

Timothy Doyle

The Great Attraction

*A Tibetan Youth and the chance to change his destiny.*

A *stupa* is a Buddhist shrine symbolizing Buddhahood. The largest *stupa* in the world is the Bodhnath Stupa in the Kathmandu valley. At the dawn and dusk of each day Tibetans circle the shrine with their right shoulders to the object of veneration, reciting prayers and mantras in a ritual known as *kora-gyab*.

Tibetan refugees from all areas of Tibet live in Bodnath, including recent arrivals as well as members of the generation that followed the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959. One new arrival to Bodhnath is Tashi, a 20-year-old from the Tibetan province Amdo. Since coming to Kathmandu Tashi has peddled snack foods on the street, sold clothing in a makeshift shop and worked in an illicit gambling house before finding his current occupation, helping his friend, an artist, make Tibetan religious art. Tashi cuts colored shapes from sheets of pre-marked patterns and his friend arranges and paints the patterns on a canvass. Between these jobs he has asked strangers to support him with places to sleep, meals and occasional cash hand outs. "People have helped him," he says, "but such generosity only lasts for so long."

Tashi's father, Lho-gyal, was made him a monk by his parents at the age of ten when they sent him to *Tashi-Khyil*, a large monastic community. Tashi says his father later encountered an "obstacle." He isn't sure what happened but he suspects his father broke his vow of celibacy and around the age of twenty Lho-gyal returned home to the life of a householder. A feud festered between Lho-gyal and his brother. One day they fought and

his brother shot Lho-gyal two times. Lho-gyal recovered and took revenge by burning his brother's grain stock. Then he fled the village. He moved from place to place, working for food, begging for food and moving on.

After two years Lho-gyal came upon a semi-nomadic village and married. The family he married into didn't have any livestock and Lho-gyal worked as a caretaker in a monastery. At that time the Chinese authorities were implementing the commune system as well as destroying and looting monasteries. The village had been warned of the Chinese advance and Lho-gyal buried the treasures of the monastery. The Chinese officials learned of his deceit, put him on trial and sentenced him to three years of prison labor. In prison Lho-gyal learned Chinese and befriended the guards. They gave him extra food and clothing which he had sent to his wife. After finishing his sentence Lho-gyal returned to his village to find that his wife had re-married.

The administrators of his village gave Lho-gyal a job of serving the Chinese army and staff. After a year Chinese officials informed him that his mind was rotten and that he needed to see new things. They included Lho-gyal in a group that went on a year long re-education tour of China. When the group returned the authorities assigned Lho-gyal a job in a butter factory that had been built in his absence. He worked in the factory for twelve years. During that time he remarried and had three children, two girls and one son, Tashi.

When his father recounted his travels Tashi said he spoke of staying in caves, on river banks or on stretches of barren land and rolling plateau. Some nights he woke to the sight of wolves roaming in the moonlight. He spoke of hearing ladies singing somewhere in the night but when he woke in the morning he didn't see anyone for miles around. For Lho-gyal such sights were ghosts. He also saw giant black shapes at night, flowing and swirling like smoke, and these were also ghosts. And once he saw a man in the distance riding a donkey and suddenly the man disappeared.

"People say," says Tashi, "that if you aren't afraid of ghosts then they can't hurt you. My father said ghosts are like the shadow of a hand. He didn't fear ghosts and they never harmed him." But when Tashi had his first experience with the supernatural he withdrew in fright and suffered the consequences of his fear. He was about nine years old and roaming around with some friends. A fight broke out among them and Tashi ended up walking home alone. Inside his coat he kept a kitten. He saw a Chinese soldier on the

road; he was thin and his uniform was old and faded and he was staring silently into the river. "The cat became alert," says Tashi, "and began to cry. I started running and when I turned back the man was gone. I got to the village and the dogs sprinted towards me. I tried to quiet them but they charged off in the direction of that Chinese soldier."

