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A Pilgrimage to India

Three Tibetan monks travel overland to India on foot.

Dorje, Dhondrup and Sonam, three Tibetan monks in their mid-twenties, left their village for a pilgrimage to Lhasa, capital of Tibet. The trip from their village to Lhasa takes seven days by car. The three monks covered the distance on foot. They crossed mountain passes, walked through snow and slept outdoors, sustaining themselves on barley flour (*tsampa*), Tibetan salt-and-butter tea, and faith in the Buddhist path. A pilgrim is expected to encounter and overcome difficulties on pilgrimage. The endeavor is said to purify misdeeds and clear the path of future obstacles on the quest for enlightenment.

A month after leaving their village the monks arrived in Lhasa. They prayed at the many holy sites in the city, such as the *Potala* (the Dalai Lama's former residence), the *Jho-Khang* and the "Big Three" monasteries—*Sera*, *Ganden* and *Deprung*. They also made secret plans to leave Tibet for India. They wanted to see the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet in 1959, nine years after China annexed Tibet.

Dorje, Dhondrup and Sonam came from a small village in Kham, a Tibetan province. They say the villagers there live traditional lives. They grow barley, potatoes and peas and they keep yak, sheep and goats. They celebrate the festivals and even young kids still wear traditional clothes. Two Chinese live in the village and they are married to Tibetans. There is a monastery and there are also a handful of meditators living in caves. "A few are like that," says Dorje, regarding the meditators. "Not all. But they are there. The local people support them with food and they come out once or twice a year to give teachings or preside over birth and death ceremonies."

Human rights activists blame the Chinese occupation of Tibet for the death of 1.2 million Tibetans. Activists also accuse Chinese authorities of responding to Tibetan political and cultural dissent with imprisonment, torture and the transfer of thousands of

Chinese subjects into Tibet. The monks have heard of the Chinese atrocities but say they don't know much about the situation. But they are firm in their opinion that the Dalai Lama should return to their country. "It was good when the Dalai Lama lived in Tibet," says Dorje. "We think that if he came back it would be good for sentient beings and for the Tibetan people. He is a great Lama and he can guide us properly."

Parents normally send children to monasteries around ten years of age but young adults commonly decide on their own to leave family life and join a monastery. During childhood each of the three monks attended school for three years and then quit to work with their families. After leaving school and going to work they separately contemplated joining the monastery. "When we wanted to become monks," says Sonam, "we asked our families and they said it would be a good idea."

Before joining the monastery the Lama told them, "We haven't asked you to put on a monk's robe. If you want it we have a place for you. But think hard. Because the decision is final." The three monks feel a monk's life is easier than a householder's life. "Householders have to deal with worldly existence," says Dorje. "We don't have to look after families. If you want to go to India you can go and not worry. The householder worries all day and he doesn't have time to practice religion." The three monks see the chance to become a monk and practice the Tibetan Buddhist path as a great opportunity to accumulate merit, clear obstacles and position themselves for a favorable next life, a life one step closer to Buddhahood and liberation from earthly existence.

After a few weeks in Lhasa the three monks along with 40 other Tibetans packed themselves into the back of a truck. For a fee the passengers would be driven to a remote location on the Tibet-Nepal border and guided south through the main Himalayan range to Kathmandu where they would be received by the reception committee for Tibetan refugees and given passage to India. Men and women from all areas of the country as well as several children sent by their parents to attend school in India came for the journey.

The truck drove west for two days across part of the *Chang-Tang*, Tibet's northern plane, and turned south before making its final stop at night. The passengers filed out of the back and walked two hours until they came to a river. They slept without even making tea out of fear that the fires might alert a Chinese patrol. In the morning they woke to a vast landscape of flat sand and occasional pasture used by nomads. They crossed the river. On the other side they saw the large black tents and yak herds of nomad settlements. The group stayed in the nomad tents for the duration of the day. When the sun set they started again. At midnight they rested for three hours and continued walking into the next day with quick breaks for light meals of barley flour mixed with tea.

Snow-capped mountains appeared in the distance marking the border with Nepal. Occasionally they met nomads and bought barley flour and yak meat from them. Four days after they had begun walking the group reached the foot of the Himalayan range.

For three consecutive days the group attempted to cross three different passes. But the routes didn't provide a way through and they had to retreat to a lower elevation and try again the following day. Their food supply dwindled and on the third day two people abandoned the journey.

