

NOTES FROM NEPAL: REFLECTIONS OF A MEDICAL STUDENT ON SHAMANS, LAMAS, SERPENTS, AND FORTUNES

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Twenty years ago, I went to Nepal for 6 weeks with a group of medical students on a public health project through Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. We conducted health surveys high in the remote Arun River valley. Following are excerpts of my account of the journey, a journey that took me to witness ancient animistic healing rituals, into conversations with shamans, lamas, and the monks/doctors of Tibetan Medicine, into the inevitable marriage of spirit and healing.

APRIL 17, 1986

Hedangna, Nepal

The night is still, a few dogs and jackals bark and scream, but otherwise I am left with the breeze and the impressions of the day, my first glimpse into the hearts and hearths of the people who live in this unexplored valley.

In the morning, we tediously pour over our survey questions again, but this time we finally set out to test them. A thin man with unkempt hair and shy and curious eyes approaches us. He has just walked 8 hours from his village to get help for his brother, who has been sick for 10 months and is getting worse. We can offer nothing, but we tell him to bring his brother to the clinic tomorrow. It is difficult to imagine him carrying a sick man from many villages away to see some itinerant doctors who may or may not be able to offer any help. We continue up the hillside in view of the wavy patterns of terraced fields planted with rice, wheat, corn, and millet, or simply left fallow.

Now in the distance of the night I hear the drum beat of the *Dami Jankri*, or native healer, purging spirits, curing sick souls, managing God's work to relieve the suffering in the darkness of the night. It is a sound from a different time, a time past, where the beings and spirits that form our legends, the myths that color our unconscious were part of our daily existence; it is the sound of the forces that play with us for our survival. It goes on, this music. It gets louder and softer, softer and louder, changing rhythm and intensity.

I can clearly visualize the scene in a dark home, the light of the day gone, the family gathered, the healer entranced, summoning powers from the mystery to heal a sick being, to place this soul again in the center of the universe from which he has strayed, to place once again into equilibrium the forces that have unbalanced him. For a moment, I can go there in my imagination, see the ailing villager and the healer.

Perhaps the healer is with the first woman we visited today in our survey. We came upon the house quietly, a goat in the yard, flax and millet seeds spread on the straw mats in the sun to dry, no one to be seen. Then a head rose up from the porch of a small 2-story, thatched-roof mud house shaped in soft lines, the color of the earth, white with ochre patterns, symbols painted on the front. That was this morning.

It is dark now. Steve, Karen (2 other medical students), and I decide to follow the drum beat up the mountainside. We move quietly across fields and stone paths as the beating rises and falls in the night. We arrive at a terrace and see a light casting its glow out into the dark; the evening is suffused with moonlight silhouetting the valley and the ridges across the great Arun River that drains Mount Everest. I catch my breath, crouch down low, and watch the primordial ritual unfold before me as if from a page of an ancient culture suspended in time. Drumming and chanting fill the night air; it comes from a thatched roof house that is open to view.

A family is gathered within, women, children, men, and the *Dami Jankri*. Some are playing a metal cymbal-like instrument, clanging a dissonant rhythm. One woman is standing, I see her shadow cast against the back of the house reflected by the glow of an oil flame, dancing and leaping from a round metal globe licking the darkness with orange flames. A child carries the flame outside and other children gather round. A woman's voice speaks—an incantation, perhaps a prayer, and an invocation of greater beings. And the chanting continues, deep and constant, through the rise and fall of the drumbeat. Then there is quiet, apparently a lull in the ritualized healing.

A woman comes down from the house and sees us crouching; I call out softly, "Namaste." And she cries back to the house. We slip away as she calls again, louder. It is not over. Once more, as I sit here in the dark midnight hours writing by candlelight while all else are asleep, I hear the beating in the night. Did the woman see our faces; know from where we came, wonder whether we were

good or bad spirits? Were we sacrilegious in approaching the center of their religious life?

They come to us and watch us as we bathe, eat, dress in our tents, carry out our daily ablutions and work in the clinic, where we perform our own rituals of healing. What would these proud and tough mountain people think of us now, peering into their hearth? And what manner of healing was occurring, who was the sick one, what was the illness, what part of the heart and mind was the healer working his craft upon? It is a window to another world, a nighttime world that invokes all the power, the dark, and the light of our lives. It is a window open to the forces that play with these people, the unpredictable forces of nature, of God who provides rain and crops or drought and famine, who gives children and as easily steals them away. Their entire existence remains shrouded in the unknown, and their contact to that place through the seers and healers among them gives the villagers a tiny grasp on ultimately uncontrollable forces.

This land takes me back off the road of time; traces of the 20th century are distant. These people are dignified in their way despite their dirty bodies, despite the pungent odor of their bodies covered in the scents of toil, earth, and unwashed essence. This is a hidden corner of the world; the deep cavernous river valley draining the roof of the world is inaccessible except to the hardy, and then only by foot. This is the land of red pandas and yetis. And here we live for a sliver of our lives, glimpsing something that is untouchable by most. It is the past, unadorned, unchanged, where notions of spirits and kinship, of hearth and mind influenced only by the tenor of their land and life, still linger. It is a place where few have gone, abutting a restricted border zone with Tibet, from whence men come down, men with untamed long black hair billowing wildly from their caps, eyes that shine with power, instilling respect if not terror, men who live high and hard; from whence their women come, tough and nearly invincible, strong and more agile on the mountain slopes than their oxen. We look at each other like animals from different lands. There is little between them and death except their resourcefulness and strength. So we are in their place now, and I feel weak next to them. I come here to offer help, but instead it is they who teach me by their ruggedness, their determination, their laughter and tranquility as they carry out their living.

