

# RIPPLES FOLLOWING RIPPLES

❁ RIPPLES FOLLOWING RIPPLES ❁ Abhinyana ❁

*Abhinyan*

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## INTRODUCTION

**R**IPPLES FOLLOWING RIPPLES is the third and final part of my memoirs, after *SO MANY ROADS* and *NOT THIS, NOT THAT*. For an overview of my life ~ for what it is worth ~ they should be read in that order, and if you're unable to get hard-copies of the others, they are available on my website.

I've taken the title from Sir Edwin Arnold's, *Light of Asia*, to show how one thing leads to another in chain-like sequence. There is no beginning or end to anything, but only a continual becoming. Whatever is subject to change ~ and that includes us ~ becomes something else.

The Books teach Darkness was, at first of all,  
And Brahm, sole meditating in that Night:  
Look not for Brahm and the Beginning there!

Nor him, nor any light

Shall any gazer see with mortal eyes,  
Or any searcher know by mortal mind,  
Veil after veil will lift -- but there must be  
Veil upon veil behind.

Stars sweep and question not. This is enough  
That life and death and joy and woe abide;  
And cause and sequence, and the course of time,  
And Being's ceaseless tide,

Which, ever-changing, runs, linked like a river  
By ripples following ripples, fast or slow --  
The same yet not the same -- from far-off foun-  
tain

To where its waters flow

Into the seas. These, steaming to the Sun,  
Give the lost wavelets back in cloudy fleece  
To trickle down the hills, and glide again;  
Having no pause or peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

**A** pilot-friend recently made the observation: “Some Buddhist books I've read have been *far* more complicated than anything I've ever read about flying large jets”. Well, I don't know how it is to fly jets, but I agree with him that we have made things very complicated in our desire to work things out ~ down to the minutest details ~ that there is little room for discovery anymore. As a result, religion ~ and even *Dharma* ~ has become a net that entangles us, and we can find no way out. Distrusting ourselves, and not realizing that there's no substitute for direct, personal experience, we conform to what is written in the books, taking them for infallible guides ~ *gospel truth* ~ fearing to doubt or question. Many people, until *today*, still believe that the *Bible* is God's word, when it has been pointed out, time and again, by people who have studied it objectively, that there are *many thousands* of errors in it. Nor do we need to be scholars with Ph.D.'s to find them, as they are so glaring. The four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John contradict each other in so many places; read them, to see for yourself. You would soon come across errors in my books, too; for example, in *Not This, Not That*, I inadvertently wrote 7/11 instead of 9/11. The spell-check function on my computer wouldn't pick this up, just as it wouldn't notice the contradictions and errors in the Bible, but they are there, even so.

The wheel symbol, which I've often used, denotes revolution (for what is the purpose of a wheel but to revolve?) Whether or not we are revolutionaries, with visions of how things might be, we are all turning and changing on the wheel of life, becoming different and other than we were and are. We may have *some* control over the way we change, but we cannot prevent it.

**B**ecause of feedback from the previous books, maybe I should say that although I am a monk, I wrote them not only for those who, for whatever reason, call themselves Buddhists; there are other people in the world besides such, all with hearts that send red blood surging through their veins; all with hopes, fears, and aspirations, just like us; all with pains and sorrows. We need to focus on the similarities between us instead of clinging to names that divide us and cause so much trouble.

In this and the other books, I have written a great deal about myself ~ they are, after all, my memoirs ~ but I would ask you to disregard my personality, and not invest in me ~ or in anyone else, for that matter. What we should be looking for is far beyond personality with its limitations. I would be flattered if you read my books, of course, as I wrote them to be read, but I'd like it more if you read them discerningly, and ask yourself if there is anything in them that might be useful to you, and if there is, take it and leave the rest; it's not God's word, after all.

For those who might not know about such things ~ as also for those who need things spelled out (and alas, there are such) ~ let me say that I take my stand upon ~ and try to live by my understanding of ~ *The Three Characteristics* of Impermanence, Unsatisfactoriness, and No-Self (*Anicca, Dukkha, Anatta*). Nowadays, the term *Vipassana* has become a well-known kind of meditation. The practice aims at the realization of these things; but we would save ourselves a lot of time and trouble if we saw the contradiction here: Vipassana means seeing clearly how things are, rather than as we would like them to be. This is not something we can practice or do, but something that happens. Why insist on rubbing two sticks together ~ and wet sticks at that! ~ to produce fire, when we have other means at hand? Put aside fearful self-concern about getting something that you feel you do not have, and see, instead, what is here.



## WHAT DO WE REALLY KNOW?

**F**rom Kathmandu, I flew out to Malaysia, where one of the first things I did was to have two of my molars extracted; they'd bothered me too long; I was *enlightened* by a few grams as a result. I then set out on another speaking-tour.

I crossed paths with Bhikkhu Dry again, and saw how weird his ideas had become. I disagreed with him in a talk we shared one night when he said that if a person isn't enlightened himself, he is not in a position to help others become enlightened. I am not of this opinion. It would be like seeing someone injured and bleeding and saying to him: "I'm so sorry; I'd like to help you, but I'm not a doctor". Every mother ~ and most other people, for that matter ~ knows how to treat minor injuries; there is no need to go to a doctor for every little wound or pain. Likewise, we all have the capacity ~ in varying degrees ~ to help others along the way; we do not need to be fully-enlightened for that ~ if there *is* such a thing as full-enlightenment (we speak as if we know, when really, we don't). And, in doing so, we express the enlightenment we already have ~ in whatever small amount ~ and thereby increase it. If we were to hold back and refuse to help others until we are fully-enlightened, no-one ~ including ourselves ~ would get any help at all! That would be just as foolish as making it a condition that someone must be enlightened before we listen to or learn from him. There was an anomaly in what he said: Did he consider himself enlightened and therefore qualified to help others? If not, then why did he speak like this?

Not long after this, I was told of other strange things he'd said in *Teluk Intan*. Speaking of a recent prolonged water-shortage in Kuala Lumpur, he claimed it was a punishment by the *devas* for it being a 'sinful city'. Well, having known him for many years, I recognized it as his style and wasn't surprised; the only thing that struck me as strange about it was the word 'sinful,' which I can't imagine him using, but I could be wrong; perhaps it was another word, similar in meaning. I asked one of the folks who'd

heard him say this if he had objected to it, and he said: "What's the point?"

"*What's the point?*" I echoed. "The point is that this is blatant superstition, and he should not be allowed to get away with it!"

There are people ~ many of them kind but naïve ~ who will believe things like this simply because he's a monk, but it should not pass unchallenged. It is hard enough trying to combat existing superstition without others spreading more!

What an arrogant thing to say! What gave him the right to set himself up as a judge, as if he perceived all the causes of something affecting a city of two million people?! Was he so all-knowing, so all-seeing, as to explain a water-shortage in this way? No doubt he could quote from the scriptures about this, too, but that proves nothing except his gullibility. Has he seen *devas*, and does he know what they think and why? This is pure fundamentalism, in complete disregard of the explanations of science. The *El Niño Effect* is a recently-observed and understood phenomenon that we've just become cognizant of. We do not know if it existed at the time of the Buddha, but it probably did. There was no science of meteorology then, and the causes of weather-patterns were unknown. Maybe people attributed storms, thunder, lightning, floods, and so on, to the intervention of gods or *devas*; some people obviously still do. I myself prefer the explanations of science; I don't want fairy-tales any more.

By the law of averages, there would be *some* 'sinful' people in Kuala Lumpur (every city has its share), but we cannot be so sweeping as to condemn a whole city as 'sinful'; there are ~ *must* be ~ many good people in K.L.; in fact, *his* family is there; did he include them in his judgment, whereby he was saying: "You deserve whatever you get, otherwise you wouldn't get it! And, because this water-shortage is a form of suffering, the causes of it must be such as to produce such an effect!?" He is a *Karmite*, a *Professor of Karmology*, believing that whatever happens to us is a result of our karma, whereas this is definitely NOT SO. There are other forces at work in our lives besides Karma, which ~ come on, let's be honest ~ at our level, is still a concept and not a proven fact.



**P**lease, be very careful with this concept, lest it do you more harm than good. Be very careful when listening to monks explaining Dharma. Don't assume that they are authorities and simply believe whatever they say, but listen attentively and use your intelligence to decide whether what they say is true and useful to you or not. The Dharma should not leave us high-and-dry, like whales stranded on the beach.

**A**nd at this point, I'll resume my story of Tran Cong Nam: He'd lived alone for several years after his resettlement in California in 1983, until his wife and remaining daughter joined him from Vietnam. I was glad, thinking he'd be alright from thereon. And he was, for a while. Some years later still, his daughter fell in love and got married. Only a month later, however, the boy died of a heart-attack. More suffering for Mr. Nam! We continued to keep in touch, and about this time, I received a letter from him, in reply to my last one to him, asking how he was. He thanked me for my concern, as was his way, then proceeded to tell me that he had been planning to return to Vietnam for the first time since he escaped over 15 years before, to see his aged mother. Before he could go, however, he got a phone-call, to say that a drunken, crazed policeman had broken into his mother's home one night, stabbed his eldest sister to death, and badly wounded his mother! He hastened back for the funeral, and fortunately, his mother recovered. He returned to the US to continue his life of suffering, not becoming completely insane, as many other people would have done.

**B**ack in K.L., Wong linked me with someone wanting to sell his laptop, and I bought it, this one with a modem, so for the first time, I was able to connect to the Internet, and my life was forever changed thereby. A friend named Jimmy Chew created an email-address for me and tried to show me how to use this fantastic means of communication, but I was slow in learning. Later, in Malacca, while staying with DV, I had to ask him every day for quite a while: "Come on, show me again," and was almost on the verge of giving up in despair and staying with snail-mail, when I got it. *Phew*, what a relief! I thought of changing my address to 'Cybersaurus' but it seemed someone else had already

got it. Email soon became my lifeline, and I was hooked. I had always been an avid correspondent, and reached the point, at one time, when I was writing up to 150 letters each month; after email ~ *AE* ~ that fell to about 15, but my email soared to hundreds. It is so convenient, and even when I must resort to using cyber-cafes with their varying costs and frustrations in getting connected and so on, it is infinitely better than in before-email days ~ *BE*.

**Now**, I wanted to donate blood again, but was feeling very tired, especially after eating, when I would have to sleep again; I was constantly thirsty, and had to get up in the night to pee, which I'd never done before. *DV* ~ who'd maintained his blood-donations after I'd influenced him in this over 20 earlier ~ took me to see one of his friends, a Dr. Wong. He pricked my finger to test my blood, and it showed my blood-sugar-level was very high; I had diabetes! *Damn*, I thought, this is really going to restrict me! It had probably been precipitated by drinking lots of sugar-cane-juice while I was in India, but looking back later, I could see that I'd had symptoms of it for many years, but hadn't recognized them. Back in the early '80's, I started to get attacks of *hypoglycemia*; suddenly, I would feel ravenously hungry and start to tremble, an awful feeling that someone described as like being hit by a train, although how they knew that, I couldn't imagine! If I didn't eat something quickly when I got such attacks, I couldn't eat and had to sleep. Several times, when I'd donated blood, the bleeders remarked upon my high iron-level, unaware that this was an indication of diabetes; why blood-banks never tested for diabetes when it's so easily done, I don't know, but they won't take blood from diabetics, as I soon found out.

**Someone** took me to see a Chinese doctor in K.L. ~ a roughly-spoken woman from Shanghai ~ who assured me she could cure diabetes, and that if she couldn't, she would take her sign down. She provided me several months' supply of pills.

I visited the Buddhist Society in Teluk Intan again, for what was to be the last time, and, wanting to see what people had understood from my previous visits, I asked them to arrange for someone to interview me before the audience, but not to tell me

the questions beforehand, so that it would be spontaneous instead of prepared and contrived. They agreed to do this, and when the time came, they had chosen someone who I had really hoped they would ~ a man who'd been disrespectful towards me on several occasions, and who was generally rather arrogant. I expected him to give me a hard time, but was surprised when, in front of the audience, he was uncharacteristically subdued; perhaps he realized what it was like to be in my position, always in front of others, on trial, as it were. I forget what kind of questions he asked, so they couldn't have been outstanding, but I used the occasion to confront the audience, and asked: "If I were not a monk, would you still invite me here to give talks?"

There was a long and somewhat-strained silence, until finally, someone said, "Well, ... er ... no, not really."

"Why not?" I said. "If learning is sufficiently important to you, you won't mind who you learn from, but if it is not, you will pick and choose, saying things like, 'I like this speaker, but not that one.'"

My suspicions were confirmed. I'd been wasting my time there, and never went again.

I'd been invited to give a talk in the Brickfields Vihara in K.L.. When I got there, the abbot, Ven. Dhammananda, asked me why I'd not visited him when he was in hospital in Sydney for a heart-bypass several years before ~ "All the other monks did," he said. I thought: "Why should I? I owe you no allegiance." He sat beside me on the stage ~ to monitor me, I knew ~ but I said what I wanted to say even so. Because I was dressed as I usually dress when I give talks, with the Theravada robe over my Chinese tunic and pants, I began, "Perhaps you are wondering what kind of monk I am. Well, I'm not a Theravada or a Mahayana monk." In the middle of my talk, he interrupted me to say something, before allowing me to continue. At the end, he commented on my talk: "It was very liberal," he said, although I don't know what he meant by that, "but I couldn't find anything wrong with what he said," or something to that effect.

It was my intention to make another trip to the US, but first, I wanted to see my mother in Queensland, who by this time, was

in a nursing-home suffering from Alzheimer's. DV bought me a one-way ticket to Brisbane.

Now, a letter had reached me from someone in Singapore by the name of *Tan Chye Hin*, who said he'd enjoyed reading one of my books so much that he had collected funds to have it re-printed on his own initiative. Well, I was flattered, and wrote to say so. We exchanged letters and phone-calls, and he arranged for me to stay in a small temple when I went to Singapore not long after. He met me off the bus, and was a pleasant young guy, and a vegetarian, too, which is rare among Buddhists.

One evening, in a vegetarian restaurant downtown, a man at the next table came over and introduced himself; thus I met *William Yeo*. We got talking, and when he learned that I'd soon be going to Brisbane but didn't know where I'd stay when I got there, he said he had business-interests there and could help me out by putting me in touch with one of his agents, which he did. When I flew into Brisbane, therefore, *Ong Kwee Choo* met me off the plane and took me to the Vietnamese temple ~ *Chua Phap Quang* ~ where she'd arranged for me to stay until my visit to my mother was over, but the monk there ~ *Thich Nhat Tan* ~ was of the possessive-type, such as I'd come across in many places, and wasn't very hospitable. Such monks didn't really 'leave-home' at all, but merely moved from a small home into a bigger one, thinking of the temple as their own private property.

Kwee Choo and her Vietnamese husband, Ha, kindly drove me up to *Nambour* to visit my mother, and left me alone with her for a while. The nursing-home was ~ well, what can you say about a nursing-home? We all know they are rubbish-dumps. However, this one was clean and didn't smell, like some do, and the patient-care was good. Mum was quite well, and pleased to see me; I wish I'd felt the same way, but how could I, when she was in that condition? Had I believed in God, my faith would probably have been severely shaken; how could He/She/It allow people to become like this? But since I had no such faith to be shaken, I was able to look at things quite differently, in terms of cause-and-effect, and recalled the Buddha's parting words to Ananda: "Decay is inherent in all things, Ananda. How could it be that this

body of mine, having been born, should not die?" She was sharing a room with four other old ladies; I took her to a place where we had a bit of privacy, and holding her hand, asked her, "How do you like it here, mum?" She replied: "Where am I?" I then asked, "Is there anything you need here?" and she said, "I just need my son to stay here with me," adding "We've got plenty of beds." I had to laugh, even though I knew she wasn't joking; she never had much of a sense of humor.

**Ha** and **Kwee Choo** came back for me, and mum was sad when we left and wanted me to stay; I assured her I would come again. I gave a single talk in Phap Quang temple, but it wasn't well-received. Among the people I met there were **Le Bang** (from Bataan), and **Hoa**, and of course, the first thing he looked at were my teeth, and I was minus several since we last met. Again, he offered to make me some dentures, and I accepted; an impression was made and would be ready for when I swung by that way in a couple of months.

**Le Bang** invited me to visit his home, and I was astounded! He had built this huge new house, far beyond his means, and was driving an old beat-up car that seemed incongruous beside the house. I wasn't impressed, as it was clearly only for show. He had several more children by this time, and his wife was the main bread-winner, having a better job than him.

**Air-fares** were still very high, so I took a bus from Brisbane to Melbourne, a journey lasting 26 hours. **Tuan** met me off the bus and took me to stay in the big new house he'd bought; he'd done well, working hard, living frugally himself, and not wasting money on frivolous things.

**During** the time I was there, I got a call from a lady identifying herself as the niece of **Tran Cong Nam**, and inviting me for lunch at her home the next Saturday; she said some of her friends would be there to listen to my talk. I wasn't aware he had any relatives in Australia, but happily accepted the invitation. On that day, someone came to fetch me, and I found a very nice lunch awaiting me, laid out artistically. Later, when everyone had eaten, I was asked to speak, and wove in the story of **Mr. Nam**, but without using his name, so that only his niece knew who I

was referring to. Afterwards, she came to me and quietly told me that I'd got the story wrong, and it wasn't as I'd said. When he escaped from Vietnam, with his whole family, two of his children didn't drown as I had been told. What happened was, their crowded boat had been fired upon by a communist gun-boat, and his son's brains were blown out; his daughter's stomach was torn open by shrapnel, and she died in his arms, crying, "Help me, Pa-pa! Help me!"

I was stunned! Why should someone like him ~ so quiet, humble and self-effacing ~ suffer so much? What could he possibly have done that would cause such pain? To casually ascribe it to karma ~ as if we perceive all the causes ~ innumerable causes, such as bring about any effect ~ would be horribly callous and unthinking. The fact is, ***we don't know***, and the sooner we can bring ourselves to honestly admit this, the better! The karma-idea is a two-edged sword, and without wisdom, we get hold of it to our own detriment! It might be useful to apply it to ourselves ~ and ourselves alone ~ especially when facing difficulties, to say: "I don't know why this is happening, and I certainly don't like it or want it. But because I can see there are no accidents ~ things that happen by themselves ~ but that everything comes from causes, maybe it is the result of something I did long ago, even if I don't remember it. Therefore, I'll accept it now, and see what I can do with it, and where I can go from here." But we must be very careful not to point our fingers at others in judgment and say, "This must be a result of his past karma, otherwise it wouldn't be happening to him." We must be very careful indeed!

I was keen to begin my trip in the US, so didn't stay long in Melbourne. I'd already contacted Thong Hai in Hawaii, and he'd sent me a letter of guarantee regarding my stay in his temple. Unaware of entry-requirements, I bought only a one-way ticket, from Brisbane to Honolulu, expecting to get my onward ticket there. I wouldn't need a visa, as I'd ascertained that I would get a 3-months' stamp upon entry, known as a 'waived visa.'

Then, before I could get a bus to Sydney, Trung came by and offered to drive me; I accepted, and we set off, but being in no great hurry, when we got near Canberra, I decided to stop-by

the temple and stay overnight. I called Thich Quang Ba to say we were coming, and he gave us rooms when we arrived. The next day, he drove us around Canberra, which, because it's the federal capital, is well laid-out but surprisingly small; you're in the center before you know it. We visited several places, including the National War-Museum, where I found the displays about Gallipoli of especial interest. Then, after lunch, we left for Sydney, where Baker Vo was waiting for us. He was so impressed with Trung that he offered him a job in one of his bakeries, but he wouldn't accept, and after a few days there, returned to Melbourne. I went on to Brisbane by bus, to be met by Hoa and taken to his home; I had asked him if I could stay with him until I flew out, as I didn't want to stay in the temple again. His son gave up his room for me. My dentures were ready and this time, they were a good fit.

Ha and Kwee Choo drove me out to visit my mother again, and this time, we took her out for a while, to Sheila's home, where Anita and her kids were living; Sheila and Frank had not yet moved up from Adelaide. I was not aware at that time of Anita's feelings towards mum, otherwise I would not have taken her. Back at the nursing-home, mum was most reluctant to get out of the car, but clung on; it took us a while to persuade her.

Now, while I was in Melbourne, someone told me that Thuy and her sons, Tuan and Huy ~ who I'd met in Galang Camp in '86, and again in Melbourne ~ had moved to Brisbane to operate a fish-and-chips shop, and so I got Ha to take me to visit them. I was happy to find them doing well, in a good location near the beach. Tuan was married, but had no children yet.



~2~

## TRAVELS IN NORTH AMERICA

**I**n mid-February, 1999, Hoa drove me to the airport, and there I ran into a problem: my one-way ticket to the US was unacceptable, and I had to get another, but as it was fully-refundable, I didn't mind. I could then go, but wasn't ready for the rough reception I got from the Immigration officer in Hawaii. Finally, I was through. Thong Hai was waiting and took me to his temple. He was very busy in the aged-care home he was operating nearby, so I didn't see much of him. He organized several talks for me, and invited me to join a trip he'd arranged to Big Island ~ something he did every year for his devotees ~ where we visited a number of temples and scenic spots. Following a local custom, he led his devotees to make offerings to a volcano-god. He then left me with an American monk to see some more on our own; he rented a car, and we drove right around the island, taking two whole days; near the end, we went by helicopter over an active volcano-vent, and saw the lava flowing into the sea. It was another first. The god didn't reveal himself.

Returning to Honolulu, Thong Hai arranged an all-day harbor-cruise, which was enjoyable. On another day, he took me to visit Pearl Harbor, and several other places of interest. He also took me to visit a Vietnamese who owned the largest fleet of stretch limousines in the world. Someone else drove me around the entire island. I quite enjoyed my month in Hawaii.

Flying on to Los Angeles, a welcoming-committee was waiting for me, just as in '84. I was surprised at how *rotund* Loc and Hao had become; both were married and had one child each. I stayed in several places, meeting lots of people from the Camp-days and giving several talks. Someone took me to *Disneyland*, where I'd never been before, and from the way people looked at me, it seemed they thought I was part of the show; I was *on-stage*, as it were. Someone else took me to the fascinating new *Getty Museum*, where we spent several hours. On another day, I was taken to *Universal Studios*, which was also very interesting; we went on several virtual-reality rides there. And on yet another day, I went to the *Brea Tar-Pits*, the museum of which houses bones of prehistoric animals that had been trapped in the pits and had no way of getting out. Until today, the bubbling



pitch brings bones and other things to the surface. It reminded me of the mind: so many things are hidden there from long, long ago, and now and then, something acts as a trigger to bring them to the surface when we had no idea of their existence.

It was good to see Chi Phuong and Anh Dong, and their family again. Their daughters, Thi and Yen, had both married and had children, Thi two, and Yen one. Their son, Kien, was still single. Yen and her husband, Quan, invited me to stay with them.

After some inquiries, I was able to locate Paul Trinh, and through him, his brothers, Julius and Robert; Charles had moved to Ohio with his wife, and Simon couldn't be contacted. Now, Julius, and his wife, Lan, learning that the next stop along my way would be San Jose, offered to drive me, as they had long wanted to visit some of their friends there. Consequently, having informed Drs Tuan and Diep that we would be coming, we set out, but took our time up the coast, so got there rather late, and found a number of people awaiting us and wanting me to give a talk almost immediately. There was plenty of room in the house, so Julius and Lan were also invited to stay.

Tuan and Diep had moved here from the south, opened a clinic, and bought a large house where they were living with their cats. They were doing so well that Diep asked me to guess how much they'd made the previous year; I said I had no idea, and she said \$800,000, from which they'd had to pay \$300,000 in tax!

They treated us all very kindly, and made special efforts to help me with my diabetes, giving me medication for months ahead (the Chinese pills had proved useless), and preparing food very carefully for me. And, because Lan had worked in a pharmacy before, they offered her a job in their clinic, which she happily accepted. Julius drove me to Palo Alto and San Francisco, and anywhere else I wished to go, including to whatever talks were arranged for me. Just like in '85, I met a number of people I'd known from before. I had just missed the funeral of Su Ba Dam Luu, who had died while I was in Hawaii. Her sickness had been exacerbated by protests held outside her temple against a monk from Vietnam who she'd invited to give talks there; not inter-

ested in what they might have learned from him, they claimed he was a Communist, this same silly old phobia.

**M**any relics had been found in her ashes, and were on display. During the talk I gave there, I commented on them and said that these were not the real relics of Su Ba, and would not help them in any way; the real relics were the example she set. They probably didn't understand; it was too radical for them.

**W**hile in San Jose, I made contact with the VINA family in Minneapolis, and they invited me to visit, so I got a ticket and flew over there. It was nice to see them and other people once more, and talks were soon arranged for me in the temple.

**O**ne evening, in the temple, I gave an informal talk to a small group of people, and someone named *Tho* ~ who I'd stayed with during my first visit there in '85 ~ took notes, which he showed me a couple of days later. I couldn't believe what I read; it was so distorted, and I told him that I'd never said such things! I don't remember everything I say, of course, as I say so many things to so many people in so many places, but I do know what I would and would not say. I was appalled! And this was someone who was very proud of his English!

I was able to locate Chi Ba, and she came up from Rochester to visit me; she had aged quite a bit, but then, so had I. She told me that while she was on a visit back to Vietnam, her apartment had caught fire and she'd lost all her possessions, and she hadn't had insurance. Poor woman!

I'd contacted Toan Huynh in Cleveland, who I'd stayed with in '85, and he asked me over. He met me at the airport; his only child, Diana, had been joined by two others. But he was so busy, and couldn't seem to relax; he was a full-time teacher in school, and afterwards helped his brother-in-law at his restaurant. He arranged talks for me in the temple, and I was invited to become the resident-monk there, but didn't accept.

**M**y visa about to expire, I went to the Immigration Department, only to learn that the type of visa I had couldn't be extended. I had to act fast. Go to Canada? I thought of it, but decided not to, in case they wouldn't let me back in, so bought a round-trip

ticket from Chicago to Manchester, England, and got a bus to the Windy City, to be met by a monk from the Quang Minh temple, which had relocated since I was last there. This monk was rather odd. First of all, he asked if I was hungry; I wasn't, but he dragged me off to China-town to look for a restaurant anyway. Not noticing a vegetarian restaurant, he took me to a sea-food restaurant, thinking to order vegetarian food there, but the smell was so awful that I walked out. We then went to the vegetarian restaurant I'd seen before, but he should have taken me to the temple straight away, as it was late and I was tired.

**He** had a strange habit, before answering a question or saying anything, of closing his eyes and moving his lips silently. Finally, I asked him why he did this, and he said he needed time to think before he spoke. Well, that's good, but I'm sure I wasn't the only one who thought it was quite weird to do it in that way.

**He** arranged a talk for me in that temple, and someone else fixed one up in *Phap Bao* temple, which had been established by some of the original founders of Quang Minh, when they split off after some disagreement, something very common. They invited me to stay there when I returned from England.

I then flew out, having ordered vegetarian food for the *American Airlines* flight, and when my meal was served and I opened and looked at it, I thought it was artificial meat ~ vege-meat stuff ~ but upon starting on it, discovered it was the real thing: *beef!* I complained, and was given a substitute meal of bread, cheese, and salad. Not content with this, I later wrote to the airlines to complain officially, saying that although meat wouldn't kill me, it certainly killed the animal it came from, and that if a caste-Hindu had been served beef, they might have had a law-suit on their hands. I received a very apologetic reply and a voucher for \$200 to use against a future AA flight! Worth a complaint, no?

**Arriving** in England, I found that Karin, Glen's second daughter, was going with someone of doubtful character, and was already pregnant with his child. She'd had other weirdos before; her way of attracting them must have had something to do with her *pheramones*. I soon saw through this guy, and consequently, she wasn't very happy with me.

Two weeks later, when I flew back into Chicago, I had quite an unpleasant time with a young immigration official. The first thing he said to me when I got to his desk was, "What are you coming here for?"

I was taken aback at his abrupt tone, but said, "To visit friends."

"Who do you know here?" he demanded.

"I know many people here," I replied.

"Who *are* they?" he persisted.

If I'd told him, he wouldn't have known, so I said, "Would you like to see my address book?"

"No," he said, and accused me of being evasive, adding, "You can't just come here and crash under bridges, you know." He'd probably taken a dislike to my appearance. Really, I should have noted his name and reported him.

Finally, he gave me another 3 months' waived visa, and let me go, saying, "Have a nice day."

I replied, "You, too; you need one!"

This wasn't the end. He must have alerted a Customs official to me, as he came behind while I was waiting for my bags at the carousel, and asked me some more questions. They usually wait for you go to them instead of coming to you! Really, US Immigration officials are the rudest I've ever come across, and treat people as guilty until proven innocent! This is not just my experience; I've heard tales of it from others.

This trip in the US, more than the previous one, was really played by ear, and I often didn't know where my next step would be until shortly before making it. Someone would suddenly come back into my life after some years, and I would decide to visit; my trip unfolded that way.

Someone from Phap Bao temple was waiting for me, and took me there, where I met someone who asked if I'd be prepared to go to Florida, where his parents lived. "Why not?" I said, and so he began to arrange things for me.

After several talks in Chicago, I returned to Cleveland for some days. Now, before I'd left for England, I'd already arranged with *To Van Quang* in Hartford, CT., to visit there. As air-fare from Cleveland was too high at short-notice, I opted for bus, thinking it was a direct service; I didn't want to have to go via New York, having had such a bad experience there before. But at the bus-station, I discovered the bus went only as far as NYC, and that I would have to transfer there. Unless I changed my mind and went by air, I'd have to face it, and after many hours, we pulled into NYC bus-station late; the connection to Hartford I'd hoped to catch had gone, and I was lucky to get on the next one, two hours later. Fortunately, Quang was still waiting for me, having guessed what had happened. I stayed in his apartment, giving talks in the temple and meeting friends both old and new, among them being *Cao Van Pha*, who'd married since I last met him, and had three daughters; his wife wasn't at all friendly, and I felt sorry for him, but otherwise he was doing alright.

At the temple one night, I met Dr. Tuan's sister, Eunice, and her husband, Truc. A few nights later, I met them again at dinner in someone's house.

Quang introduced me to his bosses in the small family-run business where he worked, and arranged to take time off to drive me up to Montreal to visit another ex-Palawan friend, *Nguyen Ngoc Truong*, whose nickname was *Bi*, with whom I'd kept in touch since we met in '84. He met us as we came in at night and took us to his apartment, where we met his wife and kids. It was good to see him again; *he* also took time off work to show us around Montreal; we went up *Royal Mountain* (which is the meaning of *Montreal*) dominating the city, and visited Buckminster Fuller's huge geodesic dome, among other things. He also drove us up to Quebec City, which was much smaller and slower than Montreal, with a decidedly French atmosphere. It was here that, in 1759, the British under *General Wolfe*, defeated the French forces led by *General Montcalm* at the decisive battle of *The Plains of Abraham*; the whole of Canada was soon thereafter ceded to Britain.

Back in Hartford, Quang then drove me to my next destination, a small town in New Jersey, where I'd been able to locate *Bui Minh Trung*, who I'd stayed with in Norway in '85. He had since moved to the US and married a girl he'd met in Bataan. They had a big new house, and I got a good welcome from their two kids, Kathy and Kevin, about 7 and 5 at that time; Kevin's first words to me were, "You're nice!" They were nice. I spent a week with them before Dr. Diep's brother-in-law, John Davis, drove up from Maryland to pick me up. Just before we left, I gave Kathy and Kevin a crystal each, telling them they were magic and could grant wishes, but only one each. I asked Kevin what he would wish for, and after a moment, he said: "I wish for another one just like this, so I can have a second wish." Smart kid! Later on, he changed his mind, and said he wished I would come to stay with them again; his wish didn't come true; faulty crystal!

John didn't take me directly to his home, but stopped on the way there to visit his parents in their retirement home, where we stayed with them for two days. They were remarkable people, but I was surprised that John addressed them by their first names, Clyde and Phoebe, something I wasn't used to. We said goodbye and proceeded to John's home.

It was hot and humid, and although I'd have preferred to stay home, John took me into Washington D.C. by train for the July 4<sup>th</sup> fireworks display. My instincts proved correct. It was terribly crowded when we got out of the station, and the fireworks display had just begun but lasted no longer than 20 minutes; spending had clearly been cut back; it was quite disappointing, and then we had the hassle of getting through the crowds back to the station.

John's wife, *Tam*, had been meditating, following a Tibetan lama, and had become mentally disturbed; she said she'd heard a voice telling her to transfer \$100,000 to the teacher's account. It was a case of *meditation* become *maditation*; she'd rushed into it without adequate preparation, wanting to get quick results. I was sad to see her in this state, but unless I was prepared to stay there long enough to help her 'detox,' there was little I could do.

Sogyal Rinpoche, in his book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, wrote this: "Whatever thoughts and emotions arise in

meditation, allow them to arise and settle, like the waves in the ocean. Whatever you find yourself thinking, let that thought rise and settle, without any constraint. Don't grasp at it, feed it, or indulge it, don't cling to it, and don't try to solidify it. Neither follow thoughts nor invite them; be like the ocean looking at its own waves, or the sky gazing down on the clouds that pass across it.

“You will soon find that thoughts are like the wind; they come and go. The secret is not to ‘think’ about the thoughts but to allow them to flow through your mind, while keeping your mind free of afterthoughts.”

While I'd been in the north, an email reached me from someone I'd met in Galang Camp, inviting me to visit him in Raleigh, NC. This I did, taking a bus from Washington. His name was Phuoc, and his marriage had just broken down, and his parents had come from Vietnam to see him. I stayed with him a few days, during which he took us all out to dinner, and while he ordered vegetarian for me, he and his family had meat. Phuoc also drank beer, and asked me if I minded. Now, when people invite me to a restaurant, they usually eat vegetarian, too, and certainly don't drink beer, so I said, “What would you say if I ate meat and drank beer? You'd be quite surprised, wouldn't you? You expect me to do things you don't or won't do yourself, and if I don't do them, you become upset. It means you're using monks as scapegoats. I'm sorry, but I don't play that game.”

Something good came out of my stay there. Phuoc had kept in touch with *Nguyen Tuong Chau* from Galang, while I'd lost contact with him as he's not the best correspondent in the world; he called him and I spoke with him, and the next day he drove down from Virginia to visit me with his family; it was good to see him again, and he invited me to stay with him next time around.

From Raleigh, I passed on to Atlanta, where I stayed with Hien in the huge ~ and I mean *huge* ~ new house he'd built for himself; I never discovered what kind of business he was in, as I don't ask people such things, but he told me that he'd just sold his own plane; he was from a wealthy family, and everything he touched turned to gold. I'd met him in Bataan in '81, and he'd gone to the US penniless, but lived frugally, worked hard, doing 3 jobs at the

same time, and had ~ to put it mildly ~ prospered. His mother was visiting from England, and it was nice to see her again; his youngest sister had married an American Jew; Hien had been so against this marriage that he cut her off, and I didn't see her, although she was living not too far away. He arranged some talks for me while I was there, then sent me on to Jacksonville, Florida, where I would spend a few days with Toan Huynh's brother-in-law, Cuu and his family.

**He**, in turn, drove me to Orlando, to stay with relatives of someone I'd met in Chicago a couple of months before; things always leads to others in chain-like sequence, often in unexpected ways. I was about to experience this again, when I gave a talk in one of the temples in Orlando. In the audience were people whose faces seemed familiar but who I couldn't place, until afterwards, they came and introduced themselves: more people from Bataan. Hearing I was coming to talk in Orlando, they'd come up from Tampa, and invited me to go back with them. I had a plane-ticket from Orlando to Fort Lauderdale, but they told me they would drive me down there. I was soon on my way to Tampa with them ~ *Nga* and *Lu* ~ and stayed above their clothing factory. They soon arranged for me to talk in a temple nearby, calling people to attend on short notice. Then, *Lai*, their eldest son, drove me down to Ft. Lauderdale, to stay with the parents of *Bobby*, who I'd met in Chicago. They'd arranged a couple of talks for me, and also took me on a cruise past the houses and yachts of the rich-and-famous, but their 12-year-old daughter was an insufferable brat, and finally I scolded her for being so rude to her dad. I also told her elder brother about her when he came down to join us.

They sent me on to stay with a doctor and his wife in Miami ~ *Hoa* and *Mai* ~ and from there I flew out to England again. This split-trip in the US had been good, and I had a completely different impression from that of my first trip there fifteen years before. I found Americans, in general ~ and apart from the Immigration people ~ polite and friendly, and I resolved to go again.

**Glen** had jobs awaiting me, the biggest among them being the rebuilding of a garden-shed one of the neighbors had given her;



she wanted it fixed up as an extra room for the summer. We'd almost done it, when, stepping back from it one day, I twisted my right ankle and collapsed in agony. I was unable to stand or put my weight on it, and it swelled up to twice the size. Glen took me to the hospital nearby, where I was pushed through the corridors in a wheelchair ~ yet another first ~ to be x-rayed. I was relieved to be told there was no break or fracture, and that it would take about six weeks to recover. I could manage going upstairs, but coming down had to be done on my backside!

In September, I left for Malaysia, to make another trip there. I also went to Singapore for a while. In a temple there one evening, I met somebody who claimed that Buddhism was the best religion for everyone, but when I asked what he knew of other religions, he replied: "Not very much." I then told him that he was just talking nonsense and showing his ignorance, because although he *might* say Buddhism is the best religion for *him* ~ and *then* only when he had studied other religions carefully ~ he could not speak for anyone else, let alone everyone else, otherwise, it would be like saying that bananas are the best fruit in the world when he'd never tasted any other kind of fruit.