At home his mother saw the frightened expression on the face of her son and asked what had happened and Tashi said he had seen a ghost. His mother lit incense and pieces of a revered lama's clothing. This would purify the atmosphere. But a fever struck Tashi in the night. A monk was staying in the village. They called the monk and he performed a ceremony to rid the boy of the impurities caused by the encounter with the ghost. They had to do the ceremony in secret because the Chinese forbid the practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

"When I was small," says Tashi, "people always told stories of ghosts (*dong-day*). But now people don't talk about them. Because of Chinese opposition to our religion lamas were unable to guide the spirits of dead people and those spirits became ghosts. Now that we have some religious freedom," he says, "there aren't many ghosts."

Lho-gyal made Tashi a monk when Tashi was around the age of ten. "I thought," says Tashi, "that joining the monastery might be a pleasant life. It's common for parents to send a child to the monastery. It's also common for people to decide to become monks between the ages of fifteen and twenty." At the monastery Tashi learned written Tibetan. The monastery included Tashi in a group of thirty monks that would study under a visiting doctor-monk. After three years his monastery sent Tashi to *Tashi Khyil* Monastery, where his father had been a monk, for a two year course in Tibetan medicine. While studying medicine Tashi saw caucasian foreigners for the first time. "They went to shops and the market," he says. "They carried cameras. It seemed they had lots of money and must have lived a pleasant life." Beyond those brief observations he didn't think much about them.

At that time Tashi knew very little of America. "I had heard," he said, "that it was big, powerful and scientifically developed." When he was a child the Chinese always said

America was bad. Every Sunday movies were broadcast on the television showing the Chinese defeating the Americans and Japanese in battle. For fifteen years Tashi thought it was true. But after seeing one man slaughtering hundreds of enemies in film after film he suspected it was propaganda. "Most Tibetans," he says, "who have gone to American and come back on holiday say its a place where you can make money and live easily."

After completing his course at *Tashi Khyil* Monastery he returned to his home monastery where he made medicines. Tashi never liked monastic life. He particularly disliked rising at 3:00 am for the morning worship sessions. "Occasionally," he says, "I overslept and was beaten with a wooden stick for the violation. I was beaten so hard my body was bruised to the point that even sleeping was difficult. But it was my fault that I couldn't follow the rules."

He often cited family trouble as an excuse to leave his monastic duties. Then he traveled to various cities for the sake of traveling. On his excursions he carried a weapon called a *che-khor*, an iron pipe attached to a rope. It is most often used by travelers to protect themselves from mastiffs, powerful and ferocious dogs known to maim and occasionally kill humans, which herders keep to protect their herds from thieves.

One of the monks from his monastery returned from a stay in India. He told Tashi that if Tashi could go to India it would be good, as there were opportunities for an education, to see the Dalai Lama and to possibly go to America. One night, during the evening worship session in the temple, it was Tashi's duty was to blow the long copper trumpet (*tung-chen*) which is accompanied by drums and chanting. He blew the horn but failed to stop at the proper moment. "My mind was wandering," he says, "and when I finally stopped the entire group was looking at me." He felt sad and alienated and he hatched a plan to leave for India.

By that time the Chinese had repealed the commune system and certain bans on private ownership. When the butter factory closed Tashi's family returned to a semi-nomadic life. Some monasteries allow monks of nomad families to store butter, dried cheese and other nomad products on the monastery grounds. At the time more than 600 pounds of butter

and dried cheese were in Tashi's quarters. Tashi sold 300 pounds of butter and obtained enough money to hire a car. That night he ate his evening meal, wrote a letter to his parents explaining that he had sold the butter to go to Lhasa and that he planned to stay for three months or perhaps even a year and he asked them not to worry about him. He put the letter on the table along with his robes and left the monastery with a friend in the hired car that carried the remainder of the butter which they would sell for more funds.

Forty minutes after leaving, in a barren stretch of land, the driver stopped the car and demanded more money. Tashi argued. "It's bad what you're doing," he said. "We are Tibetans and it shouldn't happen like this." Tashi got out of the car and pulled out his *chekhor*, the iron pipe attached to a rope, and threatened the driver with a broken windshield. The driver asked if they could talk and they resumed the trip without a hike in fare. "Unlike Nepal or India," says Tashi, "you have to protect yourself in Tibet."

They reached a small town on a bus route. Tashi gave the driver 50 extra Chinese dollars, "because they were Tibetans and they needed money." The driver apologized and everyone was happy. Tashi sold the remainder of the butter to fund his trip to India. Afterwards he journeyed eight days by bus, taxi and hitching rides on trucks before arriving in Lhasa.