APRIL 20, 1986

Hedangna

Yesterday we surveyed houses at the distant edge of the village. But the night before that we peered into the world of the *Dami Jankris*, slipping away when we were discovered. The next day, we found that they wanted us to join them. They had sent a boy after us in the night. The *Dami* came down to our camp and invited us back. What we saw the night before was the healer's act of expelling the evil spirits from an 8-months-pregnant woman so that her baby would be well. In the night, we once again walked up to the sound of the drumming along a moonlit trail. We came to the house of the *Pradam Panch*, the head of the village.

The family was gathered on the porch, where the healer sat cross-legged in a corner before his tray of sacraments. The oil flame silhouetted his figure against the wall, playing shadows of light against his ornaments and the long braided strand of hair coming down the right side of his shaved head. On the woven bamboo tray laid many small piles of rice carefully arranged and dark irregular nuts strung together like a necklace. Three large crystals stood up from the rice piles, and a few rupees were sprinkled about. Green leafy branches had been tied together and were set up against the wall in the corner of the porch. He sat before his ceremonial altar, beating a flat round drum held upright with a curved wooden stick, chanting unintelligible sounds, sacred words of purification. The chanting and drumming rose and fell; the shaman rose to begin a ritualistic dance in front of the head of the household and his wife. He was there to purify the house for spring, prophylaxis against pestilence, famine, disease, and all manner of evil things and bad fortune, a yearly spring cleaning, I imagine.

He moved in rhythm, holding 2 bamboo-like rods with finely shaved ends that danced as he shook them. His entire body vibrated as he danced to the drum his assistant played; the cymbals attached to his chest jangled with him. He had a long leafy plant tied together that he used as a broom to purge the evil spirits. He alternately touched his rod, then the plants, to the objects of purification—the man and his wife, first on 1 shoulder, the head, then the other shoulder, their backs and laps, shaking and chanting; then he whacked the rods with his plants, then hit the people. This went on for hours, purifying each member of the family in succession, the daughters and sons and the grandmother, who had a sickness. He removed the grandmother's shirt and placed a heavy brass plate upon her back that stuck without slipping. "It sticks," the shaman said, "when one is sick."

Throughout the ceremony, children came and went, laughed and played as though there was nothing unusual or curious going on. Eventually, the young ones huddled together in a pile on straw mats under blankets in the moonlight, finding their own place, looking after their own needs.

Later, the *Pradam Panch* brought a tray out from inside the house. I could peer inside and see a wall painted in symbols, almost hieroglyphics, a sun and a triangle in long rows in white and ochre. The tray was adorned with small effigies of animals, mostly of the barnyard variety. Often real animals are sacrificed, first chickens, then goats, pigs, and water buffalo, depending on the resolution or persistence of the illness. But here the animal effigies were used in lieu of live animals to lure the spirits away from the house and pacify the Gods. The healer ceremoniously chanted and sprinkled herbs and incense over the tray. Then, all at once, the tray was lifted and spirited away, off the porch, far from the house to fool the evil spirits into following. The ceremony continued for hours, but the *Dami Jankri* paused periodically for a cigarette and hashish break. The night was suffused with the scent of burning sage and incense. The moonlight cast its shadow upon us all. The evening passed slowly, as if what had come to pass had come many times before and would come many times again.

APRIL 26, 1986

Hedangna

Perched on the rock that juts from the mountaintop where the Tibetan Lama keeps his hermitage and watches over the well-being of his village, I see before me snatches of life among the green mountains, snow-capped peaks, and cascading waterfalls pouring down after the last 2 days of rain. Villagers are working in their fields, washing pots, grinding flour and carrying, as always, gre at loads up and down the mountain. I sit here reeling from yesterday's events and images: a day of clouds like cotton filling the valley filtered with streaks of sunlight, a day of rain and *Dami Jankris*, exploring the border between our conscious world and the invisible mysteries, forces that enter our lives without our awareness, creating patterns that determine our existence on subtle levels.

Yesterday, late in the afternoon, a group of us set out to visit Padkumari Parajuli, a *Chetri* woman from the ancient caste of warriors. She is a shaman. We walked lightly long the path, crossing streams and terraced fields until we reached the next village.

Only the daughter was home, a 15-year-old girl with a kind and gentle face. She spread out straw mats on the porch of her small house. It had only 2 rooms, one of which was her mother's ceremonial room. We waited.

At the last hint of dusk, her mother arrived. I had seen her—not knowing who she was—a few days before at the clinic for a toothache. She was startled to see all of us, despite the fact that we had arranged to come. Apparently, time here is fluid and undefined, means little. At first there was awkwardness. The moon was full and it was Friday, the day she performs her weekly ceremonies and healing for those in need. Yet she had not cleaned her altar room or bathed herself properly. But she had fasted. If we all prayed and she prayed to the Gods, then she could practice her weekly ceremony with us watching. We offered to leave but she said it would bring great sorrow if we left without receiving something. And so we stayed and prayed.