**P**eople everywhere believe their religion to be the best, otherwise they wouldn't follow it (and most people don't follow their religion anyway), but in most cases, their religion was a consequence of birth, and was not intelligently chosen. If, for example, the people of the Middle-East had been born in South America instead, they would probably call themselves Catholics, and that only because the Spanish and Portuguese forced Catholicism on the people of that continent. If people used their intelligence and investigated things instead of merely believing, we would surely see a religious revolution.

**A**s followed by people like the man told of above, religion divides us and is responsible for many of the world's problems. In 2003, there was the awful massacre of 12 innocent Nepalese in Iraq, by people who obviously thought they were doing it in the name of their religion, but is *that* what Islam teaches? Among their other reasons, they said that Nepalese worship their God, Buddha, meaning that they were *infidels*. A little bit of knowledge ~ avail-

able to anyone these days; there is no excuse for such ignorance now ~ would show that Buddhists do not worship the Buddha as a God, any more than Muslims worship Mohammed as a God. The term *infidel* is a subjective term, used to refer to people who believe other than the people using it; Christians use it for non-Christians, Jews for non-Jews. As far as I know, Hindus don't use it for non-Hindus, Buddhists for non-Buddhists, or Taoists for non-Taoists; it is a term used by theists ~ that is, *Godists*.

If we are to effectively deal with the problems besetting our world, we must learn to focus on the things we share in common, not on things that divide us. The whole world will never become Muslim, Buddhist, Christian or Jewish; we must accept the existence of other religions, and not dream of imposing ours on others. Just like love of one's country is not demonstrated by waving flags or singing the national anthem, but by living in such a way that doesn't bring shame on one's country, so Religion is how we live, not what we call ourselves. And, just as Margaret Thatcher said something like, "If you need to call yourself powerful or a lady, you are not," so we demonstrate the validity of our religion by the way we live, not by saying it's the best!



~ 3 ~

### BATAAN REVISITED

**W**hile in the US, I'd re-established contact with Victor ~ we'd lost touch with some years before ~ and he invited me to visit him in Manila. So, thinking to go on to the US again from there, I went to the Phils in November '99. Victor met me at the airport and took me home, where I was made comfortable. I had several old acquaintances to renew.

I met Tomas and Avelina again, of course, and spent a couple of days with them. Victor took me along to an ARE meeting, where I

gave a short talk, and met Bet. When she learned that I wished to visit the Camp at Bataan, she offered to take me, and arranged a driver to go with us.

The sky was overcast as we left Manila for what had been called *PRPC* or *Philippines Refugee Processing Center* (an odd name that always made me think of a food-cannery; no wonder many refugees felt they were mere commodities or statistics on paper, without real identities!) Being Sunday, the traffic wasn't so heavy, and it didn't take us as long to escape the vortex of the city as it would have done on other days; Manila is so congested that it is choking on its own emissions. It took us 3½ hours to get there, as parts of the road were still in bad shape from the damage caused by the cataclysmic eruption of *Mt. Pinatubo* in 1991.

When we arrived at the check-point, we were held up for some minutes while the guards checked with the Administration Building. Satisfied we had a legitimate reason for visiting the Camp, we were allowed in "to visit the temples only"; we got the impression that there must be some secret activities going on there, though what they might have been, we could only guess at.

Proceeding from the check-point, it was as if I'd never been there before, as there were no refugee billets in sight, like there used to be, but only thick overgrowth, and trees where none had been. Somewhat confused, I gave the driver halting directions, until we found a familiar road that led to the temple in Neighborhood 7, but it was only with some difficulty that we were able to discern the temple-gateway through the tangled vegetation; in just a few short years, the jungle had taken over completely.

Forcing our way through the gateway, we could then see the Kwan Yin image behind a clump of bamboo I had planted during my last visit in 1987; it had not been vandalized, but remained as it was when the Camp closed in 1994, its hand raised in perpetual blessing. A marble plaque stood beside it, engraved with the words: DON'T WORRY; IT WILL PASS ~ EVERYTHING DOES. My last gift to the Camp, I'd had this made and placed there to remind people to hold on and not give way to despair; my hope was that they might think of these words as Kwan Yin's and draw consolation and courage therefrom.

Wary of snakes, we pushed through the weeds and brambles to the image, standing beside the dried-up pond wherein water-lilies used to bloom, and took some photos. Alas, I mused, the artist who had so skillfully crafted this image, a humble and softly-spoken man, had died of a heart-attack in California some years after resettling there. When he was creating it, I asked him not to put his name on it, and he agreed; I said it wasn't necessary for people to know who made it, but just for it to be there, symbolizing hope; there were no names in the temple, except one on a stele that had been erected later in memory of a man who had died when he fell from the roof while working there.

On one side was the grove of mango-trees under which many a refugee had sought shelter from the sun, and on the other were the ruins of the temple we had established in '80-'81, and which was later named *Chua Van Hanh*; the roof had gone without a trace, probably to serve other uses in the nearby town of *Morong*. All that remained were a few termite-riddled pillars that crumbled to the touch, and the Buddha-image gazing impassively on the desolation.

It would have been too much of an effort to force our way through the weeds and thorns to where we might look out over the stream and forest behind the temple, so we didn't even try. We did, however, come upon two cement seats I had set up, with the inscriptions on their tops still legible; one of them read: "The Law of Life is Change ....." One seat had cracked in the middle, and a seed had germinated therein, giving rise to a flourishing sapling.

We proceeded up through the Camp, passing the place where the Catholic Church had stood; this, too, had gone, but the image of Mary, atop a globe of the Earth, remained. The Camp hospital was there, closed but intact. Next was the Admin Building, with some activity inside; what it is now used for, I didn't ascertain. Then there was the ICMC building, where the basic-English education of the refugees had its nerve-center. Nearby, too, was the Camp Post Office, which I'd nick-named the 'Lost Office' because of the large amounts of mail that used to go 'missing' there; there are always people to take advantage of any situation to enrich themselves, seemingly unable to put themselves into the posi-

tions of those they exploit; what we would not like others to do to us, we are quite willing to do to others.

Up then, past *Freedom Plaza* and the refugee-boats that had been brought from the coast nearby rotting away, those who had escaped from Vietnam in them long settled in other lands; one was little bigger than a rowing-boat, without cover; how brave or foolhardy were the people who had risked everything to cross the sea in that! Many thousands ~ how many, will never be known ~ perished in their quest. Life must have been so hard in their homeland for them to embark upon such a hazardous venture!

Following the road onwards, it was hard to imagine that 18,000 people at a time had lived here; their billets had gone without trace, bulldozed, I was told, some years back. The Camp had been divided into ten neighborhoods, each neighborhood having thirty buildings, with ten billets each, each billet accommodating six people or more; there they cooked, ate, slept, studied, worried, argued, fought, played, sang, loved, planned, prayed, dreamed, and made do with what they had. During the time I spent there, over 100,000 people from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos passed through, most spending about six months there, but some getting stuck and having to wait much longer; there were others, too, who never left the Camp, but were resettled, sooner than they expected or wanted, in what came to be known as *Neighborhood 11*: the cemetery.

The temple at the top end of the Camp, near Nbhd Two, was in better shape than the other one; at least, the roof was still on, but the fibro-cement walls, on which the Cambodians had painted scenes from the life of the Buddha, had been smashed; some fragments remained, hanging on the framework. This temple, more than the lower one, bore the marks of my hands, as I had done a lot of work on it myself, and constructed it more sturdily; the octagonal window-frames, that I'd decorated with *bodhi-leaves*, were still there. The main painting of the Buddha behind the altar had been partly-destroyed and wore campaign-posters of some politician; one Buddha-image had been decapitated.

In vain I searched for the hut I'd built and lived in, but was unable to find even the cement floor. I looked, too, for two coconut trees

that had grown from nuts left over from some festival we had in 1980, expecting them to be quite tall now, but they had also gone. The Bodhi-tree, however, which I'd brought as a tiny sapling plucked from a wall in a temple on the island of Cebu in 1979, and planted in the Camp in 1980, was now big and tall; this was the tree that had been inexplicably cut down by Monk X shortly after I had left the Camp, and resulted in the Cambodians taking over the temple from the Vietnamese, but had regrown and was in the process of wrapping itself around and absorbing a small shrine the Cambodians had erected against it.

**A** Buddha-image ~ made by the Vietnamese when they established the first temple there in 1980, soon after the Camp opened ~ sat in a shed at one side of the temple, together with a larger-than-life image made later by the Cambodians.

**A**round the trees in what had been the temple-compound were stones we had positioned to serve as seats that termites couldn't eat; it was hard to imagine that this area had once been clean and neat. We had a picnic here, from the food Bet had brought.

I climbed the hill behind the temple, hoping to look down on where the Camp had been, but this was not possible owing to the trees and shrubbery that enshrouded everything. It did not, however, prevent memories from flooding back into my mind. I 'saw' many old faces there, and thought of their stories, each of them unique; I wondered where they all were.

**F**our years of my life were spent in this Camp, watching people come and go, some with little more than the clothes they were wearing. Some few I saw again in places like the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Denmark, Norway and Australia; they changed the world wherever they went, and in turn were changed.

**L**ife goes on, flows on, like a river, usually with no sense of direction, not knowing where it came from, where it is, nor where it is going. We think we are in control of our lives, but are not, and even small things, unexpected and sudden, can change us considerably. If we learned to look at life as an adventure, instead of clinging to it with fearful self-concern, we could enjoy it much more than we do. If, too, we would give up the idea or desire that everything should be *nice*, and tried to see the *good* in it instead,

we would learn more than we do. There is always white in the black. I met people in that Camp (and in other Camps), who were quite happy there; not all were sad. I also met people later, in the lands where they had resettled, who said that they would like to be back in the Refugee Camps, where life was simple and uncomplicated. Some even said that their time there was the happiest part of their lives.

Victor invited me to join him on a trip to Baguio in the mountains, but I was soon to regret accepting, as much of the road was still unrepaired after the volcano's eruption, and the air-con in their van wasn't working, so it was hot and uncomfortable; I considered taking the bus for the return journey, but didn't do so.

Back in Manila, I went to visit Rita, the cake-lady, at her home, and found her greatly aged. She and Victor had disagreed years before over money she'd borrowed from him; unable or unwilling to repay him, she claimed he'd given it to her. Shakespeare's advice is good to remember: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be".

I queued up at the US embassy and applied for a visa that would allow me to stay in the US longer than 3 months; I was given one valid for ten years!

Sister Biao Chin, the nun who had so generously supported me before, wanted me to take over the running of two temples which had fallen to her to look after when their resident monks had died; one of them had 108 rooms! "What?" I said, "I'd be forever cleaning!" She was quite insistent, however, and it was hard to say no. Just then, however, I got an email from someone in Melbourne with a message from Tuan's wife, Van. She had discovered that he'd been having an affair, and was broken up about it; she asked me to return to help, saying I was the only one who could. This was a good excuse to escape from Manila.



## A NEW MILLENNIUM

I'd been in touch with Tinh Giac and arranged to stay at the temple where he was staying with his brother, *Thich Tinh Dao*, in Melbourne. I left Manila on a night-flight on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, arriving next morning to find not just Tinh Giac waiting for me, but also Tuan and Van, who wanted to take me to their home. I told them I'd have to stay with Tinh Giac for a while first, but although the temple ~ just like Dull Moon ~ had lots of space, being a converted school, it was under-utilised; Tinh Dao's vision extended only to external things like constructing images; he had no idea about Dharma-propagation. I was glad to leave.

I was in Tuan's place for the *Millenium*, although to me, it was just another day, no more and no less important than any other day; moreover, it was of significance only to Christians, as our dating-system is a purely arbitrary thing. It would be better to date it from an event that involved everyone, like the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, which really changed the world.

We had an all-out discussion ~ with someone else acting as translator ~ about Tuan's infidelity, and he didn't try to deny it. By then, Van had accepted it and wasn't threatening to divorce or leave him anymore; instead, she used it to get a new BMW for herself. I was surprised he'd even found someone to have an affair with, as he's not at all attractive with his psoriasis; but there you are, the world is full of strange people.

Knowing I was on my way to the US again, Phong ~ the person who had emailed me on Van's behalf ~ suggested I stop-over in New Zealand, and offered to arrange things for me, with his brothers and sisters there. I agreed, as I'd not been there before.

From Melbourne, I went to Sydney for a while, and gave some talks there, including one at *Sangha Lodge*, a centre that had been established by *Tejadhammo*, an Aussie monk, some years before. This was run very well by him, and had a mixed membership of Westerners and Asians. It was my first time there, and at the end of my talk, someone introduced himself, saying he was Lebanese. He'd been interested in Buddhism for some time, and it was *his* first visit to that place. I gave him some of my books,



and soon thereafter he started to correspond with me by email on a regular basis. His name was Iman.

On, then, to Brisbane to visit my mother again; she had deteriorated some more, but that's how it is with that dreadful disease. I was surprised at how I took it, as I always thought I would miss her terribly when she went, and here she was, going before my eyes, in a sort of no-man's land ~ not here, and not there ~ with nothing at all I could do about it.

Flying on to Auckland, I was surprised by the security. A dog sniffed my hand-baggage, and its handler asked if I had any food in it (they are understandably concerned about things being brought in that might cause diseases unknown in N.Z.); I had none. He asked if I'd had any in the past two weeks, and I said yes; he said their dogs can smell things from so long back.

There was a welcoming-committee waiting for me such as I don't like: video-cameras, flowers and so on; why make such a fuss? I was taken to stay with Phong's younger brother and his family, who follow a Taiwanese sect called '*Tien Dao*' ('Heaven's Way'), which is a mixture of things from various religions and assures people of a ticket to heaven on payment of an initial fee of just \$10; of course, they can offer no evidence in support of their contentions, but that's not unusual, is it? Most religions are like that.

Whatever, they treated me kindly, and took me where I needed to go for what few talks had been arranged. I enjoyed the month I spent there, and thought it would be a good place to settle, if I ever reach that point.

There was a call for me one day from Wilanie in Adelaide; she never kept in touch with me, but had somehow tracked me down. She told me that Wick (which was how he pronounced his name, Rick), had left her for a younger woman after living with her for over ten years, saying that he didn't love her. She was heart-broken about this and asked me to pray for her, as she wanted him back. Well, I'd known that he was a rat-bag for some years, and wanted to tell her that she should cut her losses and adjust to life without him, but I couldn't do so. Poor woman; she expected so much from me, and I couldn't deliver what she wanted. Before I went to India in '87, she'd asked me to visit Sai Baba

and ask him to help her husband, John, return to her. I couldn't do that, and her husband never came back. I was sympathetic, but it was clear that her clinging caused her so much suffering.

Remembering that Nghia 'Houdini' from Bataan had resettled in N.Z. (though which part, I had no idea), I asked about for him, but no-one had heard of such a person. The day I was to fly out to the US, however, I went to a shop to buy some postcards, and upon coming out, ran straight into him. How strange! "*Nghia!*" I said. He also recognized me immediately. It was as if our meeting had been engineered. He looked a bit rough, and when I asked about the aunt who had sponsored him, he said she'd died some years before. "Then where are you living?" I asked.

"Oh, no place special."

"How to find you if I come again?"

"Just ask the police," he said.

My point-of-entry to the US this time was Los Angeles, but after clearing Immigration and Customs, I got a connecting flight to San Francisco, where Julius was waiting for me. However, my bags had not come on the same flight, so we had to drive around and come back later for them. We then went to Tuan/Diep's new house; not only had they bought another in the past year, but also a condominium at Monterey Bay; it was their way of avoiding paying excessive tax.

It was still cold when I got there, being the end of winter, and there was snow on some of the hills. Tuan's aged mother was breathing her last in their home, and in fact died quietly the next day. I refrained from offering my services as she was a Catholic, and her family might not have approved had I done so, but I *did* stand beside her bed and send her positive thoughts. Her body was taken to a funeral-parlor, and her children started to arrive from all over. I again met Eunice and Truk, from Hartford.

One of Diep's brothers drove up from L. A. to see me; he considered himself a healer, and he *might* have had some power, but I wasn't impressed with what he told me, and thought he was a bit

cracked. He commented several times on Tuan and Diep's prosperity and said he himself was poor. I detected a note of envy.

**As** in the previous year, I gave a number of talks in this area, and in Oakland, met Thich Tinh Tuong (who I'd last met in Hartford in '85). His brother had a temple in Oakland, and Tinh Tuong, knowing I was going to Vancouver, offered to arrange talks for me in Edmonton; I accepted. I didn't know ~ because he himself didn't at that time ~ that he had a rapidly-growing cancer.

Tuan and Diep loaded me up with medication again, and took me for an eye-examination, with good results. They then sent me on to Seattle, where Nga and Lu of Tampa had arranged for me to stay with a cousin, Albert, who'd set up several talks for me. After two days with him, I went to stay in a temple and from there was picked up and taken to Vancouver. Soon after I got to the temple there, someone I'd known in VRC in '86/'87 came to see me: *Thao Ngo*. It was a real surprise, as I had not known where he'd resettled. He was a nice young guy, and had recently married; his wife was quiet and shy ~ at least in front of others ~ but I later learned that she would occasionally give Thao a hard time.

**Also** in Vancouver, I met Victor again. His family had a house there, too, and he was in the process of settling there himself. He was within walking distance of where I was staying.

Thao bought me a plane-ticket to Edmonton, and I enjoyed the flight over the Rockies. It was really wintry when I got there, and I didn't spend much time outside. Edmonton is on the plains, so the wind sweeps unobstructed over it. Talks had been arranged for me in the Vietnamese temple. Thay Tinh Tuong also came to give a talk there; it was the last time I would see him alive. After my talks, it was time to return to Vancouver, but in Edmonton airport, I met a Taiwanese monk who had a temple in the city that I'd not known about. He invited me to come and stay if I ever passed that way again.

**Back** in Vancouver, I met Victor once more, and arranged to see him yet again in L. A., as this was the next stop for both of us. I flew out of Vancouver, after going through the unpleasant US Immigration in the airport there, and was met by Quan and taken to his home again. He was vegetarian himself, and was fond of

Indian food, too, so we had some good meals together, even coming across a buffet-style Indian restaurant with a wide variety of dishes. Victor also came and took me out to one of his favorite eating places; this guy really knows how to eat, but never seems to gain weight! Unlike Quan he refuses to eat curry, however!

One evening, I went with Chi Phuong and her family to a buffet restaurant, and while sitting there, someone stole her bag; she'd hung it on the back of her chair and turned around to find it gone. The manager was informed, and the staff alerted, and in a few minutes, the bag was found outside, minus the money ~ quite a large amount. It quite spoiled our evening out.

After talks in various places, Quan drove me to the airport for a flight to Houston, but while waiting at the gate to board the plane, I was unaware the gate had been changed (it's hard to hear the announcements in airports; they're so harsh and unclear), and missed my flight, and since the next available one was not for some hours, I called Quan who came to pick me up and take me for lunch; in the evening, he took me to the airport again, and this time I made the flight, but it wasn't direct; I had to change planes somewhere, and got to Houston quite late, to find Nga and Lu (who'd come over from Tampa to see me) and other people waiting for me; my bags were also there, waiting to be claimed; they'd come in on the flight I'd missed. That would not happen today.

I was taken to the largest Vietnamese temple in Houston, and given a nice room. Talks had been arranged for me but although the translator did what she could, it wasn't very good.

In Houston, as in other places, I met a number of people I'd known before, and someone I'd corresponded with some years earlier: *Nguyen Trong Kha*, an elderly gentleman who was poor of hearing. His wife was with him, and she was blind, so he had to see for her while she heard for him; they were a lovely couple. He had such hopes that I could bring the Dharma to America; I was sorry that I couldn't fulfill them. Nga and Lu introduced me to some of their friends.

Someone I'd met when I first went to Bataan in 1980 ~ *Sophie Hai Nhan* ~ had arranged talks in Dallas for me, so that was my next stop, and I had a good time there, too. I met some other

people from Bataan; one of their daughters ~ Amanda ~ had become a dentist in the meantime, and told me that if I needed any treatment the next time around, she would be happy to do it for me. Well, my teeth had been giving out over the past few years, so this was something to keep in mind. In fact, I'd already had some fillings done while I was in San Jose.

**B**ack to Houston, then on to Tampa, to stay with Nga and Lu again; they'd set up talks for me, both in Tampa and Orlando, and these over, drove me down to Miami, leaving me with Hoa and Mai in their waterfront home.

**N**ow, having met Chau in Raleigh, I decided to visit him, so from Miami, I flew to Washington D.C., where he was waiting for me and took me to his home in Virginia. His wife, Phuong and their children made me welcome, and I stayed with them a few days, giving talks in several places in that area. It was at one of these talks that I happened upon Yogacara Rahula's autobiography, "A Single Night's Shelter", that inspired me to write my own memoirs (I told of this in the Introduction to "So Many Roads"). Chau told me that he'd been so disappointed with his eldest daughter's conduct and the people she hung around with that, in order to discipline her, he sent her to a special school, from which she was allowed to come home only once a year; I don't think it had the desired result, and maybe made her more rebellious. His other children were alright.

**F**rom Virginia, I doubled back to Atlanta, and stayed with Hien again. He drove me to several places, sight-seeing, including a worked-out gold-mine, and some deep caves near Chattanooga. He then sent me on to Hartford, where I stayed with Eunice and Truc for a while. They took me to New York one day, and while having lunch in a crowded restaurant, a lady opposite started to talk to us, and it turned out she was Thai, so I spoke a few words with her in her native tongue; she was pleased by that, and insisted on paying for my lunch. We went to the Statue of Liberty, but were unable to get right to the top. By then, there wasn't time to see much else, but it was quite enjoyable nevertheless. I never got near to the Twin Towers.

I also spent a few days with Quang. He took me to visit a large Chinese temple in the hills not far away, together with the monk from the Hartford temple, *Thay Tri Hoang*. One of his students, a newly-ordained American monk was staying there, and for the sake of conversation, I asked where he was from. The smart-ass replied, "That's what I'm trying to find out." End of conversation.

Another person named Phuoc, who I'd met in VRC years before, called me from a town named Lawrence, near Boston, and invited me over, saying he would pick me up soon, as he was in the vicinity. 'Soon' was almost midnight; I had to quickly get ready to go with him. After a few days with him, taking my early-morning walks past huge old cotton mills, I flew out to Cleveland, for the last time with Toan Huynh and his family. I had a quiet week there, as I'd been told in advance not to expect too much as most people would be away on vacation over the Independence Day holidays, and so I wasn't disappointed. I needed a break anyway.

A monk who I knew from '85 in Chicago (before he was a monk), came down to Cleveland to pick me up and take me to his temple in Detroit, where I spent 10 days. My stay there was good and I enjoyed it; my four talks went exceptionally well. The first was in a Thai temple where there was a mixed audience of Thais, Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans and Americans, without translation, too. The resident American monk even praised me for it ~ a real bouquet! Contrary to what I expected, he was very friendly. He was strict, according to the Thai way, but not stiff; he even invited me to stay there when I next passed that way. He himself had spent 10 of his 30 years in Thailand working in the Cambodian refugee camps, so we had a lot in common. The second talk there was in the Vietnamese temple where I was staying, and was translated by an American Vietnam-vet named Bob; it was quite good. Several times before, I've had Westerners translate for me, and the Vietnamese audiences loved it. That same afternoon, I gave a talk in a Sri Lankan temple, and there was a mixed audience there, too. My final talk was in the Vietnamese temple.

While in Detroit, a visit to the Ford Motor Museum at Dearborn was a must, and I found it very interesting, although I grew tired after some hours there. The vision of Henry Ford had changed

the world. "You can have whatever color car you like," he said to someone who'd asked him about that, "as long as it's black."

From Detroit, the monk drove me to Chicago, a seven hours' trip. I had a good time there, too, made better by the Indian food that I had chance to partake of several times in restaurants. My week there soon passed, and was really not long enough; actually, I'd tried to squeeze too much into that trip, and should have spent more time in fewer places. Nga and Lu came up from Tampa to visit me and take me around. By this time, I'd come to realize that Nga was overly attached to me, and I found her attention cloying.

My final place of visit in the US this trip was Minneapolis. I stayed with the VINA's again, and was treated nicely. Before coming, I'd asked them to find me a different translator from the previous year, and Tho had volunteered. But, because of the distorted notes he'd made of one of my talks, I didn't accept, and when he asked why, I told him. He was very upset, claiming his English was better than most Americans'. That may be so, I said, but it was still not good enough for me. He later became quite abusive via email, thinking that a 2-weeks' visit to India qualified him as an authority on Buddhism.

At the end of July, I flew out to Atlanta, where I caught a connecting flight to Manchester; another long trip was over.

This time, Glen had got timber waiting for me to make double-doors for what used to be her garage; she had no idea what kind of job I would make of them, and was delighted; they were the first of many I would make there.



~ 5 ~

## THE TROUBLED MIDDLE-EAST

**I**'d come to England for only a short time, however; it was in my mind to make a trip in the Middle-East, knowing, before I began, that it would be a challenge. I was rea-

sonably well, health-wise ~ in fact, *remarkably* well, everything considered ~ and in spite of the ankle-injury sustained the previous year which still showed no signs of healing, I could walk alright, howbeit with some pain at times. For one thing, being both vegetarian and diabetic meant that my diet had to be restricted in various ways. I went prepared to live mainly on bread, tomatoes and a little fruit, and this is really how it was. But first, a little background:

As told earlier in my narrative, I first went to Turkey, Syria and Jordan thirty-three years before, when I was just a callow youth, but this time, I planned to go to Egypt, too. Of course, I could no longer travel as I did in those early days, when I was carefree and my naïveté protected me, and when simplicity and economy were a matter of necessity. Then, I hitch-hiked my way around, walking long distances when I couldn't get a ride, and only when really necessary taking a bus or train. There seemed to be an unwritten standard for 'on the road,' and poverty was practically a virtue; travelers like me were proud of getting by on as little as possible. In those days, it was safe enough to travel this way, which is not to say there was no danger; I guess I've had my fair share of that. Sometimes I was aware of it, and other times not; when you are young, you tend to overlook it or not recognize it as such. Now, I need a modicum of comfort, and no longer hitch-hike or sleep rough, as I often used to do; I like clean clothes regularly, and to shower every day ~ not that I was dirty before, but a daily shower was a luxury that was often unavailable.

Taking leave of Glen on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, 2000, I flew out to *Izmir* in Turkey, a 4 hours flight. Arriving, I changed US\$100 and became a multi-millionaire. (When I was first in Turkey in '67, one US dollar got 13 Turkish Lira, but the inflation-rate there has been around 80% for years, and \$100 got me 66 *million* Lira!) Pockets bulging, so to speak, I went to *Seljuk*, a small town south of there in order to revisit Ephesus, This time, like the previous time, I went early, so as to have the place to myself before the tranquility was shattered when the tour-buses disgorged their cargoes. As usual, however, when one tries to repeat an experience, it didn't succeed, and I did not feel the same magic as upon my first visit.



My next stop was *Canakkale*, to visit Ali, the tour-guide who'd so inspired me at *Gallipoli* 3 years earlier. We'd kept in touch since then, and he had invited me to stay at his home whenever I came again, saying: "My door is always open to you." He and his wife, *Aiten*, made me very welcome and were careful about my dietary needs. I joined Ali's tour-groups around Gallipoli two more times, and enjoyed again his exposition. Aiten also took me on trips in the area, to ancient sites that otherwise I would not have seen.

I spent five days with them before going on to Edirne, an historic town on the Turkish border with Bulgaria dating back to the time of Alexander the Great, and which was the Ottoman Turks' capital for some years until they captured Constantinople in 1453. Edirne's most prominent landmark is a magnificent mosque built almost 400 years ago; it was this that I wished to visit, because when I'd passed through during my earlier visits, I had not bothered to stop. I spent only one day there, meditating for some time in the mosque, before going to Istanbul, where I got a room in the *Sehir Hotel*, the same hotel I'd stayed in when last there. My main reason for coming was to get a visa for Syria, the next country of my route, but being my favorite city, I had to spend a few days there, retracing some of my old footsteps and trying to find some acquaintances of my last visit. I succeeded in finding only one ~ Dusun, the man I'd helped to overcome severe headaches. He recognized me before I did him, and we talked over tea.

I did not visit many places in Istanbul, as I'd explored extensively in '97; instead, I took long walks around. Almost daily, I went to meditate in the Blue Mosque, an awesome edifice about 400 years old. It is a major tourist-attraction, though still used as a place of worship. It was there the thought came to me that one superstition is as good as another. It doesn't matter what we call ourselves; names mean very little. Most people do not bother to investigate or understand their religion, whatever it might be, and so fail to derive much benefit from it; they take the easy way out, merely believing. *Great ideas always degenerate when small-minded people get hold of them.* And yet, I will be objective and see the positive side, too. Here is something I wrote while sitting in the Blue Mosque:

Magnificent piles ~  
 The mosques of Istanbul,  
 The temples of India,  
 The cathedrals of Europe.  
 Without superstition and fear  
 Masquerading as devotion and piety,  
 They would not have been built.  
 There is something to be said for Ignorance  
 When all is said and done,  
 And it wins over Truth hands down.  
 Many forms it takes, this human weakness,  
 And one form is as good as another;  
 There is little difference between them.

Afraid to fairly acknowledge  
 And take credit for his abilities,  
 Man has attributed them to something higher,  
 Saying they are gifts from God;  
 Thus he becomes a slave.  
 With much help from others before us, of course,  
 We have done what we have done ~  
 No God and nothing else.  
 Better to give through love and joy  
 Than from fear or greed.  
 In this way, we fulfill ourselves,  
 And discover more of what it means  
 To be Human.

I went to a cyber-café to check my email, but the young guy there spoke no English, so went to find someone who did. It was thus that I met *Fetih*, who spoke fluent English and Dutch, having lived in Holland for some years. Though a devout Muslim, with the distinctive beard and mustache favored by those believers, he was not fanatical or bigoted, and we had several conversations over the days I was there. He had a stall selling silver jewelry beside the street down which ~ I told him ~ I'd ridden into Istanbul in style by *Mercedes* in 1967, the year of his birth.

To facilitate my trip, I bought a *Lonely Planet* guide, "*Istanbul to Cairo*," containing all kinds of information that came in very useful

along my way; this book must have paid for itself many times over by my trip's end.

The Syrian consulate was a long bus-ride and walk from where I was staying, and having got there, I learned that in order to get a visa with a British passport, I would need a letter of guarantee from the British consulate, but that Aussie passport-holders could get a visa at the border without such a letter. It didn't take me long to decide to use my Aussie passport, and avoid the hassle and expense of going to the British consulate; I have long been allergic to paperwork, and the less of it in my life the better.

Freed of the need to get a visa for Syria, I left Istanbul and took a ferry across the *Sea of Marmara* to *Yalova*, then traveled in stages to the south, passing through the spa-city of *Bursa*. By the time I got to *Antalya* on the south coast, I had a throat-and-chest infection that required antibiotics; having had such before I knew better than to leave it long before starting treatment, hoping it would get better by itself. I didn't know the cause of it, but suspect the amount of cigarette-smoke I'd been exposed to was a major factor. It was several days before I got over this infection, and I saw little of Antalya except its museum and its marvelous natural harbor, the advantages of which must have been recognized long before the Romans came and made use of it. Pirates probably used it as a safe haven until Pompey the Great swept them from the Mediterranean in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

It was hot in Turkey, especially in the south, and I feared it would be even hotter in Syria, where I was headed, but I carried on to *Antakya*, the last stop in Turkey. *Antakya* is the ancient *Antioch*, another important city of Roman times, and there are still tokens of its former glory in the museum ~ especially mosaics. I stayed only overnight, as I'd been there before, and was eager to press on. Buses run between there and *Aleppo*, the first major city in Syria, just over the border. I boarded one of these for the 3-hours' journey, with a few other passengers.

Leaving Turkey was no problem; after getting our passports exit-stamped, we proceeded to the Syrian border a few miles on. Syria is well-known for its bitter anti-Israel stance, and anyone with an Israeli stamp in their passport stands no chance at all of

getting into Syria; if one has a Jewish-sounding name, it is reason enough to be turned away; and it is sometimes enough to be suspected of having been to Israel or intending to go there for them to reject you. I'd been in Israel in 1968, the year after Israel's astounding victory, but that was before everything was stored on computers, so I felt confident there would be no record of that. It was with some trepidation, however, that I got down from the bus at the Syria border-post, and with good reason, it turned out.

Together with the other travelers, I filled in a visa-form and paid the \$30 fee, and waited in line for it to be processed. This done, we all got back on the bus, but had not gone far when we came to a police-post where our passports were again checked. Everyone else's was in order except mine, and I was ordered to get off the bus with my bags, while the bus went on without me. I was taken back to the Immigration office, feeling that yes and no are the same; if I could go, good; if I couldn't go, also good. The problem was, I had entered Turkey on my British passport, and both the entry-stamp and the exit-stamp were in that one, while I'd tendered my Aussie passport to the Immigration-officer at the Syrian border. In that passport, therefore, was the Syrian visa, but no stamp to show I'd entered or left Turkey; the Immigration-officer must have missed this, the border-police didn't. Both passports are legal, of course, and I had no worries about that, but because the Syrians are so suspicious, I knew they might question my reasons and motives, and turn me back. They were not very friendly or polite; moreover, the people at the heavily-guarded border-post spoke almost no English, and I don't speak Arabic, but there was nothing to do except wait while they left me sitting in the Arrival Hall, and went away to determine my fate. The outcome was favorable, and I was handed my passports with the universal word "Okay"; no apology or smile.

**M**y bus had gone without me, so I had to find an alternative way of getting to Aleppo, an hour away. It was noon and hot, and few vehicles running at that time. I waited in some shade for quite a while before a pick-up stopped nearby, and I asked the driver if he was going to Aleppo, and if he was, might I get a ride (and I just said my hitch-hiking days were over!) Well, he wasn't going all the way to Aleppo, but took me as far as he could. On the way,

I noticed military uniforms everywhere ~ even young school-children were so dressed! This has been going on for many years ~ two generations or more. How tragic to be so influenced and trained, and yet apart from the government officials I met, the common people of Syria were friendly and hospitable.

Stopping to let me out at his turn-off, my kindly driver hailed a minibus and asked the driver to take me into town; he agreed, and I was dropped near the center, then used the city map in my guide-book; many cheap hotels were shown on it, as well as lots of other useful information. I made my way to such a hotel ~ *Green Star* ~ and got a room there. The proprietor was quite friendly, and after a rest, I set off to explore. I've always had a good sense of direction, and easily negotiated the maze of alleys and narrow lanes and found my way to the labyrinthine covered-bazaar, one of Aleppo's main places to visit. I didn't buy anything there, except something to eat, but it was interesting wandering around anyway, and I met several people who were eager to talk, apart from the many who called out to me to buy their wares. Aleppo's bazaar, like the more-famous one in Istanbul, is very old, as this city was a major point on the caravan-routes running from the coast to the east as far as one can think ~ indeed, it was on one of the branches of The Silk Road ~ and immense wealth passed through here; some of it stayed, and the city prospered.

In the bazaar, I bumped into someone I'd read about in the guide-book, a friendly young guy calling himself *James*, who spoke English with a Cockney accent, although he had never been to England. He was clearly gay, and proud of it, but when he spoke disparagingly about women, I reminded him that his mother was a woman. The next day, I met another guy like James; *he* called himself *Sebastian*. Now, although Islam regards homosexuality as a grave sin, I'd noticed, on my various trips in this region, that it is quite tolerated, maybe because women are so secluded and repressed, and you can be as gay as you like as long as you don't say you are. Pure hypocrisy, but how else to deal with it when their religion so strongly condemns it?

English is not widely-spoken in Syria, but back at the hotel, I fell into conversation with a group of people who *did* speak it, and

one of them asked me my impressions of Syria, and whether I thought of Syrians as terrorists. I told him that when I was in school, my best and favorite subject was history, and I even had a brief idea of becoming a history-teacher. Since then, I went on, I came to realize that history is not true and is always one-sided, because it is *his story*, and biased. And, although I try to keep informed of what's happening in the world, I don't believe everything in the newspapers or government propaganda, but prefer to see for myself whenever possible. I told him my impressions of Syrian people from my visit in '67 were favorable, and that I did not then, nor do I now, consider Syrians terrorists. On the other hand, though, surely he was not going to maintain that all Syrians are good people. In any country, there are people who might be called good and bad, and many shades in between. He seemed pleased with my answer.

In that hotel I met an elderly man from Austria, who'd cycled most of the way from his homeland, alone. We introduced ourselves; his name was *Isidore*, and he planned to travel the same route as me, so we had something in common. He spoke fluent English and French, besides his native German.

The next day, I continued my explorations, and visited the citadel ~ an old fortress dominating the city from a hill; inside the encircling walls most of it was in ruins, but the throne-room had been restored and was really quite magnificent; no wonder the entrance-fee was steep, but I'd struck lucky, as the day I went was International Tourist Day, and entrance was free. So, too, was the city museum, although there wasn't much worth seeing there anyway, but this completed my sight-seeing of Aleppo, and I decided to leave the next morning.

On my way to the bus-station, I was astounded to see the kind of bread I'd been eating over the previous two days laid out on ~ and I *mean on*, with nothing between ~ the dirty sidewalks to cool as it came from the bakeries; apparently, this is quite normal, and the local people don't question it. Well, I've probably eaten lots of dirty food on my travels, and I guess if I'd questioned the preparation of it, I would be much thinner than I am. Perhaps it's better not to think too much about it. I've survived so far.

My next stop was *Hama*, another place with a long history. The city itself doesn't hold many attractions, but is the center from which people visit other places of interest, so I signed up for a tour of several Crusader castles the next day.

