted ambulatory supported by thirteen-inch thick length ribs. The whole ceiling right up to the loft bore those powerful nerves which the thirty pillars bolstered, groined and dense in the shadows of the ambulatory. The vision, nonetheless, remained ambiguous: there I sat indeed, but the surroundings appeared so familiar, like a Christian church-grotto in southern Turkey or in northern Syria! Behind the giant *stupa* the odour of camphor, urine and screaming bats. A wicked stench indeed, it seemed to converge there like the decomposing corpse of Father Zossima. From afar the temple lay in statuesque repose: the serried pillars, bare, not those of buff backgrounds, encasing bodhisattva warriors of grey, orange and ochre robes. A pity indeed: I had forgotten to count the number of ribs and joists.

Why had the monks not awakened me? Another tinkling, triangular sound. Was this not the same assembly hall that I had once lingered in, alone, cold: the two long rows of rock benches now dilapidated, yet imprinted with the hollows of the eternally seated monks and their High Priests. Could that place have been the proto-type of the buddhist *vihara*? There I did sit alone, the echoes of the chant circulating within an empty uterine chamber, yet flitting in and out of unfinished chiseled traces upon the walls and floors. But these visions held no resonant souvenir, for like all starred darkness, the dawning flood of pellucid light caused to disappear, for ever, the Vision...

Why was I left to my visions and dreams? Had they all forsaken me to my starry vigil? The visions would multiply like all sleepless nights. Yet they were real! And it was this reality, these *candlelight scenes*, that drew me to the drum beat, to the tinkle of the triangle, to the blare of the ox-horn; pinned me to the Mountain...Not to be pitied is a sign of exclusion. Not to pity oneself is a sign of ontological inclusion. Not to pity others a sign of strength for the weak, their only salvation from the pitying fools who bury them deeper into their self-dug graves...

'Untergehen! Untergehen!' rang the *relmo*. The face of that Buddha, of brow serene, sensuel, inactive, looming large in its golden rimmed green nimbus, pursed its lips in a compassionate smile. In His hand he held a shell bowl from which a lotus of nelumbo blue sprouted...

The mountains can provoke powerful and insane visions; trigger unfathomable obsessions: was any particular peak overwhelming me? Would the obsessions, if any, transform into a Style? How was one to overcome that obsession? Perhaps by donning the mask and dancing with the laughing skeletons...to dance, yes, to dance to the service of thought...to the service of *leaping*...

And so I began to go 'go down' as the bold glowing sun rose over the village of Yugar, setting afire the rushing waters of the Lungnak promising many a new Dawn to come. Untergehen! Untergehen! Was it not time for this subterranean soul to rise once again to the surface? This habit had endured long enough...

*... 'Death, thy servant, is at my door. He has crossed the unknown sea and brought thy call to my home.
The night is dark and my heart is fearful -yet I will take up the lamp, open my gates and bow to him my welcome.
It is thy messenger who stands at my door...'*

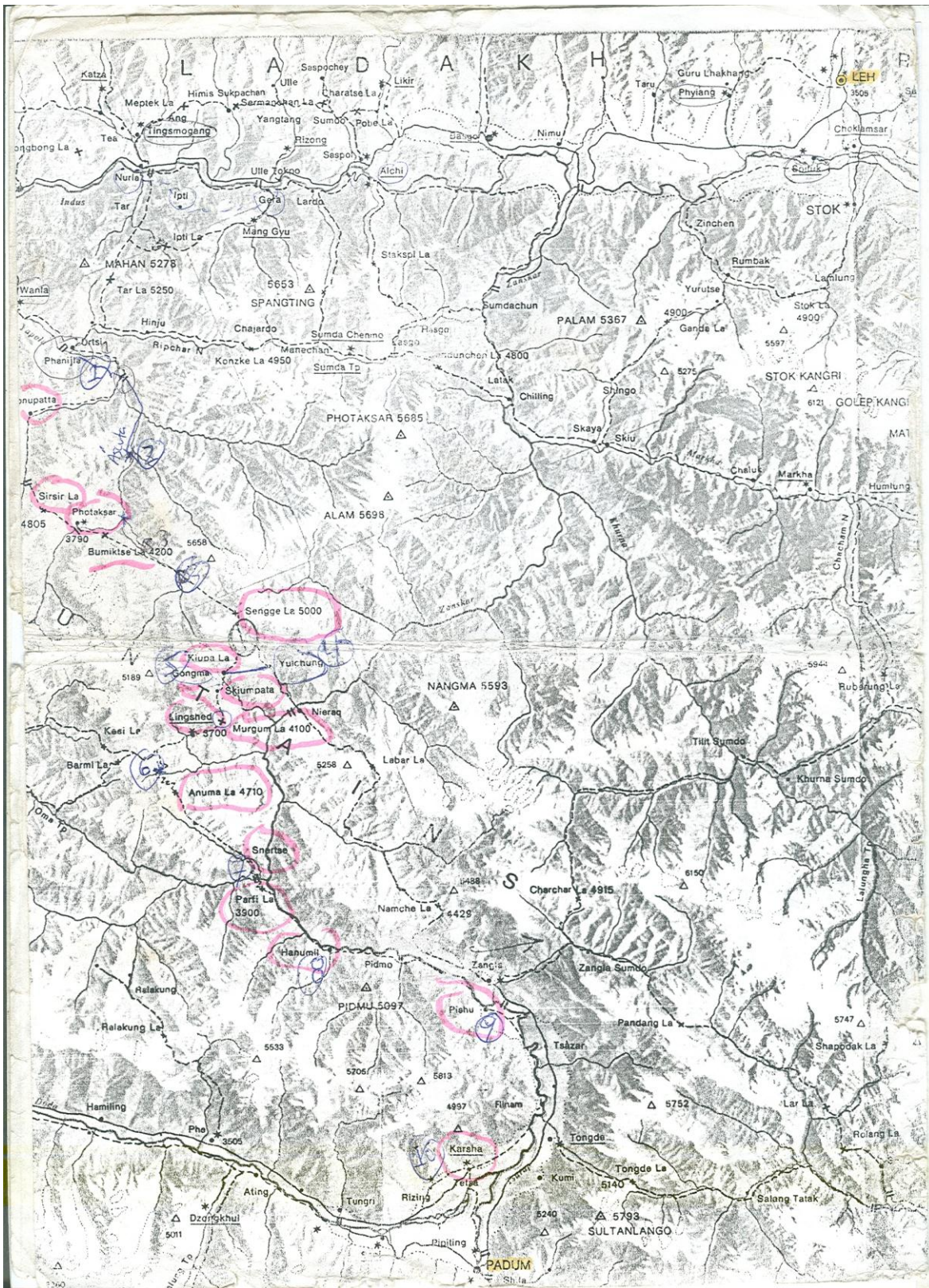
Nicholai Roerich 'Agni Yoga'