Padkumari is a widow with 1 child. Her father is also a healer. Now she is 30. Ten years ago her husband died, and she began at that time to have strong dreams and experiences, spontaneous shaking and chanting. At first she resisted, afraid. But later another healer recognized her. She learned *mantras*, or sacred words of healing, as well as the songs and ceremonies from a master, a male *Dami Jankri*.

She is a slight woman with a serene and still peace washing over her face. When she speaks, though I understand none of the meaning of her words, the mellifluous sound of her voice rising and falling, colored by gestures and expression, conveys kindness and love. She listens to us with her eyes open, watching, absorbing, and attempting to catch the subtle messages behind words.

And so it began as she asked us to be patient while she cleaned her small sacred room. Through the doorway of her house we could see the sparse mud floor, a straw mat in one corner, a small fire in the other corner, brass water pots and plates glowing against the wall. She unlocked the altar room and swept it out carefully, then changed her clothes, put on a bright sea green flow-

ered skirt, wrapped her waist and her head with cloth, and began to gather and set out her sacred objects: a small dish filled with oil, another with milk, and a plate of rice, beside which she placed the oil lamp. She added coins and sticks of incense. She placed these on her altar, with the 7 water jars on the 7 shelves, along with the other sacred objects—a seashell, sticks, and plants. She gathered the sacred nuts on a string and placed them around her neck. Each act was done with purpose and care.

Coals were brought from the fire into the small altar room, no more than 5 ft by 3 ft by 5 ft high, with a doorway so narrow I had to enter crouched and sideways. She spread the hot coals on the floor and sprinkled leaves of sage around to purify the room (much in the same manner as Native Americans use sage for their purification rituals).

She grabbed the coal with her bare hands, grasped it tightly and began to chant, crushing the coal in her hands and sprinkling the ashes over her body, head, legs, arms, feet, and back. There was no sign that she burned her hands. In 1 hand she then cupped the seashell carved with ancient designs and blew into the end, echoing out a call, long and deep, 3 times, punctuated by 3 short, high-pitched bursts. After she replaced the shell carefully upon the altar, she grasped a small drum on a stick with 2 wooden balls attached, 1 to each side. In her other hand she held a brass bell. She beat the drum, she rang the bell, and her voice cried out in song. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, her body began to shake until the drum was racing and her whole body vibrated furiously as she sat cross-legged in front of the altar. She stopped drumming and continued shaking, contorting, as if possessed by a spirit. Finally, her preparations were done.

The room was purified, the Gods called upon to make good this night. Now we were to pray in our own way to create goodness. We entered the room, placed our rupees on the altar, and prayed as she beat her drum and chanted her song. Her shadow, like all the others, was cast against the wall, the drumstick shaped like a serpent danced with her silhouette against the earthen interior of her sacred room.

When we finished our prayers, she took another drum, large, round, and shaped like a paddle, that she began to beat in rhythm with her chanting. Her body shook once again; the tempo and volume of the chanting grew until she stood up and began to dance, hopping on 1 foot, then the other, then shaking, then dancing in a frenzy. On and on she chanted and danced. After half an hour, she stopped, drenched in sweat, her face radiant in the glow, calm and light. By this time, the villagers began to gather, crowding us out, having no sense of personal space, touching, hanging all over us, peering into the small room, peering at us, at ease and matter of fact about all that was occurring.

Most of us left; only Pasang, our Tibetan translator, and Steve and I remained, intently aware of the mass of strong-smelling bodies pressed against us in the sea of flesh and spirit. They came to be part of this, to gain some merit, some light or healing. We all gathered round the spirit channel, the window to another world, in the space before all religion, in that space when natural forces imbued with spirit control our fate, when we depend on those windows to

the other world to make sense of our experience.

Pasang was the first to ask his fortune, then each of us followed in turn. I placed my rupees on the altar; she touched them with oil from her lamp, then with the end of her drum, calling to the Gods, chanting, singing, shaking until she stopped, changing from her melodious song into a staccato story of my fortune.

“Your father has 3 children, your future is bright, your Karma powerful, your trekking will bring you no harm. There is no disease in your body and your family will be good.” (In fact, my mother has two children, and my father, 3, one from another marriage.)

She told Steve that his arm and leg were hurting him, and yes, he had fallen 2 days before her words were said. She told him that some child of his siblings or cousins would soon die, or was already dead. As for Pasang, she said that there was a widow in his home, and yes, his father is dead. Soon, in 2 or 3 months, he himself would have a sickness of his lungs. Strangely, the other night, another shaman said the same thing to him, a sickness in 2 or 3 months. How strange, once, twice, perhaps a coincidence, but 3 times? What is that other world where time is not linear, but circular, where the subtle patterns that form our unconscious activity and interactions are written?

The evening has filled with the chaos of the spectators and worshippers, and the 1-pointed focus of the woman who despite all the noise and people about, maintained her rhythm, her entrance into another realm, who gave me the sense of returning to an original scene where elemental forces, spiritual guides and dream messages are woven into the texture of each day, each life. Out of context, what we observed and partook in seems a primitive reaction to the ignorance of the true nature of reality or even the hysterical acting out of neurotic possession, the manifestation of a diseased mind. It could be a type of mass psychosis. Except for some strange incongruities.