At the time appointed, I was pleased to find that Isidore had got in from Aleppo by bike and would be on the same tour; the rest of the group consisted of five French women, who kept mostly to themselves, leaving Isidore and I together. It was rather a long and tiring day, requiring a lot of step-climbing inside the immense and strong castles dating from the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, reminding me of the ultimately futile presence of the European Crusaders in the Middle East. What determination they must have had to build such fortresses, crowning strategic hills all over that area, intended to defend and control what they called '*The Holy Land*'. In 1099, when they captured Jerusalem, they carried out such slaughter in the name of Jesus that the streets ran ankle-deep in blood! So superficial was their understanding of religion! Eventually, after victories and defeats, they had to withdraw and return to their homelands ~ the survivors, that is ~ with little to show for their enterprise. Many of these castles are in a surprisingly-good state of preservation, so well-built they were. The most-famous of them is the *Kerak des Chevaliers*, which Lawrence of Arabia called 'the finest castle in the world'.

Perhaps I should mention here that, contrary to my expectations, Syria wasn't as hot as Turkey had been, which was something I appreciated; in fact, Turkey was the hottest part of the whole trip.

Leaving Hama early the next day, I caught a rather old bus to *Homs*, the next big city on the way, an hour's drive, but I stopped there only long enough to catch a mini-bus to *Palmyra*, perhaps Syria's greatest must-see site, a desert-city dating back only about 2,200 years ~ *only*, I say, because *Damascus*, the capital of Syria, is supposed to be the oldest continuously-inhabited city in the world. Palmyra became so wealthy astride the caravan routes that at one point its ruler ~ *Queen Zenobia* ~ imagined she could challenge the might of Imperial Rome; the result was that her forces were defeated, and she was carried in chains to Rome; her city was sacked and destroyed so completely that it

never recovered and sank into oblivion. The ruins cover a large area and show a typically laid-out Graeco-Roman city, with temples, amphitheatres, market-places, tombs, and row upon row of re-erected columns. Considering that Palmyra is surrounded by desert on all sides, it is amazing that it reached such a state of development. There is no water-shortage in the modern town around the ruins, and the markets are full of fresh fruit and vegetables. Numerous hotels have mushroomed here over the few years since Syria has opened up, and their rates are very low; there is much competition for the many visitors.

**W**andering around the ruins, I heard someone call my name, and looking about, saw Isidore; he had cycled from Hama to Homs, but balking at riding through the unmitigated desert, had put his bike atop a bus to Palmyra and rode in ease. This was the third time we met, and turned out to be the last, although I expected to meet him again somewhere along the way.

**T**he next morning, I had a further look around the ruins, and decided to go on to Damascus that afternoon. I waited for a bus and was lucky to get the last seat on one coming from another city. The trip took three hours, and I got down on the outskirts of the city ~ the bus-stations in this part of the world always seem to be far out of town, probably to cut down on congestion ~ and got a taxi to the center, along one of the wide boulevards. Although I'd passed through this city so many years before, it seemed as though I hadn't, as I recognized nothing at all.

**A**fter finding a suitably-cheap hotel, I set out to explore the capital of Syria. My hotel was centrally-situated, and everything I wished to see was within walking distance. The day after I arrived, I visited the National Museum, the covered-bazaar, and the *Umayyad Mosque*, which is one of the oldest in the world; this must have been truly magnificent until invading Mongols stripped it of the gold that covered much of its walls and ceiling. It was never restored to its former state, but was still well-worth seeing.

**T**he mysterious narrow alleys inside the walls of the Old City beckoned, and I spent some of the next day wandering into them to test my sense of direction. Here and there, traces of Roman building showed through ~ walls, columns, and arches. It was



quiet and peaceful here, away from the traffic. There is a street that follows what had 2,000 years before been the *Via Recta*: Straight Street.

Modern Damascus didn't attract me, and I bought a bus-ticket for *Amman*, capital of Jordan, four hours away. Clearing the checkpoints at both borders took quite a while; the Jordanian visa cost \$15. Soon, I was in Amman, a city built on hills, with hardly a tree in sight. It was a nondescript place, with no reason to spend long there. I'd been to the Dead Sea in '67 and had no desire to see it again, but I did want to visit the ruined Roman city of *Jerash* not far away. This was really remarkable, and I spent several hours there. I was more impressed with Jerash than with Palmyra. Much restoration-work has gone on and is continuing. A huge temple to *Artemis*, the patron goddess of the city, sits on a hill overlooking the city; and, as in most Roman cities, there is a large amphitheater and hippodrome.

In Amman, there were newspapers in English, so I could get the latest news. I'd hoped to visit Jerusalem, for old times' sake, but while I was in Aleppo, the situation in Israel ~ which had been showing hopeful signs of moving towards peace ~ exploded into violence. I was dismayed to read it had further deteriorated, and feared another war was imminent. Noisy demonstrations were held in the streets of Amman, with many armed soldiers and police standing by. It wasn't necessary to decide not to go to Israel; it had been decided for me: all borders with it had been closed until further notice. So near, yet so far away.

This latest tragic situation in that sad land was brought about by an act of stupidity on the part of *Ariel Sharon*, an Israeli military-man and politician hated and blamed for the massacre of Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982. With many bodyguards, and knowing well what he was doing, he went to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem during Friday prayers at the crowded Al Aqsa mosque, an act calculated to cause trouble.

The result was predictable: widespread riots by Palestinians and killings on both sides. And this is known as *The Holy Land*! What a strange context for the word 'holy'. '*Holey*', more like: full of holes: bullet-holes and bomb-craters. Which land is more blood-

soaked than this, where for thousands of years hatred and war have flourished, and the politics of the region endanger the whole world? It is *the* prime example of how religion divides people, and clearly demonstrates that what the Buddha said about attachment is true: it causes suffering. For the sake of a few stones ~ the *Wailing Wall* ~ Jews are ready to sacrifice everything, including their lives, just like Muslims over their mosques, not seeing that these are the externalia. Why can't they practice the principles of their religion without a wall? Does religion depend upon things like that? Some Jews wish to destroy the mosque standing on the site of their ancient temple which was demolished by the Romans in 70 A.D., in order to construct another temple and resume their animal sacrifices. If they succeed in destroying the mosque and the *Dome of the Rock* ~ which is Islam's third most-holy shrine ~ the world will be plunged into unstoppable war.

This nonsense raises the whole question of religion: what is it for? Do we need it, or should we outgrow it? Should it cause more or less hatred in our hearts? Should it make us more narrow and intolerant or more open and kind? Should it *ennighten* or enlighten us? We cannot ban religion outright; that was tried in the Soviet Union, China and elsewhere and it didn't work. Only through education can we understand the purpose of religion, and that, alas, takes a long time. It makes one want to give up in frustration and despair!

Most of the *Buddhist* holy places in India were destroyed mainly by invading Muslims in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries, but we do not hold that against Muslims forever, and certainly not against present-day Muslims; we take it as another example of Impermanence and realize that all building ends in destruction. Those who carried out the destruction acted from ignorance and hatred. In the great university of *Nalanda*, there were 10,000 monks and 2,000 teachers at that time; most of them were massacred and the rest fled for their lives. Enlightened people do not kill and destroy like that. Our enemy is *Ignorance*, not people, and no-one really wants to be ignorant, do they?

Having seen all I wanted to in and around Amman, my next stop in Jordan was *Petra*, the fascinating city cut almost entirely from

rock in a mountainous region over 20 centuries ago. *Petra* is Greek for *stone* or *rock*, so the city is aptly named. Spread over a large area, it is not for those who dislike walking or are unable to. It is reached through a gorge that narrows to about two meters before it opens out and reveals the impressive façade of a tomb. This is a city mainly of tombs, which are everywhere, and many are huge, like temples; the sandstone from which they were cut is multicolored in places, as if it has been painted. The city had flourished under its builders, the *Nabateans*, and had later been taken over by the Romans, but had been lost and forgotten to the outside world for about 700 years until it was rediscovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The entrance-fee here was the highest of any place on my trip ~ \$33 for two days, which are needed to see the whole area ~ but having come this far, it would have been silly to miss it, so I paid. Only in the last 30 years has it been open to visitors, and now plenty stream in. In the middle of the desert ~ most of Jordan, like Syria, is desert ~ there were almost no trees, and no water, the aqueducts of the people who lived there having ceased to function long ago. Yet, during the rainy season, flash floods occur, and once, several tourists were swept away and drowned when they disregarded the warnings of the locals. Outside the ancient city itself, in what, not long ago, had been a poor village, many hotels, from back-packer places to five-stars, line the streets; times change.

Two hours by bus from *Petra* is *Aqaba*, Jordan's port at the head of the Red Sea; this was my next destination, as it is from here that ferries cross the *Gulf of Aqaba* to *Nuweiba* in *Sinai*, which had been occupied by Israel from 1967 to 1982, when it was returned to Egypt. There was an exit-tax of \$10 to pay before leaving Jordan (it is a poor country that needs all the money it can squeeze from foreign visitors), but I'd made allowance for this, and spent my last Jordanian money on food before boarding the fast catamaran ferry (there's also a car-ferry, but it is slow and apparently unreliable, and I wanted to reach Cairo that night), at noon; this cost \$30 for a 3-hours' trip; little choice. It was full, too. Pulling out of the harbor, I could see *Eilat*, Israel's southernmost city ~ or rather, town; it is too small to be called a city ~ where I'd spent some time camping in a *wadi* (dry stream-bed or valley) in

'68. Viewing it from the sea, I could tell it wasn't much bigger than it was all those years ago; there were a number of new hotels and port-facilities; this is Israel's only access to the Red Sea. Memories of long-gone days surged up.



~ 6 ~

## THE SMILE OF THE SPHINX

**D**isembarking at Nuweiba, I went with everyone else to the pyramid-shaped Immigration office. Most people already had visas for Egypt, but since the guide-book said visas could be obtained upon entry, I lined up to pay the \$15 fee and waited for my passport to be endorsed. I was in Egypt, the Land of the Pharaohs. Strange how I'd never been there before, but my route as a youth had taken me to India and back by the shortest way; it was India that attracted me in those days; it still does.

Formalities complete, I headed for the bus-station nearby. People from the ferry were going in different directions; many went south to the resorts of the Red Sea, like *Dahab* or *Sharm El Sheik*; only a few took the next-available bus to Cairo. I was one of them, and for the 6-hours' drive through the Sinai Desert, I sat next to a young Japanese guy who'd traveled alone through China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Syria and Jordan, and who intended to fly from Egypt to Greece, then go to Italy, France, Spain and Portugal, and from there return to Japan. We had quite a lot to talk about. There was also a young Korean who had made much the same journey.

After a break along the way for food and rest, we passed through the tunnel under the Suez Canal, and an hour or so later came into the suburbs of Cairo; it was about 10 pm. The Japanese and Korean guys and I had decided to go to a hotel recommended in

the guide-book. We got a taxi (surprisingly-cheap in Egypt) and were driven recklessly to the *Sun Hotel*, where we were lucky to get rooms, as it is a popular budget-hotel that's usually full. The taxi-driver accompanied us into the hotel where no doubt he got a commission for bringing us in; that's the way it works there.

As I intended to spend a few days in Cairo, I didn't rush around seeing everything as soon as possible; the next day I spent getting the feel of it, and went first to see the Nile, which had allowed the brilliant ancient Egyptian civilization to flourish; I crossed and re-crossed one of the bridges that connect both banks, pondering how a river like this is "the same yet not the same" as it flows ceaselessly towards the sea. Afterwards, I went to the famous *Al-Azhar*, which is not only one of Cairo's earliest mosques but one of the world's oldest universities; students are no longer taught here, however, but in a number of its campuses all over the country. The *souks* (markets; bazaars) that surround it are also fascinating. Cairo is one of the largest cities in the world (with a population of about 12 million), and chaotic with it; in spite of this, however, I quite enjoyed it. *Cairenes* sleep late and consequently rise late, so my early-morning walks were relatively quiet, and, being the world-wanderer I've been for many years, it didn't take me long to find my way around; I had some good long walks in Cairo, and never felt other than safe there, even alone.

The morning of the second day I went to the marvelous Egyptian Museum, which houses ~ among countless other treasures ~ the contents of Tutankhamun's tomb; these cause everyone to slow down and gaze in fascination. Three hours in the museum was all I could stand at one time, however, because of the tour-groups shepherded around by their guides. Feeling claustrophobic and gasping for air, I left the portals of that incredible place. It was nice to get outside!

The next day, I took a water-taxi down the Nile to Old Cairo instead of walking, and wandered around there again. I climbed the spiral steps of one of the minarets of an old mosque; obviously, no-one had done this for years, as the stairs were deep with the droppings of pigeons and bats. Luckily, I'd brought a flashlight, otherwise I'd have had to grope my way up and down in the dark.

For this particular mosque there was no entrance-fee, but the attendant demanded *baksheesh* (tip, or gift); I gave him something, or I wouldn't have been able to ascend the minaret, but not as much as he demanded. *Baksheesh* is a word one encounters all over the Middle East and in India; it goes against the grain for most Westerners to comply with this custom, but to refuse often results in foot-dragging and mutterings that can only mean something unpleasant. If curses could kill, I would not be alive now to write this. The words "*My friend*" were so common that I soon came to see they have about as much meaning as they would from a parrot! A friend is a treasure that is not easily come by; I do not apply this word to complete strangers.

Tourism is Egypt's main source of income and many Egyptians think of foreigners as sheep with golden-fleece to be shorn; they come up with so many scams to cheat one, and it becomes tiring. Come to think of it, to cheat people requires a certain disdain for them ~ one might almost say hatred ~ because fellow-feeling wouldn't allow a person to cheat another. A cheat knows what he is doing; he must look at the person before him and decide how much to overcharge. But would he like the same thing done to him? It's not difficult to understand this, so how come there are so many cheats in the world ~ cheats who call themselves Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, etc.? No religion encourages or condones cheating or stealing.

Next to the mosque of the pigeon-droppings was a larger and more-ornate one, a screened-off portion of which contains the tomb of the late Shah of Iran. The Shah had fled Iran in '79, but was hounded all over the world until his health gave out and he died of cancer. I had not known where he was buried until then. Egypt had refused to be intimidated by his arch-enemy, the *Ayatollah*, and had allowed his body to be buried there. What a splendid resting-place! His wife ~ I was told ~ had spared no expense on it, and thus, indirectly, the people of Iran had footed the bill. It was a hall of multicolored marble and granite, with a carved and painted ceiling.

Passing on, I went through the *Street of the Tentmakers*, where old men sit throughout the day hand-stitching beautiful cushion-

covers and wall-hangings known as *appliqué* work. As elsewhere, you must haggle for their wares; it is an expected ritual, and you soon learn that the initial asking-price is often two or three times what they can be bought for. This is time-consuming, of course, and you can't be overly-sensitive, otherwise you will be ripped-off.

You cannot wander around the streets without being accosted by people trying to sell things like carpets, paintings on *papyrus*, and all kinds of other tourist-stuff. Of course, it is normal for visitors to buy souvenirs of their trip, and there are many lovely things for sale ~ things unique to each country or region. In Egypt, there is no shortage of such things, cheap by Western standards, but you must remember that you are not in the West, and that by paying too-high prices, it causes prices for the locals to rise, too. I sent postcards to many people from Egypt; it didn't take me long to learn that postcards do not ~ or should not ~ cost 50 *piastres* (about 13 cents) each, but can be bought for five per Egyptian pound [E£] (26 cents). When the vendors realize that you know their prices, they sell to you next time without argument.

On my third morning in Cairo, I crossed the Nile to see what, to people the world over, epitomizes Egypt: The Pyramids. I went early, so as to view them at sunrise, and was awed to watch them emerge from the mists of dawn. They are stupendous, like mountains, and you can't get an idea of their size from pictures; you wonder ~ as countless others have wondered over the past 4,500 years ~ how and why they were built. They have been vandalized over the centuries and don't look as they did when they were first built; one *sultan* even had the idea of demolishing them altogether, and using the stones for building-material, but fortunately, the task proved too much for him. Of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, they are the sole survivor.

Although I was one of the first there, I didn't remain so for long. It soon gets hot here, and needless to say, there is no shade. Except for smiling back, the Sphinx didn't respond to my greeting, so I left it to its perpetual musings. Suddenly, I was surrounded by camels whose riders pestered me to ride one of their mounts. They are persistent in this, and in asking where you are from. They know a smattering of many languages ~ English, French,

German, Italian, Spanish, Japanese and even Russian now! ~ but were somewhat confused when I lied and told them I was from Vietnam and didn't speak English! (This tactic worked quite well in other places when I wanted to get people off my back).

I wished to go inside the Pyramid of *Cheops*, but the daily quota was already full, so I had to settle for the smallest of the three, that of *Menkaure*. You have to stoop in the low tunnel to descend into the burial-chamber and the air is stifling, and because there is little to see inside ~ no treasures, mummies, sarcophagi or paintings ~ few people spend more than a few minutes there.

**B**efore I left Cairo, I checked several travel-agencies for flights to Istanbul, ready for when I would leave Egypt. I was thus able to compare prices, and found *Fayed Travel* the cheapest, at E£855. I resolved to get my ticket there upon my return to Cairo. I then took a bus to Suez, to see the great Canal. I sat and watched huge ships sail past in convoy, at intervals of fifteen minutes. There is one-way traffic only, times being set for ships going south alternating with those going north. The Canal was built at great cost in lives as well as money, and earns, I was told, about \$10 million dollars per day for Egypt ~ a lot of money to spend on armaments. During the Six Day War in 1967, a number of ships were sunk there, effectively blocking it for everyone until the wrecks were salvaged some years later. It is a marvelous piece of engineering, brought about by men of vision.

**A** ten-hour bus-ride took me from Suez along the desert-coast of the Red Sea where almost nothing grows, to *Luxor*, capital of both Upper and Lower Egypt after the collapse of Memphis, near the Pyramids. Upon arrival, the bus was assailed by taxi-drivers and hotel-touts, vying for passengers, something else I'm used to; I haggled for a suitable price. Because it has an international airport, Luxor is an even more popular destination than Cairo and swarms with tourists. To accommodate those who don't come by cruise-ship, there are far more than enough hotels of all ranges, and rates are half those of Cairo. Electricity is cheap because of the amount generated by the Aswan High Dam upstream, so air-conditioning is offered as an added inducement, and in the summer this is very attractive.



Luxor has no pyramids; the Age of the Pyramids had passed by the time Luxor became the capital of a united Egypt. Instead, it has other things of wonder. During my 4-day stay there, I visited the Great Temple at *Karnak*, the Mummification Museum, the Temple at Luxor itself, and the Valleys of the Kings and Queens across the river. The temples are immense, and from the state they are in now we can imagine how stunning they looked in their prime when they were painted, inside and out, in brilliant colors; some faded colors still remain, clinging to walls, ceilings, columns and obelisks. One distinctive motif carved in bas-relief in these and other temples, shows *Ramses II* ~ the greatest pharaoh in Egyptian history ~ holding a mace over a group of cowering captives whom he grasps by their hair.

The faces of the statues and bas-reliefs are calm and impassive. Sadly, throughout Egypt it is rare to come across a statue that hasn't been vandalized; most of them are missing at least their noses, and many much more. The destruction was perpetrated by the early Christians ~ known, until today, as *Copts*, from which the name *Egypt* is derived; there are still many Coptic Christians in Egypt ~ followed by the Muslims. They abhorred statues and images. Ignorance and misunderstanding give rise to fear, which in turn, produces hatred.

The Mummification Museum was a bit disappointing as it had few exhibits, nor was there a detailed explanation of the process of mummification. The Museum in Cairo spoils you for anything else of this nature, but because many people fly directly to Luxor, missing Cairo and other places, this place has some value.

Across the river, on the west bank, were numerous mortuary temples, where the dead were prepared for burial. Most of them are just piles of rubble now, their stones having been hauled away and used for other purposes over the thirty-and-more centuries since. After the lengthy embalming-process, the mummies were taken in procession to the tombs in the hills behind. We have no record of the ceremonies performed for them, but we can imagine they would have been extremely elaborate and long. The tombs were cut deeply into the rock, and their entrances covered to conceal them once the funerals were over. The rulers and nobles

of ancient Egypt spent years and fortunes to build tombs before their deaths, so preoccupied were they with the *afterlife*. Lesser persons built according to their means. Their religion, unique as it was, had an influence upon later religions in the Mediterranean region. As far as we know, *Monotheism* ~ the concept of One God ~ originated in Egypt, which is where the Hebrews got it from. And the name *Moses* is Egyptian, not Hebrew; note the similarity between *Ramses* and *Moses*.

Tomb-robbers were more down-to-earth, and concerned with the wealth of *this* life. Most of the tombs were found and plundered soon after being sealed, but some may still remain concealed and untouched. Archaeological digging continues, more methodically than ever before, using the tools of modern science.

The main sites of the tombs are known as the Valleys of the Kings and Queens. I joined a tour to visit some of these ~ there are many, probably hundreds ~ because to do it on one's own would be inconvenient and take too long. We went to the Valley of the Queens first and into several tombs there, being allowed a few minutes in each, but as it was hot and humid inside, this was long enough for everyone. The shafts leading down to the burial chambers are quite long, and the tombs are covered throughout with frescoes depicting people in scenes from daily life, gods and goddesses, birds and animals. There are also passages from the various holy books written in hieroglyphs. For the most part, these frescoes are well-preserved and the colors still bright.

The Valley of the Kings contains tombs more stupendous still, because, after all, they were men, and throughout history, men have regarded themselves as superior to women, and women have accepted it. This is why the magnificent temple-tomb of *Hatshepsut* ~ the only woman to rule Egypt as Pharaoh ~ was desecrated and vandalized by her bitter and jealous successor, *Tuthmosis III*. How dare a woman build for herself such a tomb!

The most-famous of the tombs here, of course, is that of *Tutankhamun*, which was discovered, with the king's mummy and its treasures intact, in 1922, but it is not the most-resplendent. Apart from the royal sarcophagus, which remains there, its treasures, as mentioned earlier, are in the Cairo Museum ~ luckily for me,

as I refused to pay the extra hefty entrance-fee for the tomb itself. Most of the tombs open to the public are empty, so one can see only the walls and ceilings. Some frescoes here depict rows of headless figures who appear to be running in panic; there were also figures hanging upside down, like animals in a slaughterhouse. These, our guide explained to us, were people who didn't believe in the Afterlife. Ah, I thought, did it begin here, the use of fear to inculcate belief and make people conform? "This is what will happen if you do not believe as we do," they might have been told. Religion has always been used as a political tool. The priests and rulers worked hand-in-hand, and were sometimes one-and-the-same. And thousands of years later, there is still no consensus over 'the Afterlife'.

The railway-station at Luxor has a Tourist Office, where I had an interesting discussion with the man-in-charge. He asked me my profession and I told him "Teacher".

"What do you teach?" he then asked.

To make things simple, I replied: "Philosophy".

"Oh, that's terrible!" he said.

"Why do you say that?" I asked him.

"Because you have to think so much!"

"Well, what's the use of having a brain if you don't use it?" I told him that everyone has a philosophy, even a thief, who thinks it is good when he's stealing other people's property, but who probably wouldn't be very happy to come home and find that someone had stolen *his* stuff. His philosophy doesn't extend very far, nor help him to deal with the changes of life.

Although he didn't say so, I think the tourist-officer was a Coptic Christian, as he asked if I believed in God. I replied: "In order to answer that question, you must first tell me what is God, otherwise we may be talking about different things".

"The Creator of the Universe," he said.

"That is very vague," I said, "and it raises the old but simple question that even children ask but which not even the wisest can

answer: 'Which came first: the chicken or the egg?' Could you be more specific?"

Not replying to this, he asked if I believed God parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to escape from Egypt, and that he made the sun stand still in the sky until the Israelites had won a battle with the *Amalakit*es and destroyed them?

"Come on, those are fairy-tales, not to be taken seriously," I said. "We are better-educated now than people long ago ~ though not necessarily more intelligent ~ and shouldn't believe everything that has come down to us from the past. Those 'events' you just mentioned are simply impossible. Had the Red Sea parted, the Egyptians would have recorded it somewhere ~ after all, it wasn't something that happened regularly, like the annual flooding of the Nile ~ and so far, no record of this has been discovered.

"The Egyptians believed that the Earth was the center of the Universe, and that the Sun was rolled around the sky by a gigantic dung-beetle (*scarab*); we now know otherwise. We cannot see the Earth spinning while we are on it, of course, but if the Sun had 'stood still in the sky,' it would have meant that the Earth had stopped spinning, and if that had happened, there would have been a tremendous jolt and the waters of the seas would have sloshed all over the place, obliterating all buildings, forests and living things on the land, and the Earth would have gone out of orbit. Clearly, this never happened."

He couldn't argue. I went on to explain to him the difference between Belief and Faith, and said that most people believe; few really have faith. I don't know if he was convinced, but we parted friends.

Not only have we inherited tremendous good  
 And benefited immensely from the past,  
 But this is where Belief, Ignorance,  
 Bigotry and Prejudice came from.  
 We have not deliberately chosen them,  
 You and I, but have just  
 Accepted them without question,  
 And become their victims.  
 Were we to investigate,

We would probably see them  
For what they are ~  
Baseless relics of a past lost in time ~  
And watch them turn to dust  
Like mummies' shrouds.  
It behooves us to use our brains,  
To determine what should  
And what should not be retained.

It is easy to see that we have benefited immensely from the past, for this is where almost all we have and are came from. To counteract the tendency to become proud and think we have achieved things by our own efforts, we should ponder on this; in reality, we do nothing by ourselves; whatever we achieve and accomplish we do only because of the help and support of countless other people and things. Contemplating this brings us down to earth and permits us to go forward with humility.

**B**ut good things in abundance are not the only things we get from the past; it is from the past, too, that our ignorance, conditioning, beliefs, and misunderstanding come, and most of us are unaware of this, just as the fish is unaware of the water it swims in. we did not choose or want these things; they became ours by default. We are not responsible, to praise or blame for the situation we find ourselves in; no-one is; it is just the outcome of countless causes conspiring to produce whatever comes, and only when and if we can understand this shall we be able to bring any sense of direction into our lives. The present is ours, to make of what we will; the future is not fixed.

**"**Most of the good things that have happened to people throughout history are due to the good works of others. Thanking God for the good deeds of people is wholly unfair and inconsiderate. On the other hand, holding God responsible for tornadoes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, floods and other 'Acts of God' is ignorant and nonsensical."  
Davis).

Once, noticing I had no companions with me, someone asked if I were traveling alone: I had an insight, and replied: "No, of course not. Wherever I go, so many people go with me; it is impossible to be alone. *You* cannot see them, but *I* can. If I look at my clothes or through my bags, I see people who gave me this or that; in fact, I live as I do only because of the support of others. My life is full of people". And it's true. Whatever I have, whatever I use, has all come from others; they are not mine alone. Whenever I think of this, I feel grateful, and smile to myself. Because we are more mental beings than physical, we experience everything by our minds; our friends, therefore, are never far away; we have only to think of them in order to be with them.

I'm not always mindful of this, however, and so ~ like most other people, I guess ~ at times I feel lonely. It would be good to have a companion with me to share my thoughts and experiences, but it seems I must travel alone. However, this side of Enlightenment, we are all subject to changing moods, so it's not surprising to feel lonely. Alone, we have to come to terms with things like this, and try to face whatever comes up ~ both from outside and inside ~ with courage. It cannot be said often enough that understanding something of Impermanence helps tremendously. Every day is a new day, and we can't possibly imagine, when we wake up in the morning, what lies ahead of us. We should treat life as an adventure, instead of always trying to pin it down and control it.

From Luxor, I went to *Aswan*, further upriver. This is a good place for a rest, and I spent four days here, too, wandering around the bazaar and visiting some of the famous places in and around the city, like the tombs on the other side of the river, the Aswan High Dam and the temple of *Philae*. This was completely dismantled, removed and reconstructed on an island in *Lake Nasser* created by the construction of the Dam in the 1960s. The ferrymen there are avaricious, knowing there is no other way to get to the island except through them, but the temple is worth seeing.

About 300 kms from Aswan and almost on the border with *Sudan* lie the most beautiful and imposing constructions of Ramses II: the rock-cut temples of *Abu Simbel*. These, too, were saved from submergence under the lake by a massive international effort,

which successfully reassembled ~ exactly as they had been ~ the temples on higher ground. Four immense images of Ramses ~ three quite intact ~ sit outside the main temple, which was built to face the sun, so that the images in the inner sanctum, 65 meters from the portal, are illuminated by the rising-sun's rays several times a year. Because of murderous attacks on tourists a few years ago by fundamentalist Muslims, however, the road to Abu Simbel is closed to foreigners now, but I suspect this is just a ploy to extract more \$\$'s from tourists, as the only way left for them to see the marvelous temples is to fly in and out, at a cost of almost \$100. Few can resist the trip, having come this far, and the two flights per day are usually packed. My plane-load got there before sunrise and we were ushered into the dark temple to wait expectantly for the 'light show'; it was one of 'those days'. There were many guards inside, to keep us in place. Slowly, as the sun crested the horizon, the darkness inside was dispelled, and the frescoes became visible. It was a memorable experience.

This was the southernmost point of my trip; from Aswan, I returned to Cairo by train, in an a/c carriage; thankfully, it was forbidden to smoke inside. The journey took fourteen hours, and followed the course of the Nile, although the river was seldom visible; I'd expected we would run right beside it all the way. Back in Cairo, I had to wait quite a while for a taxi, refusing to pay the high rates they were demanding; this wasn't because I could not afford, but because we have a responsibility to those who come after us; if we pay the first price stated, it will become normal. Eventually, I got one at a reasonable rate, and got to the *Sun*, prepared to spend a few more days there. It was quite a bit cooler than when I was there ten days earlier, which was a relief; I had to use blankets at night, for the first time since leaving England.

The next morning, thinking I had plenty of time to get my ticket to Istanbul, I put it off until later, and went to the Museum again, but seeing the crowds waiting for opening-time, I turned round and walked away, unwilling to submit to the crush. Instead, I spent time buying a few things in Old Cairo, and in the afternoon, went to get my ticket. I thought I could remember where the travel-agency was, but this time my memory failed; backwards and forwards along the streets and alleys of that area I went, asking di-

rections of many people, showing them the business-card, all in vain (and earlier in this account, I'd been boasting of my sense of direction; we often have to eat our words). At one point, I stopped to buy a *Time* magazine at a stall on a street-corner.

After two hours, I was tired and gave up for the day, resolving to search again early the next, which I did. This time, I found it quite easily, just about where I thought it was, and I'd passed it several times the day before; indeed, the stall where I'd bought the *Time* magazine was practically beneath the agency's sign! Sometimes, we fail to see things that are right before our eyes. How silly I felt! My search had been time-consuming and frustrating, but then I looked at it in a different way: as a measure of my determination to find it; I could easily have gone to another agency and bought a ticket for a slightly-higher price, but there is no need to waste money, especially when I had time. I wanted *Fayed Travel* and eventually I found it. If I lose or misplace something, I won't rest until I find it. This habit or quality may be positive and useful in my quest. After more than thirty years, I have not given up, even though my way has sometimes been hard and arid. I may go slowly, and make many mistakes, but eventually, I get there.

It was still early, however, and *Fayed Travel* was not yet open, so I went away and came back again shortly after opening-time, but it was still closed. Intent upon getting the ticket that morning, I put other things out of my mind and walked around a couple of blocks with the aim of returning to *Fayed Travel* yet again, when I spotted another travel-agency I'd not seen before. With nothing to lose, I went in to inquire about flights to Istanbul, and was told the fare was E£890. I protested that I was able to get it cheaper elsewhere, and when asked how much cheaper, said E£855. At this, the obliging clerk did some calculations and, not wanting to lose a potential sale, said she would let me have it for E£850 (about US\$190). I decided to give up on *Fayed Travel*, and bought the ticket there and then for a flight two days later.

My remaining time in Egypt soon came to an end. Overall, I had enjoyed it and was impressed. One thing I can say about Egypt with certainty ~ and about the whole of my trip, in fact ~ is that, al-



though I went everywhere alone, I always felt safe; I wish I could say the same about Western countries.

The flight took only two hours, and it was dusk as we came in over the Bosphorus, with its two bridges connecting Europe with Asia. Then the mosque-studded city, with tall, slim minarets poised like rockets ready for launch, was beneath us; I never tire of seeing it from the air and picking out familiar places. It was the third time I had flown into Istanbul, and since the last time, a new airport-concourse had been built. Getting through Immigration and Customs, I boarded a shuttle-bus to the city. I was surprised at how cool it was. While I'd been in warmer climes, winter was coming on in the northern hemisphere.

Getting off the bus at a place I recognized, I took a taxi the rest of the way to the *Sehir Hotel* and was received as a regular patron. The next day, I checked a number of travel-agents for flights to Manchester and compared prices. After a while, I decided on a *KLM* flight for \$160, with free pick-up from my hotel.

I then went to visit Fetih, my silver-stall friend. He was pleased to see me again, unexpectedly. Noticing that I was feeling the cold, he offered to lend me a jacket, and said he would bring it the next day, which he did. I was very grateful, as I had no warm clothes with me. I visited him almost every day until I left, and at one point ~ since he'd shown some interest ~ I gave him a booklet on Buddhism that I had been carrying around with me; it was called: *Buddhism for Human Life*, but I told him I didn't agree with everything in it, and that he should read it with discrimination, picking out the good points. I didn't want to scare him off, so showed him one of the things I disagreed with on the first page, and will quote it here: *"Other living beings cannot realize this Dharma because human intelligence is superior to that of all other living beings in the universe. Only the human mind can appreciate the Dharma. It is significant to note that humans are the only living beings in this universe who can conceive a system as complex as religion. Even devas and brahmas have no particular religion."* This is typical of how many people write about Buddhism, as if speaking from personal experience of the universe beyond our Planet Earth, and are familiar with beings known in Sanskrit as *devas*

and *brahmas*. It is no different from the beliefs and dogmas of other religions. We can do with much less of such arrogance and fanciful thinking.

My last few days in Istanbul passed quietly, and it was soon time to return to England. I was picked up at my hotel on the morning of November 5<sup>th</sup> and driven through empty streets to the airport, where I checked in at the KLM counter and went through to the gate to wait for boarding; I had quite a lot of time to spare, as I'd come early. It was good to hear periodic announcements over the P.A. system that smoking was strictly prohibited in the concourse. When I last flew out from Istanbul in '97, although there were *No Smoking* signs on the walls, they were openly ignored, and the place was full of smoke. I had an exchange with a Turkish woman about this; she was on her way to the U.S., and justified her smoking by saying that 80% of Turkish people smoked. To this I replied that if the signs don't mean what they say, they shouldn't be there, and I'd like to see her ignore the signs in U.S. airports. We are getting there, you see, if only slowly.



~ 7 ~

### DRAWN TO THE U.S. AGAIN

I had to transit in Amsterdam, and arrived at Manchester around noon, only to find that my bags had not come on the same plane. Upon inquiry, I was told they would come in on a later plane and be delivered to my home, which is what happened. Another trip was over, but a month later, I was on my way back to the US, flying into Atlanta this time. It was so cold there, and snowed quite a lot during my two weeks' stay. I expected it would be warmer in my next stop, Tampa, but it was cold there, too. Nga and Lu invited me to spend Christmas with them and their children and grandchildren, although Christmas

has no meaning to me; I don't even enjoy Buddhist festivals, preferring quiet to noise and confusion.

**B**ecause I was unable to buy travel-insurance in England for the U.S., I got it in Tampa, as it is too risky to be there without insurance; it cost \$935 for 6 months!

I arrived in L.A. on January 5<sup>th</sup>, and things soon started to happen for me. I stayed in a large Vietnamese temple near what is known as "Little Saigon," which has the largest concentration of Vietnamese people outside Vietnam; it is about 50 kms south of L.A. The temple was convenient for me, and the monks and other people there were alright.

**M**y first two talks that weekend were a bit 'slow,' but led ~ as things always do ~ to other things, and then I really took off. In all, I gave 19 talks in 16 days there, and even if I say so myself, they were probably some of the best I've ever given, though this was due to the receptivity of the audiences. Several places requested follow-up talks, and I was happy to oblige.

The weather, in general, was quite good while I was there ~ not as cold as in Tampa, and with only two days of rain; it permitted me to take my early-morning walks, which lasted usually an hour-and-a-half or more. I felt good.

**N**eedless to say, I met a lot of old friends and made some new ones, and best of all, was able to locate friends I'd lost contact with years ago, and who I'd tried to find during my two previous visits to L.A. One of them was Ping Kim Suor, the Cambodian lady who I've mentioned several times earlier. Anyway, this time, I got the number of a Cambodian temple, and called the monk, Ven. Khong Chean, who I'd met before. I asked if he knew where Kim Suor was, and was very happy to hear him say: "She's here right now, working with me!" She was as happy to hear my voice as I was to hear hers. She was working in a mental-health clinic, assisting the monk. It wasn't long before I went over to see her in the temple, and found her looking extremely well. Her husband had died 6 years before, and she was on her own again, but not unhappy. In fact ~ would you believe it? ~ she said to me: "I now realize that I lost nothing, but gained everything!" She attended one of my talks a few days later, in which I spoke about how I be-

came involved with the refugees. At the end of it, she requested to be allowed to speak, and told how she had met me. Her story was so moving, and everyone listened very carefully. I asked for a copy of the video-tape of it all, but when we eventually got it several weeks later, it turned out to be unclear. What a pity! I would love to have had it as a record.

Tinh Giac turned up in L.A. while I was there, staying in a Taiwanese temple. I saw quite a bit of him, and even took him to visit Chi Phuong and her family, as he'd known them in Bataan, too. He attended my talks in several places.

In L.A., too, I met some Indonesian Buddhists, friends of Onfat; one family had even driven down from Las Vegas, where they lived. I'd met them in Jakarta in '97, and it was nice to see them there. They invited me to visit them in Las Vegas.