Some people in the group argued. Some people cried. Some felt death was inescapable if they went forward. Others feared a beating from the Chinese police and wanted to try again. The three monks said that they wouldn't have returned. "No one forced us to go to India. We had tried and the attempt seemingly failed. It would have been more damaging to us if we broke our vow of pilgrimage and so we were quite comfortable with the prospect of death."

Two group members who had gone in search of nomads in order to find returned with enough food to feed the group two meals. After eating the group set off and on the fourth attempt they found a trail with yak prints leading to a pass—indicating a trading route to Nepal. The monks went ahead of the group to look for more nomads who could feed the party. Before going the monks and the group agreed that if the monks should not find food that they should keep going and fend for themselves.

Dorje, Dhondrup and Sonam walked for two days before they found a nomad couple that could only spare them tea. Later in the day they spotted prayer flags atop a small *stupa* (a Buddhist shrine) indicating the summit. They walked through snow and

crossed the pass. They didn't carry any sleeping gear and they hadn't slept for nearly two days and two of them suffered from severe blisters. On the other side of the pass they met an old man. He wore a red hat and a yellow shirt, colors normally associated with Tibetan religious orders, and they presumed he was a monk. But after coming closer they saw that he was a layman who was going to cross the pass into Tibet.

The monks explained that they were on pilgrimage to India and that they needed food. The man opened his bag and offered them all of his barley flour and *chang*, barley ale. While making a fire the man told them that they were in Nepal and then the monks ate. "The food was wonderful," said Dorje, "and we will never forget that man's kindness." After the meal the man pointed out the proper road and told them to avoid Nepali police who were notorious for stealing money from pilgrims. The man then left for his village to get more food and start for Tibet the next day.

The monks continued into lowland Nepal. They walked mostly at night and skirted two police check posts while staying in rest houses during the day. They were happy to be out of the cold and desolate mountains and they appreciated the green terrain. At one point seven Nepali police arrested the three monks. They ordered the monks to strip. The monks didn't know any Nepali. They said "Dalai Lama", "Dalai Lama," to indicate that they were pilgrims. The police took their money, a silver bracelet, a watch and a sheepskin jacket. The monks asked for some of the money. The police gave them Rs. 250. The monks asked for more and the police beat them, threw them outside the check post and tossed their bag to them, saying, *Dalai Lama gao*—"Go and see the Dalai Lama."

"We were very frustrated," they Dorje, "because we were outnumbered and unable to fight." Fortunately the police failed to find a small amount of money stitched into their robes. They traveled two more days on foot and one by car before they reached Kathmandu. From Lhasa 22 days had passed.

Officials at the Tibetan refugee reception center in Kathmandu asked the monks why they had left Tibet. The monks said that they had come to see the Dalai Lama and the Buddhist holy places of Nepal and India. The reception officials asked them if Chinese rule affected their decision to leave Tibet. Not really, they said. But if the Dalai

Lama still lived in Tibet they doubt they would have tried to visit Nepal and India. When they had completed their pilgrimage they intended to return to Tibet.

On the third day in Kathmandu the three monks met their group, all of whom had safely arrived. The group left Kathmandu the next day on a bus bound for Dharamsala, India. The monks decided to stay in Kathmandu for a few months in order to avoid the fierce Indian summer.

They rented a flat in Bodnath, a Tibetan area of the city and home of the Great Stupa, a principal Buddhist site of worship. In the mornings and evenings they sit next to the stupa reciting prayers as Tibetans circle the shrine in the rite of worship called *kora-gyap*, when people often give small rupee notes to the destitute as well as to needy monks seeking a way to India. During the day the three monks perform ceremonies in the homes of lay people thus earning the money to pay their rent, eat and save for the coming journey to India and an audience with their beloved leader.

The monks had ambivalent feelings on the monastic community in Kathmandu. On the one hand the sight of the auspicious shrine, many monasteries and many Tibetan people pleased them. On the other hand they were skeptical of the sight of Tibetan monks driving motorcycles, wearing sunglasses and T-shirts and keeping radios and pictures of Hindi film stars in their rooms. “We wear only our robes,” said Dorje. “We don’t drive cars, have radios or do business. That is for the life of a householder. A monk’s life and a householder’s life should be separate.”