Perhaps I too am a dupe absorbed in the fantastic mystery of the scene, swallowed in this valley, affected by the great Arun River Valley, the mountains, clouds, and remoteness of this land, wanting to believe just as these people do in something greater, in a benevolent protector, in evil forces from which I must be protected, but my experience, my sixth sense points me toward acknowledging the power of these healers. The language is different, the symbols, images, and rituals exotic and bizarre; yet a quality, a subtle theme, underlies all these practices. In all cultures there are holy people, the healer with connection to other worlds, conduits for wisdom and spiritual guidance. The particular form in which these people carry out their work depends upon the unique culture, the place, the plants, and the animals in the land. Even if the realms, the spirits, the existence of God are a creation of the human mind, it still serves a basic need to integrate the world, to explain the unknown and provide a way of relationship to the self, the other, the world and the universe; it serves to give meaning.

As we became more developed, the forms changed. The original connections to life's forces became filtered through education, science, and material ease, leading to a striving beyond man's basic needs, to the creation of a mind unaware of the unconscious, a world disconnected from spirit. We still have our priests and rab-

bis, but they have lost their power, have become impotent as the spiritual became political, as the God became money.

But we came back here, stepping off the world, reaching back through time, where the barrier and the buffers and filters of the modern world are not even known, and people have only the earth, each other, the drama of human life, and the power of things that come mysteriously: storms, births, sickness, and death. Generously they welcome us. We are so new, so unknown, not regarded at all with suspicion or jealousy. These spiritual people are eager to share their practices, seeing us as healers too, healers imbued with the same forces alternately powerful and impotent toward sickness and death.

So I go back to the incongruities, to last night. What we saw could be the machinations of a crazed woman except for her presence, her serene face, her composure and clear eyes that radiated warmth, that spoke of an infinite kindness, that showed no disordered thinking. And her words were simple, matter of fact, not elaborate or dramatic; in the context of the moment, of their lives here, it did not seem odd or disconnected. She was far from a hysterical woman. She was a farmer, caring for her daily needs, and a simple villager who had been graced with special vision, with access to dreams, to unseen patterns that connect.

She told us of our lives, gave us guidance, gathered us into the human family. Honored by our visit, the night continued, crowded with many people, children, and 1 Tibetan woman whom I shall remember. She lived a day's walk from the clinic. People travel long distances and stay in one another's homes. Guests are always welcome, connected by the same forces, always aware of the value of giving. I huddled next to this woman, who was sweating in her heavy wool clothes, in her square cap with rainbow colors adorned with silver coins and jewels, and I breathed her breath. She admired the fine material of my socks. I offered them to her. She took them for her sick husband to keep his feet warm in their high village of northern Nepal. The smiles and easy understanding, the giving and receiving, joined us for a moment.

The evening ended. We walked back through the misting rain to the glow of the full moon behind the clouds and arrived at midnight in a trance walk on the rocky trails. A day and evening has passed. We are now all in the schoolhouse. The monsoons have begun, and our campsite and tents are flooded. Hard storms pelt us. This afternoon, the hail fell in ice cubes 1 inch in diameter.

APRIL 27, 1986

Hedangna

In this valley there are many ethnic groups—*Chetri*, *Rai*, *Tibetan*, and *Gurung*—and each has its own language and slightly different culture and religion, yet common to all are the existence of shamans. Their practices often blend into common rituals with only subtle distinctions. And so it was we found when we visited a *Rai* healer. The *Rais* came across the Himalayas from Mongolia hundreds of years ago to settle in the cradle of the roof of the world. This man called himself a *Pujaray*, or healer. We found him in his thatched-roof, stone-and-mud house on the hillside in the rain. We heard tell of him from the local villagers. He lives with his brother's

family; he is unmarried, a celibate, and a devotee—a pure link to another world. He emerged from the dark, smoky house onto the porch and gave us, as always, straw mats to sit on. My friend and translator, Pasang, was my tongue and my ears, allowing me to imbibe the flavor and rhythm of the man without the intercession of language. The shaman called himself “*Satruman Kai* or *Janki Man Prai*”; he does not quite seem to know or be much concerned about his uncertainty. He is 45, he thinks. He is a happy man, almost like a child, smiling and laughing as we talk. He is open and genuine, apparently happy to share his world with me.

He became a healer many years ago. When his grandfather, who was also a healer, died, young Sat ruman had a dream. In this dream, his grandfather came to him and instructed his grandson to go to a certain place to find him and receive instruction. His grandfather became his master. Sat ruman Kai went the next day to this place, prepared an altar with incense and prayed; he prayed for permission to contact his guru, his ancestors’ teachers, the God of everything, the God of the waters and the universe. He tells me that he began to shake uncontrollably, to feel cold, to feel black, unconscious, his heart tearing. He thought, “Why is this happening to me, an ordinary person?” This was the beginning of his power, his ability to contact other worlds.