I went on to San Jose by mini-bus instead of flying, and had a nice time here, too, but with not so many talks. I was quite busy checking all my books for someone who had offered to set up a website for me so that my books would be available to anyone through the Internet. I was pleased about it, because someone else, who offered to do it for me 18 months or more before, had so far installed only one of my books on it.

Now, last year, before I left England for Turkey, there was a sore spot on the sole of my right foot, and I thought I must have got a piece of glass or something in it, but probe with a needle though I did, I was unable to find anything. In San Jose, I asked Dr Tuan to check it. He examined it and said it was probably an ingrowing wart rather than a piece of glass, and asked if I'd like it removed. "Yes," I said, "go ahead." He duly cauterised it, but it was so painful afterwards, that I became more concerned about it than before. He offered me pain-killers, but I told him I could stand the pain; I just wanted to know what was causing it.

After two weeks, my stay in San Jose came to an end, and I flew out to Portland, where I'd never been before. I spent a week in a Vietnamese temple, but although things were not well-organized at first (what else is new?) they got better as we went on, and I ended up giving 5 talks, one after the other. The first was a bit of a fiasco due to the poor translation by a woman who argued with

me, but the next was much better, and the rest just went on from there, with the audience requesting 'one more,' and numbers increasing rather than decreasing, even on week-nights. Many people asked me to return and stay longer, and I would like to, but doubt that I will. I met several people from Bataan who I didn't expect to meet. Even the monk-in-charge expressed his appreciation of my visit, and that is rare!

It would have been good to have some books to distribute, but the reprint of "BECAUSE I CARE" had not arrived from K.L. and I was not pleased with the printers as they had assured me they would be sent off promptly. Only later did I hear from various people across the country that they had arrived.

I was shown something of the environs of Portland, and taken along the Columbia River and up snow-covered Mt. Hood in a ski-lift. I heard someone say in surprise upon seeing us: "What the hell!" so I replied: "What's the matter ~ have you never seen *yetis* before?"

Then, from Portland, to Vancouver, where, once again, due to personality-problems between some of the monks, arrangements had been poorly-made, but it turned out well ~ so well, in fact, that I even got the idea of settling in Canada sometime; when I saw the paper-work involved, however, this idea soon faded (I'd forgotten how it was getting Aussie citizenship); I'm allergic to paper-work. Thao took me to Victoria on Vancouver Island; it was lovely there, but so are the settings of Vancouver. I met a monk who runs a monks' training center, and visited him there, and he invited me to stay anytime; well, I fell in love with the place, built in log-cabin style in the forest. It was really beautiful, and so quiet and peaceful. I told them I'd come and carve totem-poles there, and wasn't joking; it seemed a distinct possibility at the time, but I don't think it will happen now.

Victor was again in Vancouver at this time, in the final stages of relocating from Manila. I met him several times.

While I was in Vancouver, I felt the earthquake that caused so much destruction in Seattle; it was quite strong even there. Actually, if things had gone according to plans I made upon my return to the U.S. in December, I could have been in Seattle at this time,

but people there didn't bother to reply to me, and so I didn't go. Luckily, the quake didn't cause much loss of life.

After a week in Vancouver, I flew to Edmonton. Unfortunately, it was cloudy, so visibility was poor and I saw nothing of the Rockies this time. Coming into Edmonton, however, there was very little snow, whereas I'd been expecting a lot. I was received by quite a delegation, led by the Taiwanese monk I'd met in the airport as I was leaving there last year, and who'd invited me back to give talks in his temple. I had requested just one or two people to meet me, as I feel embarrassed by crowds, but they disregarded my wishes, and pressed bouquets on me.

I was surprised at how mild the weather was, with temperatures just above freezing, although it felt much warmer. They told me it had been 15 degrees below the day before, but had decided to warm up for my visit. Arriving at the temple (a converted second-floor office), I could tell that people there were serious and not frivolous, as the place was so orderly. The monk was strict and seldom smiled, but people obviously appreciated this, and he was good with me, and being my junior in monk-hood, he treated me very respectfully, and even assigned someone to be my attendant. This man was too fussy over me, and I felt cramped. If he learned that I liked something, he overdosed me with it ~ curry, for example, and durian, which I ended up getting with every meal, three times a day, so that I became rather fed-up with it (something I never thought would happen).

All this time, since San Jose, my foot was so painful that I had to abandon my morning-walks. The day after I got there, I had a distinct limp. Investigating, I noticed that the spot where the wart had been removed was inflamed, so decided to prick it with a needle. A lot of pus came out, and the next morning, it felt better, but I went to see a doctor about it anyway, and he put me on a course of antibiotics, which soon cleared up the pus; the pain also subsided, and eventually disappeared.

I gave 2 talks in the Vietnamese temple, and was introduced by a young monk named *Phap Hoa*. I began, and he then left the hall, to return only near the end. He'd done the same thing the previ-

ous year, when Thien Tuong was giving a talk; since then, Thien Tuong had died. Later, I wrote the following letter to him:

*Dear Phap Hoa,*

*there is something that I wished to tell you after my second talk there, but the opportunity to do so didn't present itself. I needed to tell you on your own. Please understand that I am not saying it from a desire to hurt you. I wish it weren't necessary to say it.*

*It concerns getting up and leaving the hall in the middle of a Dharma-talk, as if you have better things to do, or you do not need to listen, maybe thinking that you know it all already. This is improper, and causes a bad impression in other people observing it. Maybe you do know it, but we should not listen with minds already made up.*

*Last year, when Thay Thien Tuong was there, you left the hall during his talk and went to your room to work on your computer; I heard your computer. I sat beside him throughout his talk, to show solidarity with him and give him moral support, even though I did not understand what he was saying; he appreciated this, and said so. I'm sure that you could have learned something from him if you had stayed, but you have lost that opportunity forever now.*

*This side of enlightenment, we all have pride; it is a manifestation of the ego, of course. Humility, on the other hand, is not something we can practice or do, but is a result of understanding; it must come, and if it doesn't come, there is nothing we can do to make it arise, but we should try not to show pride, even though it is there.*

*It is a matter of respect for Dharma, not for the speaker.*

I didn't expect to get a reply to this, so was surprised when I did; moreover, he was humbly apologetic.

Well, my 4 talks in the Chinese temple went very well, and the translation ~ into Mandarin and Cantonese ~ was of a high standard. After that, I was taken to Calgary, in the south, for 3 talks there. These also went well. While there, I was driven to the

mountain-resort of *Banff* in the Rockies. Although it was snow-bound, it didn't seem cold. We went into several luxury hotels and up in a cable-car to view the surrounding area; it was lovely. A visit to the city museum and an elevator-ride up the telecom tower concluded our sight-seeing in Calgary, and we returned to Edmonton the next day for more talks there. These over, I flew back to Vancouver, and the next day, out to Los Angeles. As expected, I was interrogated by an American Immigration official at Vancouver airport, but finally got through. I know they have a job to do, but why do they have to be so rude while doing it? They almost treat people coming in like criminals; does the law of the U.S. consider people guilty until proved innocent?

I was met at L.A. airport by Quan, and spent 12 days in his home. It was a quiet and uneventful stay, with only one talk in the house of Ping Kim Suor, who had called some friends to attend, and she translated for me. I kept in touch with her by email now and then.

Victor had also come to L.A. the day after I got there, to stay with his eldest sister in her palatial home. He took me out for lunch and dinner several times at buffet places, where there is an amazing variety of food, much of it suitable for vegetarians, and cheap, too. Now, America is a country of overweight people, and you can easily imagine that such places attract them like flies, where you can eat as much as you like for a set price (at that time about \$7.50); some of them are amazingly fat, and I didn't feel out of place there! There were even sugar-free desserts, and so yours-truly availed himself; it's not often he has the opportunity for things like apple-pie or cherry-pie.

Talks had been arranged in Las Vegas for me, when suddenly, I got an email from someone in Chicago, saying he'd be coming to Vegas and had booked a helicopter to fly him and some friends over the Grand Canyon. He invited me to join them, as there was a spare seat. I hurriedly made plans to leave L.A. a day earlier than planned, as this was an opportunity too good to miss.

Taking a bus to Las Vegas, I went to stay with a family who had set up talks in their home for me; not many people came ~ just as I expected ~ but it was quite good anyway; Las Vegas is, after all, a city of gamblers, so I gambled with my talks, and succeeded in



reaching at least one person, an American woman who worked with delinquent kids. It wasn't a waste of time, therefore.

I joined my friends on the helicopter flight on Saturday morning. It lasted two hours, and was fantastic! We set down in the Canyon itself for a picnic, and flew over the Hoover Dam. I'm glad I went. Many thoughts came into my mind and I felt I could write so much about and because of it.

Over the next days, I was taken to visit the Hoover Dam. We joined the long line to get in, and were taken through it, descending into its depths; it was incredible. I was also taken through a casino-complex to a vast restaurant, where the amount and variety of food was simply staggering, and the wastage nothing less than criminal. Because the buffet-rate was so low, people would load their plates up with far more than they could eat, and if they didn't like some of it, simply leave it and go back for more; waiters hovering nearby would then clear the tables of the excess food.

Las Vegas *is* a city of illusion, to be sure, and people go there to escape from the reality of everyday existence, which they find boring, but there are many stages to go through before we wake up; we do not become enlightened in a short time. I saw a couple of entertaining shows along the Strip at night: a battle between sailing-ships, and an erupting volcano, both in the open and free.

The family from Indonesia picked me up and took me to their place. They were trying to set up a restaurant, but had problems with the contractor, who had reneged on his agreement; they asked me to perform a blessing-ceremony at the place, hoping this might unblock things, but it didn't, and eventually, they had to cut their losses and get out. Our communication by email didn't last long after this; maybe they were disappointed because I didn't work the magic they desperately wanted, but whenever I agree to do things like this ~ at people's request ~ I make it quite clear that I cannot guarantee any results.

I went on to Houston, expecting it to be much hotter than Vegas, but in fact, it was almost cold! It was raining when I got there, but it cleared up after a day or two. The abbot asked me to stay there a long time and I told him I would do so if he could keep the weather like that! He laughed and said he would lock it up!

Things went fine for me during the week I stayed there, except for the translation of my talks, which was mediocre, and when it's like that, I feel quite handicapped.

I went next to Dallas, and stayed for two weeks with friends of Nga and Lu in Tampa; ~ *Cu* and *Thi* ~ and they took me not just to any talks that had been arranged for me in Dallas itself, but also to places like Wichita in Kansas, and Austin and San Antonio in Texas; we covered a lot of ground, and it was rather tiring, but I enjoyed it all. Also, taking advantage of Amanda's offer of the previous year, I had her fix some of my teeth, but they were too far gone, and there wasn't a lot she could do.

The next stop was Miami, to stay with Hoa and Mai again; they'd requested me to spare a few days with them after I had bypassed them in January. I'd asked him in advance to do a biopsy on a spot on my head which burned at times and which I feared might be skin-cancer (I had one done in San Jose last year, but it showed negative; however, I wanted a second opinion,) but when I got there I found Hoa embroiled in a law-suit, accused of malpractice by an Indian woman who had come to him with a swollen and painful stomach, convinced she had cancer. When he opened her, he found her ovaries consumed by T.B. and fused to some other organs, and decided to remove them. By doing so, he probably saved her life, but, seeing an opportunity to dig gold, she took it differently and sued him. Her lawyer tried to settle out of court, but when Hoa refused and insisted on going through the court, he threatened to take him not only for the million dollars he is insured for, but for as much of his assets as he could. Well, he was in court for all the five days I was there and three days after, and the case went against him, although the judge was sympathetic to him, too, and understood his reasons for doing what he did. He awarded the plaintiff \$150,000 in damages, which was much less than they feared having to pay. I had a nice rest in their beautiful waterfront home, with no talks there, but didn't mention my biopsy; it would have been too selfish of me; so I still have the spot on my head.

In Miami, I began sending out a Daily Thought to many people on my mailing-list; I called them **JATs** ~ **J**ust **A** Thought ~ and kept

them up for two years or more, until I felt it was enough, and stopped; few people asked why, so obviously, it was time to stop; it wasn't always easy to come up with things for them anyway.

From Miami, I flew on to Washington D.C. and arrived late at night, to be met, unexpectedly, by a small delegation of people. Again, I stayed with Chau and his family, and enjoyed being with them; I walked every morning in the woods near their home, and sometimes in the evening, too. Chau drove me to my talks and wherever else I needed to go, including the meditation-centre out in the mountains run by Rahula, who I mentioned earlier. It was really good to meet him, a kindred spirit. Even though he is a Theravada monk he is not narrow and stiff as many Theravada monks are, but friendly and relaxed, and of course, we had a lot in common to talk about. He told me he had returned to India in '99 and had made a 700 mile trek in the Himalayas lasting 10 weeks, and had also been to Ajanta again, where he'd had quite an adventure: one night, while meditating beside the waterfall that over the past how-many-millennia has carved out a huge basin in the gorge through which its water flows, it started to rain heavily, and within two hours, the waterfall changed to such a raging cataract that the water-level rose 5.5 meters and came up to the place where he was sitting in the darkness. It took him so by surprise that his escape was cut off before he knew it, and he was convinced he would die there, but just as the water was almost up to his waist, the rain stopped and then the water fell as rapidly as it had risen. He said it was very interesting to observe his thoughts during this event, and his readiness to face his end in that place.

I told him that if I'd known him earlier I would have accompanied him on his trip, and that if he decides to go again, to let me know. Since then, we have exchanged emails, and he invited me to stay at his place the next time around (this time, I could spare only 3 hours with him, as I had to get back for a talk that evening). I gave him a copy of "BECAUSE I CARE" and he commented positively on it, especially on my views regarding vegetarianism.

Chau took me into Washington for a bit of sight-seeing one day; I wanted to go up the Washington Monument, but when we got

there, it was closed for repairs. Next we went to the Washington Cathedral, which was built last century in the medieval Gothic style of Europe; it was beautiful, and we spent several hours there, and joined a couple of tours, so we could hear lots of facts and stories and ask questions. Chau had never been in such a place before, and probably would never have gone in one by himself, so he enjoyed it, too.

While in Virginia *that* time, I got an email from an American who'd attended one of my talks in a temple there. He asked why I didn't feel that Jesus was the way for me, and tried to prove the validity of his beliefs by a long string of quotations from the Bible. I replied and explained why I am not a Christian and never will be. We exchanged several emails, and when he saw he could not convince me, he became rather upset and threatened me; this is an extract from his final mail:

"Many of your simple questions have simple answers which you could easily discover for yourself if you had bothered to order the FREE materials from some of the websites I pointed you to. If you are too lazy to search for the truth for yourself, why should I be bothered? Why do I care if yet another Yuppie is determined to send himself to his **richly deserved eternal reward** simply because he is too stubborn to admit that he doesn't yet know everything and that he cannot save himself?" (I bolded the four words above.) In my reply to that, I told him that he was welcome to believe what he believes, but should not try to impose his beliefs upon others. I also reminded him who initiated this correspondence: not me. I didn't hear from him again.

I have long thought, *and* stated, that if I get no further in this life, it will have been enough to have escaped from Christianity. It is already a high degree of liberation. Now, why do I say this?

Let me quote from a book which I'd like to see become required reading in all high-schools, "*Insights For the Age of Aquarius*," written by Gina Cermina. Speaking about **General Semantics** (GS) and its emphasis on *Allness statements*, she says:

<p>"Allness evaluations are often expressed with terms like <i>every</i>, <i>always</i>, <i>never</i>, <i>everybody</i>, <i>all</i>, <i>nobody</i>, and so forth. The state-</p>
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ment, 'Nobody knows everything about anything' is in itself an Allness statement. But it would seem to be a legitimate or justifiable one, because of the limitations of human sense equipment in the presence of vast multi-leveled reality. There are other types of justifiable Allness statements, such as 'All triangles have three sides and three angles,' which is true by mathematical definition. 'All the windows in this room are closed,' and 'All the people on this block have their garbage collected on Tuesdays' could also be justifiable Allness statements".

Continuing, she says:

**"Monastic orders, both Catholic and Buddhist, have provided many disciplines for the deliberate cultivation of humility. These include such activities as fasting, begging, self-denial, menial work, obedience, prayer, and meditation. Unfortunately, such disciplines are usually undertaken only by that relatively small number of people who dedicate themselves completely to the religious life.**

**"The lack of humility, commonly known as pride or arrogance, and regarded as one of the seven cardinal sins in Catholic theology, can be manifested by people in many different areas of their total being. There is the arrogance of youth; of beauty; of health; of wealth; of power; of prestige; of ancestry; of race; of fame; of the intellect; even of psychic or spiritual attainment. GS has no monastic disciplines and does not provide specify correctives for all of these arrogances. Life itself usually chastens man, eventually, in all of them. But GS does have one specific antidote for the arrogance of intellect, which is related to the arrogance of knowledge or supposed knowledge. This antidote is found primarily in the Non-Allness principle; although as we'll see later on, other GS ideas also tend to counteract the poison.**

**"It is curious but true that some of the very churches who encourage the virtue of humility in their flocks are sometimes the most arrogant in their claim to a monopoly of religious truth. Their followers then easily fall into the habit of religious pride. They make many absolute statements regarding matters that are difficult or impossible to prove ~ such as how and why the world was created, the ultimate destiny of mankind, the nature of God, what**

God wants or what God did in the past or what God will do in the future. They claim that God made the True Revelation *only* to themselves or their predecessors, and to nobody else before or since or elsewhere on the planet.

“In the same prideful category is the belief that the Bible to which they give credence is the Only Source of religious or spiritual truth. A typical statement of this is to be found in a tract of a fundamentalist Christian group: ‘There is no book that is available to man that is more beneficial than the Bible.’ In earlier ages, it was natural and almost inevitable for people to believe in this way. Printing was unknown, books were few, and the communities of the world were isolated. But now such a belief betrays lack of acquaintance with other great scriptures and books of wisdom in the world. These scriptures are currently available in a variety of translations, and the books of wisdom are increasingly to be found in inexpensive editions. It takes only a little attentive reading to discover that they contain profound and ennobling statements, many of them very similar to those found in the Christian Bible, and many of them clearer and more appealing to certain temperaments, and therefore more workable in their daily life.

“Also in the category of pride are 1) the claim that mankind is the Lord’s Highest Creation ~ a claim that is shockingly immodest, completely unverifiable, highly unlikely, and (in view of the endless stupidities and villainies of mankind) even downright blasphemous; 2) the claim that mankind is ‘God’s most valued creation’ ~ a claim which downgrades all of nature and all other forms of sentient life, and which has given justification to men in Christian countries to exploit nature without conscience; 3) the claim that our particular ethnic or religious group, of all the people on the planet, was ‘specifically chosen’ by God ~ a claim which in the first years of the Space Age has been hastily enlarged by some to the claim that their particular group of all people in the *universe* was ‘specially chosen by God’; 4) the claim that only those who accept Jesus will be ‘saved’ from ‘eternal damnation’ ~ a claim which has seemed unbelievable to thinking Christians for centuries”.

Long before I read this, I had turned away from Christianity, but it certainly backs me up.

I said goodbye to Chau and others in Virginia, I went next to Chicago on May 1<sup>st</sup>. It was quite hot when I first got there but cooled down considerably later on and became quite pleasant. I spent a week there, with only two talks there and one in Milwaukee on Saturday; it was my first time back in Milwaukee since my one-and-only visit there in '85; I stayed only long enough to give my talk and then returned to Chicago.

The people in the temple in Chicago had not implemented my last year's suggestion to put up posters with quotations in both languages so that anyone could read them instead of the walls being blank. I've spoken and written about this for years. It's really difficult to motivate people, and sometimes I think it's better to talk to stones, because although the stones will not understand anything, neither will they misunderstand, as people often do! Why didn't I give up trying years ago?! It's hard work!

Wesak came and went, just like any other day (it also happened to be the 29th anniversary of my ordination, but that's not important; the important thing is being human; being a monk comes later). I gave a talk that day, and spoke about the destruction of the Buddha-images in Afghanistan, using this to emphasize the fact that there are far more than enough images in the world, and that what is lacking is an understanding of Dharma. The crazy Taleban presented us with a wonderful opportunity to explain the significance and purpose of the Buddha-image; nor is it only non-Buddhists who need to know this; many Buddhists are ignorant about it, and are guilty of what we are sometimes accused of: idolatry, or mistaking the symbol for what it symbolizes. As far as I could see, we missed that opportunity ~ dummies!

I left Chicago and went to Detroit, where I stayed with someone I met there the year before ~ in fact, the person who created my website for me. It was nice staying there and I had plenty of time to myself. I walked around the neighborhood in the early morning, probably startling a few people; after all, it wasn't every day they saw someone so strangely garbed. Generally, though, I wasn't hassled in the U.S. during those trips, as I sometimes was in '85.

Not many talks were arranged for me in Detroit ~ only 3 or 4 ~ but that was okay; I was winding down and looking forward to having a long break in England; of course, before then, there were still other places to go.

From Detroit, there was no direct flight to Hartford (my next stop), so I had to fly via Chicago, but because of bad weather over Lake Michigan, the flight to Chicago was delayed and I missed my connection to Hartford, so had to be rerouted via Baltimore. Some people ~ one in particular ~ were quite annoyed at the inconvenience. I told myself there was no point in this, and actually, was glad we came through the bad weather alright; we might not have. For reasons like this, some years back, I began to write thank-you cards to hand to one of the air-hostesses as I deplaned ~ the Turkish greeting-cards like those on the covers of "BOLEH TAHAN" and "THIS, TOO, WILL PASS" ~ with the words: "To the Pilots and Crew of Flight Number so-and-so: With Thanks and Appreciation for a Safe Flight, from a Grateful Passenger." Several times, one of the flight-attendants came up to me while I was waiting for my bags at the carousel and thanked me for the card. It is a small thing to do and can make some difference; everyone likes to be appreciated, and flight-attendants must sometimes deal with difficult people.

Arriving in Hartford around 8 pm instead of 11:45 am, I found that my bags had not come in on my plane, but was told they would be delivered to me as soon as they came. I called Eunice and Truc, and they came to get me; needless to say, I was tired, but I soon bounce back and don't suffer much from jet-lag. Fortunately, my bags were delivered intact that night, around 1:00 am.

I had a pleasant time in Hartford with my friends, and visited other friends there and in Boston, and went to the temple, on the eve of my departure for Canada, to participate in the weekly meditation-session ~ attended mainly by Westerners ~ and was requested to give the talk afterwards. During it, I mentioned that I'd been corresponding with an Indian follower of Sai Baba in Tennessee, and in one of his emails, he had expressed the common idea that everything happens for a purpose, the purpose being our spiritual development. I replied that I don't accept this idea and find it quite



egoistic, as it implies that the universe is centered around and concerned about oneself. I said that although everything happens because of causes, it doesn't mean that there is a purpose to it all. It seems that it is my role to puncture a few balloons as I go through life, but haven't I written that I am the 'Devil's Advocate'? Sitting beside me was the young monk I'd met in the Chinese temple the year before, and after my talk he explained to me that he had to work in order to support himself, and was finding this quite hard; he asked me if I worked, and when I said yes, asked what kind of work I did. I told him he'd just seen me doing it.

I called Glen from Hartford to ask how she was, and she told me that the father of Karin's two children had been found dead of a drug-overdose on *his* father's grave. Karin had broken up with him a year before due to his drunkenness, but had gone to the funeral, where his mother ignored her completely, as if it was Karin who had caused it! Actually, his mother used to say how much she hated him ~ her only child ~ and had wanted to shoot him several times herself; shortly before his death she'd called Karin to tell her that he had been in jail four times within the past year, one of them for 'pushing her around,' which probably meant beating her up. After his death, however, she changed her tune and appeared very upset. Well, he'd gone, and Karin certainly did not shed any tears for him. He was a useless fellow ~ useless to others and useless to himself ~ and wasted his life. I used to worry that he would go to Glen's and make trouble there as he'd done before, even though Karin was no longer living with Glen but had her own place, about 10 minutes' drive away.

Truc and Eunice drove me up to Montreal, where we stayed in the home of Truc's sister, and her family was very kind to me. They took me to several temples, although I'm not really interested in such. And Bi took time off work to drive me to Ottawa, Canada's capital about two hours' drive from Montreal. I had never been there before and found it very nice, although we had time for only a short drive around as we'd stopped at an aeronautical museum on the way in. I'd like to go again sometime.

Leaving Montreal by Air France for Paris on May 30<sup>th</sup>, I had a feeling there would again be a problem with my bags, which were

checked through to Manchester. The 6½ -hour flight to Paris was uneventful, but Charles De Gaul airport was confusing, and it took me a while to get to the terminal and check-in counter that I needed; maybe the efficiency of the U.S. had spoiled me; it's quite easy to get around airports there. The next flight ~ of just over an hour ~ was with Cathay Pacific, the HK-based airline, and I was pleasantly greeted by the cabin-crew, some of them Chinese and some Thai. I was fascinated by the south coast of England and the white cliffs of Dover; it brought back memories, as this is the point from where I used to make my forays into Europe in the 'Sixties, when plane-travel wasn't an option. We flew right over London, too, and I saw the Millennium Dome far below, but soon after, clouds obscured the view. There was quite a bit of turbulence as we neared Manchester, but we landed alright, and I was soon at the carousel waiting for my bags, which, alas, didn't come; the feeling I'd had in Montreal was vindicated. The girl at the appropriate counter was apologetic and assured me that they would get them to me as soon as they arrived on another flight from Paris, where apparently, there had been some delay in getting them onto my flight.

Glen and Karin, and *her* two kids, Chelsea and Lloyd, were there to meet me and were surprised at how little baggage I had ~ just my computer and another small bag ~ until I told them what had happened. Anyway, I called the airport to see if they had any update on my missing bags, but they didn't and so I called again several hours later, to be told they would be coming in on another flight that evening. Around 8 o'clock, they called to say that my bags had arrived and would be delivered within an hour, which they were, intact and nothing missing; that was a relief, as all my gifts, apart from my clothes, medication and almost everything else I own, were in these bags. It was my intention, at this point, to return to Montreal at the end of September, and make yet another trip in the U.S., but things happened to change that idea.

I was soon busy with my tasks there, but the weather wasn't very good, with frequent rain-showers, so it was difficult to get things done. It was June and supposed to be summer, but it was cold and windy. The first job I started on was the carport roof. At first, we expected to just change the PVC sheeting, but because there

was not much of a slope on the roof, we decided to raise one end of it, thus creating a steeper incline. After two weeks, it was just about finished, with a sigh of relief on my part.

One day, the phone rang, and the voice of an old man asked to speak to Mrs. Bayley. I said "She's not here right now. May I take a message?" He said: "Just say her twin-brother called." I was a bit surprised, as I'd not heard his voice since 1970, and didn't recognize it; nor, apparently, did he recognize mine, because when Glen called him back the next day, and he asked who had answered the phone, he could hardly believe it when she told him it was me. There will be no reconciliation between us; he didn't come while I was there, and I was glad he didn't. He lives only 15 miles away, but Glen said she hadn't seen him since her husband died 5 years before. Some twin!

A bright spot on a Sunday was a visit to what is known there as a car-boot sale ~ kind of a flea-market (though why they call them flea-markets, I've never been able to discover; I've never seen any fleas for sale). I used to go regularly, and come away with all kinds of stuff, most of which I didn't really need, but it was so cheap that I couldn't leave it there; I should restrain myself from going, actually; but I got some good books for almost nothing, and some tools for my work, and it was fun! One of our cousins took me, and we would go to three places in succession. She's five years older than me, so is midway in age between Glen and I, not that that's important. She was always complaining about her husband ~ the second; she drove the first one nuts, and is probably doing the same to this one; we never heard his side of the story, but began to doubt the things she told us ~ saying he never did anything, or if he started something, never finished it; as a result, their house was a dump and she was ashamed to let anyone see it; we wanted to see what it was like, but she refused our attempts to invite ourselves; maybe it was like the Addams' house, and not surprisingly, as she never spent any time there to do the housework, but was always gallivanting somewhere, to this or that market. Funnily enough, she always seemed to have money for that, but was always crying poverty, a trait that she no doubt got from her mum and dad, who were very stingy. Apart from her, we didn't see any other rellies.

She wore the most preposterous clothes ~ her long, see-through skirts were almost as bad as her shorts and sleeveless thingies. And her weird ideas ~ I really don't know how she came up with them! One day, she asked us if we knew where was the well that our stonemason maternal grandfather had dug in a field near where he used to live. She'd been looking for it, and, not finding it, presumed it must be covered up, so was wondering where she could get hold of a metal-detector to facilitate her search, again supposing that it was covered by a metal sheet or something. I wrote about her and another cousin in one of my books, tracing back our family-tree; I asked her if she would like some cow-dung ~ of which we'd just had a load ~ to fertilize the roots). She was hopeless at haggling at the car-boot sales and asked us to do it for her; I mean you don't just pay the asking-price, but have to haggle; you offer a lower price and can always come up; usually you get things cheaper. Moreover, she bought the most appalling rubbish; one time, she bought a couple of rusty old hinges ~ huge things that look as if they might have come from an old castle or somewhere ~ for use on some gates that she dreamed might one day get built up her drive, but which almost certainly will not; paid a pound each for 'em, she did, when they are the kind of things most people would throw away; this was one of the times she bought something on her own, without asking us to help her.

I usually took the dog out for a brisk early-morning walk and she enjoyed it; we left around 4:30 and got back 2 hours later; she was quite tired and thirsty afterwards. She was a mongrel, with some pit-bull in her, although she wasn't aggressive. She was terribly scared of fireworks, and almost every Saturday night ~ and some other nights at random, too ~ fireworks went off in the park not far away, and then the dog scratched at the back door to get in; on those nights we made exceptions and let her sleep in the house instead of in the garage. Another thing she was afraid of was anyone sneezing. I was very fond of her, and she of me.

Around this time, an email from Anita told me that her second daughter ~ only 15 years old ~ had left home to live with her dad in Melbourne. His new wife wasn't very nice to the girl, however, so she moved out and lived rough on the streets for a while before going to live with a boy she'd met, and she was supporting

them both by working part-time in Macdonald's or somewhere. This is what I replied to Anita:

“Oh dear, bit of a bombshell you dropped on me this morning! I'm so sorry to learn about Shanna; what can have propelled her into this? It's little consolation to know that she's not alone in the course she has taken; unfortunately, it's not at all rare these days; you should hear the stories of the young Vietnamese that I hear, and I hear them, of course, because of my long involvement with the Viets. But that doesn't help you in any way ~ doesn't help anyone. I don't know what to say in the way of advice or comfort; words are often hollow and cold.

“You are right in saying that help is useless when it's not wanted; it is as I say about Dharma ~ and you know that word, I guess: it is something that must be not only needed but also wanted, and if you give it when it is not wanted, it is rather like giving a diamond to a dog! You must wait until she's had enough of the hollow and empty life she's living ~ and it is so, I know; I've been there myself ~ and realizes that the people she considers friends are really not friends at all, and be there for her when she turns her face for home; hopefully that will be sooner rather than later.

“Meanwhile, you will suffer, of course, but you can reduce this by reflecting on the uncertainties of life and how it is a gamble from the moment we are born until the time we die; every day involves so many choices and risks; sometimes we win and sometimes we lose, but we cannot just sit still like statues, doing nothing; we have to do something. What a tremendous gamble is marriage, as you found out by bitter experience; and an even bigger gamble is begetting children, as there's no way of knowing what kind of kids are going to come through; they cannot be ordered to specification, nor returned to the store for a refund afterwards. My mum ~ your grandmother ~ used to say that if she had her time all over again she would not get married, adding: "But then, I would not have had the joy I've had through my children." Amazing, I thought! I often wonder about the love of a mother for her children: by all accounts (and I cannot speak from personal experience here), child-birth is a painful thing; one would think once would be enough, but few women stop with just one child and

willingly undergo the travails of giving birth again and again. Can you throw some light on this mystery for me?

“Yes, life is a gamble, but if people had not gained more than they lost over the ages, the human race would probably have become extinct by now. It is up to us to try to find something positive in anything, and it’s amazing how we can do this if we step back a little and view things from a distance instead of standing with our nose up against a mural that covers an entire wall, as it were.

“Suffering is like a gateway; there are few people who come to an understanding of life by any other way; how would we understand and commiserate with others who suffer if we have not known it ourselves? The word Compassion is very interesting etymologically; it means: To suffer, or feel, with, and is therefore a painful quality, yet there is none greater.

“Children are like water: the tap is the channel through which it comes, but it does not belong to the tap. And if one accepts the concept of karma, one might see it all as a matter of causes and conditions working themselves out, with no discernable beginning or end. There is really no-one responsible for it all, no-one in control, no-one to blame.

“I saw something on TV the other night about the collapse of Egypt's Old Kingdom, regarding which there is still no consensus of opinion. It was claimed that it was due to a global climate-change 4,200 years ago that lasted several decades, causing drought and widespread famine in Egypt; the Nile didn't flood as normal, and maybe millions starved to death; cannibalism was common, and people ate their own children in an attempt to stay alive, just as they did thousands of years later, in the thirteenth century. The program's purpose was to illustrate the terrible effects of climate-change, against which we are almost impotent. We spend a great deal of time trying to make ourselves secure, but this is all illusion, as a tiny thing can change the kaleidoscopic picture completely and throw us into confusion and panic. The only thing we can do is accept the fact that life is insecure and fragile, and trembles in the balance like a dew-drop on a lotus-leaf, and inasmuch as we can do so, our fear of the uncertainty and insecurity will diminish, and so we might find some security.”



~ 8 ~

## THE DANGER BECOMES WORSE

Soon after this, I turned on the TV one day to watch the news, and saw the Twin Towers of New York in flames. Thinking it was a movie, I turned to another channel, and another, and they all showed the same: it *wasn't* a movie, but the real thing. It was such a shock, and I couldn't tear myself away. The world changed forever that day, and became much more perilous. Undoubtedly, great evil was committed, but like everything else, it had causes as well as effects, and it would have been in the best interests of the West if it had paid more attention to those causes and tried to understand them before rushing off to war. Certainly, something had to be done about the perpetrators, but they had and *still* have their point-of-view, and while we do not need to agree with that, it would help us to deal with them if we were willing to consider it instead of thinking, "They are wrong and we are right," as the vast majority of people anywhere are prone to do. When we lock ourselves into positions like this, we become blind and refuse to see possible solutions to our problems. Our leaders think they can get away with making black-and-white statements like, "*If you are not with us, you are against us,*" magnifying problems out of all proportions, and causing untold suffering around the world. And we allow them to do this, and even back them up. Are we not also responsible?

"Why do *they* hate *us* so much?" is a question that should have been asked and answered long ago. It is not a new problem, but has roots stretching back centuries, like everything, and if we try to trace anything to its origins, we will go back and back and back, identifying certain causes only to find others before them, until we find everything somehow involved with and connected to everything else, not separate or independent. But what are they saying, these people who hate so much? It takes a lot of energy

to keep the fires of hatred stoked and burning. What explanations or reasons do they give for their standpoints and behavior? Can we afford to blithely disregard them? Or should we be willing to look at them and address them, and try to remove the possible causes of the effects we do not like, instead of adding more fuel to the flames? What would a disinterested, uninvolved visitor from outer space make of our problems? Is it possible for us to learn to look at things impartially and dispassionately? Our education hasn't prepared us to do so, but our travels in other countries ~ either actual or vicarious travels, through TV or books ~ should have had some effect of opening our minds somewhat, or at least recognizing that people of other lands and races are similar to us in many basic ways. Or do we travel in suits of armor, insulated from and forever cut-off from the people around us, cocooned in an ego-spun case?

Let us look at how things are: For centuries, Westerners have tried, by any means they could devise, to force their beliefs onto others, and in spite of the fact that knowledge about other cultures and religions is readily available today, leaving no excuse whatsoever for ignorance about them, they still do this, with huge budgets behind them. Americans, especially, are guilty of this; their missionaries swarm in every country, doing their utmost to convert and 'save the heathen.' It is so arrogant! What gives them the right to do this? Would they like others to do the same to them? Do we not cause many problems by our self-centeredness? It is this very mind-set that is responsible for such quagmires as Afghanistan and Iraq, where people are fighting back. Nor can we blame those people for this. The American colonists did so when they felt oppressed by Britain, did they not? And undoubtedly, Britain would have branded them terrorists if that term had been current in those days. How would we feel if we were Iraqis or Afghans or members of other nationalities and races that have felt America's armed heel? People in Australia would say, "Come on, mate; fair go!"

There is little that people like us can do about the world-situation, but it reminds us that the only real refuge is in the Dharma. Let us hope that the craziness doesn't get out of hand and lead to worse things. There, I've reduced the great danger we live under to just



a few words; it's amazing how quickly we've accepted it all and adjusted to it, isn't it? Television has the effect of making everything so banal; nothing seems real any more. This thing has been coming on for a long time and can easily escalate. I'm afraid that it's going to get worse before it gets better.

Since that never-to-be-forgotten event, we saw the phenomenon of empty churches filling up, for a while. Thinking to find God in a building, and driven by pain, fear, hope and desire, self-interest impels people to embrace religion. Therein, finding some solace and explanation ~ even though it is primitive, in most cases ~ they relax, and sink into the mud of complacency, not knowing why they call themselves 'Christians,' 'Buddhists,' 'Hindus,' 'Muslims,' etc., and never going deeper than the name-and-form.

Some of the Buddha's last advice ~ to be islands unto ourselves, lamps unto ourselves, and a refuge unto ourselves ~ is as valuable now as when it was when He gave it 25 centuries ago. We should come back to ourselves instead of depending so much upon others, and, through understanding, develop a sense of self-reliance and responsibility.