In Lhasa Tashi visited the main pilgrimage sights—the “Big Three” monasteries (*Ganden, Sera, Drepung*), the *Potala* (home of the Dalai Lama) and the *Bhar-Khor* (an ancient cathedral). Except for basic language he had trouble with the Lhasa dialect of Tibetan and sometimes he used Chinese with other Tibetans. Tashi drew positively from Lhasa’s urban atmosphere, its variety of people, shops and activity. And while there he arranged to be secretly guided out of Tibet to India via Kathmandu.

Twenty seven people left in a truck from Lhasa that drove two days, only at night, to Tingri, an area on the northern side of the Nangba la pass, which would provide the group passage through the main Himalayan range into the Khumbu district of north east Nepal, an area made famous by the presence of Mt. Everest. The passengers were mostly monks who wanted to pursue their studies in the refugee communities of India where Tibetan

culture has been resurrected, nurtured and maintained. The monastic education in India is said to be superior to that of Tibet where religious institutions have suffered under Chinese guidance.

The truck dropped the group off and they walked for four days before crossing the pass. Tashi always lagged behind the others and three times the guide kicked him in the butt for his laziness. The group walked at night and slept during the day in seasonal nomadic stone enclosures. They laid plastic on the snow and blankets on top of the plastic. "It was so cold," says Tashi, "that I couldn't sleep and we huddled in groups of two or three to stay warm." Deep crevices cut through the glacier on the Nepal side of the pass. "We were frightened. We shuffled on our rear-ends through those areas. If someone had fallen into those cracks he would have died."

Walking at night and sleeping in the day they passed below the tree line, through Khumbu and Solu Khumbu, the home of Sherpas, who have strong cultural and linguistic links with the people in Tibet proper. On the road Tashi saw a group of westerners. "They didn't walk fast like us," he says, "but slowly, with sticks in their hands, carrying large packs on their backs." Tashi wasn't fond of the up and down nature of the trek through the valleys of Nepal and he couldn't wait for it to end. The group finally came to Kathahar, a Nepalese town on the Indian border, from where they took a bus to Kathmandu.

They went to the center that receives Tibetan refugees, registered, ate and rested while a few people were treated for their badly swollen feet. The next day officials interviewed Tashi to determine his refugee status. They asked him why he left Tibet. He replied that he wanted to see the Dalai Lama and learn English. They asked him about the conditions in Tibet under Chinese rule. "If you are a thief and break the law," he said, "they will treat you harshly. Otherwise they are reasonably friendly."

On the subject of Chinese rule Tashi says he doesn't know about such things. Then he complains about pasture fees and other unnecessary taxes imposed by the Chinese. He speaks of the corruption and abuse of power among political and bureaucratic people. He has heard about the well publicized Chinese atrocities in Tibet—arrests, executions, beatings, imprisonment, the destruction of the monasteries—but he

remains unimpressed. "I have heard," he says. "My father spoke of such things. But I have no clear idea of what happened."

Following a brief stay in Kathmandu Tashi went to Dharamsala, North India, seat of the Dalai Lama and his exiled government. He studied English for eight months and retained nothing. He also had the coveted audience with the revered Tibetan leader. During the audience he kept his head down and his body rigid. Although seated in the front row he couldn't bring himself to look at the Dalai Lama. People in the audience cried. He began to feel joy and he cried. The Dalai Lama addressed the group. "It's good that you have come safely," he said. "I'm glad to see you. If anybody is going to school study hard. If you are going back to Tibet take care of the elders there. All of you should be kind to all sentient beings. This will bring you happiness. One day we will be able to go to Tibet together."

After nine months in India Tashi returned to Bodhnath where he struggled from job to job. He says he wants to make money, survive and rid himself of his difficulties. Friends in Bodhnath have suggested that he return to Amdo if things don't work out for him but he is unwilling to go.

"Amdo is a good place," he says. "But it's boring to stay in one place. And I don't want to spend my life eating *tsampa* (barley flour). It's like the world is new," he says. "Planes, movies, clothes. Everything is new. Before people thought about religion and yaks. Now people think about motorcycles, cars, America, fashionable clothes. Now there is more than one opinion about life."