He reaches his teacher now only through his dreams. He has no earthly guru. The “master” instructs, tells him where to go to find him—to a stream, a pond, a tree, a cove, or a bana garden. And there he goes to prepare an altar of bana tree and incense. His master “opens the door,” helps him through to another world.

Throughout his tale he squats a few feet from me, his arms wrapped around his knees, clad in a loincloth, a ratty shirt and vest, and a small dirty cloth cap covering his head, which is completely shaved except for a small strand of hair dangling from the side. He remains squatting there in his bare feet on the mud porch, recounting his introduction to that world, his eyes darting back and forth, looking upw ard, and rolling into his head, looking into an unknown world. His speech is a song; he chants his story.

I ask him what causes disease, how he treats people, how he diagnoses illness. His answers are sweeping and mystical, yet honest. He asks his master, his great God of the universe, Suhari, the God of the jungle, to purify the evil spirits. He connects with the sick person by palpating his pulse, touching an article of clothing, thereby directing the God. He makes no diagnosis, but rather makes an offering of blood from a chicken, goat, or water buffalo to please the God, to welcome the God’s presence. He chants sacred mantras, songs of healing that have come to him from his ancestors in dreams, songs that come automatically in a trance. He does not remember the songs and cannot repeat them when I ask.

He is unsure of why people get sick; perhaps it is the spirits, perhaps something else. He has no concept of Western medicine, of germs. His medicines are incense, mantras, and sacrificial animals. This is all he knows, all that is available to him.

I ask, “What if your practices fail; what happens when the sick person does not heal?”

He answers, “I cannot heal everything; I am not God; I am not everything.”

For him, the process is shrouded in mystery, much is still unknown, except some way, somehow, he has a link to the spirits, forces beyond the reach of most people.

“What about death?” I ask.

He laughs. “Death—we cannot say anything about it. When people live, we can talk with them, do for them, but when one dies, the person has lost his body; he becomes like clay, like soil. There is only one God, the God of everything, the universal God. But evil arises from the spirits of dead people who live in another realm and return to manifest evil on earth.”

Each healer seems to have a different conception of good and evil, ranging from monotheistic to pantheistic, all woven into the fabric of the culture, absorbing strands of Hindu and Buddhist deities, gathering whatever wisdom or forces they can, doing whatever works. There is no sense of exclusivity, no boundaries to the concepts of what constitutes a true spiritual life. They accept whatever works, whatever attracts the individual healer: Hindu, Buddhist, animist—no matter.

All the villagers, whether from the Indian plains or the Tibetan plateau, mix their practices into a *mélange* of worship, gathering merit from all sources. So it was not surprising to find all the healers open to Western medicine, incorporating it without any understanding. For them, it is only another mystery. This healer likened his spiritual healing to Western medicine. He works with incense; we work with medicines. If it works, it works. If not, it doesn’t. If it does not work, it is not his fault, but simply the nature of the person who has the disease and their karma. Death and sickness are invisible. “We can never see it with the naked eye; we can only guess what happens.”

We talk and laugh, sitting on his porch in the rain, sharing a point of contact between 2 worlds, our minds inhabiting different realms, but we are human beings squatting together on a wet morning, and we are of 1 heart. There is a lack of contact with the Western world, with any sense of its development or its science. There is an equal lack of desire to find out about the West. It is not that they are not interested or curious; rather, it never occurs to them to question, to discover. We ask if they have any questions about us, our world, and always the answer is no. No questions; apparently content with the way things are, with their karma, with their station in life, the result of many lifetimes of accumulated merit or ignorance.

APRIL 28, 1986

Hedangna

The monsoon has come. Our camp is flooded. Multiple waterfalls born from nature form white streaks down the mountain. Snow, fresh and white, covers the peaks, and the rain keeps coming. Now in the day’s first light, the clouds hang heavy in the valley below. It seems a propitious moment to meet a veritable Tibetan lama, the guardian of the village, and 6 of us, 4 medical students and 2 Tibetan translators, Tashi and Pasang, who by now are our allies and friends in discovery, climb the steep mountainside to the lama’s stone hut perched on a cliff overlooking the Himalayas. His name is Tenga Lama. He is from the Tibetan village

of Hatiya, 2 days' walk from here. In his village, he is both farmer and father. Yet he comes to Hedangna in April and October, the 2 critical times of the year when the rains must come and the rains must stop; he comes to protect the village from various hells, to create rain, to stop rain, to ward off famine.

Tenga Lama's father was lama, as was his father before him and his father before him, who learned from the Dalai Lama. They have been watching over the fortunes of this valley for generations. There is a monastery in his village, and when he was 9 years old he began his initiation into Tibetan Buddhism, into the endless teachings of the Buddha and the sacred mantras that are used to control the elements. When he comes to this village he is paid in kilos of grain, a little from each household to protect it from hell. For another 3 months of the year he goes into seclusion, meditating, practicing the mantras and visualizations that sustain his power and propel him toward his ultimate goal: to reach Buddhahood, enlightenment. The rest of the year he is husband, father, and farmer. He comes this spring to Hedangna with his little boy, perhaps to begin anew the endless cycle of initiations.