Religion should be based upon reality instead of fanciful thinking like it often is. It means seeing that we depend upon so many other people and things around us, and cannot live otherwise. From this comes a sense of gratitude, which, in turn, gives rise to other things. We need no belief, no complicated philosophy, no savior, nor anyone to tell us what to do or to lead the way.

The danger from the terrorist menace stems from religion gone awry, and the wrong ideas thereof must sooner or later be confronted and exposed, as they are the real cause of the trouble, just as the Buddha said so long ago. Ignorance is the real enemy of mankind and always has been. But who wants to be ignorant? Who will admit to being ignorant? It is a sickness we are usually unaware of or turn away from and deny. To recognize ignorance and acknowledge it requires some degree of wisdom.

Organized religion is a crutch that is useful only if we cannot walk unaided, but becomes an impediment after that. Even so, this 'crutch' must be understood as such rather than just followed blindly, because, like anything, it can be misused and often is.

The Muslim concept of 'Jihad' or 'Holy War' is an example of this; it really means an inner struggle against Ignorance, *not hatred, violence, killing and war.*

You wish to be liberated or enlightened? Well, it is yours for the taking. Just see through the illusion of the wrong ideas we have inherited from the past. Most religions divide humanity into the 'believers' and the 'non-believers,' the 'saved' and the 'damned.' Judaism speaks of non-Jews as '*Gentiles,*' Islam terms non-Muslims '*kafirs*' or 'infidels,' Christianity thinks of non-Christians as destined for hell. Religion, and even the names thereof, divide people, and such division is productive of great trouble. Clearly, religion, in this way, has been, and continues to be, detrimental to humanity. Why should we go on living with such arbitrary divisions when we can see the sorrow they cause?

Asian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and *real* Taoism (if the latter two may be considered religions at all) are much broader than their Middle-Eastern counterparts, and do not divide humanity. Buddhism, for example, holds that everyone, and not just those who call themselves 'Buddhist,' has 'Buddha-nature' and can become enlightened; it doesn't say you have to be a Buddhist for this, and that if you are not, you will not be saved and will go to hell. We must go deeper than the exterior aspect of Buddhism, however, deeper than its religious façade, and realize the Dharma within; it is that which helps us see beyond divisions to our essential unity.

When we call ourselves something ~ like a religious brand-name ('Jew,' 'Buddhist,' 'Christian,' 'Muslim,' etc.), or a nationality ('English,' 'French,' 'Chinese,' 'Thai,' 'Indian,' etc.) ~ at the same time we are saying, unspokenly, what we are not ~ "I am not this, I am not that." Like this, we limit ourselves and deny ourselves the possibility of drinking at the well-springs of many sources.

If we were not so attached to and preoccupied with names and labels, and saw, instead, our basic humanity, the wisdom of the world would be available to us in staggering amounts (it is anyway, but we make little use of it), and we would feel no shame or hesitation in picking up jewels wherever we find them; a diamond is a diamond no matter where it is found.

**W**e could avoid religious and racial conflict and antagonism if we realized that we do not live in water-tight compartments, shut off from people of other races, nations and religions, and that we are now well-into a world-culture; our lives touch and overlap those of others like tiles on a roof or the scales of a fish. Even if we never travel abroad, we depend so much upon people from all over the world simply because of the global-economy. But this is a gross example. More basically, more obviously, we are all human, with the tremendous faculties and potential this involves. We should ponder on these things. We need others.

**A**lbert Einstein wrote:

**“A** human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest ~ a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

**A**nd this was written by Sogyal Rinpoche, in “Glimpse After Glimpse”:

**“N**othing has any inherent existence of its own when you really look at it, and this absence of independent existence is what we call 'emptiness.' Think of a tree. When you think of a tree, you tend to think of it as a distinctly-defined object, and on a certain level, it is. But when you look more closely at the tree, you will see that ultimately it has no independent existence.

**“W**hen you contemplate it, you will find that it dissolves into an extremely subtle net of relationships that stretches across the universe. The rain that falls on its leaves, the wind that sways it, the soil that nourishes and sustains it, all the seasons and the weather, moonlight and starlight and sunlight ~ all form part of this tree.

**“A**s you begin to think more and more about the tree, you will discover that everything in the universe helps to make the tree

what it is; that it cannot at any moment be isolated from anything else; and that at every moment its nature is subtly changing. This is what we mean when we say things are empty, that they have no independent existence."

"One powerful way to evoke compassion is to think of others as exactly the same as you. 'After all,' the Dalai Lama explains, 'all human beings are the same ~ made of flesh, bones and blood. We all want happiness and want to avoid suffering. Further, we have an equal right to be happy. In other words, it is important to realize our sameness as human beings.'"

**A**bandoning my idea to return to Canada, and forfeiting the return portion of my ticket as it was non-refundable, I made preparations to leave England and return to Australia, fearing the outbreak of a great war. I bought a ticket with Swiss Air as far as Istanbul, intending to get the onward tickets there.

**We** got to Manchester airport around 11:30, in plenty of time for my flight which was supposed to take off at 3:50. I was told that, unlike the previous day, when no hand-luggage of any kind might be carried and even lap-tops had to be checked in, I could carry my lap-top in a plastic bag, but the bag would have to be checked in. My baggage-trolley had to be checked in separately, too, and I felt at the time there was something unusual about this. I was informed that take-off might be delayed by about an hour.

**H**aving checked in, I told Glen and Karin not to bother waiting any longer, as I don't like prolonged goodbyes but prefer to get it over with as soon as possible. Therefore, they left me on my own, and I went through the passengers-only gate to wait, not thinking that it would be an extra 3 hours before we boarded the plane. Just before boarding, there were further checks of hand-baggage, and one guy in front of me ~ who had a lap-top in a case, plus other baggage (the new rules were obviously flexible), was caught with a Swiss army knife and a pair of manicure scissors, which were confiscated, of course. What surprised me about this was, first of all, it had been announced on TV that all such things could not be carried in hand-baggage, and secondly, how they managed to escape scrutiny on the x-ray machine and electronic-gate.

The flight would be via Zurich, where I'd have to change planes. Unfortunately, because of the long delay in Manchester, my connection left before we got to Zurich, so I had to wait in a long line, inching forward, to get reassigned on another flight. When I finally got to the desk, and was told there was no other flight until 10 the next morning. I was given a voucher for a hotel-room, including transportation to and fro, meals ~ dinner and breakfast ~ and a SF10 phone-card. Before going to the hotel, I searched around the baggage-carousels among the many loaded trolleys for my bags, but could not see them; I was assured they would be checked onto the new flight to Istanbul, and given a toiletry-kit for the night, and with that, I went to the hotel. I was very tired by this time so didn't linger over what dinner was left, and went to sleep like a log, but only for four hours, as I wanted to get back to the airport in plenty of time. So, after breakfast, I boarded the shuttle-bus and found my gate at the airport. We set off for Istanbul and arrived without incident three hours later.

At Istanbul, only my computer-bag came out, so ~ together with many others ~ I went to the missing-baggage office to fill in the necessary forms. I could have had my missing bag delivered to my hotel if I'd left my keys with them, so that they might be opened for Customs' inspection, but was unwilling to do this, not because I didn't trust them ~ although I had reservations about that, too ~ but because I had such a job fastening my bag after stuffing it so tight, that I felt no-one else would be able to close it again if they opened it. Then, I got a bus into the city, getting down within walking-distance of the hotel where I stayed during my last visits to Istanbul. Even so, it was quite a walk, and on the way, I stopped to visit *Fetih*, who was pleased to see me again, unexpectedly. I sat with him for a while at his road-side stall, until I'd cooled off; it was about 31° at 5 o'clock, and very humid.

I got a room in the Sehir Hotel; it was cheaper this year than last, at 6 million Turkish Lira, due to the high inflation-rate; \$1 this year got 1.5 million, while last year it was 665,000. Once again, therefore, I was a multi-millionaire!

**E**arly the next morning, I took a bus out to the airport and was relieved to find my bag in the office, but not the trolley; anyway, I didn't mind losing that; it was the main bag that was important.

**A**fter dropping my bag at the hotel, I went in search of my ticket. There are many travel-agents in the tourist-belt, offering cheap flights, so I checked out several of them, but their rates weren't as low as I expected them to be; however, I chose the cheapest I could find and paid US\$645 for a one-way ticket to Melbourne with a stop-over in Malaysia. MAS flies from Istanbul to K.L. twice weekly, Wednesday and Saturday, but the Saturday's flight was full so I had little choice but to take the next day's flight, although I wanted to spend a bit longer there. I quickly emailed DV to let him know when I'd arrive, did a bit of shopping, saw Fetih again, and got ready to leave the next day.

**T**aking a final walk around the area comprising the Blue Mosque, Aya Sophia and Topkapi Palace ~ all of which stand where the palace of the Emperors of the Byzantine empire and the Hippodrome once stood ~ I left for the airport and before c

hecking in, went to the Lost-baggage counter again, but there was no sign of my trolley; they told me it was still in Zurich, though how they knew that I don't know. I gave them my Malacca address to send it to if it turned up, but it never did.

**T**he 11-hour flight to K.L., with a 90 minute stop-over in Dubai, was tiring, and waiting at the baggage-carousel for my bag, I saw that most people from my flight had got theirs and gone already, and I thought: "Oh, no; not again! This is happening to me with monotonous regularity!" Imagine, my bags had not turned up on the same flight as me five times in the past 18 months! Then, just as I was getting ready to go to the Lost-luggage office, it came out of the shute, much to my relief.

**P**assing out into the hall, I expected DV to be waiting, but he wasn't, and I wondered if he'd got my email. I wandered around a while, then called him on his mobile and asked where he was. He told me he was at a meeting in K.L. so couldn't meet me, but had chartered a taxi to pick me up; there was someone waiting in the arrival-hall holding a sign with my name on it, he said. Off I went to look for this man, and sure enough found him waiting at the

rail. He had not recognized me because I was wearing ordinary clothes instead of the robes he expected. Anyway, we were soon on our way, and I was taken to DV's home.

They all welcomed me back and took good care of me. When asked why I didn't give any talks there I said I'd retired. My ideas, I felt, weren't suitable for Malaysian audiences; there is too much superstition and attachment to names and forms there, and it's hard to work against it. This is why, when I decided to quit there several years ago, things just fell apart like a house of cards.

Almost every morning, DV took me for my favorite Indian food, and sometimes for lunch and/or dinner, too. The climate there was very trying, though, and prevented my daily walks; I didn't feel good about that, but if I had gone walking, within five minutes I would have been drenched in sweat. How I managed to spend so many years in that part of the world I just don't know!

While I was in Malacca, I got an email from somebody in Jakarta, requesting me to go there for a big ceremony and give talks shortly after, all expenses paid, of course. In my reply, I thanked him for his kindness, but told him it was too short notice, and that if he had informed me earlier, I might have considered it.

Anyway, I decided to visit Tor Hor in Penang for a few days, stopping off in Ipoh on the way. The bus-trip to Ipoh ~ although only 5½ hours ~ was tiring, as the a/c wasn't working well; I was glad to get there. A welcoming-committee was waiting for me, and persuaded me to stay for two nights, and it was good, as people there had always been kind to me. I gave a talk there that evening, but it assured me that few people had understood much of my previous talks. It must have seemed strange to them when, in answer to one of their questions, I said something like: "Years ago, I could have answered your question, but now, I can't." To clarify this somewhat, I added: "In the beginning, it was important for me to think that I knew, when in actuality, I didn't, and was only repeating what I had heard or read from others. Now, however, I'm more sure of myself and it doesn't matter to admit that I don't know. Moreover, the things about which you ask are not important and are just excess baggage." (Someone had asked me about what is called in Buddhist terminology a '*Silent Buddha*'

~ one who doesn't teach. Well, what do I ~ or anyone else, for that matter ~ know about this? We wouldn't know a Buddha if we fell over one!)

I continued on to Penang in another such bus. Tor Hor met me and took me for dinner in an Indian restaurant, and then, before going to his home on the third floor of a block of condominiums, we stopped by to see Amigo and his family; they were surprised to see me as we'd lost touch years ago. It was quite late when we got home, therefore, and I went straight to bed in the master-bedroom which Tor Hor had vacated for me, but here again, the air-con wasn't working and I spent a sweaty night.

Early the next morning, he went to work, leaving me on my own to do my email, watch CNN and whatever else I wanted to do; he returned at 2 o'clock and took me out for lunch. The days passed in this way, and I quite enjoyed my stay there and met most of the friends I wished to see. One of them, a local nun who stayed in a Burmese temple, invited us out for dinner one night but she herself didn't eat because she follows Theravada. I told her not to worry, and that I would transfer what I ate to her, so she wouldn't be hungry, referring to the Buddhist practice of 'transferring merit,' which I question. (once, DV had complained about feeling tired, so I told him I would transfer my afternoon nap to him, but next day he asked me not to do it again as he was unable to sleep that night! Such is the power of transference!)

Before dinner, the nun had requested me to visit a friend's home where people would like me to give a talk; I agreed, but was to rue it, because when we got there, there was a ceremony in progress, with about a dozen monks and nuns chanting and a lot of people in attendance. I thought: "What have I got myself into here?" and would have left there and then if I could have; but I was stuck and had to go on. Fortunately, the ceremony ended just then, and the monks and nuns were plied with food before going off to another such ceremony, leaving me with the people who had remained. When they were quiet, I gave a short talk and answered a few questions, then took my leave. That was the only talk I gave in Penang.



The day after I got back to Malacca was the first anniversary of Goh Sr's death, so I was requested to perform a simple ceremony at the family home. They were grateful for this, even though the ceremonies I perform are the same for any occasion. They had earnestly requested me to visit them on the way back to Oz from England, and had offered to pay my ticket from Istanbul, but had no idea that I would be with them for the anniversary.

DV dropped me at the airport on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October in plenty of time for my 9:15 flight. Airport security in K.L. was not as much of a hassle as I expected; the only difference from before was that everyone was frisked, which had not been so common. The flight left pretty punctually and was quite smooth, arriving in Melbourne on time, 7 hours later. We had to wait quite long at the baggage-carousel, as they couldn't get the baggage-doors of the plane to open; eventually, they had to use a can-opener! (a little bit of hyperbole on my part here).

Translator Tuan was waiting for me, but he took all the byways instead of the freeway, which he said would be congested at that time, so we were long in getting home. Anyway, after resting a while, I was ready for anything but had no plans at all. I was open to the unexpected, waiting to see what came up; something always does, and it did, very soon: I got an email from a monk there, asking me to give a talk at his temple, and I accepted, but thinking it would be to just a group of old ladies, I wrote:

“Could you arrange a more public talk for me, and announce it in the press, rather than me just talking to the people at the weekend retreat, most of whom would probably be elderly ladies? The reason I ask this is because I find it difficult to talk to old people in a way they would understand, and I say this from long experience. I do not have the wisdom necessary to perceive people's level of development and teach accordingly; nobody has something for everyone.

“During my recent stay of 3 weeks in Malaysia, I gave only 2 talks, and only because I couldn't avoid them. When asked why I didn't want to give more, I said I'd retired. Over the years I spent there, I did what I could in Malaysia, but with little success. I have something to give, I know, but it must be wanted rather than just

needed, and if it is given where it is not wanted, it is a waste. If people come to ask for something, I can give them something”.

He replied and said he agreed to my request and asked me for the topic of my talk. Well, I seldom put a topic on them, but this time one came readily to mind, so I told him, “THE FLAVOUR OF LIBERATION.” I spoke about the implications of the concept of reincarnation, but don’t know if anyone understood, as it was a different slant on the subject.

Some people suggested I stay in one of the temples near where I was staying, but I replied that it wouldn't work, as they are too small ~ even though one of them is quite large ~ for two monks; they 'belong' to the monks who stay there, and you know what happens when a dog intrudes on the territory of another dog. Many monks are possessive.



~ 9 ~

### A FALSE INVITATION

While I was still in Malacca, I got an email from Anita, on behalf of Sheila, saying:

“We would like you to come here and stay with us when you come to Australia. We know that you have many friends in Melbourne but you have family here on the Sunshine Coast! You are welcome to stay with us if you desire, we have a room for you with a bed so there are no worries there. In fact, it's even a 2-storey room!! (it's the tower room you may have noticed on the front of the house), although small, it has the top level that you could store some of your stuff.”

Needless to say, I was pleased to hear this, as I honestly thought we'd never get back on track again. At that time, I didn't know if I would take them up on the offer, but it was there; I told them I had

no plans, but would see how things went. Actually, I had so much stuff stored in Tuan's garage, and it was really a burden, as his health was far from good; in fact, he'd had a heart-attack a few months earlier and needed an operation to insert a *stent* in his almost-blocked arteries. I needed to shift that stuff.

My Medicare card had expired, and when I went to renew it, I was told that since I had been out of the country for so long, they could not issue me with one. Apparently, it is valid for only five years from the date one first leaves the country, regardless of how many times one has been back since then. I've been out and back several times since I became a citizen in '93, but there was no stamp in my passport for the last two exits and entries. They advised me to write to the head office and explain my circumstances. I told them that I had no such problems with the National Health Service in England this year when I went to see a doctor there for the first time since the end of the '60's; they still had my records and I was even able to get an exemption from medication fees. Many people leave the country frequently and for prolonged periods; what's happening here? I wrote to the head-office.

In early November, I decided to go to Queensland, mainly to visit my mother for her birthday, so got a ticket on special for A\$289, and flew up to Brisbane. Before disembarking, I gave one of my cards to a stewardess addressed to the Pilots and Crew. As I was waiting for Huy to pick me up in the baggage-claims area, she came up behind me and said, "Thanks for the card." Well, it's a small thing, but it makes a difference, and it's obvious that few people do more than verbally thank them. We pay for the ticket, and assume that we'll reach the destination safely; usually we do, but it's not a guarantee, and we shouldn't take it for granted.

I spent two days at Bayview Café with Thuy and her family. They were very kind, as they always were to me. Huy drove me to Nambour. Sheila and Frank welcomed us warmly, and after Huy left, Frank went to bring Mum home for her birthday-tea. She was pleased to see me, and I her, but she was very frail and slow and couldn't walk unaided; she could follow what we said, but her mind wandered immediately afterwards. I bought her a dozen red roses on the way in; I also took a box of mangoes for Sheila.

**M**y room was cramped, being rather small, so as this was to be my home, I decided to make a new bed to maximize on space. The room had a semi-circular alcove by the window. Frank took me to a demolition-yard where I bought some cheap second-hand timber, and with it built a box-bed in the alcove, in which to store stuff. Above this room was another room, topped by a conical roof; this upper room was reached by a ladder. These two rooms would be adequate for me when I'd arranged them to my liking. I also bought a new jig-saw, which was very useful; I didn't need to rely upon blunt hand-saws. Most of Dad's tools were still there, but it was hard to find anything when I didn't know where to look. I had wanted to build a self-contained hut for myself in the back-garden, but they wouldn't hear of it, probably thinking I'd make an eye-sore. They said I could have part of a big shed there and fix it up to my liking; it would require a lot of work.

Their place was lovely, although the area of land was not as much as the last one; the house was much bigger, with Anita occupying the downstairs, and S & F, Sharona and Luke upstairs, and me, too. They'd constructed a sewing-room on the front for Sheila to work on her quilts in, and boy, did she spend time on those! It had become an obsession with her, and with orders coming in, she was on the tiger's back, wanting to get off, but unable to. They had a stall at a craft-market every Sunday, and sold from 5 to 10 quilts a week, at A\$70, including 4 matching pillow-cases, which wasn't very much considering how long it takes to make them. Anyway, it certainly enhanced their pensions.

**A**nita was fine with me, but Stuart refused to see me, although he came twice while I was there. Well, that was okay; I didn't mind. Anita was planning a trip to Egypt, paid for by her parents. I saw how they tried to please her, afraid that she would leave them on their own. She didn't always reciprocate, however, and Sheila told me that one day, because she had arthritis in her hands and couldn't write well, she'd gone downstairs to ask Anita to address an envelope for her, but she was working on her computer and refused, saying, "Mum, this is *my* time now; I'm busy." How long does it take to address an envelope?

It was quite hot and very humid for the first few days I was there, then it cooled off a bit and was quite pleasant. At the bottom of their back-garden is a large pond, fed by a stream; about 30 wild ducks had made their home on it, and didn't have to go far for food as Frank fed them devotedly. There were also some bush-turkeys, a family of kookaburras (so tame that they would eat out of your hand), magpies, and many other species that I was not familiar with; there were some wild animals, too, but I didn't know what they were, either. There were also quite a lot of mozzies.

Anyway, they took care of me well and I enjoyed my week there, though I gained some unwanted weight. I went to visit Mum twice in the nursing-home; Sheila visited her on alternate days. I decided to make my base there, and thought of spending 6 months of the year there and the rest elsewhere, maybe between Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney.

Before Huy came to pick me up and take me back to Brisbane, I got the number of an old lady I'd not seen since '78 in Moonta ~ a friend of Mum and Dad; her name was Mrs. Babidge. We used to write to each other, and I knew she was in Queensland. Lucky that I called when I did, as her daughter was just about to take her to a nursing-home; had I called a little later, I'd have missed her. She was delighted to hear my voice, and I told her I'd try to stop by and see her in the afternoon. When Huy came, I asked him if we could visit her and he said it wouldn't be a problem.

Taking leave of Sheila and Frank, therefore, we set off, and an hour later, reached the nursing-home. It was good to see her again. At 93, her memory was remarkable, and she talked almost non-stop for an hour; I'm glad I went, as it made her so obviously happy. We promised to write to each other again.

After 2 more days in Brisbane, I returned to Melbourne; before doing so, however, Thuy and her sons, knowing that I intended to go to Sydney by bus next week, insisted on buying me a plane-ticket so I wouldn't have to sit for 10 hours in a bus.

On the flight back to Melbourne, one of the air-hostesses came to talk with me about Buddhism; originally from Serbia, she said she had become Buddhist about 20 years ago. She was the third person I'd touched on this trip, making it well-worth going. The other

person was an elderly lady I met in the chip-shop; she suffered badly from depression and appreciated a bit of sympathy.

**M**y new Medicare-card was awaiting me when I got back; they had responded favorably to the letter I wrote explaining my circumstances. Of course, I was glad about that. It's valid until 2008.

**O**ver the next few days, I started to pack up my stuff in Tuan's garage (well, repack it, as it was already in boxes there) and sent most of it up to Nambour. This done, I flew to Sydney, to be met at the airport by Iman, my Lebanese friend, and taken to his home. He had rejected Islam at an early age (though couldn't be open about it while he was in Lebanon) and embraced Buddhism a few years before, and is sometimes more Buddhist than I am! I included two articles by him in the last edition of *BECAUSE I CARE ~ Dream Come True and Morning Glory*. When he knew I was coming to Sydney and intended to stay in a temple he invited me to stay with him, and I accepted. He was living with his second son, separate from his wife and other son and daughter, but still on good terms with them; in fact, I met them several times, and even corresponded with his wife for some time, but our interests were different, and we stopped writing to each other.

**H**e was hospitable, and I had quite a nice time during the 10 days I stayed with him; it was good to have a change of cuisine; I like some Lebanese food; they eat a lot of beans. He also likes Indian food, so I ate out in Indian restaurants with him a couple of times. He arranged for me to speak at the same Buddhist Society, too, as he'd become a regular member there, and was even a committee-member.

**T**he real reason I went to Sydney that time was to meet Cu and Thi who were visiting from Dallas. They were staying not very far from where I was, so I met them a couple of times, and it was good to see them again. They'd had a lot of trouble with the Customs at Sydney airport, flying in as they did from Vietnam, and their bags were thoroughly searched, delaying them by an hour. They also arranged a talk for me in a friend's house, but this was not very successful. From Sydney, they went to N.Z. for ten days, and their email informed me they'd had a pleasant time there, in

spite of frequent rain. Their next stop would be Melbourne, where they would visit me again.

**A**fter a few days with Iman, I moved to stay with a young Vietnamese couple named Toan and Loan, who had earnestly invited me, and I had a nice time with them, too; they were very kind to me, getting anything they thought I might like. Toan was a wholesale fruiterer, so there was an abundance of fruit on the table: mangoes, peaches, mangosteens, lychees, bananas, apples, and even the King of Fruits: *Durian*.

**W**ell, I had two other talks in Sydney ~ one in the home of Bok and Pearl, to a large group of Malaysians, and the second in a Chinese temple where I'd spoken the previous year. Both talks went very well. At the first, I met a Malaysian woman who I'd not seen since 1974, when she was still in school. I'd heard she was in Sydney, married, with two children. We were pleased to see each other, and she promised to keep in touch, but ..... At the other talk, I paid homage to George Harrison, who had just died, saying he had found a way that suited him and died peacefully in it; as a Hindu, he requested that his ashes be scattered on the River Ganges.

**A**fter two weeks in Sydney, I returned to Melbourne on Tuan's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I presented him with a book by the Dalai Lama that I'd bought in Sydney; it had the most wonderful picture of the Dalai Lama on the front, sans glasses, so that if he didn't read the book ~ which I doubted he would; he's not a big reader ~ the picture would be enough; it was called, "An Open Heart".

**B**y this time, I'd decided to make another trip to Egypt, as Anita would be joining a tour there in January, but that it would leave her with 5 days on her own in Cairo when it ends, and that's not a good place for a woman to be alone. I didn't need much of an excuse to go to Egypt again.

**N**eeding to get an aching tooth fixed, I visited my dentist-friend, Jamie, but he couldn't complete the job the first time, even though I was in his chair for about an hour, he asked me to come back, but wasn't sure he'd be able to save the problem-tooth as it was very far gone. I think he was surprised at how well the sec-

and bout went, and as for me, well, there was no pain for a while. I didn't want to go overseas without getting it fixed first.

**Cu** and Thi arrived from N.Z. and had had a hard time with the Customs in Melbourne, too; they were detained for over an hour, while their bags were thoroughly searched again, and told that it was because of the events of Sept 11<sup>th</sup>. Now, they were middle-aged, and didn't look at all suspicious, but you cannot argue with Customs and Immigration, so they had to submit. They were staying not far from where I was, and came to visit the next day.

**On** Xmas Day, Nhi took me to see the first episode of *The Lord of the Rings*, and I thought it was fantastic ~ well, it literally was, of course. I'd read the book almost 30 years before.

**Coming** out of the cinema, I got a call from Trung, who I'd not heard from for a while, and when I told him of my Egypt plan, he said he would go with me, and even offered to pay for me. Well, I thought, it would be good to have a companion, but felt it would also be a burden on me, as I'd not forgotten ~ how could I? ~ what had happened with him in India in '96. Would it be a repeat of that? I asked him why he wanted to go to Egypt, and he said because he'd never been there before; but that was not a good reason, as he'd been almost nowhere else. However, I agreed, and he got the tickets ~ about A\$1500 each ~ and also travel-insurance, which I wouldn't have got had I gone on my own. I figured he owed me plenty, so let him pay, even though I later found out he had to borrow the money and was heavily in debt. He had his reasons for wanting to get out of Melbourne for a while, as the girl he'd been living with was threatening to kill herself if he broke up with her, and had already tried several times.

I told Anita she now had *two* body-guards instead of one. She should have felt honored, but showed no appreciation, and with hindsight, I wish I'd let her go on her own and face all the risks.

**We** were booked on the same flight as her from Sydney, and duly met up with her there, but I could tell that Trung took an instant dislike to her. The flight, via Singapore, took about 16 hours, and we arrived in Cairo the next morning, cleared Immigration and Customs, and haggled for a taxi to take us to the Sun Hotel, where Trung and I would stay. That was quite a ride for her, as



she'd not experienced such hectic driving before. We checked in, then accompanied her to the hotel she was booked in at, and left her there; her tour was to start the next day.

**N**ext day, after my early-morning walk and breakfast, I took Trung to the Museum, and we were among the first in, before it became crowded. He was not interested, however, in spite of all the wonders there. Had I expected to turn a sow's ear into a silk-purse? We saw Anita there with her group as we made our way out.

I signed up for a taxi-tour of the pyramids and tombs at Saqqara; these had been constructed before the pyramids at Giza, and cover a vast area, much of which has not been excavated. We climbed to the entrance of one of them and descended into the tomb-chamber; it was incredible. We circumambulated the Step-pyramid, and went into a number of tombs alongside. We saw craftsmen cutting limestone blocks using ancient techniques. On the way back to Cairo, the taxi-driver told us he was a school-teacher, but was unable to earn his living that way, and barely managed to support his family by driving cabs.

**We** wanted to climb the Great Pyramid of Giza. Although this isn't allowed, there are ways around the prohibition if you're prepared to pay enough. We found someone who offered to arrange it for us, but the amount he asked for doing so ~ \$700 ~ was too much, and we abandoned the idea.

I gave Trung enough space, not expecting or even wanting him to be with me all the time, but he didn't take advantage of the opportunity to see any of the sights; instead, he spent hours in a cyber-café chatting with friends back home

**We** took an overnight train to Luxor, and compared to the trains of India, for example, it was almost luxurious. After checking into a hotel, however, Trung announced his desire to go off on his own so as to have more adventures; apparently, he found my company dull. I did not agree with this, but could do nothing to change his mind, so I had to let him go. I moved to another hotel, but didn't stay long, as I'd been there before. I didn't see him again, as it seemed he returned to Cairo almost immediately. Of course, I visited the Karnak Temples again, and the Valleys of the Kings and Queens; I also took a one-day taxi-trip to the well-

preserved temples of *Edfu* and *Esna* further up the river. After 4 days, I got a night-bus back to Cairo, only to catch a bus out to Alexandria, on the coast, where I stayed for two days, seeing some of the few sights which that place has to offer; I didn't enjoy it. A fortress stood on the site of the famous Lighthouse. Back in Cairo, I later met someone who had befriended Trung, and he told me that he had been in his shop a few days before and had already left for Singapore, with the idea of going on to Vietnam from there. Was this part of his plan from the beginning or not, I wondered? Whatever, it was an awful waste of money on his part, as he saw almost nothing of Egypt while he was there.

Anita had greatly enjoyed her tour, and returned to Cairo at the end of January, and I met her as we had arranged, to show her around until she should fly out. While doing so, I suddenly decided to abort my trip and return to Australia on the same flight as her on Tuesday, if I could get a seat at such short notice. I'd had a cold for over a week and had resorted to antibiotics to clear it up; no doubt they were partly responsible for the degree of fatigue I felt, but there was a sense of meaninglessness about the trip, too, especially as my responsibility to her was over. I went to the Egypt-Air office, but was told that all their twice-weekly flights to Sydney were fully booked until the 20th of March. I asked to be wait-listed and said I would check back regularly, as the office was only five minutes away from my hotel.

Anita was hard to please ~ in fact, I came to see that, like her dad, she was cold and hard, and not much fun to be with (as if I'd not known that before). During her final day there, she was very particular in shopping, and really took her time, so that by the time she'd finished and I'd put her in a taxi to her hotel, I was very tired. Making my way back to my hotel, I napped for almost an hour before going to the airline office again, but there was no change. I called in again at 7:30, and was advised to go to the airport and take a chance on getting on; they said there was a 70% possibility. I resolved to do this, so prepared my stuff and at 11 pm, went over to her hotel far away, to go with her to the airport from there.

I had to wait in the airport to see if I could get on, until all the other passengers had gone first. Anita went ahead, not knowing if she would see me again or not, but before going through the gate, she said ~ *very* reluctantly, I could see, so reluctantly that she almost spat it out ~ that it had been good to have me accompany her around Cairo the last few days, but there was no word of thanks. Well, I'd known for many years how mean-spirited and stingy she was, and there's no sign that she'll change. *Too* right, it *was* good for her to have me show her around; it saved her a lot of time, hassle and money. I think she enjoyed the attention and compliments ~ however phony and insincere ~ she got from guys there, as she obviously doesn't get much in Oz. One time, while she was buying something in the bazaar, I stood aside to let her deal, and the guy began to get fresh with her, saying, "How beautiful you are! *Felesh!*" (the last word meaning, 'flesh'). He offered me 100 camels for her. I wish he'd meant it! Another time, in an artist's shop, the owner ~ a great fat guy ~ offered me ~ jokingly, of course ~ 100 kgs of gold plus 10 kgs of bananas for her, and couldn't keep his hands off her! The bananas would have been more than enough! No need for camels!

To cut the tale short, in the end, I *did* get on, and found that there were many empty seats ~ so many, in fact, that I had the four middle seats to myself and was able to stretch out for some time. Not only this, but in spite of having to go 'stand-by' (for the first time in my long history of flying), there was still vegetarian food available, whereas on the flight *to* Egypt, even though I'd ordered it in advance, there was not.

Anyway, the flight back seemed much faster than the flight out, even though I spent most of it quietly, on my own. We got to Sydney about 8 am, where going through Customs was a breeze, too; I always dread having to unpack everything, not that I have anything to hide. I wasn't checked-through to Melbourne, so had to make a booking, but this was soon done, too, as there were flights between Sydney and Melbourne every 30 minutes. I got there around 12:30, and caught a shuttle-bus to the City, from where I got a taxi to Tuan's house; it was good to be back.



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## ARRIVAL IN ADELAIDE

**T**hat was my shortest-ever trip out of Oz. I was still stuffed-up with cold, and it took a few days to clear up, not helped by Van's habit of keeping the front and back doors wide open, so the wind whistled through quite strongly, and the day-time temperature was around 15 degrees at that time; even the kids were shivering!

It was a bit uncomfortable staying there for another reason: Van was surly and taciturn (symptoms, I felt, of deep unhappiness), and some days I got barely a dozen words from her! She'd been like that for a long time. She spent hours talking on the phone, however, in a tone that sounded like she was complaining.

**M**y teeth in need of more attention, I went to see Jamie again. He was always pleasant as he went about his work.

**E**nough was enough and after two weeks in Melbourne, I took wing to Adelaide, only to discover that the Vietnamese people who picked me up at the airport had misunderstood me over the phone and had not arranged accommodation for me, thinking that I would stay with Wilanie and her family; *she* had a house full of visiting relatives, however, so that wasn't an option. In the end, after some hasty phone-calls, which turned up nothing positive, I had to be put to stay in a motel.

**T**he next morning, according to an agreement made while I was in Melbourne, I went over to a Sri Lankan temple, where, contrary to my apprehensions, I was well-received. I say 'contrary to my apprehensions' because the way I dress identifies me more with Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhism, whereas the Buddhism of Sri Lanka is of the Theravada kind, and sectarianism among Buddhists is often as strong and virulent as among followers of other religions, although it has never led to violence. Moreover, the

resident monk, Sumedha, was surprisingly friendly, and it was not long before he took me aside and invited me to stay there long-term. Not only that, but late at night, after everyone had gone home, he asked if I'd like to eat something, and of course, I did, as I was very hungry by then, long after lunch. This was unexpected, moreso as he also ate something himself.

I didn't stay there longer than a few days before moving to stay with an Aussie couple I'd been introduced to, Rick and Pat; they were fantastic, and I had so much to talk about with them; Rick had been thrown from a horse at the age of 25 when he was working as a stockman at the abattoirs and became an invalid as a result, confined to a wheelchair; that was 17 years before. He had triumphed over his adversity in many ways, discovering that he had an ability to paint, and became a successful artist; his paintings selling for thousands. He was a most positive person and enjoyed life tremendously. Pat was also a lovely person and the care that she necessarily lavished on him was heart-warming to see. I didn't know them, or anything about them, before I met them; they opened their home to me and made me feel very welcome, but I was careful not to overstay.

Someone tried to arrange a talk at another temple for me, but I came up against someone there, who called to get some information about me. I gave him what I gave at other places, and which had always been accepted as adequate. After I'd gone to bed that night, he called again to ask for more. I returned his call the next day and told him I wasn't prepared to give more information as it was not ~ or shouldn't be ~ important. He said, "But it is our policy to ask such things of visiting monks in order to make announcements about their talks." I said, "I'm sure you're not going to print out all that information," and told him I'd decided to cancel the talk. He accepted this without apology and didn't try to dissuade me, which made me think they were not really keen on having me there anyway. I later wrote to him, but decided not to send it; here is my letter:

Mr. _____ this is not meant to be a 'nice' letter, but I feel I must write a few words to correct some obvious misunderstandings.
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First of all, I did not ask to give a Dharma-talk at the Chinese Temple; do I need to come there? It was arranged by Lan Thi Ngo (her Vietnamese name, though you probably know her as Nga), who has known me since 1986. Moreover, I gave talks your temple years ago when it was functioning in someone's garage; no doubt there are other people at the temple who know me. And there are now people who know about what has just happened.

To be so insistent on asking for personal information from me is actually very rude on your part, especially as you had no way of knowing or ascertaining if what I told you were true or not. The Sri Lankan Buddhists here, to whom I've given three talks over the past week, didn't ask silly things like that, and seemed happy with what I said and requested more. I generally give only the minimum information about myself, as I regard that as unimportant. Do you know the name of your mailman? Probably not, because it's not important; what is important is that he delivers the mail; and I am like that; my job is to deliver the Dharma. But I wonder if you know what that is? How much do you know or understand about the Buddha's Teachings? Did you not say to me, as we closed our phone-conversation on Saturday: "May God Bless You"? That is a very strange thing for a Buddhist to say; perhaps you think the Buddha is a God, or maybe you are really a Christian. In any case, an uninformed Buddhist should not hold a position of authority in a temple; it is like a chicken pretending to be an eagle.

Maybe you are familiar with Bright Moon Temple in Melbourne, which I believe has some affiliations with your temple. Well, I spent some time there years ago, and saw how it had fallen into the wrong hands, so that the emphasis was on making money and Dharma-propagation was almost non-existent. Better not to have a temple if it's going to be misused. Unfortunately, it has been my experience over the past 30 years to come across so many temples like that.