En hommage à Alexandre Csoma de Kőrös

Appendix: Maps



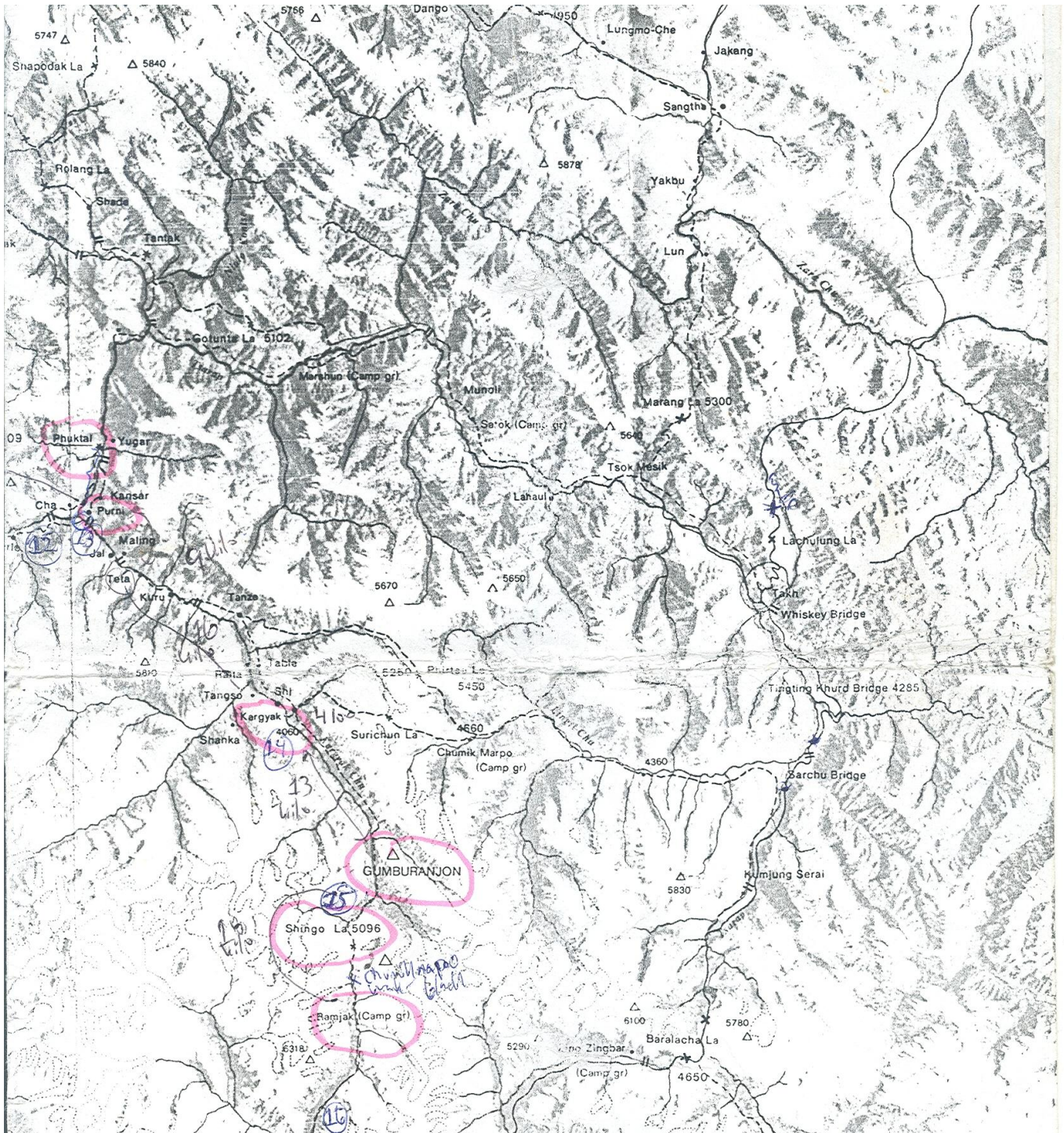
Map 1



Map 2



Map 3



Map 4