We walk up to the door of his 10-by-15-ft stone hut, peer into the open door. He is still lying in his blankets with his son, warmed by the fire near the wall. He invites us in and we gather round, barely able to fit. He dresses, puts on his pointed lama's cap with the image of Kalchakra, the symbol of unification of male and female sexual enlightenment carved in yak bone and pinned to the front of his cap. He removes his necklace from a hook and places it round his neck. It is made of one hundred eight wooden beads, representing one hundred eight different Gods, and adorned with carved amulets and ornaments. One lone carved ivory tusk forms the beginning and end of the cycle of mantra (sacred sounds or words), repeated one hundred eight times.

"Om Mane Padme Hum."

It literally means "the jewel in the Lotus flower;" however, each syllable represents 1 of the 6 self-created hells of consciousness that we continually recreate through our lives in an endless cycle of birth and rebirth. By chanting the mantra, the self-sustaining prisons of our minds are made conscious and purged with the breath that carries the sound. The elephant tusk on the Tibetan "rosary" represents the elephant that is king of the serpent, who is in turn king of the water; "*Naga*" controls the water and the rains. There is also a red coral representing the heart of the goddess "*Tara*." The other iron and silver ornaments grant his necklace more power. Besides the necklace, he wears a red string with a small gold Buddha and a picture of the Dalai Lama, who is his protector.

He is a happy little man with a round face and gentle air about him, totally at ease with us, willing to share whatever small piece of his religion and life that he is able. I give him in return a picture of the Dalai Lama, which he touches reverently to his forehead.

Then we begin to ask questions about his practices, his function here, and how he protects the area from the "hells."

"To learn the practice," he says, "you must learn the Buddhist texts, learn and practice the sacred mantras with the aid of a teacher."

He is a student of *Awaloketsvara*, the Bodhisattva of compassion. (A Bodhisattva is a nearly enlightened being who turns back from the gate of his own enlightenment in order to save all sentient beings from their ignorance and hence their suffering.) In order to attain the powers of a lama, he must abstain from meat, salt, and alcohol, retreat to a cave or monastery, and continuously chant the mantra nine hundred thousand times, counting with his beaded necklace for 2 to 3 months. Only then is he able to emerge and practice his power of moving the clouds and maintaining the mantra in daily life.

His main focus of visualization, source of power and wisdom, is "*Padasyudakpu*," the universal God with 3 faces and 6 hands, the controller of *Nak*, the serpent, *Devi*, the goddess, and *Bud* the ghost. The faces are red, white, and black, each with a corresponding, identically colored serpent; upon the head of this universal God sits an eagle with a beak and claws of iron and feathers of knives. The eagle is the vehicle for Lord Vishnu. By visualizing this, he becomes the eagle and flies about the land to control the evil forces, the hells and rains. He sits there, on his rock, watching the valley, and performs his daily practices, his tantric mantras and visualizations.

People also come to him for healing, to remove the evil forces, the spirits. He performs ceremonies in people's names, never sacrificing animals, for Buddhists do not kill. Rather, he makes effigies to draw away the evil forces from the person. He sees the local shamans, the *Dami Jankris*, as misguided, perhaps even evil, men who have no concept of where they are going, of what the greater purpose is, the seeking toward Nirvana, toward the fulfillment of compassion. He sees the villagers as fools who are ignorant of Western medicine, who simply kill animals to rid themselves of sickness. He will perform ceremonies only when there is no Western medicine available, realizing that spiritual healing is better than none at all. His criticism seems incongruous in the face of his description of how he becomes an eagle and flies about affecting the colors and the weather. But his face belies intensity as he describes his transformation into an eagle, spreading his arms in mock flight. All his descriptions of his esoteric practices are matter of fact, and for him they are.

We leave with warm goodbyes and the admonition that it would take a long, long time to recount his entire life, all of Buddhism and his practices. We leave, the rain our companion, as we make our descent from his world. I feel as if I taste just a minute grain from the depths of his learning, from the energy of his life, a life wrapped in spiritual practice, each day another opportunity to move further along the endless teachings, the endless knowledge. It is wonderful to imagine him carrying out his life, protecting villages, saying mantra and visualizing images of God for months each year, tending his crops, loving his family and making pilgrimages to sacred places—to Tibet and Darjeeling, Bhutan and Boudanath, continuing a life evolved centuries ago, now relatively unchanged.

The question of whether his powers are real seems irrelevant. It is simply his life. No one seems to care. He is the symbol of the holy man. We all want reminders of God about us to protect us from ourselves.

MAY 10, 1986

Kathmandu

The mountains are distant now over the rim of the city. We have descended to Kathmandu. But today I entered again that remote theater of the unknown. Walking in the street, I ran into Chousang, one of our translators, on his way to get medicine for his wife from the local Tibetan doctor. Call it coincidence, synchronicity, or the unseen patterns that connect, but Pasang, who was going to take me to see this doctor, had left unexpectedly. I was disappointed. I wanted to meet this particular doctor and resigned myself to other realms of discovery on my meandering through the streets of Kathmandu. Then I meet Chousang, and merrily I go along.