You know, there are probably some people ~ even if only a few ~ who might have learned something had I given a talk there, but they were prevented by you, and you must accept responsibility

for that; many Buddhists would say that is really bad karma; I would say it's just ignorance and bad-manners.

After five days with Rick and Pat, I went to stay with Wilanie, not far away. She was still suffering from the loss of Wick, unable to let go. He continued to visit her at times, not caring that he was turning the knife in the wound, keeping it open and bleeding instead of allowing it to heal. She had three sons (I forgot to mention this before), all but the youngest now grown up; the eldest, Kevin, wasn't living at home, and she suspected he was dealing drugs, as he would come now and then with huge wads of money to hide around the place. To augment her meager income, and having spare rooms, she took student-boarders. She cared for me very well during the week I was there, and assured me that she benefited a lot, too.

Some other arrangements fell through, but were compensated for by the success of all the talks ~ 9 or 10 ~ I gave in Adelaide, to various groups. While there, I got an idea of making a collage of pictures from magazines on a large sheet of card, of people ~ or even animals ~ who we might have been in previous lives. We do not know, of course, about our previous lives (if any), but most Buddhists, if not all, accept the concept of many lives, so it would be a matter of using one's imagination. When I came to do it, however, I soon found out that it would take a long time to do properly, so I delayed, and never got around to doing it. The purpose of it was to serve as a kind of meditation-object, to help us identify with people of various races and of different times, male and female, young and old, beautiful and not so. It could be a way of helping people expand their horizons beyond their conditioning, because of course, we all see things according to that, and this is how racism arises, whereas if we would consider the possibility of having been members of various races and nationalities before, and of becoming so again, racism would definitely diminish. Right now, we are either physically this or that, but how we became so, we really don't know; I mean, I didn't choose to be born in England any more than anyone else chose to be born where they were; this happened beyond our control, but we could

try to expand our minds and learn what it means to be members of the human race. I've never heard of anyone conducting such an experiment before.

I met a number of people with whom I lost contact years ago, and made some new friends, like the couple mentioned above. An optometrist-friend named Tony, who I'd met through Wilanie years before, tested my eyes for signs of diabetic damage, and was pleased to note that there was none, and very little change in my eyesight since I was last tested.

Then, someone who had attended one of my talks at Wilanie's came forward and offered to support me, so that I could settle down to writing my memoirs, which I'd been meaning to do for some years. His initial enthusiasm didn't last long, however, and he made the excuse of wanting to go into seclusion and devote himself to the practice of mindfulness with the aim of becoming enlightened, to cut contact with me. I don't know what became of him, but I was a bit concerned that he would go off the tracks with his meditation and become crazy.

Another person I met at this time, and was to become quite close to was an Aussie woman named Georgina. Knowing that I was on my way to Brisbane, she asked for my email-address, saying she'd also be going there soon. It wasn't long before we started to correspond regularly. It had been my intention, when I first went to Adelaide, you see, to go to Sydney afterwards, and from there, maybe to New Zealand again for a while before going to Queensland, but after a week, I decided to abandon that idea, and go direct to Queensland instead, and get down to work on writing my memoirs; indeed, as mentioned earlier, I intended to make my base there. Consequently, I bought a ticket over the Internet to Brisbane. Huy met me at the airport and drove me to Nambour, where Sheila and Frank were expecting us.

Soon after I got there, Sheila and Frank left for a 3 weeks' vacation in Spain, Portugal and Morocco. As I was seeing them off, I suggested to Anita that she write her email-address for them, as they would probably meet someone of their trip who could help them with email, as they don't know how, but she said, "There's



no possibility of that!" and Frank signaled to me to leave it that; he knew better than to pursue the matter with her.

I was left to take care of myself in the upper portion of the house, and Anita was in her quarters downstairs with two of her three children, who were as taciturn and uncommunicative as she. In spite of what she'd written to me in Malaysia, saying that I had a home there if I wanted, it soon became clear that she considered me an intruder, and knowing that I was dependent upon her for transport to visit my mother in her nursing-home, she offered to take me only twice in the three weeks her parents were away. Well, I'd known for a long time that she hated my mother (her grandmother), and never went to visit her herself, but that was no reason why she couldn't have dropped me off to see her, as she went out to gym every morning. She never as much as invited me down for a cup of tea with her!

I didn't get very far with my memoirs in Nambour; the inspiration just didn't flow. There was no hurry, however, as it was mainly for my own edification; it's a good thing I don't write for a living, or I'd very soon starve.

Anyway, S & F returned, not having enjoyed their trip, but I wasn't surprised about that, as Sheila is not at all adventurous where food is concerned, and won't try anything different; she had gone with the expectation of not enjoying it, so it was sort of a foregone conclusion; it was really a complete waste of money. I waited for an opportune moment to inform them of the situation, and said that rather than disturb the balance there (they were so afraid of upsetting their 'lovely' daughter in case she moved out), I would leave; I could not live with such negative feelings, and talking to Anita in a reasonable way wasn't possible, as she's a cynical, cold and hard person, and I could well-understand why her husband had left her nine years before; I'd not heard his side of the story, but he undoubtedly had one.

After repacking the stuff I'd sent up from Melbourne, I parted amicably with Sheila and Frank. Huy had driven up from Brisbane for me. We went to visit my mother, and she asked me why I was leaving so soon, making me wonder how much or little she really did understand. It was sad to see her, not knowing if I'd ever see

her again; she'd lost a lot of weight, and her hands were like birds' claws ~ skin and bones and worm-like veins.

On the back into Brisbane, I asked Huy if we could stop by to visit Mrs. Babidge, who was expecting us as I'd called to say we were coming; she was delighted to see us again, and at 94, her mind and memory were still very sharp and clear; we stayed over an hour with her, listening to her stories, and when we left, she insisted on giving me some biscuits and candies and money in an envelope; I couldn't refuse, as giving me these things meant so much to her, *and* to me. I wrote to her now and then after this, as she liked to hear from me, and it is a small thing to do to make someone happy. However, it wasn't long before her failing sight precluded her replies to me.

My teeth in need of treatment yet again, I visited a dentist someone had introduced me to; being Vietnamese and Buddhist, he treated me without charge, filling three teeth and thereby relieving me of the ache thereof.

By this time, I'd decided to go to England again, and so, after some talks in Brisbane, I returned to Adelaide, to spend two weeks more in the Sri Lankan temple. During this time, Georgina, who had also returned from Brisbane, invited me for dinner, and came to collect me. She was living in a lovely place in the hills with her husband, Rob and one of their sons, David. We spent a pleasant evening together.



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## TRAGEDY

**B**ecause of heavy bookings, I was unable to get a flight out on the date I wanted, so had to settle for May 26<sup>th</sup>, which was Wesak Day, and I had to leave halfway through the celebrations in the temple, which must have seemed quite odd. Fortunately, because I flew MAS, the long flight to England was

broken for 24 hours in K.L., where I was accommodated in a nice hotel, included in the fare and with all meals provided; this gave me time for a good rest before the 13 hours' leg to Manchester.

Glen and Karin were waiting for me at the airport, pleased to see me, as I was them. It wasn't long before I threw myself into various jobs around the place, doing two or three at the same time, so that when I got a bit tired of one, I could turn to another. I expected to be there until at least September.

We resumed going to car-boot sales, whenever Annabelle was in the mood to take us; Karin couldn't be relied upon, as she liked her bed too much. The markets were only just getting into swing because of the weather; although it was June, it was more like March, cold and wet.

Karin's children ~ Chelsea, aged 5, and Lloyd, aged 2½ ~ were growing nicely and were well-mannered. Chelsea liked going to school, and the little boy was a delight the way he loved animals and insects; he often came up with a worm or spider or caterpillar in his hands, holding them very carefully so as not to hurt them.

There was a Buddhist Society not far away, and I emailed them to introduce myself and offer my services, but wasn't graced with a reply, which confirmed my idea that they were insularly 'Tibetan' and not open to 'others.' I knew their email-address was valid, as I got someone else to email them to check, and *he* got a reply. I visited their website later, and it was as I thought: very Tibetan, not that there is anything wrong with Tibetan, but when they are sectarian ~ as is often the case ~ it is not a good thing; the West needs Dharma, not sectarian Buddhism. Buddhism is spreading in the West, but I'm not very happy about the way it *is* spreading. Many Westerners come to Buddhism with an inbuilt affinity for Dharma, but soon get sidetracked and embrace and conform to one of the various forms of Buddhism, with its cultural trappings. This is, to me, more of a loss than a gain, as we've had our own culture and should be looking for something that will take us beyond local things like that to something truly universal. They surely would not want me coming along and disturbing their set-up, as no doubt I would have done.

**O**ne morning, out with the dog, I let her off the leash to run around, and as often happened, she went chasing rabbits in the bushes but failed to reappear, so after much looking and calling, I gave up and went home, with many glances behind to see if she was anywhere in sight. I envisaged having to come back later to look for her, but when I turned the corner into our cul-de-sac, there she was outside the gate. It was quite a distance from where she disappeared, and the way is by no means straight, winding and twisting through several streets before we got home.

**K**arin, now 29, had had a new boyfriend for some time (she was seldom without one), named Lee, a motor-bike enthusiast. One day, he asked her to go racing with him, and although she was tempted, she decided against it because of the kids. At about 6 o'clock, she got several SMS's. Upon reading them, she burst into tears, as they were to say that Lee had had a smash on his bike and was in hospital with broken legs and brain-damage! She hastened off, but came back soon afterwards, saying that she'd not been allowed to see him, but had been told that there was no hope of his recovery as the damage to his brain was so severe. Poor girl was devastated, of course, as she loved him so much, and was on the verge of accepting his marriage proposal.

**L**ater, she went to the hospital again, expecting to be there a long time, but was back much sooner than expected, and said: "I'm not upset anymore, but more angry than anything else." She then told us that she'd met another woman at the hospital whom she knew, and who'd told her so much of her close relationship with Lee that Karin was doubly-devastated to realize that he'd been two-timing her all along.

**S**he took it all remarkably well after that, probably because her love had turned to hate. A week later, she received an SMS from his mother, saying that she'd authorized the pulling of the plug on her son; what an awful decision for a mother to have to make. Karin attended the funeral.

**S**ince then ~ and this is where it got even worse ~ not only did she behave as if this had never happened, but had several other lovers, and even took to spending the nights with the latest one at his parents' home just around the corner, taking her kids with her!

She was behaving like a whore, but would listen to no-one and did just whatever she wanted, refusing to think about the effects it might have on her kids later on. It was good that we didn't live in a classy area, as all the neighbors knew. I was ashamed to tell anyone, and wished it were not happening; it was very irresponsible of her, and not only set a bad example to her kids, but caused friction between us all. Some good news was that a few days later she moved into a council-house that she'd been allocated. Her stud moved in with her, but it wouldn't be long before she got fed-up with him, as he suspected her of seeing other men; she couldn't go out alone without him asking her where she'd been and who she'd seen. He even read her diary and checked her phone-messages. Unable to tolerate this, she chased him out, and was on her own again for a while.

**G**len was expecting me to stay there permanently, but that could not be. I mean, it was good to have a break and do some physical work, but it didn't satisfy me completely, and there was little intellectual stimulus such as I get when I give Dharma-talks. I didn't tell her until later that I'd probably leave around November and return to Malaysia, and go on from there to make another trip in Nepal and India, as I was sure she would be sad about it. It wasn't a plan but just an idea, and I waited to see what would happen. Sure enough, something did. I got an email from Onfat in Jakarta, on behalf of the temple, asking me to go and give talks there. I accepted, and prepared to leave, but then the news came about the Bali bombings, and I changed my mind, thinking there was no need to go looking for trouble.

**A**s time passed, however, I reconsidered, thinking that I must die somewhere, of something or other, and so I wrote to Onfat saying that I would come after all, and suggesting mid-December, so that they would have enough time to prepare. He got back to me and confirmed this, saying he'd send a ticket to Malacca for me.

In the meantime, I contacted my old friend, Stan, and got him to take me to the airport for my flight at the end of November. I was soon up in the air, Malaysia-bound again. DV was waiting for me the other end; it was good to be back there again, and to eat nice South-Indian food every day.



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## IN AND AROUND JAKARTA

**O**ne morning, Maggie picked me up, and we saw a large monitor lizard in the middle of a busy road, so we made a u-turn, but by the time we'd got back, it had been run over and was almost dead. I got out anyway and dragged it to the side and laid it on the grass. They are commonly seen on the roads there; ten years before, I saw one, and always regretted not stopping to help it.

**M**y ticket came and on the 10<sup>th</sup>, I went to Jakarta to begin a month of talks in Indonesia. I became quite busy there, going from place-to-place, but that's how I like it. The climate however ~ as in the rest of S.E. Asia ~ was not to my liking, and I was constantly sweating, while everyone else appeared cool; this was the price I had to pay for being there.

**N**ow, Onfat had collected funds from his friends to cover my expenses, and two days after I got there, he put me on a plane to Semarang, to visit Bing Twan for a while. It was good to see her again, as she'd been very loyal to me since we first met in 1978. She took good care of me during the time I was with her.

**B**ack in Jakarta, I was interviewed on a Buddhist radio-program, and it went well, with phone-in questions from listeners as well as from the compere. I also gave several talks in the temple where I was staying. The translator ~ a young monk named Nyanditya, resident there ~ was very good; he would accompany to other places as my main translator; there were many talks still to go.

**T**hen, because my right ankle was still painful at times ~ 4 years after the sprain ~ Onfat arranged for me to see a specialist, who, although he was a Catholic, didn't charge me. He recommended I have an MRI ~ *Magnetic Resonance Imaging* ~ on it, so we went

for that the next day, at a different hospital. I was asked to lie down and keep still for about 40 minutes while this huge machine did its stuff on my ankle. It was very peaceful ~ and fortunately, nicely air-conditioned there ~ with soothing music playing, so I almost went to sleep for a while until I was 'cooked'. The charge was about \$120, very cheap by Western standards.

Onfat had managed to contact a monk I was keen to see again, and took me to his place at Bogor, an hour from Jakarta. Since I met him in 1978, he had become the head of the Mahayanists in Indonesia, with a number of large temples in different places, and was very wealthy. We had lunch with him, and I asked if he had any spare robes he could let me have. Of course, he had, and gave me some. We also visited Michael, Nyanaditya's father, who I'd also known for 25 years. He offered to help me get my visa for India in Jakarta, so I gave him my passport and plane-ticket to Kathmandu. On the way back into Jakarta, we collected the results of the MRI and took them back to the specialist, who soon saw from the films what was wrong with my ankle ~ the cartilage between the joints was worn down at one point, but nothing wrong with the ligaments. He prescribed some medication for the regeneration of the cartilage, but I don't think it helped. At least I knew what the trouble was, and my mind was more at ease about it. Unfortunately, he said walking was not good for the problem and would only exacerbate it. How could I not walk, however?

My talks went well; I had one almost every day, and sometimes more than one, but I didn't mind, as I usually got plenty of time to myself during the day, and after all, I went there to give talks.

I was called upon to conduct a weekend retreat in Jakarta, and there was good feedback from it. I also participated in a retreat in the mountains, and gave two talks a day during it. It was nice to be away from the heat and humidity of the lowlands.

In Jakarta one day, a young guy came to talk with me and opened up about a problem: He'd been in love with a certain girl for the past three years, but had discovered that she didn't love him anymore; he requested some advice. I asked him how it felt to love, and he said "Happy."

“Then why ask for more?” I said. “We cannot make other people love us, but if we love them and feel happy, it's surely enough.” I then asked him if he loved her only when he was with her?

“No,” he said, “Even when I'm not with her.”

“Then you can see that your love is not merely physical, but is of the mind or heart, and there's no reason for it to cease if she doesn't love you in return, is there? Loving isn't a thing of the market-place, an exchange of goods.” I told him the story of Dante ~ an Italian poet who lived about 700 years ago ~ and his love for Beatrice ~ how, whenever he thought of her, he was so happy that he couldn't think ill of anyone, and he never even met her, and saw her only twice during his life!

When my British passport was returned, I found that the *babus* at the Indian Embassy had given me only a single-entry visa valid for 3 months from the date of issue ~ probably because I had a visa for Pakistan in it ~ so it meant I'd have only two months left by the time I got to India; they also charged me almost US\$70, whereas in Kathmandu, a multiple-entry visa valid for 6 months costs only US\$32. I would try to get another Indian visa there.

The program they'd set up was quite grueling, and my tongue was tired after giving talks almost every night and sometimes thrice a day. Also, speaking to audiences as large as several hundreds, wet with sweat, was a bit hard to take; at some places, there wasn't even a fan for me. I decided to return to Malaysia sooner than planned; had they tried to dissuade me, I might have stayed, but they didn't, and so I left the land where God is used as a rubber-stamp. You can be as corrupt and dishonest as you like, as long as you believe in God, as required by the Constitution of the land. Imagine that: Indonesians must believe in God by law. How can you legislate about things like that? It will only make people hypocritical and cunning. No wonder Indonesia is one of the most corrupt countries in the world!





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## RIDING AND TREKKING

**I**t was good to be back in Malacca, even if it was only for a week. Knowing that I wanted to get a mountain-bike to take to Nepal with me, Leong, DV's younger brother, offered me one he'd had in storage for some years and hadn't used; it was a good France-made bike, and a nice gift.

Flying into Kathmandu via Bangkok on a round-trip ticket valid for 6 months, I found that the chain on my bike had been broken in transit. I filled in a complaint-form to take to the office of the airline, and got a taxi-van to take me in. I checked into a hotel, then went to get my bike repaired, getting a receipt to take to the Thai-Inter office, where I was paid for the damages ~ about \$10.

The air of Kathmandu is so polluted that I soon became sick and had to resort to antibiotics (it happens every time). It was quite cold, with daytime temperatures no higher than 15 degrees, and night-time very much lower. Fortunately, there was constant hot-water in the hotel. I bought some cooking-equipment: stainless-steel water-jug, heating-element, bowls and cup, and cooked one of my daily meals of fresh and cheap (for me they were cheap, though not for the locals) vegetables; I enjoyed this. I also made coffee and tea whenever I felt like it, using milk-powder.

One of the reasons for coming to Nepal this time was to look for herbal medicine for diabetes. I went first to a Tibetan doctor whose clinic I came across, and was given some pills, which I took as prescribed. I also found an ayurvedic medicine-shop where I was assured that the tablets I bought were efficacious, but neither these nor the Tibetan pills had any noticeable effect. I've tried so many things over the years.

I extended the distance I rode on my bike until I was going for long rides, several times riding up to Nagdhunga, and down the

other side to Naubise or further. More than once, I took a bus to Daman and rode back to Naubise; once, I rode from Daman to *Hetauda* in the *Terai*, some of the way on road that was being re-surfaced; I had often to stop to tighten nuts that had shaken loose. I greatly enjoyed these rides, especially as I'd never been to Daman since my first trip to Nepal in 1970. There is a wonderful view of the Himalayas from there if the sky is clear, stretching in a glittering semi-circle on the horizon.

Internet usage was quite cheap in Kathmandu, but varied from place to place; I frequented a cyber-café charging Rs20 per hour (about 30 cents US). Not surprisingly, there were frequent cuts and power-outages.

One of the hotel-boys was suffering so badly from toothache that I took him to a dental-clinic and paid for his treatment there, but it didn't really solve the problem.

After two weeks in Kathmandu, during which I got a new, double-entry visa for India (the hotel handled that for me; I paid them \$65), and one for Pakistan, I left for Pokhara, and spent a week there, making a half-hearted attempt at writing my memoirs, but it didn't come to much. Compared to Kathmandu, it was quiet and peaceful there, with a greatly-increased number of hotels by the Lakeside since my last visit 5 years before. Cyber-cafes charged more than in Kathmandu, and at Lakeside, where most of the tourists stayed, it was Rs100 per hour!

From Pokhara, I went to Tansen, and stayed 24 hours there, hiking up to the hill behind to catch the view. I then descended to Bhutwal and Bhairawa, where I loaded my bike with my stuff and rode to the border several kms away. I had too much baggage for cycling, and it was hard to ride, especially because there was quite a bit of heavy traffic. I got there, however, and crossed the border. There, I was assailed by touts, and before I knew it, my bike had been loaded on a bus to Gorakhpur that was about to leave, and I climbed inside, only to find it grossly over-crowded. They gave me a seat, as they'd charged me double because of the bike (the bike should have been charged at half-fare. Usually, in Nepal, I was not charged at all for the bike), and then began a horrible journey, with frequent stops to pick up more unfortu-

nates. Many people were standing, hunched over because of the low roof, and no-one offered to give up seats for anyone. Finally, tired of sitting jammed into a narrow seat, I got up and gave my seat to an old woman, intending to stand the rest of the way. This embarrassed the conductor, and he made a younger man give up his better seat for me.

Arriving in Gorakhpur after what seemed an age, but which was no more than 3 hours, I got off near the railway-station, opposite which was the hotel recommended by the *Lonely Planet* guide-book; it was called *The Ellora*. I got a room there, then went over to the station, with the aim of inquiring about trains to Lucknow, but was repelled by the swarms of people there, and quickly came out, abandoning my idea of going by train. I rode off to the bus-station where inquiries were easier, and got the necessary information. I then went to a cyber-café for a couple of hours; At Rs15 per hour, their rates were quite reasonable, but the connection was very slow. On the way back to Ellora, I bought some vegetables, and was soon cooking my dinner, intending to get a bus to Lucknow the next morning.

That night, however, all hell seemed to break loose in the hotel, with people ~ *demons* ~ running through the corridors yelling, screaming, and banging on doors; I never understood what it was all about. Apart from this, there was a cacophony of truck and bus horns blown at full-blast, and the ubiquitous loud-speakers of the subcontinent, blaring out harsh music. It was impossible to sleep, and because of it, I made up my mind to abort my intended trip in India and Pakistan, and return to Nepal forthwith; I had no desire to remain in this country of demons.

Unwilling to get on a bus to the border like the one I'd come in on the day before, I haggled for a taxi, and settled for Rs800, which was rather a lot, but worth it. Less than 24 hours after entering the country, I was leaving it. The Indian Immigration-officer expressed surprise that I should stay so short a time, and asked why; I told him it was long enough in hell.

Getting a new visa for Nepal was easy, and cost \$30 for a month. I then caught an already-packed Pokhara-bound bus, and had to squeeze into the strange little driver's cab, with so many others.

Eventually, I got a window-seat there, but it was over the wheel-arch, so my knees were stuck up until we got to Dumre 7 hours later, and I was able to move into the front seat. I was charged ~ Indian-style ~ Rs120 for me, and 80 for the bike. I didn't mind all this; it was such a relief to be away from India! I actually felt that I'd got that monkey off my back at last, after it being there for so many years. As it turned out, however, it was only temporary.

Among the people in the cab was a young boy named *Dipak* who spoke some English (and from whom I learned the Nepali word for vomit: '*ulti*'). So many people throw up on buses there that I needed to know this word). When we reached Dumre, he came to sit beside me in the front seat, and I gave him an old watch. He was pleased with this, of course, but soon afterwards, he moved, and I didn't see him again ~ he didn't say anything. I think his older brother and some others didn't like me giving him a gift; perhaps Nepalese are afraid of gifts from strangers.

It was almost 6 o'clock when we came into Pokhara, and I wasn't surprised when a hotel-tout got on and asked where I intended to stay. I asked what he had to offer and he showed me pictures of nice rooms in a Lakeside hotel called 'Miracle,' with constant hot-water, for Rs200. I told him I was thinking of paying only Rs150 for a room, and he agreed to this. So, getting off the bus at the bus-station, he helped me with my stuff and I loaded my bike ready to follow him on his motorbike; he took one of my bags and away we went. It was a nice hotel, so I told him ~ *Padam* was his name ~ that I would pay Rs200 after all.

Needing to send some post-cards, I went to the GPO in the town, and bought the necessary stamps, but there was no water-dish to moisten them with, as there usually is, so, being averse to licking them, I asked for some water. A minute later, someone appeared with a jug and poured a small puddle on the counter for me! I laughed and said: "I wanted water and water I got!"

I decided to go trekking, and signed up for the *Muktinath* trek, with a young guy named Santosh as my porter-guide. Negotiating with Padam on behalf of the hotel, I paid \$350 for 10 days; it included plane-fares to *Jomsom* for both of us, all my accommodation and 3 meals per day for me. My trekking-permit was extra.

Searching for a bamboo staff, I got a farmer to cut me one from his clump. While doing so, he told me he was a Christian, but I made no comment; missionaries were hard at work in this area. I paid him Rs30. This staff would serve me well on my coming trek.

With my bike and excess baggage stored at the hotel, early on the appointed day ~ February 11<sup>th</sup> ~ we got a taxi to the airport, and after paying the airport-tax, boarded the light plane and were soon high above the mountains, with spectacular views. It was a flight of only 1/2-an-hour or so, then we descended steeply to land at *Jomsom* and the ground rushed up to meet us. There was a noticeable difference in temperature. We breakfasted in a hotel before setting out for *Kagbeni*, but it took ages for them to prepare it. I met two Dutch girls, Melanie and Lisa, who had come in on the same plane; they had a porter-guide named *Hera*, and were going up to Muktinath, too. Apart from a tractor or two, there were no vehicles in Jomsom; the absence of noise was very nice.

It was a good walk to Kagbeni; Santosh said it would take about four hours, but we did it in three with two rest-stops. The track was rough, with stones that slipped and slid; constant attention was needed. I matched Santosh's normal pace; my feet were alright that far. We checked into a lodge where I got a room with attached bathroom/toilet. The Dutchies and three others caught up with us and also stayed there. The food was reasonable. Having already paid, I didn't pay much attention to the menu-prices. It was very cold at night. Lucky that I'd asked for a thermos of hot water to take up to my room, as there was only very cold water in the bathroom. I shaved and washed with it in the morning, and had enough for coffee, too. I also made a bottle of coffee using cold water, to drink along the way; I enjoyed this.

After a warming breakfast of buckwheat-bread and tea, the hotel-people presented us with *kataks* (Tibetan silk scarfs, offered as a mark of respect), which was good PR. We started off at 7:45, climbing all the way, puffing and panting and stopping now and then to rest; I was unused to the thinner air there. We were on the southern edge of the barren Tibetan plateau, where the hills and valleys bear the heavy scars of erosion. There were great views as we climbed. The Dutchies and their guide caught up

with us halfway at a roadside lodge named *Romeo and Juliet*. There were patches of snow all around. We stopped in *Jarkot* for lunch of spaghetti, then pressed on to Muktinath, 5 hours' walk from Kagbeni, excluding stops. There were many birds ~ *choughs* ~ in the sky, with an occasional eagle; and ponies, mules and hybrid yaks on the trail; also, lots of trekkers coming and going, some friendly, some not. I was to notice this on subsequent treks, and couldn't understand why many people didn't even bother to return greetings.

At Muktinath, we checked into *Hotel Mona Lisa*, where there were other trekkers. After some rest, I went on up to the temple ~ Muktinath's main claim-to-fame ~ but wasn't impressed; the 'eternal flame' ~ from a natural-gas vent ~ was little bigger than a lighter's flame. There was no hot-water in the hotel, of course, but luckily, I got a thermos of hot-water for use in the morning as I'd done in Kagbeni. Rather than sit long in the dining-room, where there was too much smoke ~ some people were even smoking dope ~ I retired early for some meditation, and slept around 8:30. I was warm enough in bed, but the bedding stank of stale vomit or something.

It was freezing, but I still got up early, and meditated a while before brushing my teeth and shaving; lucky I had my flask of hot-water, as the pipes were frozen solid. I went down to sit over a brazier in the kitchen to thaw out before being the first to get breakfast of buckwheat-bread and *tsampa* porridge. The Dutch girls ~ with whom I'd arranged to descend to Jomsom ~ came down and ate; we left at 8:30, but going down was harder than going up, and my toes got the brunt of it. It was very windy as we got halfway to Jomsom; the wind just whistles up the valley of the Kali Gandaki from noon until sunset.

We stopped in Jomsom at the hotel where we'd had breakfast; in terms of the trails, this hotel was luxurious. I got a room with attached bathroom and toilet, and waited for the water to become warm enough before taking a shower, but slipped and fell heavily on the smooth-tiled floor just after I'd dried myself; fortunately, no bones were broken. One of my toe-nails was already turning black from the walk down, and would eventually come off. I quit

wearing the shoes I'd had and resorted to sandals. Lisa had blisters on her feet but pressed on manfully; Melanie was unwell with something she'd had for a while; she was a chain-smoker, which might have accounted for it.

Next morning, I ate something in my room and then went down. While waiting for the others, I went outside and met an elderly Belgian couple I'd met the day before; they were traveling with a dozen porters, and had been to Upper Mustang, which they said was fantastic! They said it had been 2° in their tent last night.

These people were considerate of their porters, but others were not, making them carry huge loads. It is shameful to see them used as beasts of burden, when the campers ~ who must spend a great deal of money ~ could afford to employ more porters to share the loads; the campers would never be able to carry such loads themselves, so why do they expect others to carry them, regardless of the fact that they pay them? It's undignified!

Eventually, the Dutchies being so long-winded, Santosh and I set off without them. What little snow there had been in the night had melted and hadn't frozen, fortunately.

It was just over an hour to reach Marpha by fast walking; we had breakfast there. Afterwards,

I sat on the topmost  
Of a flight of steps  
Up to the monastery of Marpha,  
From where there was a fine view.  
Below me, the flat clay roofs of houses  
Surrounded by ramparts of logs split,  
And beyond them  
The fields delineated by dry-stone walls  
And paths that criss-cross them.  
There were orchards, too, of various kinds –  
Apple, apricot, peach,  
Though their branches were bare.  
Then, behind, rising in tiers, the hills  
And mountains rose, culminating  
In peaks capped with snow which never melts.  
I heard, instead of engines and

Man's machines, the sound of bells hung  
 Around necks of ponies, mules and cows  
 As they trudged along beneath huge burdens –  
 A pleasing sound, though indicative of pain.  
 Then, from behind and within, came the  
 Sound of boy-monks playing, off for a while  
 From their studies; life was not hard for them.  
 The wind blew slightly, not strong, as yet,  
 But later would increase in force and cold;  
 I did not sit there long.

**L**isa, Melanie and Hera came along, so I explained a little about the inside of the monastery to them. I wished we had stayed in Marpha the previous night instead of Jomsom, as it was so much nicer. My legs and feet were alright while I was walking, but became stiff and ached when I stopped for a while.

**B**y the time we reached Tukucho, another 1½ hours on, the wind had begun to blow, so we stopped at the first place in the village ~ a lodge run by a Dutchman and his Nepalese wife ~ and got a room there. The food was very nice; I had tea, pumpkin-soup and croquet-potatoes. Perhaps I should mention here that guides and porters were given free accommodation for bringing in customers, and if they didn't eat free too, were charged very little for food.

**W**hile walking, there was little talk with Santosh, and I was alone with my thoughts, usually reciting something syllable-by-syllable as I paced along, so that it became a form of meditation. Most of the time I had to watch my steps, eyes down, as the way was rough and strewn with stones that slipped and twisted underfoot; you could not ~ dared not ~ look around too much, unless you stopped to gaze for a while.

**I** noticed ~ in others, as well as in myself ~ the strong urge to talk at the end of the day, when we would gather to eat and sit around a fire or stove; but, repelled by the chatter of so many voices, I preferred to sit aside, and having eaten, retired to my room. This might have been antisocial, but many trekkers were smokers, and I didn't want to put up with it. I restrained myself from then on, speaking when I had to, although I did meet a couple from near



Crewe in Tukucho ~ Alan and Linda ~ and had a nice talk with them; they were going up the trail while we were going down.

I woke in the midnight  
 And immediately heard the sound –  
*Incessant* – of the river  
 Not far below my windows –  
 The Kali-Gandaki that we've  
 Been following since coming down  
 From Muktinath and will continue  
 To do so for several more days.  
 It was a soothing sound – *sshhhhh* ----  
 But there was another sound – a *surprising* sound –  
 That seemed out of place there at that time:  
 A man-made sound. I raised my head  
 From the pillow to make sure it wasn't in my head,  
 Mind-made. It wasn't; 'twas still there,  
 And seemed to be coming from below me.  
 I rose, swathed myself in blankets,  
 And sat upright,  
 Having slept enough for now; it was an ideal time  
 To observe my breath and let the mind be calm.  
 And then I got it – the sound's cause –  
 It was from a refrigerator –  
 So then, I let it go, and slept once more,

then rose again at 5:30, by which time it was very cold and the electricity had gone off; luckily, I had prepared my bottle of coffee earlier. At 7 o'clock, I was the first up, followed by the landlord. I went outside to take some photos of the river ~ it was freezing! Came back and ordered tea and a bowl of tsampa-porridge, but Santosh was slow about his brekky, so I set off before him, at 7:45, leaving him to catch up with me, which he did an hour later, as I had taken a long-cut up and down a track above the river-bed, while he followed the low way. It was a tough walk, and we rested briefly after 1½ hours, then continued to Kalopani, where,

I heard the sound of the wind  
 Entangled in the branches of

The pine trees on the slopes behind me,  
 Struggling to free itself, souging as it did.  
 Wisps of it, escaped, brushed past me,  
 Gently touching my face with cool fingers;  
 It had come from Dhaulagiri's icy peaks.  
 To one side, a chicken, destined for the pot,  
     Went about its daily round,  
     Blissfully unaware of what lay in wait;  
     Are we also not like this somewhat?  
 From somewhere came the muted sound of a radio,  
 And human voices, one of the most disturbing  
     Sounds of all, because so meaningful.  
 Approaching, up the lane, and passing by,  
 I heard the bells hung around mules' necks –  
 Pleasant sound to me, but a sound of bondage;  
     What karma to be born a mule?  
 Flies buzzed past me as I sat still upon a step  
     Of a mountain-lodge at Kalopani  
     Where we'd stopped for lunch;  
 It was a hard walk to get there that morning,  
 And we had a similar stretch ahead, too,  
     With my energy almost gone, my legs  
     Aching and my ankle playing up.

**N**ot long after, the girls arrived ~ they'd made good time, as they had left after us, and we'd walked fast. They sat down to order food, and we went on, Santosh saying it would take 2½ hours to reach Ghase, the next stop, but we made it in less, stopping for a few minutes to rest beside a waterfall. We checked into the first place we came to after I'd ascertained that the girls would be staying further on; I'd had enough of their smoke! Here they were, breathing some of the cleanest air on the planet, but still polluting themselves and others around them.

It was cold there, too, and my room was draughty, but it sufficed. My legs and feet ached a lot, but I managed alright. Neither the solar-panels nor the geyser were working, but I got a bucket of hot-water and washed the smelliest parts of me; I'd do until I got something better. I fed the last of my Pokhara bread to some

chickens there ~ perhaps hastening their demise thereby; maybe they knew this, as they were not very enthusiastic about it!

Some Americans I'd met at Muktinath came, but I deliberately segregated myself from them in the dining-room because most of them smoked. I had potato-soup, chapatties and tea, then retired to my room, to sleep early. Again, the bedclothes were smelly.

The next day, our sixth out, was to be the best yet. We set off at 7:20, and I soon fell into a fast pace, feeling like a mountain-goat, fairly dancing along, even though the way was rough. It must have been the tsampa-porridge I had for breakfast. Santosh was almost worn out! By 9:00, we'd passed the place where he expected to have lunch, and he kept asking if I wanted to rest, but I said 'No' and that we'd have lunch when we got to *Tatopani*. We crossed 3 or 4 suspension-bridges. At one point, I took a wrong turn and found myself on a path that had been carried away by a landslide, and had to back-track and find another way down. We stopped for 20 minutes about half-way and reached Tatopani at 11:00 ~ just 3½ hours, without our break; normally, it takes 5 hours. Santosh said it was like running in a marathon!

Tatopani is a place that everyone looks forward to, as it has hot springs; indeed, the name means 'Hot Water'. There were citrus orchards there, so there was an abundance of oranges, lemons and mandarins. We checked into a hotel, and I got a room with a bathroom and toilet ~ one of the few there, and quite high-priced. I sat in meditation for 45 minutes before having a veggie-burger for lunch; all sorts of food were available there, including apple-pie and cakes of various kinds; the owner had made his fortune from all the trekkers passing through, but good on him; he provided a useful service. I washed some clothes and hung them outside; it was quite warm, so they dried pretty soon. My hunger appeased, I went down to the hot springs by the river and showered in cold water before entering the hot pool ~ gee, it was hot, but once I got used to it, it was so relaxing and soothing; I spent about an hour there, soaking away the dirt and the soreness of my limbs; it was surely good for my legs and feet. The black toenail was almost off, but there were no blisters on my feet, which

was really quite surprising, as I'd always been prone to getting them. I felt quite high from it, and slept well that night.

We stayed in Tatopani an extra day to rest up, and I went down to the springs for another hour there. While there, the sky turned gray and overcast, and I was apprehensive. It had become rather cold again. In the night

There was a new sound ~  
 One that wasn't there before.  
 I could still hear the river, dimly,  
     As it rushed ever on,  
 And if I strained my ears;  
 It was almost drowned out  
 By the sound of rain on the  
     Roof over my head,  
 And it was ominous for the trek ahead  
     As the dust would turn to mud,  
 Making for poor grip on the track.  
 Also, if I did not change my mind  
 And take the high road to Ghorapani,  
 What here is rain might there be snow.  
 I awaited the dawn before deciding,  
 But the steady downpour seemed to favor  
     The lower road to Beni.  
 I slept again, as there was nothing I could do  
 About the weather; it was out of my hands.

The rain had ceased before I rose, although the sky still looked full. I breakfasted on porridge and Tibetan bread. We set off at 7:15, but I wasn't optimistic about the journey, so not far down the track, when we crossed the river and got to the junction, I asked Santosh if we could expect snow at Ghorapani, and he said 'Yes'. So, there and then I decided to take the fork to *Beni* instead and reach Pokhara that day. He had told me earlier that, even at our speed two days before, we could not get to Beni in less than 5 hours. I determined to prove him wrong, and set and maintained a fast pace ~ even though there were muddy and dangerous patches from the rain ~ for 2½ hours, when we were halted for some time while blasting was carried out on the road being built

from Beni to Tatopani. There were some tremendous explosions before we were allowed to proceed, and then only by a precipitous path that climbed high above the blasting area before coming down on the other side; this was perhaps the hardest part of the journey, although by the time we reached Beni two hours later, I was very tired; it took 4½ hours, not counting the time we had to wait, but if we hadn't been stopped, I would have walked straight through. Santosh, I could see, was more tired than I, and wished to stop to rest and eat earlier, but I insisted on walking on to Beni, even though we could have taken a taxi from a place ½ an hour earlier, where he said the food was better.

In Beni, we crossed our final suspension-bridge to get to the bus-station on the other side of the Kali-Gandaki, and found we had time to spare before the next bus left for Pokhara, so Santosh bought the tickets and we ate samosas and curry while waiting. The bus left on time and ran along a very rough track along the river, until it joined a better road from *Baglung* for the rest of the way. Even so, it took almost 5 hours, but I quite enjoyed it as the road rose and fell steeply through magnificent scenery. I didn't feel tired, but Santosh slept beside me for a while.

We got to Pokhara and went to the *Miracle*, where I got my baggage and put new batteries into my blood-test-kit (the old ones had died at Muktinath, or wouldn't work at such an altitude); I was pleased at the result of my first test since Kagbeni ~ 5.7! But if that day's walk couldn't bring it down, I don't know what would! I was surprised ~ *amazed* ~ at my stamina! I learned something of what I was capable of, and although my feet were sore – especially the heels ~ I still didn't have blisters!

After showering, I felt refreshed. Two days later, I transferred to a different hotel ~ *The Paramount* ~ where I got a room for Rs150 per day, with a hasp on the door so I could use my own lock, as I prefer. Later, I walked up to the Shanti Stupa overlooking the lake ~ quite a climb! At the bottom of the hill, a boy attached himself to me all the way to the top, and then asked for money to help with his studies; I gave him Rs50, feeling I'd been conned..

On the way up, we met a man with his young son searching for their buffaloes, The boy greeted me ~ *Namaste* ~ and his expres-

sion was lovely to behold when I took from my pocket a candy left over from the flight to Jomsom and gave it to him; there came a quiet 'Wah!' from his lips and his eyes shone!

From the stupa, I watched the paragliding from *Sarangkot* Hill. Lisa had told me she'd done it, and said it was fantastic. I felt inspired to do it myself, and later checked out the prices.

I went for some good rides, one of the best being to put my bike on a bus as far as a place called *Khare*, just over an hour out of Pokhara on the way to Baglung, and ride back from there. Most of it was downhill, and it took about an hour to get back to town, not stopping at the Tibetan Refugee Settlement as I had earlier intended to, as I'd been turned off by two pushy Tibetan women I'd met the day before at Lakeside, selling handicrafts; following up on their polite and friendly approach, they had really pressed me to buy something, and when I refused, they were visibly not happy; I would be cautious with such in future. Actually, they were forbidden to do this, as many tourists had complained about them, but they did it anyway, and their prices were very high.

Lisa and Melanie had returned, and told of lots of snow at Ghora-pani; I was glad I hadn't gone. They also said that their porter had claimed his wallet and address-book had been stolen in Tatopani.

On the way back, I stopped to buy something for my ankle, which had been really sore again. The shop-owner tried to sell me some *Tiger Oil* marked at Rs180, but I haggled with her for Rs150, and gave her a Rs500 bill. While waiting for her girl to return with the change, I saw a picture of Sai Baba over her desk and asked if she was a follower of him. "Yes," she said, "I like him very much!" I asked if she'd been to visit him in India; she hadn't. She tried to persuade me to pay Rs160 for the oil, but I refused, and then I noticed it was from India, and picked at the price-tag on the box, uncovering the Indian price of only Rs35, making it about Rs50 in Nepalese currency (the Nepalese rupee is pegged to the Indian rupee, 1.6 to 1). I refused to buy it and asked for my money back, saying some profit is justified, but not such a mark-up, which was pure greed. She cursed me as I went out! It was clearly enough for her to like and believe Sai Baba, not follow his teachings. But this is normal, is it not?

**B**ack at the hotel, I asked the manager, *Khem*, to book me for a paragliding flight two days later, with the proviso that if the weather was unsuitable, I would get a refund. He would get a small commission for the booking.

**M**y ankle was still aching, so I abandoned my idea of walking up to Sarangkot. When I went out for breakfast, I met Hera, on his way to see me. He told me he'd had Rs1600 and papers stolen from his room in Tatopani; I felt sorry for him and gave him Rs500; Lisa and Melanie had probably given him something, too, apart from paying him the agreed-upon daily rate. I told him I was thinking of going to Ghorapani from the other direction, in order to complete that trek, but that I didn't want to get another trekking-permit; I said I might engage him to accompany me. He said we could by-pass the only check-point on that route, so I wouldn't need another permit.

**T**he day dawned cloudy, not good for viewing the mountains while flying. I went to the paragliding office to see if I could postpone my flight until the next day, but on second thoughts decided to go, as there was no guarantee the sky would be any clearer. Because there was still plenty of time before the flight, I went down to the boat-pier and ate samosas and curry. When the vendor tried to charge me Rs25 instead of Rs15, I protested and told him that he shouldn't try to cheat people, as by so doing, he would become poor in future. I gave him Rs15, and he didn't protest or argue, just kept quiet; I'd made him think.

**S**everal others were flying, including a woman from Liverpool, and two elderly ladies. We were driven up a very winding and rough road to Sarangkot from where the flights were launched. The 'chutes were laid out on a steep incline ready for take-off; we were to fly tandem, and I was first in line, harnessed up in a seat-pack to an Indian pilot named *Ajay*. We readied ourselves, took several steps forward, and were airborne, soon rising high above the launch-pad, riding the thermals. It was fun, but I soon got used to it, maybe because of the way we live ~ I'd done it all before, vicariously, through TV and movies. My flight lasted over an hour. At one point we descended and had a hard time climbing again, but finally succeeded, though not as high as we'd gone at

first ~ almost 6,000 feet asl. With dark clouds approaching from the west, Ajay decided to land rather than risk being 'sucked in' by the clouds. Coming down, he did some tight spirals, leaving me feeling nauseous; I landed sitting on the ground. It was quite an experience, and worth the cost to feel like a dandelion-seed borne on the wind.

Hera came to see me again, just when I was thinking of visiting him; he didn't want to lose a prospective client. I said I was undecided, as the weather was still unsettled; I'd make up my mind the next day. I was almost ready, but my ankle was still painful.

The next day, the sky was quite clear, so I decided to go. Leaving my bags and bike at the hotel, I walked round to Hera's; he was ready and waiting for me, and we got a taxi to the northern bus-station, and a bus from there to Khare. After drinking tea, we set off at 9:00; it was a steep climb of over an hour to *Pothana*, where we had an early lunch of dal-bhat; I'd agreed to pay him Rs600 per day, which was really too much. This was what Lisa and Melanie had paid, and I hadn't bothered to check, thinking it was standard.

After a bit of a rest, we set off again, up and down, and along the trail we met *Rajan*, a guide we'd met in Tukuche. He greeted me by name and told me that Alan and Linda – who he was guiding – were just up ahead, resting. As we were talking, they came down and it was good to see them again, especially unexpectedly. I asked if they would visit Glen for me when they got home, and they said they would. (They never did).

It was a hard slog ~ much of the way crudely stone-stepped ~ and took about 4 hours (not counting our breaks) to reach *Tolka*, where Hera suggested we stop for the night instead of pressing on to Landruk. Well, I was ready for this, particularly as the sky had darkened, portending rain, and the mountains weren't visible; indeed, soon after we got there, it did rain. The inn was basic, and the wind whistled through gaps in the walls and shutters of the rooms, but it sufficed, and there was electricity, too. Food-prices were high, unreasonably, but what to do? I chose cheaper dishes, like fried rice.



**M**y ankle had held out quite well; while walking, it was generally alright, but started to ache a bit when I stopped, and the pain took a while to abate when I started again, so I limped a little.

There wasn't much rain in the night, but the sky was still overcast at dawn, with Annapurna briefly visible. I breakfasted on Tibetan bread with some kind of soup. Hera was late in getting up, so we didn't start as early as I wanted. It was hard-going, mostly downhill, to *New Bridge*, where we stopped for tea, then an uphill crawl, with many rest-breaks, to Gandruk, taking us three hours altogether from Tolka. We checked into *Mountain View Hotel*, where I got a room with attached bathroom, but there was no hot-water, because of insufficient sunshine.

**A**fter a short rest, I had dal-bhat, then slept awhile before going for a brief walk; while visiting the local monastery, it began to rain, and the sky turned very dark, so we returned to the hotel. It then started to thunder and lighten, and heavy hail fell; this did not bode well for our onward trek; there would surely be snow further up. I would decide the next day whether to go on or turn back.

**A** friendly English couple ~ Ian and Tilly ~ checked into the room next to mine, and we had a nice talk over dinner. They'd been married in a monastery in Pokhara a week earlier, and were on their honeymoon. I gave them a book I had with me by the Dalai Lama. They'd just come from Ghorapani and said there was a lot of snow there; they'd been caught in the rain and hail ~ and gee, did it thunder in the mountains afterwards! ~ on their way into Gandruk. This caused me to decide not to go to Ghorapani again, and turn back to Pokhara.

The sky had cleared by morning, permitting some good views of the mountains, especially of *Macchapuchre* (otherwise known as 'Fishtail'). I stuck to my decision to turn back, however, as the trails further up would still have been under snow; so, after breakfast of Tibetan bread and tea, and another chat with Ian and Tilly (who spoke Nepalese quite well, working as they did with Gurkha soldiers in England), we set off down the steep stone steps until Hera wanted to stop and rest. We then had an easy stretch along the flat for sometime before crossing the river and climbing stead-

ily to *Chandrakot* for about two hours, with several rest-stops. It was good weather for trekking.

**C**handrakot was once a major stop on the trekking-routes, but when the road was extended to Baglung, it lost its importance, and there was only one functioning inn there now. We decided to spend the night there, and ordered dal-bhat, but it was very slow in coming. By this time, a wind had blown up and clouds obscured the mountains, and it became quite cold. While waiting for food, I watched some young boys just out of school; one of them bought cakes for 3 of them, but excluded the fourth, so I bought him one; no-one likes to be left out.

**A**fter lunch and a nap, I decided I didn't want to stay there as the room-charge was Rs150 and the toilet-bathroom was outside the inn itself. I decided to go on to Pokhara. We packed our stuff and told the innkeeper, who seemed a bit sad, and only charged me for the food and cakes, but I gave him something extra for having a nap in the room, and we set off for *Lumle*, about 35 minutes away. When we were almost there we saw a bus coming up the road and the conductor-boy saw us; we signaled to him, and the bus waited for us down on the road; if only the internet connections of Nepal were like that!

**T**here were plenty of empty seats, and we had a quick ride to Pokhara, and got dropped off at the top of Hera's road, so walked back instead of taking a taxi. I left Hera, paying him and giving him a bonus, as is customary, and continued on to Paramount where I took a nice shower before soaking my tired feet. It had been only a short trek, but I'd done alright.

**B**efore my visa ran out I went to the Immigration office to extend it, but this was easily done: I filled in the application-form, paid Rs2,335, and collected my endorsed passport in the afternoon. That day was the Hindu festival of *Shivaratri* ~ but all I saw of it ~ or *in* it ~ was a lot of hocus-pocus; the Hindu gods have the same reality ~ or *unreality* ~ as the gods of other religions. Raj ~ a boy in the hotel ~ told me that people are expected to smoke dope that day in honor of Shiva, and of course, he complied. What bull!

I'd decided to accompany Hera to *Ghorika*, as he was going to his home-village in that region for 10 days; I would come back alone.

I bought bus-tickets to Ghorka for the following day, and arranged to leave my stuff in my room while I went, with my own lock on the door. I was the only guest in the hotel at that time; the tourist-trade was down as a result of the Maoist-insurgency, and most hotels had very few clients.

**O**ur bus left unusually promptly at 7:00, and we had quite a good ride, arriving in Ghorka about 11:00. After checking into a hotel, we ate samosas, puris and curry, then climbed to the temple on the hill ~ apart from the views on a clear day (and that day it wasn't clear), it is Ghorka's only claim to fame, and a disappointing one at that. Taking photos was not allowed inside. A couple of dumb sadhus sat smoking dope there.

**M**y feet ~ especially the heels ~ and ankle were sore when we got back to the hotel, where I had a nap, in spite of monotonous singing from upstairs that went on non-stop for hours; it was some kind of concert. I went out to get away from it, and ended up eating the same food as lunch. By then, I'd already seen Hera with the address-book he claimed had been stolen in Tatopani; it was just a con to play on the sympathies of Lisa and Melanie ~ *and me* ~ and get more money from them!

**T**he next morning, when we were ready to go our different ways, he tried to extort another Rs200 - 300 from me, but I hadn't employed him to accompany me this time, and gave him just Rs60. I got a bus as far as Dumre, and went directly to the sundry-shop of someone I knew to ask about Yam Bahadur, and was surprised to find his father there. He was pleased to see me again and told me that his son was in Kathmandu, but was due back the next day; also, that he was married and had a daughter, and that they had rebuilt their home. The shop-keeper was able to get Y.B. on the phone for me, and he told me that he would visit me in Pokhara when he returned.

**B**ack in Pokhara, I changed another \$100. The guy scrutinized it carefully, as it was a few years old; I told him it was alright, as I'd printed it only the day before, but I don't think he understood my joke. I was getting tired of Pokhara, as the internet-connections were so slow and unreliable. I had Khem call through to the shop-keeper in Dumre and leave directions for Yam Bahadur to get to

Paramount, but he didn't get the message, as he came directly from Kathmandu to Pokhara two days later. By that time, I had bought a bus-ticket for Kathmandu for the next day, but when he arrived I postponed it until the day after. Then, with a whole day in between, I took him hiking up to Sarangkot to see the sunrise on the mountains, but even though we started early, it was such a climb that the sun had risen long before we got there. I decided to walk to Naudanda, 11 kms away, rather than returning the same way. It was an easy walk, compared with the climb, and we got a bus back to Pokhara.

There, I sent him to look for shoes while I did my email. He came back telling me he'd seen some he liked, but when I went with him to see them, he couldn't remember where. I was hungry by this time and beginning to shake, and when that happens I can't think straight and must eat something quick. His shoes were secondary, particularly as he couldn't make up his mind. Later, we again looked for shoes for him, but with no more success, so I just gave him some money to do with as he wanted; he'd told me that he earned only Rs1500 per month at his part-time job.

I paid my hotel-bill and was given a Rs150 voucher for my first night's stay in *Elite Hotel* in Kathmandu. We ate dinner at a small restaurant next to the hotel, as Raj – who was supposed to be the cook – couldn't get himself together and was on the phone talking with some woman he was forming a liaison with. Yam Bahadur had an amazing capacity for rice! I went to bed early, having developed another chest-infection.

The next morning, Y.B. accompanied me to the bus-station with my loaded bike, then went back to Paramount. The bus left promptly at 7 o'clock, and the trip was quite good; we reached Kathmandu around 2:00, and someone from the Elite was waiting for me, but he was unprepared for my bike, so had to call someone else to come on a bike and lead the way. Getting along on *Kantipath* was a bit of a nightmare, as the traffic was thick and I was unable to signal. I just had to trust that vehicles behind me would let me in, and luckily, they did. Imagine this happening in the West! I wouldn't have survived very long!

At the hotel I got a room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, though at first, they wanted to put me on the 5<sup>th</sup>. I don't like climbing stairs. I soon went out to do various things. Got some more antibiotics for my chest-infection, and some silicone earplugs, but they were useless. The barking dogs were ear-plug resistant.

One night in the Elite was quite enough, as it was very noisy; you could hear everything in the next rooms; the hinges on the room-doors squeaked and needed oiling; and some dummies on the ground-floor talked loudly until midnight. I went out first thing to find another hotel and ended up at Snow Lion Guest House in Dhobichaur, where I got a large room on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor with a good view of Swayambhu. At first they asked Rs200, but agreed to Rs150 when I said that was what I'd been paying. It was full of Nepalese and Indians, no tourists there. I made two trips back to Elite for my bags rather than bring them all at once; the people at the desk weren't very pleased that I was leaving so soon.

The water in Snow Lion was as it was in '98 – slightly rusty and smelly; very hard to find a place without problems.

I was considering doing the Everest Region trek, but needed to find out about weather-conditions there first. In the meantime, I went for long rides on my bike. I always stopped buses and put my bike on the top for the ride back to Nagdhunga, not being game enough to attempt that climb. On one such bus, a man sitting beside me started a conversation, in the middle of which, learning I was single, he insisted that an 'alone-life' is a hopeless one. I convinced him that I was not alone, ever ~ no-one is. I also showed him how dependent upon others we are by asking him, "Has anyone helped you today?"

"No," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Did you have breakfast today?"

"Yes, I did."

"If no-one helped you, how could you have breakfast?"

**O**n another bus, I got talking with some uni students, and asked them if they thought the gods were still useful. One of them said he supposed so, as they helped people become better. I disagreed, and pointed to the various pictures of gods above the driver's seat, saying that the drivers imperil the lives of everyone on board by picking up so many people that the buses are dangerously overloaded, and many of them come to grief that way, with great loss of life. Moreover, the people who must stand or sit on the roof don't pay half-fare or ride free, but are charged full.

**B**efore we got to Nagdhunga, a tout from the Elite Hotel got on and tried to enlist me, but I told him what I thought of the place ~ too noisy ~ and he gave up.

I made my first trip to *Trisuli*. I'd expected it to be uphill all the way there and envisaged a long downhill ride back to Kathmandu, but it wasn't like this. I took a bus and had gone quite a way past *Kakani* on the ridge of the valley and down the long, serpentine road before I realized it would be mainly like this all the way to Trisuli, so I asked off and began maybe my best ride yet, through magnificent countryside; it took me about 1½ hours to get there, and the bus I'd been on overtook me only just before the town, and that only just because of a short but steep stretch, part of which I had to walk up.

I'd lost a nut by the time I got there, so the bike was quite rattly, and I had to get a replacement. Then, with no reason to tarry, I got the next bus back, waiting only ½ an hour. A confrontation with the conductor ensued because an indicator-lamp got broken when I was hoisting my bike to the roof; he demanded R100 for it, but I refused to pay, saying it was an accident, and if my bike got damaged on the bus, *they* would not pay *me* anything. I had occasion to chastise this same conductor later on, when he spoke harshly to an old man sitting beside me on the bus.

**J**ust before Kakani, I noticed a figure standing beside the road, like a Buddhist monk; it was so life-like, as we flashed past, that I wasn't sure it was a statue or a real person, so before we came into Kakani, I asked off the bus, and rode back down to see; it took 10 minutes to reach it, and behold, it was a statue, but what it was doing there, I was unable to determine.

Riding back, it took 20 minutes to get to Kakani proper, and then, as I began the descent to Kathmandu, several nuts came loose again and began to rattle, so had to be tightened; later, my chain also came off, and I had to release the wheel to get it back on.

The onslaught on Iraq was about to begin, and I kept in touch ~ via newspapers and internet ~ with what was happening in the world, but, Nepal being quite remote, it all seemed so far away.



~ 14 ~

## EVEREST JUST OVER THERE

**M**aking up my mind to do the Everest Region trek, I bought a plane-ticket to Lukla, the starting-point for many trekkers, and changed sufficient money. I also obtained another bamboo staff.

It rained quite heavily in the night before I was to fly, with thunder and lightning, and when it stopped a little yappy-dog opposite the hotel started. I really didn't want to get up and go, and if I could have cancelled my ticket, I would have done so. But I rose when my alarm went off, and was soon out of the hotel, looking for a taxi. Of course, in my usual way, so afraid of being late, I was at the airport far too early, and while waiting to board the plane, I met a friendly German couple ~ Hans and Rosita ~ who I would meet numerous times along the way.

There was a delayed take-off because of fog ~ something common in Kathmandu ~ and we didn't leave until about 8:30, taking less than an hour to reach Lukla, where we came down very steeply and with a bump on the very short runway.

On the plane was a Sherpa woman who worked in a hotel at Namche, and I asked her if she could recommend a porter to me, so at Lukla, she introduced me to a young guy named Pasang Dawa. I negotiated with him for R500 per day ~ although he was

initially asking R1000 ~ for which he would carry one of my bags; the R500 was inclusive of his expenses, food and accommodation. He was ready to go, but stopped by his home on the way out of town to pick up some stuff and inform his mother that he had been lucky in finding a client that day. (At the airport perimeter, so many hopeful porters were waiting, but no comment was passed, no joke or laugh made as I wound my way through them; quite a contrast to people of the lowlands).

**We** set out for *Phakding*, three hours away, where he said we'd spend the night, but he was surprised that we made it in 1½ hours. I was all for pressing on to *Namche Bazar*, but he advised against it, saying it was going to rain; in fact, there'd been a few spots as we were coming into Phakding, and an hour or so later, it started to fall quite heavily; lucky he'd persuaded me to stay. We stopped at the *Peregrine Hotel*, with basic rooms for R50, and what turned out to be the only decent toilets on the whole trek. Food-prices were high, but got much higher further up. I got two nice thick blankets and had a nap, and an hour's meditation.

**Descending** to the dining-room, I found a group of Aussies and Brits had arrived after me, and surprisingly, there was no smoke ~ quite a change from the lodges on the Jomsom trail.

The rain fell steadily for some hours ~ just how long, I couldn't tell, as the sound of the nearby stream was stronger. I got a thermos of hot-water for tea/coffee, shave and wash in the morning, for which I was grateful.

The next day dawned clear, and after breakfast, we set off at 7:30. I was soon to wish I'd brought more food-supplies with me; the bread and pastries I'd brought quickly came to an end.

**Needless** to say, there were no roads along the way, and except for the occasional sound of planes and helicopters, it was quiet and peaceful. It was a pretty tough hike, mainly uphill, especially towards Namche Bazar, where we came to fresh snow from the night before, making the track muddy and treacherous as it melted. We came to a suspension-bridge over the roaring white-water river far below; the boards were wet and slippery, and I crossed it very carefully. Not long after the bridge we caught up with Hans and Rosita and walked slowly with them for a while;



they'd been caught in the rain, having left Lukla after us, and had hired a porter-guide at the rate I had told them about.

**B**etween Phakding and Namche, at a place called Monjo, I got my trekking-permit, at a cost of Rs1000, and we reached Namche at 11 o'clock. Checked in the Peregrine Hotel, the same as in Phakding; Pasang probably got commission for bringing guests to these lodges, apart from free lodging and cheaper food himself. I was hungry by then and quickly ordered a plate of chips, after which we went to buy a few things. I was again given two thick blankets for my bed, and was glad of them, as it was cold.

**A**s upon the Muktinath trek, there were many trekkers up and down the trail ~ some friendly, and others not. Beside the hotel was a group camping in tents; some of them were amputees, some in wheelchairs. I didn't envy them in their tents, but when I spoke with some of them, they said they preferred it, and were not too cold. They were on their way to Everest Base-Camp, and some of them even intended to climb the mountain.

The bathrooms were basic, with no running water; hot water was available by bucket. I used the water from a thermos I got the night before for shaving and washing. The toilets were something I'd not come across in Nepal before ~ a hole in a board over a pit, with a pile of dry leaves in the rear to throw down to cover your droppings afterwards.

I had plenty of time for meditation in my room, though not outside as on the Jomsom trail, so far, as it was much colder there.

**N**amche Bazar was so called because it was the focal-point for a weekly market, as well as having a considerable number of shops selling various things; there were even internet-cafes and several bakeries. People would come in from quite a distance around to sell things and buy what they needed, and of course, anyone passing up and down the trail had to pass through there. It was muddy because of thawing snow; I hoped there wouldn't be any more, so the trails would dry out; I'm scared of walking in snow or mud. We spent an extra day in Namche so as to acclimatize, and made a one-day trek to *Thani*, at not much greater altitude.

It was quite a trek to Thani, and halfway there, we met an Anglo-Pakistani girl from Canada, trekking on her own, which I thought was quite daring. On the way back, we met Hans and Rosita; she complained of headache, often the first sign of altitude-sickness.

Arriving back in Namche, I hired a sleeping-bag for R40 per day. I put a deposit on it, refundable, minus the rent, upon return. We had coffee and donuts in the *Everest Bakery*, to the sound of old Beatles' songs, which brought back many fond memories.

Evening in the dining-room was a cacophony of many people talking at the same time, but again, fortunately, no smoke. The Aussies and Brits I'd met in Phakding were there, but as a tour-group, were insulated. I sat in meditation until the food I'd ordered was served. After eating, I retreated to my room; Pasang was nowhere to be seen to bring me my thermos, so I had to go up to ask for it myself. Clouds that had earlier come up thickly before dark dissipated and stars became visible.

Someone coughing loudly and a dog barking non-stop somewhere woke me and kept me awake, so I got up to go to the toilet ~ I wasn't the only one, either ~ around 2 o'clock, and washed my hands with snow afterwards. Then I sat for a while before sleeping again; it seemed easy to meditate in the mountains. I got up again around 5 to wash and shave; there was almost no water left after that to make coffee.

The sky was clear, and after breakfast, we set off, but hadn't gone far when I insisted on taking the sleeping-bag from Pasang, so he wouldn't have to carry two packs, but from the next day on he strapped it to the top of his pack instead of putting it inside.

It was quite a strenuous trek of 3½ hours to *Tengboche*, passing and repassing strings of yaks and heavily-laden porters, and the handicapped-expedition, some of whom were carried in chairs on the backs of sure-footed and immensely-strong porters. There was one very muddy stretch which was a bit hard to negotiate.

We reached Tengboche before noon, and I told Pasang to find me a quiet lodge, but this wasn't possible, as there were so many people on the trail and few lodges. I was surprised that the room-charge in the lodge he chose was R150, and the food-prices cor-

respondingly higher, as must be expected. I had a bowl of watery Sherpa-stew ~ vegetarian, of course; no yak or yeti meat ~ for lunch and afterwards had a nap using the sleeping-bag.

Tengboche centers around a monastery, and after visiting it briefly, I climbed to a small cave I'd seen overlooking the settlement. It was a bit cold, but had a flooring of dry leaves, and was sheltered from the main blast of the wind (by this time, the mountains were obscured by cloud). It had a good feeling about it, and I was sure many people had sat in it over the centuries, just as I was doing then. (Indeed, when I wrote to Rahula and told him about it, he said that it was probably the same cave he'd sat in when *he* was there). I sat there about an hour, and had several *flashes* about the nature of being ~ how, by ourselves, we simply do not exist, but have an identity only in dependence upon other people and things. So intricate is our dependence, in fact, that it extends to everyone and everything. I'd seen this before, but high up in the Himalayas, it was reinforced. So many people, living and dead, are with me every step of the way, wherever I go. My sandals gazed up at me, and I thought not only of the man who had brought them from the U.S. to England for me the previous year, but also of the unknown person(s) who had made them, somewhere in China, perhaps. I thought of the porters who are paid a pittance for hauling stuff up the trails, and the lodge-keepers ~ without them, we could not come this way.

*Pangboche* was only 2 more hours from Tengboche, and I asked Pasang why we didn't continue on, since we had plenty of time. He was reluctant and said something about altitude-sickness, and indeed, I'd heard of several people coming down with it, but I felt well, so far, and could easily have made it to Pangboche that day, as it was only 70 meters higher than where we were, but to reach it we must descend quite a bit before climbing again. Also, it was not in Pasang's interest to move too quickly.

The next day, we set off and immediately the trail became icy, as it was in the shade and the sun never reached it; we had to be very careful going down. Even so, I slipped and fell for the first time, but suffered no hurt. We got to Pangboche in 1½ hours and rested for ½ an hour there. An hour later, tired and hungry, we

stopped at a lonely house for rice-and-curry, and shortly before one-o'clock, reached *Dingboche*, at 4,410 meters. Pasang led me to a lodge ~ also a Peregrine ~ and I had a nice nap beneath 2 warm-enough quilts, without needing the sleeping-bag.

Just before we got there a few snowflakes fell and continued after my nap; it didn't bode well. We would spend two nights here to further acclimatize, as recommended by all guidebooks.

At this lodge I met 2 young guys from North Wales ~ Sean and Paul ~ and had a nice talk with them. Also, an elderly couple from York ~ Martin and Jean ~ but she was rather snooty and cold.

The next morning, I decided to wash some clothes, but the water was ~ not surprisingly ~ icy. Pasang offered to wash my jeans and shirts for me and I accepted. While he was doing it, I felt ashamed and joined him to wash my undies. I had to thaw my hands over the kitchen-stove afterwards. This done, we set off up the valley for *Chukhung* at 4,730 meters. We had lunch there, and a short nap afterwards before returning to Dingboche. Our clothes were almost dry when we got back. I heard Hans and Rosita in the room next to mine and met them later, by which time it had started to snow lightly again.

The sky next day was clear and bright, and we set out with the Germans, but further up the trail, there was more snow and it had begun to melt, making the paths muddy. It was hard going, especially the second half, from *Dughla*, where it became very steep, and then we came to much snow and a glacier; luckily, I didn't slip. I sent Pasang on ahead to secure rooms at *Lobuche* for us, and this was wise, as the *Above-The-Clouds* lodge he checked us into got very crowded later, and someone even came to ask if he could share my tiny room; normally, I would have agreed, but there would have been no space for bags.

The battery in my 35 mm camera had died, or wouldn't work at that altitude, but I saw a suitable one for sale; the hotel-owner ~ a hard and avaricious woman ~ asked R500 for it, but I managed to get it for R400. (at the sleeping-bag shop in Namche, they were priced at R600, but at Gorak Shep, I saw the same battery with a price-tag of only R300 on it).

That was the longest night of my life! My feet were cold in the sleeping-bag, and the single blanket on top didn't help much. I slept very little, perhaps 10 minutes at a time, and then woke up (this was my first and only symptom of altitude-sickness, although I didn't know it at the time). There was no electricity, and no point in getting up in the dark; I had to lie there and wait for the dawn.

It had snowed somewhat in the night, but the way up wasn't as bad as I had feared. It was 2 hours to *Gorak Shep*, where I had some more tsampa and waited for Hans and Rosita to get there, but in the meantime, I decided that, as the mountains were still surprisingly clear ~ there being no clouds as yet ~ I'd skip going to Base-Camp and go for *Kala Patthar* instead, and was glad I did. It was very hard going, especially towards the top, where there were patches of snow. I stopped to rest every 3 or 4 minutes, puffing and panting. We reached the rocky top in 1½ hours, and the vistas were incredible ~ at 5,500 meters above-sea-level, we got a better view of Everest than if we'd gone to Base-Camp – and it was worth all the negativities and hardships so far. There was a group of other people at the top, and for some unfathomable reason, a number of choughs circling and playing around us (nothing for them to eat there). Euphoric to have made it, I hugged Pasang, and gave him a Rs500 bonus.

We stayed there about 20 minutes and passed the other people on the way down, taking 45 minutes to the hotel. After lunch, I had a brief nap; I'd got quite a nice room, with two quilts, so didn't need to use my sleeping-bag again. I met Rosita in the 'sun-room'; Hans was asleep beside her, exhausted; she told me how they'd got only two-thirds of the way to Base-Camp before giving up; they would go to *Kala Patthar* the next day. I noticed Pasang playing cards with other guides and porters (they are incorrigible gamblers and drinkers, wasting whatever they earn that way).

I spent another long and almost sleepless night, with lots of farts; I'd been constipated most of the way up, and was quite uncomfortable. The rooms of all these lodges up the trail have thin plywood walls, making everything audible to everyone. I was glad when dawn came and I could get up. It hadn't snowed again, thank goodness, and the sky was clear. I had a big plate of fried

potatoes for brekky, and paid my bill of R1000 ~ the highest of all, at the highest lodge of the trek ~ and we set off down the track at 7:00, reaching Lobuche 75 minutes later, but not before I'd soiled my undies with a bit of diarrhea on the way. It was a cold walk, and I used the toilet while Pasang reserved a room for Hans and Rosita for that night, and drank tea ~ boy, did he like tea!

**We** crossed the glacier and climbed the slopes overlooking Dughla before descending to that place (only 20 minutes down); it took an hour from Lobuche, and we stopped to rest for a while. The group of disabled people were there, on their way up.

**Resuming**, we got to Dingboche at 10:30, Pasang forging ahead, 3 hours 40 minutes from Gorak Shep. I got the same room I'd had before, with 2 warm quilts for the night, though whether I'd be able to sleep any better remained to be seen; I'd just learned that sleeplessness was one of the symptoms of altitude-sickness, and also stomach-upset; I didn't have any headaches, however.

**Pasang** washed clothes while I shaved in cold water (I'd missed 2 days and felt really scruffy). I then had tea and fried-rice followed by a fragmented nap. The dining-room was quite full afterwards, with a camping-group there. I ordered a plate of chips.

**After** dinner ~ which was slow in coming as they took care of the group first ~ I felt the urge to *go*, and took off my jacket, forgetting that the key to my room was in it. When I'd *done*, I discovered that the key was in my room, and had to ask if there was a spare, but though they searched and tried so many, they couldn't find one; eventually, the owner had to smash the lock off. I understood that I would have to pay for it, and although they asked for only Rs50, I gave them Rs100, as it was a large lock.

I slept a bit better, and after breakfast of tsampa and Tibetan bread, set off on my own, leaving Pasang to eat and catch me up later, which I thought he'd quickly do, as my heels were cracked and sore from the day before. Once I got going, however, I fell into my usual stride, and it wasn't until the other side of Pangboche 1½ hours later that he came up with me.

**We** had again to negotiate the muddy and icy stretch coming up to Tengboche, but it was accomplished without any mishap. It

took 2½ hours from Dingboche to here, and I told Pasang I aimed to push on to Namche or further. I left him resting by the stupa while I descended through the forest, but somewhere I took a wrong turn and ended up on a narrow and precipitous little path that almost fell to the river, where, near the only bridge, he caught up with me again. Then followed a steep climb to a place where we stopped for lunch, 3 hours 50 minutes out from Dingboche. My first job was to go to a toilet, having felt 'loose' all morning, and was so relieved by the enlightenment. I then ordered fried-rice, and sat in meditation for ½ an hour until it was ready. Having eaten, which didn't take long, I told Pasang that I wouldn't stay in Namche but would press on as far as I could, and set off ahead of him. 75 minutes later, just after one-o'clock, he caught up with me on the way into town, but refused to accompany me to the sleeping-bag shop, saying he'd meet me at the Everest Bakery, while he went to the Peregrine Hotel; I think he had his own agenda ~ maybe to collect some commission from my stay there on the way up.

**A**t the shop, I got back my deposit minus 6 days' hire, and went to the bakery, where Pasang had just arrived. I ordered coffee for us both and a donut for myself; he declined, although just 20 minutes earlier, he'd said he was hungry again. He wasn't happy with my announced intention to head for Lukla that day. Actually, I'd enjoyed walking alone, and when, shortly out of Namche, he started making 'popping' noises with bubble-gum, I told him to walk ahead or behind me. We left Namche at 1:30, and crossed the wooden bridge which had been wet and slippery on the way up, but which was now dry (the trail down was mainly dry, whereas it had been muddy from snow-melt on the way up).

**H**e was waiting for me at the Monjo checkpoint, having taken a short-cut that I didn't know, and realizing that I really did mean to get to Lukla; he made all kinds of excuses ~ too far, impossible, curfew in force, etc. It wasn't too far, and wasn't impossible, but by the time we got to Phakding, it had begun to rain, so I compromised and halted for the night. At the same hotel where we'd stayed going up, I paid him his daily R500, but he asked for R200. I thought he wanted smaller change (what he really wanted was something extra to gamble with), so I took back the R500

note and gave him Rs200, at which he was not happy, saying R500 was nothing and that he wasn't pleased with today's walk ~ 3 days' camp in one day, as he put it. I gave him the Rs500 again and reminded him that this was what we'd agreed upon when we met, and that it was standard rate. Also, I said that it was not yet over, meaning that I would pay him more the next day. Maybe he didn't understand this, and thought he would lose out on pay, as he stormed off, saying he was going to Lukla. Early the next morning, I left on my own, carrying all my stuff, and as I paid my bill, I was told that Pasang was still there, asleep.

Halfway to Lukla, a young guy named Kami ~ himself a trekking-guide ~ fell in beside me; speaking quite good English, he offered to carry one of my bags for me and I accepted. All this time, I'd been expecting Pasang to come up behind me, but he didn't, and so I never saw him again, much to my sorrow, as I really did want to pay him a bonus; and now he will think that I ran out on him!

We reached the airport shortly before 8:00, and I got a ticket for the first plane back to Kathmandu. I was soon in the air, the only passenger on a *Yeti Airlines* flight, which took 50 minutes to get there. With no checked-in baggage to retrieve, I was able to walk straight through the terminal to get a taxi, and reached Snow Lion at 9:30 ~ very fast! ~ the Everest Region trek was history. After the quiet of the mountains, Kathmandu seemed extra-noisy, and also quite warm. I'd pushed myself, to see what I could do, and was quite pleased, but maybe I should have stayed away longer.