We walk into the large, cement, bare, and clean building that is home to young monks and 2 doctors. It is their clinic as well as the clinic for the whole Tibetan community. It is quiet; the old doctor is sleeping or perhaps meditating. The terrace looks out over Dingo Kinsey's new monastery. (Dingo Kinsey Rinpoche is said to be one of the living Buddhas. He is at the end of a direct line of transmission from the Buddha himself and a repository of Buddhist wisdom and law—in short, an enlightened soul. He also happens to be the personal guru of the King of Bhutan and drives an emerald green Mercedes, a gift from the king.) On the terrace, a number of young monks, all younger than 12, sit in their maroon robes, rolling small balls of herbs into the pills that form the pharmacopoeia of Tibetan medicine. Carefully, they place each completed pill on a woven bamboo basket in complete geometric symmetry.

An old monk with long white whiskers and enormous ears that fan like sails from his head informs us we can see the doctor. He comes out of his room, which adjoins the small clinic. He is dressed in long maroon robes, his head shaved. Thick black-rimmed glasses are held round his head by a red lama string nowhere near his ears. His face radiates a serene and happy interior.

Chousang, one of our Tibetan guides and translators, talks to him first about his wife, who, 3 months after giving birth, still has abdominal pains and swelling. They speak in Tibetan, the doctor sitting cross-legged on a platform in front of his desk, listening.

As they talk, I look around the small room. In one corner is his desk, and behind it along the wall is an assortment of herbal preparations in the form of small, mud-colored round pills, carefully labeled and stored in Hörlick's malt jars. In each corner, bags upon bags of these medicines brought overland from Tibet are stacked. There are a few chairs, a bed frame without a mattress, and a large photograph of the Dalai Lama wearing the symbol of the yellow hat sect, which he leads, a great crescent-shaped yellow hat. Though spartan, the room, the medicines, the monk/doctor, priest/healer, give me the feeling of safety and protection.

Slowly and in pieces, the story unfolds. Appreciating my interest, he laments that there are over three hundred different medicinal preparations, each containing up to 35 different herbs, and thus it is impossible to share it all with me in such a short space of time. I clarify the confusion in the translation, saying I am

not interested so much in Tibetan medicines per se, but in Tibetan medicine as a whole.

He is 68 years old, born in Western Tibet, where he learned medicine as a young monk from another doctor as an apprentice, learning the texts, the herbs and plants, the techniques for preparation most doctors learn in formal medical schools. There were none in his remote village. He learned the subtle skill of pulse diagnosis, stool and urine analysis from his teacher and engaged simultaneously in the life of the novice monk. He carried on with his work until 1959, when the Chinese invaded Tibet, when they jailed and murdered religious and political leaders and oppressed the elite class. He remained in Chinese jail for 22 years. At first he was a laborer carrying wood. He was moved several times, first into West Tibet, then to Xiagatse and then near Lhasa. He did not practice medicine for the first 8 years of his imprisonment. The Chinese then realized that their purpose might be better served with him as a clinic doctor in jail. He worked there, still a prisoner, until they gave him his own clinic of Tibetan medicine that he ran for a few years near Lhasa. In 1981, he was given the choice to stay in Lhasa or return to his native village in Western Tibet. He chose the latter.

After a few months in his village, at the age of 63, he escaped a cross into India to Dharmasala to visit the Dalai Lama, who told him to remain in India or go to Kathmandu to practice. He had intended to return home to his village in Tibet, as conditions were improving, but his guru requested otherwise.

I sit with him for 2 hours in that small room as patients come and go, as he practices his art, as his patients recount the history of their illnesses and their treatments. The patients speak to me as well. One man, a middle-aged Tibetan in jeans and a Western shirt, enters, carrying his motorcycle helmet. He sits beside the doctor, who feels his pulse, asks him a few questions, and then dispenses some mysterious little pills. The patient receives no relief from the Western doctors or their medicines. He finally, in desperation, comes to the Tibetan doctors. The medicines work more slowly and subtly, not only affecting the diseased organ but also acting to restore the entire pattern of imbalance that originally gave rise to the disease. Each week, the patient returns to have the progress of his healing assessed by pulse and a number of pointed questions and to have the precise herbs adjusted to the new conditions in the body created by the previous herbal formula. With the smile of a child given chocolate, the patient shares his enthusiasm for the power of the medicine that cures his ills and the power of the doctor who makes him feel cared for and protected.

Curious to test his acumen and feel for myself his directed attention, I complain of a chronic itching of my scalp. He motions me to come close to him. Gently, he flips his hand through my hair, takes my hand in his, and palpates my pulse with his long, soft fingers, which can read the mysterious and subtle changes of energy, the disturbances that create disease. He first uses 3 fingers, examining the pulse at different depths, at 3 different points along the artery on each hand. As he feels the throbbing of blood in my vessels, he looks intently, his eyes gazing out as through he is reading from an invisible text, seeing the meaning of the pulsations

beneath his fingertips. Often, there is a curious expression of recognition on his smooth face.

He proceeds to describe my history in strange terms, a symbolic language that suffers from the limited English of my Tibetan friend, who does his best to convey the essence, often losing the detail. Yet the sound of the doctor's voice, the tenor of his words, transmits more than the translation. He tells of an illness a few years ago that left me with weakness in my "gall bladder." It is this illness, along with the change in altitude in Nepal, that causes the itching. It would spread to my shoulder, he says. He lifts up my shirt and presses 2 points, 1 on my ribs, the other on my back, both exquisitely tender. Then he dispenses 3 different pills, wraps them in thin brown paper, and instructs me to take 1 type in the morning, another mid-day, and the third at night. It is enough for 1 week. Ideally, I should return and continue therapy for months, evolving and changing the treatment until the delicate balance of health is achieved.

Chousang tells me that a few years ago his daughter was very sick, unable to breathe, near death. He brought her to the Western hospital and they could not help the child. He brought her then to this Tibetan healer. His daughter now lives and is well.

Another man, a Westerner from the Koppan Monastery near Boudanath, comes to get medicine for another. He tells me that some months ago, 2 of them came from India with jaundice and hepatitis, and after 2 weeks of treatment from the old doctor, they were well. The medicines, he tells me, work on subtle mental levels as well, helping Buddhists involved in vigorous practice to deal with the obstacles that block progress toward enlightenment.

Tibetan medicine is unique among medical systems. It is distinct from other shamanistic pre-religious practices of illiterate societies. There is a complex classification of diseases and a rich textual basis for theory and practice stretching back thousands of years. Diseases or disorders can be grouped into 4 classes of one hundred one disorders each: (1) one hundred one disorders that are under the strong influence of actions (*Karma*) in previous lifetimes; (2) one hundred one disorders of this lifetime that have their causes in an early period of the life and manifest later in this same lifetime; (3) one hundred one disorders involving spirits; 4) one hundred one superficial disorders, so called because simply by following proper diet and behavior patterns, one can correct them without having to resort to medicines and accessory therapy.

The monks' education is rigorous. They learn intricate systems of philosophy and phenomenology. Those monks who go on to become doctors learn from the accumulated knowledge of centuries, the secrets of the human body, (of which we in the West know relatively little), learn first to tame their own minds, to develop the clarity to penetrate another's suffering. The sacred and the mundane are indistinguishable in Tibetan society. It is the only society in which the political leader is also the spiritual leader, a man who lives a monastic life devoted to enlightenment, to the happiness of all sentient beings.

This doctor is a monk, a man devoted to the alleviation of suffering, to the goal of developing a compassionate heart. He charges

nothing for his care and only a nominal fee for the medicines. Before I leave, he again laments the impossibility of learning Tibetan medicine in so short a time, but says that if I return, and if he is still alive, he will be willing to teach me what he knows. Who knows? His offer was sincere; surely there are many gaps, but there must be some wisdom, some undiscovered power in the medicines he dispenses. Perhaps it is only romantic projection, but there may be a storehouse of undiscovered treasure in this medicine, in this model of the healer/priest ministering to body and spirit.

For me at least, it provides motivation to pursue that road. Now I go back to Canada, to Western medicine, to the rigors and the myopia of a system more concerned with quantity than quality, back into a time of long hours of work and concentrated study, and I do look forward to it, anticipate a time to develop my skills, gather knowledge, and have a daily opportunity to cultivate the unspoken healing that passes imperceptibly from physician to patient and back again.

EPILOGUE

Before the expedition left for the mountains, I found a few days to play in the world of a Tibetan refugee community just outside Kathmandu, in a small village called Boudanath. It is one of Buddhism's great pilgrimage sites, a place where Buddha himself once gave teachings. This town along with Dhamsala in India has become a modern repository for Tibetan Buddhism. One quiet afternoon in an inconspicuous corner of a large monastery, I was taken to receive blessings from Dingo Kinsey Rinpoche, the living Buddha. In a 1-story brick building at the edge of the temple, hidden among trees and other structures, the Rinpoche received disciples. I entered a large waiting room filled with *puja*, or prayer scrolls, the written *dharma*, or teachings. Monks scurried about helping people, ordinary Tibetan peasants come to pay tribute and receive the blessings of the compassionate one. A poor-quality synthetic scarf, or *kata*, was provided as an offering for those too poor or ignorant—like myself—to bring his or her own. Following the example of the slight Tibetan woman in front of me, I entered behind a cloth curtain into a tiny room, and before looking up, I prostrated myself 3 times, touching my forehead to the floor, placing my mind below my heart, symbolically letting the ego fall away. I looked up, and there, sitting like a Buddha, half in this world, half already transcended, was Kinsey Rinpoche, cross-legged, a huge man easily over 6 ft, 5 inches, and 300 lbs, naked, covered only from his waist down by blankets and robes, his breasts hanging down. A knot of silver hair curled atop his head crowned his cherubic face. Mala beads and woodblock prints of ancient texts were strewn about, allowing him to pray even as he received his disciples. I handed him the scarf, and in 1 flowing motion he took it from me with 1 hand and placed it over my head and brushed his blessing over me. His hand was warm and heavy, like an anointment of liquid gold. Sacred herbs were sprinkled into my palm and a red lama string placed around my neck as a reminder and a protector. There was a Western disciple beside him, a German man in his 40s. He offered me the chance to ask the Rinpoche a question.

“How,” I asked, “can I integrate a spiritual life with the distraction and intensity of work as a physician?”

He answered with clarity. “The profession of medicine and the practice of compassion are deeply bound together already. Even though the study and practice of medicine is difficult, requiring long hours, try to find time each morning and each evening to practice, to awaken your compassion—even if it is a very short time. The vehicle is compassion.”