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## REALITY CHANGES

A shower was so refreshing after being without for 2 weeks, and afterwards, I went for lunch of samosas ~ the first food of the day ~ and then to search for a shoe-repair place, as the soles of my trusty sandals had split on the final day. I got new batteries for my



blood-test kit, only to discover that the old ones were working normally again out of the mountains; it really must have been the altitude affecting them. The black toe-nail didn't wait to grow out but suddenly came off completely, without pain. My heels were cracked and sore, and it would take some days for them to become normal, like after Jomsom.

One day, I stopped at a thanka-shop to have a look, and got talking with the owner, *Sanjay*, about Dharma. He was happy about this and invited me to visit his guru ~ *Swami Ramanandagiri*, Nepal's leading Sanskrit scholar ~ at *Pashupatinath*; I accepted, and he took me on his motorbike. It was pleasant meeting the old bird ~ same age as me, actually; his English was quite good and we had a nice exchange. After talking at some length, I requested him to say something to me, and somewhat hesitantly at first, he did ~ something about *Shankaracharya*. Once he got going, he became more confident, and I found his ideas quite in accord with my own. He is known as 'the angry swami' because of his refusal to accept any nonsense from his audiences, even to the extent of scolding people for as much as looking at their watches during his talks. Well, I could relate to this, as so many times during *my* talks, people have been chatting in the audience, and sometimes, I've stopped and asked them not to do so, as it's inconsiderate of others; if you want to talk, I said, better don't come here, but go outside or stay at home; instead of making merit by attending a talk ~ as many people think they will ~ you will only make demerit by talking during it. And this, while someone was translating for me, so people could not make the excuse of not being able to understand. Good on you, Swami-ji. I quite agree!

At 5 o'clock, I had to excuse myself to return to Chetrapati for my bike, which I'd left for repairs, although I would have liked to stay longer. I took a taxi back.

Someone named Jivan, whom I'd recently met, said he'd like to go to Trisuli with me, and I thought it would be good to have a companion, so we made arrangements, and rented him a bike. At the bus-station, we loaded our bikes onto the Trisuli bus, and decided to sit on top to watch that no-one sat or walked on them. It was quite a bumpy ride to Kakani, where we got down and began

our ride. About 20 minutes later, however, he came off and injured his right ankle. He tried to go on, but it soon became clear that we'd have to go back. We got to a place where all the buses stop for people to eat, and after being ministered to by kindly people at a restaurant, we got a bus back to Kathmandu. By the time we got there, his ankle was quite swollen, but he said it didn't hurt much. I gave him taxi-fare to go home, while I took his bike to the hire-place and paid for the buckled wheel to be repaired. I later went to see him; he'd been to a doctor, who told him his ankle was not fractured or broken; lucky for him.

Really wanting to do the Trisuli ride, I set off again 2 days later. It was a lovely day, but shortly after the place where Jivan came off, I hit some loose gravel on a bend and also came off. My spill was worse than his, as it became immediately clear, from the pain as I lay there on the road, that something was quite wrong. I struggled to my feet, but knew my right shoulder was dislocated, as my arm hung heavily down, although my hand was functional. My right forearm, left palm and left shin were abraded. Just then, a bus came up the road and stopped for me. My bike was put on the roof, and I got in with some difficulty, my arm hanging down; a seat was found for me at the back ~ the worst place. People were quite kind and solicitous, but I was in considerable pain, and almost fainted. Half-an-hour later, a seat became vacant in the middle of the bus, so I moved there. Soon after, the bus jolted as it hit a large pot-hole; I felt a stab of pain which made me wince, and a click in my shoulder as it went back into joint, after which it felt a lot better.

The trip back to town felt much longer than 90 minutes, of course. I negotiated with a *taxi-van* to take me to my hotel. I didn't bother going to a hospital, as I figured nothing was broken or fractured and it just needed time to recover. Instead, I had my arm and hand dressed at a medical-shop, and got some analgesics.

After lunch, I had a nap and slept quite well, although I knew I'd be sore for a few days. Then I went to see Sanjay, and sat talking with him and his brother for about an hour, during which I told him I was a monk. From there, I went to do my email, but couldn't

read and reply to it all as the connection was extremely slow; there was one from Ashok, Jivan's brother.

**W**ashing clothes, shaving and showering was a bit hard, but I managed. Would I learn anything from the incident, I wondered? Was it a karmic lesson for my lack of sympathy and even annoyance towards Jivan, and my arrogance in considering myself an experienced rider and him not? Pride goes before a fall, it is said. Although it wasn't easy, I was on my bike again the next day, even though the slightest bump on Kathmandu's moon-scape roads sent shock-waves up my arm. By this time, the bruises were showing, and oh, it was like the aurora-borealis, with all the colors of the rainbow!

I decided to go to Pokhara and spend time recovering there rather than in Kathmandu, so got a ticket. The bus left on time, and I had a seat behind the driver, where it wasn't too bumpy. The trip was uneventful except for a lengthy delay at one point because of a terrible accident, unfortunately, all too common on Nepal's perilous roads. I'd wondered what hotel-offers I might get upon arrival, but Khem of Paramount was the first to greet me, and so it was more-or-less decided that I should stay there. Hera was also at the bus-park. He told me he'd worked only 4 days since I last saw him, but how to know if he was telling the truth? I'd seen before that he didn't always.

I got the same room at Paramount. Crazy dope-smoking Raj had left and been replaced by a young guy named *Bishal*. He helped to carry my bags to the room, and then offered me some hash, but I reprimanded him for this, and he apologized.

**A**s soon as I'd showered and changed, I went into town, only to find that the cyber-cafes had uniformly raised their rates to Rs100 per hour. I connected only long enough to tell people on my list that I wouldn't be in touch until I returned to Kathmandu.

**B**ack at the hotel, I asked Khem if anyone could help me with my arm, and he suggested Bishal, who readily agreed. He gave me a good work-out, for which I paid him Rs50; he was very pleased, and helped me over the following days, but it became more painful; I felt nauseous and the right side of my chest ached. I decided to go for an x-ray, and Khem recommended a nursing-home

nearby, but when I got there they told me the x-ray machine was out of order, but otherwise, an x-ray there would have cost Rs500 and the doctor's consultation-fee \$25 on top of that. I went off to the government hospital far away, and through the procedure of registering as a patient, Rs200, getting a referral-form, paying Rs100 for the x-ray, and lastly getting the x-ray itself. The hospital smelled none-too-clean, and I could easily imagine infection stalking the corridors. I had to wait 45 minutes for the x-ray film, but gave up waiting to see a doctor for the assessment as there were just too many others in line. I went back to the nursing-home, where I complained that \$25 was too much. Clearly not wanting to lose a fee, they said I could put what I felt like in the donation-box, so I saw the doctor, who soon informed me that there was nothing seriously wrong and that it would take 2 or 3 weeks for my arm to fully recover; meanwhile, I shouldn't do any strenuous exercise. I put Rs500 in the box, feeling lucky that I got away with paying a third of that originally quoted.

Almost every day while I was in Pokhara, there were thunderstorms with lots of rain, and of course, frequent power-cuts as a result. From the balcony outside my room, I observed egrets flying past on their way to work, contrasted against the dark clouds; in the evenings, they would return to roost in their regular places, looking like great white flowers on certain trees. One day, from early morning right through until evening the next day, a solitary *hoopoe* uttered its call non-stop, probably in search of a mate, but obviously getting no response, poor thing. Several brain-fever birds also made their rising-crescendo calls.

When I'd had enough of Pokhara, I packed my stuff and prepared to leave. I gave Bishal Rs1500 ~ for him, a month's wages ~ and he said he would use it to buy ear-rings for his wife.

The bus-trip was uneventful, and we reached there at 2 pm, and I got my previous room in Snow Lion, but it was hotter then, and there was no fan. Yappy-dog across the way barked as usual, but when I yelled out of the window ~ at almost 10 p.m. ~ "*Shut that bloody dog up!*" the owners must have understood and taken it inside, as it then went quiet. Unfortunately, a score of other dogs in the vicinity did not. I went looking for another hotel next morn-

ing, but it took quite a while to find one I considered satisfactory, thinking it would be much quieter.

**A** student-led strike – Maoist-inspired – meant that almost all shops were closed, and there was no transport except rickshaws; it was strange without cars and taxis on the streets.

I moved to the new hotel and shortly afterwards, my water-heater burned out and blew the fuse in my room; I had to get someone to fix it, and blamed it on my mozzie-zapper. My illusions about that being a quiet hotel were soon dispelled when a band started up in a nearby night-club, but I didn't mind it so much ~ even though they went on until 10:45 ~ as they played lots of old '60's songs. When they'd finished, a yapping dog ~ which had been unable to compete before – started up and went on for about an hour, so I had to resort to using blu-tack in my ears, but I did not sleep well owing to the pain in my shoulder.

The next night was even worse, with horribly-repetitive Nepalese music and singing, and when that came to an end, there were other sounds. But nothing was as bad as the loud voices and laughter of some people ~ who I later learned were Israelis ~ in an adjacent hotel, which went on until at least 3:30! I then understood why Israelis have such a bad reputation in Nepal! After them came *Yappity* for a while, and then I eventually dozed off for about 1½ hours, determined to make finding another hotel my priority in the morning, which I did. After checking several, I chose a room in the *Yeti Guest House* at Rs225, so went back to get my stuff, explaining my reasons for moving. I also requested ~ and was given ~ the stack of Bibles from their bookshelf, that had been brought in by some Americans, obviously with the hope of influencing some 'heathen' Buddhists and Hindus into converting. I made an offering of them to the Bhagmati River-Goddess.

There is a Rajneesh centre outside Kathmandu, and since I had long been looking for one of his books called "Christianity, the Greatest Poison", I visited Arun Swami, the secretary, to ask about it, but he said there was no such book, unless published under that title by a private publisher.

I was awaiting a reply from D.V. to my query as to a suitable date for my return to Malaysia. He's a busy man, and often unable to

get to a computer. Eventually, I heard from him and went to make my booking, but the earliest I could get was a week hence.

Yeti Guest House was much better; finally, I'd found the quiet I wanted; there was no music, and although I could still hear dogs barking, they were not very near. Even further away, across a piece of waste ground behind the hotel, I heard the occasional call of a peacock, and some brain-fever birds.

Sanjay offered to drive me to Chobar Gorge, the outlet for the rivers of Kathmandu from the valley. An old myth tells how this came to be: Long ago, Kathmandu Valley was a lake, with only the hill of Swayambhu standing above it as an island. The Bodhisattva Manjushri then came with his Sword (the Sword of Wisdom that cuts through defilements), and with one stroke, cut a way through the valley-wall, draining the lake, and leaving a beautiful and extremely-fertile valley. The water that now flows through the gorge is black and noisome from Kathmandu's pollution.

I began shopping for gifts and souvenirs for some of the many people who'd made this trip possible, and spent a lot of time looking at and haggling for thangkas and other things. During this, I met someone I'd helped before ~ a young woman named Puja ~ just after I'd been thinking of her; she had her baby on her back, and was pleasant, as always. I bought two of the bags she was selling, and allowed her to overcharge me.

DV had told me to sell the bike for what I could rather than take it back to Malaysia with me, as I had intended to. Finding a buyer for it, however, was not easy, but eventually I did, and was glad to get it off my hands, because although it had served me well, I'd also had quite a lot of trouble with it, and had frequently needed to get it repaired. I got the equivalent of \$100 for it.

The scabs on my arm and legs were all dry by this time, with no more pus, but the pain my shoulder remained ~ another souvenir of my trip in Nepal; there were so many, some of which I was happy with, and others not. But life is like this, is it not? ~ a mixture of many things.

Altogether, I had spent 3½ months in Nepal, and had some great times there. I'd lost some weight, of course ~ at one point, I was

down to 70 kgs and felt delighted about it! ~ but after my bike-incident, I couldn't exercise as I usually did, and the lost weight began to come back, and more besides!



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## SHUTTLING AROUND

**D**V met me when I flew in at night, and soon had me at his place. It was nice to be back there, in spite of the heat and humidity, as he and his family were as kind to me as always. I presented them with the gifts I'd bought for them, including some thanngkas, which they had nicely framed. He took me to a dentist, to have a broken tooth repaired; after that, he took me to a physiotherapist about my shoulder, who reassured me that there was nothing fractured. He suggested some exercises for it, but for my part, it was a matter of remembering to do them. I made several more visits to him before I left for Adelaide.

I'd been corresponding with Georgina since the previous year, and she'd invited me to spend some time at their place in the hills, and so, this is what I did, but she gave no indication as to how long I would be welcome. She picked me up at the airport, and took me home. Her husband, Rob, was cordial enough, and I enjoyed staying there, going for walks in the early morning.

With winter coming on, I began to gather wood from the nearby forest for their open fire, and with the help of their chain-saw (I'd never used one before, so it was a novel experience), built up a sizeable stack, enough to last them until the next year. I also did whatever other jobs I could for them around the place.

Whenever necessary, Georgina would drive me into town for any talks I had to give. I also spent some days in the Sri Lankan temple, where the monk ~ Sumedha ~ really pressed me to stay; he was a gregarious person, and easy to get on with, but didn't like staying on his own. For my part, I didn't like having to pretend so much; I mean, the devotees were very nice and kind, but I didn't

enjoy being on a pedestal. The room I was given was also the room where Sumedha had his computer, on which he used to work long into the night. Now, I like to sleep early, as I get up between 2 and 3 o'clock, so this wasn't a good arrangement.

**M**y talks there went well, as did those I gave to several Vietnamese groups. Sumedha and other people in the temple requested me to stand-in for him when he went back to Sri Lanka at the end of October for 3 months or so; I asked them to allow me to defer my decision about that until nearer the date.

**S**omeone invited me to a display of relics at the big new Chinese temple, and together with Sumedha, I went. There was a Thai monk sitting before the altar, he was the one who'd put on the show, and what a freak-show it was; the beautiful glass stupas carried labels proclaiming their contents to be '*Buddha's Relics (plasma)*', '*Buddha's relics (blood)*', '*Kwan Yin Bodhisattva's Relics*', '*The Next Buddha's Relics*', and so many more. People were milling around to gaze in awe on these things, never questioning the preposterous claims. The temple must have made quite a lot from hosting this mockery, not to mention the monk. Such traveling-shows are quite common now, and are really big business; flourishing on ignorance and superstition.

**I** got a poster depicting these things, and later, wrote to the monk at his email-address thereon, questioning his claims. He replied, inviting me to visit him, when he would explain everything to me. I wrote again, revealing that I am a monk, and asking however would he be able to explain *blood-relics* of the Buddha to me, or relics of the *Next Buddha*? It is hard enough to combat existing superstition without having to deal with new forms of it, I said. He didn't reply a second time. (I even heard of a Vietnamese monk in America returning from India with *brain-relics* of the Buddha! And the person who told me this believed it without question! How stupid people can be!)

**N**ot heeding the signs at the time, I overstayed my welcome at Georgina's, and spent 2 months there when it shouldn't have been so long. Georgina was undergoing marital problems. Thuy and her sons came to my rescue, and sent me a ticket, so I flew to Brisbane at the end of July, staying with them at their café.



Huy would marry at the end of August and they wanted me to be there for that, and to join them when they flew to Melbourne for another ceremony with their family there. Meanwhile, Huy drove me out to visit my mother several times; the first time, she didn't recognize me; the second time, she did, and the third time, didn't; she had moments of lucidity, before slipping back into fuzziness; such is the nature of that disease. We also stopped to see Sheila and Frank, and I brought some of my stuff back with me.

The weather was good during my stay, and I soon got into a routine with my morning-walks along the sea-front, but in ordinary clothes, for practicality, and not in my robes. There were many other people strolling or striding out. Some greeted me with a "Good morning" or "G'day" while others ignored me. I grew used to seeing one man in particular; he could be heard long before he hove into view, greeting everyone with a loud and cheery "Good morning! Have a great day!" so that no-one could pretend they hadn't heard and had to reply.

Arrangements for talks were not well-made. I gave two talks in a Sri Lankan temple, and they were about the best.

Huy's wedding went alright, although it was very warm that day and the house of his wife's family ~ although large ~ was very crowded. I was happy when it was over (years earlier, after attending a wedding in Adelaide, I vowed it would be the last, but I made an exception here). I joined the family on a flight to Melbourne the day after, as most of their relatives live there and a second ceremony was held, which I attended, too; in my opinion, this one went better than the first; for one thing, it was much cooler. I stayed in their home until after the ceremony, when I went to stay with Translator Tuan again.

In Brisbane, I'd had a tooth extracted, but in Melbourne I needed more treatment, and visited Jamie, who filled 3 teeth for me; I was really fed-up with my teeth!

The committee of the Sri Lankan temple in Adelaide didn't bother to respond to my several emails informing them that I'd decided to accept their invitation to stay there, so I changed my mind and went to Sydney instead. They were very disappointed about this, but these days, there is no excuse for poor communication, and

I'd emailed the monk and two other people. I was quite relieved, as I didn't want to be in charge of the temple even temporarily, and go along with all the rituals; people expect so much from monks, and if you try to live up to their expectations you become a puppet rather than a human being with feet on the ground!

Arriving in Sydney, I stayed with a young couple I'd met before, and gave a talk in the largest Vietnamese temple there ~ Chua Phuoc Hue ~ the next day. There was a large audience, and it went quite well, but the translation wasn't the best. It was a pity they didn't find someone more competent, as we have to be very careful with translation, otherwise we might convey the wrong meaning. The lady who did it had translated for me many years before, and I recalled I wasn't pleased with her translation at that time. She reminded me that I'd told her in '87 that I wanted a translator ~ someone who would give my ideas ~ not an interpreter ~ who would give her own ideas of what I say. The two are quite different, and I often have to deal with this.

Chua Phuoc Hue wished me to talk in their temple in Melbourne ~ Chua Quang Minh ~ so although I'd just come from there, back I went. The person who'd arranged to pick me up and drive me to the airport, however, not only came late, but was unfamiliar with the way, and we spent so much time in finding it that I missed my flight and had to buy another ticket!

My talk in Quang Minh over, I returned to Sydney forthwith, as other talks had been arranged for me there. This time, I stayed in Chua Phuoc Hue, but hadn't been there very long when I got a call from Melbourne to say that *Ba Chin* ~ an old lady who had always been very kind to me ~ had just died. I had seen her just 3 weeks before, when she was very frail, and told her then that if I were in Australia when she *went*, I would return to try to 'help her on her way', just as I did when my dad died 10 years earlier; I didn't expect this to be so soon, however, but then, we can't tell what will happen, or when, can we? I quickly made a booking on the internet, and after lunch in someone's house, was driven to Sydney airport. Again, we left late, and again missed my flight, but this time, they got me on the next flight an hour later without charging me for another ticket.

The funeral ceremony was conducted by a Vietnamese monk as per their tradition, and he also gave a talk. I was pleased about that, because normally, all they do is chant, when a funeral is the best opportunity to sow some seeds; many people never go to temples, so at a funeral, you have a captive audience who might be receptive in the presence of death, and if you waste this opportunity, you probably won't get another. Anyway, the monk did not know her like I did, and so I gave a eulogy, too.

I returned to Sydney once again, and this time stayed with Baker Vo, as I'd done many times before. And once more I had tooth-ache, so he took me to a lady-dentist, but she was a real botcher, and drilled a huge hole in the aching tooth before slapping a filling in, chatting with her assistant all the time she was working, unaware that I understood some Vietnamese. The tooth ached for days after and I had to go to yet another dentist. She also overcharged me ~ or rather, overcharged the medical-insurance of Mr. Vo ~ and I was not happy about this. I called her later to complain, and she said maybe the tooth needs a few more days to settle down. I also queried the bill, and she explained that she had had to put it that way as the bill was in my host's name and he hadn't had any fillings, so she had to invent some items such as x-ray and teeth-scaling. No wonder these people become rich!

I must condense things a bit here because I moved around so much towards the end of 2003. First, I went again to Adelaide for another two weeks at Georgina's (my mistake); this time, I was to see that her marital problems were of her own making; Rob was placid and easy-going, while she had a ferocious temper, and would sometimes explode at him for very minor things; it was embarrassing to be present during such.

About that time, there was an incident in the Vietnamese temple in Adelaide: Someone got into the locked shrine-hall and smashed all the images, etc. The police came and arrested him, and he was in jail awaiting trial. The damage was estimated at about A\$100,000. Rumors immediately started to circulate in the Vietnamese community about it, but the guy ~ Vietnamese himself ~ was a drug-addict and so probably acted impulsively on his own. Many Vietnamese imagine communists behind every tree

and under every bed; there was probably no conspiracy behind it. He said he was acting under orders from God.

Like the destruction of the images in Afghanistan, it was a great opportunity to explain the meaning and purpose of the Buddha-image, both to Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. But did we use our opportunity? Of course not; we merely bewailed the destruction, and learned nothing from it! The monk there went ahead collecting a huge sum of money to buy replacements. Really, I despair of organized Buddhism! And not just this, but I'm afraid the future for the whole world looks very bleak. Even with the huge bounty on his head, Osama Bin Laden continues to evade his pursuers, indicating how much support he has worldwide. The way things are going, we should be prepared for anything, including the worst, if we can imagine what that might be; we've lived too long in a fool's paradise and are ~ I think ~ about to be rudely awoken. What a pity that GWB and his advisers seem to have learned so little; the roots of the problems are completely ignored as they stumble blithely on. We don't have to like or agree with others' points-of-view, but we should certainly be prepared to consider them; that, after all, is what the 'art' of war is all about, no? We must try to get into the enemy's mind to see where he's coming from, and then we can perhaps forestall him. The amount of money that's been spent already could have created a paradise in the Middle-East and solved the problems there. It's all so unwise, and we will be exceedingly fortunate if we can avoid another world-war, the battle-grounds of which will be our centers of dense population. We will soon need to depend upon what we have understood of the Dharma, as this will be our only refuge in facing what will probably come upon us.

Returning to Sydney once more, Toan and Loan picked me up and took me to their home, but their little boy seemed to have made it the purpose of his young life to destroy my laptop, and I couldn't let him do that, so after a few days, I called Baker Vo, and moved back to his place, to stay with them over the Lunar New Year. Chua Phuoc Hue invited me to attend their celebrations, but I declined, not liking crowds. Another reason was that it

had become very hot, as it was mid-summer; temperatures reached 40 degrees.

I had several talks, one to a group of Malaysians organized by Bok and Pearl, and another to an Indonesian Buddhist group who discovered I was in town. From the latter, I learned that Santithitto was still in circulation, so I got his number and went to visit him at a Laotian temple where he has a kuti. He had aged since I'd last seen him, of course, as he is 5 years older than me, and has diabetes, too, but was injecting insulin. Some years before, when he was in Thailand, he fell and broke a leg, and had to walk with a stick. In spite of these things, however, he was still quite cheerful, just as he used to be.

Then, I got an email from a Vietnamese-Chinese school-teacher in Brisbane who I'd known about 5 years, telling me the sad news that his only child had become a junkie, and asking for advice. Well, I knew he was grasping at straws, as he couldn't think of what to do. And what could I say that would be of help to him, except to offer him my deepest sympathy? I try to turn people back to themselves to find the necessary inner strength to deal with whatever life throws at them. I didn't hold out false hope, but urged him to "lean on the Dharma for support, as it is our only true refuge; everything else is subject to change, and parents, children, friends, possessions, health, and even our own body will let us down sooner or later, even if unintentionally.

"Your son will not listen to you at this time and probably for a long time to come, and any attempt to get him to talk will only make him withdraw from you further. And yet, how can you behave normally and go on living your life? It is very hard for you, and now you need Dharma friends more than ever before. Perhaps you know how Ananda once remarked to the Buddha that spiritual friendship was so important that it formed half of the holy life. The Buddha rebuked him and said: 'Say not so, Ananda; say not so. Spiritual friendship is the whole of the holy life.' Don't be ashamed to accept consolation from others; you are not a superman." I didn't see him when I went to Brisbane soon afterwards, nor hear from him again, so don't know how he went on.

Huy drove me out to see my mother for what would be the last time, but really, my mother had gone long before, leaving only a travesty of a human being; what a cruel disease is Alzheimer's! She wasn't even aware of me saying goodbye!

We also visited Sheila and Frank, who'd recently been to China on vacation, and after their disastrous trip in Spain, Portugal and Morocco the previous year, I couldn't believe how much they had enjoyed it, with all those 'foreigners' there, but I was certainly glad about it.

I returned to Melbourne to stay with Pham Thanh Hung and his family in their convenience-store, but only long enough to get a new passport and prepare to depart to England again. He took me to a travel-agent-friend, who gave me a good price for a one-way ticket, even deducting the airport-tax for me.



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### COLLISION-COURSE

**M**y baggage was so heavy ~ my days of traveling light are long-gone ~ that I expected to have to pay excess-baggage charges at the airport, but they let me go, and I was on my way to Malaysia again. DV picked me up, and once more I had a nice time in Malacca. Before I flew on to England, I bought a new laptop, having given my old one to Hung's son, *Hai*; they don't last long, especially with the amount of use I give them. I also got a new digital camera. Unwilling to take another chance with my baggage at K.L. airport ~ especially with the extra things I'd acquired ~ I sent a box of it off by sea-mail; it arrived months later.

The KLM flight from K.L. to Amsterdam was very cramped, and I needed to *go*, but hung on until we got there, then went quickly to

relieve myself. The connecting-flight to Manchester was much better, and of course, brief.

This time in England, however, although it started off alright, was to turn into a disaster, and it pains me to have to write about it, but if I don't, my story will be incomplete.

Glen wasn't happy that Karin had got back with her stud again and was once more pregnant, but just had to accept it as a *fait accompli*. Karin didn't care what anyone else thought, and did just whatever she felt like doing.

I plunged into my work around the place, and did numerous things that I'd not planned to do. I'd long-noticed that while doing one job, other jobs presented themselves to be done; it was as if I went looking for work. Over the years I'd been going there, I had completely reshaped the back-yard and extensive garden.

Then came my nemesis: Glen's 16-year-old grandson ~ her eldest daughter's son ~ for a weekend, his name was Wilky (short for Wilkinson), and I got a taste of what to expect some weeks hence, when, upon leaving high-school, he would come to stay with Glen in order to attend an agricultural-college nearby (*his* home was maybe 150 kms away). He'd been a nice young kid, but was certainly not a nice teenager. Now, I'm not the easiest person to live with, and am ready to admit this, but I was quite prepared to be friendly with him, and indeed, had looked forward to his short visit, and tried to make conversation with him; all I got in return were monosyllabic answers or grunts. Well, many teenagers are like that, I know, but that is not an excuse.

Glen had spoiled her kids, and I saw her repeating it with this brat. She could see that I wasn't impressed with him during that initial visit, and said, "I don't want any trouble when he comes to stay," as if she expected me to initiate it.

Well, his parents brought him, with all his stuff, and he soon had a part-time job on a farm somewhere. I must be fair and say this about him: he wasn't lazy, but was a good worker ~ although only for his own sake. He would come home stinking of manure, but often went days without showering; fortunately, because the weather permitted, he'd made a den in the unused garage where

he slept with the dog, so his stink remained there, but when he *did* come through the house to shower, the smell was awful. Then, he would leave his dirty clothes on the bathroom floor for Glen to pick up, and left the bath-mat soggy; his parents had obviously not made a very good job in their upbringing of him.

He fixed speakers up and played rap-music at such a volume that it could be heard far down the street. He had a scooter, on which to commute to work and so on, but it sounded like a chain-saw as he roared up and down the driveway at any time of the day and night, clearly showing utter disregard for others. The neighbors on one side couldn't have been quieter, but those on the other side were just the opposite, often holding late-night parties with blaring karaoke music and using bad language, even though they had young kids of their own. Other neighbors finally united and lodged a complaint against them, and they were ordered to tone things down. *We* also used to complain about them, but with this kid on his *chain-saw*, we'd lost the moral high-ground, and had no right to say anything more. I told Glen to tell him about this, but it was a long time before she did; she was afraid of offending him and that he might leave her.

Things came to a head one night, and there was an explosion, for which I held Glen responsible, as I'd told her it was coming, and she should have seen it herself and done something to prevent it. We were all sitting in the lounge, and she said: "Go on, plug in" ~ meaning his laptop, which was beside him on the sofa. To do so, however, he would have had to take the cable from *my* laptop and plug it in his own, as he had done several times after I'd gone to bed, but left it in his instead of plugging it back in mine. Twice, she said it, as he hesitated, knowing he should ask me, but unwilling to do so. At this, fed-up with his attitude, I said, "If he asks first". Instead of encouraging him to do so, however, Glen came to his defense and said: "How petty! We'll buy you a cable tomorrow." I then reminded her that he doesn't speak to me, and asked her why she'd not spoken to him about this, as she'd agreed to do so the week before when we'd argued about it. Unable to avoid it, she *did* ask, upon which he said: "I *do* talk to you".

"**W**hen?" I said.



"I spoke to you yesterday," he said, "when you came back from the dentist's". He remembered, you see ~ and I did ~ as it was a one-off event; he certainly didn't speak to me when he came in that evening. It is only common courtesy to greet people, isn't it? I wasn't being petty. I told Glen she thinks the sun shines out of his butt, and she agreed she did, saying she loved him to bits; but this was indulgence, not love, and is exactly the way she spoiled her kids before. I don't know if he was a mamma's boy, but he certainly seemed to be a nana's boy; if he came home and found her not in, he immediately zoomed off on his scooter to look for her at Karin's; he couldn't bear to be there when she wasn't.

Now, when we go to stay with other people, we feel our way and adjust to the situation there, speaking to everyone politely and in a friendly way, no? Not this kid; from the very beginning, he set himself on a collision-course with me. I don't know if he was simply rude or had taken an immediate personal dislike to me, or what, but he hardly uttered a word to me. I couldn't think of anything I'd done that might have accounted for his bad-manners, but Glen doted on him and took his side totally. I saw clearly from this that she had a way of avoiding problems by sweeping them under the carpet instead of dealing with them. She could easily have told him ~ and *should* have ~ to at least greet me whenever he came in; after all, this is British custom, too. The next day, I explained to her the error she'd made, and begrudgingly, she apologized, but it didn't solve the problem, which continued.

I also told her that he might have learned many things from me, but so biased had she become that she said sneeringly, "Like what?" I knew then that it was all over, and began to make plans to leave, but this took quite some time.

One day, I'd been out on my bike and came home with a flat tire. Fixing it, I found a tack in it, but thought I'd picked it up on the road somewhere. A few days later, there was another tack in my tire, and still I thought it might have come from the road; maybe some monkey-boy had maliciously scattered them. When I went out again, I paid special attention to the roads on my route, but there was no sign of tacks. The third time it happened, I became

suspicious; these tacks had come from somewhere nearer home. I said to Glen, "Have *you* been sticking tacks in my tires?"

"I have *not*," she said, indignantly. "Why would I do that?"

"I didn't think you would," I said, "but someone has." I don't know if she saw my point, or if her love refused to allow her to think it of him. Before I left, there was a fourth tack in my tire.

I sold the new printer-scanner I'd bought, and a circular-saw, but gave clothes and the many books I'd collected to a charity-shop, and in the end, unable to sell my bike, I gave that, too. I mailed a large parcel of stuff back to Malacca, to await me there.

Two days before I was to fly out to Turkey, Sheila called with the news that mum had died. I was upstairs in my room, and Glen came to tell me, sobbing, with tears on her face. I sat in meditation for a while, but having had years to prepare for this, didn't feel sad; actually, I was relieved that she'd been released from her ruined body. She was almost 93. (Sheila saw to the funeral arrangements, and Anita hypocritically gave the eulogy. Her body was cremated, and Sheila later sent the ashes to Glen, to be scattered at the place where mum had been born).

Later, an argument developed over mum's death, and quickly turned to dad. I'd not realized before just how badly Glen had felt about him. She dredged up things from many years in the past that she'd kept in the back of her mind. I told her that I'd made my peace with dad before he died, and was happy about that; *she* hadn't, and it was too late now, and she was left with so much hatred, for that is what came out in her words and on her face. I let her go on, as I could see that nothing I could say would have any effect other than add fuel to the flames. She then said, "I know I'll never see you again," and she was probably right, as I can think of no reason whatsoever to return to England again.



## MORE TURKEY-TRAILS

The cheapest flight I could get to Turkey was to *Bodrum*. I wasn't prepared for the 40° heat when I arrived; it hit me like a hammer! I tried to get a taxi to *Milas*, 15 kms away, but was unable to negotiate anything less than 45 million Lira (about US\$32; exchange-rate: 1.43 million lira to \$1), I waited a while before setting out to walk the 4 kms to the highway, where I might catch a bus to Milas. I was sweating like mad, but halfway, a car pulled up beside me, and the young driver offered me a ride. He'd just dropped someone off, and was on his way back to Bodrum. I asked him to drop me at the bus-station, so I could get a bus back to Milas without waiting at the roadside. This he did, and I got a minibus; the fare was 3.5 million, and it took just over an hour; it was a hot ride, without air-con.

Reaching Milas, I took a room in a hotel, but it was like an oven as there was no fan, let alone a/c. I went to buy bread, tomatoes and cheese. Later, I tried to boil water for coffee, but my water-heater burnt out and blew the fuse; the power in my room went off, and only some hours later was it restored.

Next morning, I left my hotel early to go to Bodrum, and a friendly policeman on the street got me a ride on a police bus to the bus-station, where I took a minibus to Bodrum. I soon saw what a holiday resort was like ~ *horrible!* I went to the crusader castle that dominates the town, as that's what I'd come for, but at 15 million, entry was overpriced. It was too hot to be climbing all the steps. Parts were under restoration, and closed, but the views of the harbor and town from the ramparts were excellent. After that, I made my way through the streets below to the scanty ruins of the *Mausoleum of Halicarnassus*, constructed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C, and one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world; most of them had been carted away long ago for use in the castle and other things. It must once have been stupendous, but the remains were not very interesting.

From Milas, I proceeded up the coast to Canakkale, to visit Ali and Aiten again. They were a bit surprised to see me, as I'd not told them I was coming, but they welcomed me anyway. I met

them in ANZAC HOUSE, and they took me to their home, where I spent a few pleasant days, taking long walks in the early morning beside the Dardanelles, often joined by friendly dogs.

As last time, Aiten drove me to places of interest in the region, like *Assos*, an ancient Greek site overlooking the Aegean, with a ruined temple of Athena. It was rather disappointing except for the fine view over the sea.

Ali persisted in his habit of getting drunk every night and insisted on me sitting with him until he was ready to go to bed; he was also quite argumentative at such times. There was nothing Aiten could do to change him; she'd long ago accepted it.

Leaving some stuff at their home, I took leave of my kind hosts, and proceeded to *Iznik*, which, under the name of *Nicea*, had been a major city of the Eastern Roman Empire, and was the site of two Councils of the developing Christian Church under Constantine. It is now a museum-city, situated at the eastern end of a large and placid lake, its extensive but crumbling city-walls largely intact; only in parts can you climb up on them. It was also famous for its glazed tiles under the Turks; they can be seen in mosques and palaces throughout the country; their quality and colors were never again matched.

After two days exploring there, I went to Istanbul, a journey, by bus and ferry, of 5 hours. I got the same room in *Sehir Hotel* as last time, but without a fan, so it was very warm. I soon went out, intending to visit *Fetih*, but he wasn't there, and a friend told me the authorities had ordered him to remove his sidewalk stall. The *Blue Mosque* had also been cleared of its hawkers and vendors.

Walking along, someone tapped my back-pack as he passed by, and turned to smile at me. I wondered why, and suspicious that he might have tried to pick my bag, I checked it, to find the pocket unzipped. Had I forgotten to zip it up, or had someone opened it? It seems the guy was only drawing my attention to it, and I appreciated it, otherwise I could easily have lost my camera! Another time, in a crowded alley, there was a fat woman in front of me, blocking my way, and I was jostled from behind, and *that* pocket was picked; luckily, my camera wasn't in there at the time, so I lost only some small things; that's how they operate, it seems.

I saw some more of Istanbul, places where I'd never been before, as well as taking some long walks; I circumambulated the Golden Horn, which took longer than I thought it would. On the way back, I helped an old lady push her *borek* cart, and when I bought some of her pasties, she gave me extra.

Passing a cinema one day, I noticed the movie *Troy* was being shown, and having been to the actual place, went to see it. It was quite good, but the cinema was packed, and I had to sit near the front, never a good place to see a film.

At the Fatih mosque, I looked for school-teacher Ali, but he was not around, so I went to see Dusun, the headache man, and had tea with him. He told me he'd just bought a car and would drive me all over Istanbul if I paid for the gas. I didn't accept his offer.

I took a bus to the Black Sea entrance to the Bosphorus, which is where Greek legends say the '*Clashing Rocks*' of *Jason and the Argonauts*' fame were situated, but there wasn't much to see at this historic place. I then went in search of Yener, the kindly man who'd operated a travelers' restaurant before. I'd looked for him in '97, but the area where his shop had been had changed so much, and of course, I didn't find him. This time, I made more inquiries, and finally met someone who showed me a magazine-article about him; he'd died 7 years before! If only I'd made the same inquiries in '97, I might have seen him! I met the publisher of the *Sultanahmet News*, a nice man named *Ercument*; who served me tea, we had a good talk, and he gave me a copy of the magazine I wanted with the article about Yener.

For years, I had wanted to walk over one of the two bridges that spanned the Bosphorus, linking Europe to Asia, but knew it was not allowed. Even so, I decided to try, so went to the bus-station to get a bus over, and there met a particularly helpful man who told me he had worked in Amsterdam for 20 years; he spent quite a while helping me get the right bus. I was soon over the bridge, but was unable to take any good photos on the way. I got off immediately the other side, and went to the bridge-police-station, where I tried to wheedle permission to walk back across the bridge, saying I wished to take some photos, but was refused. My persistence, however, resulted in 2 policemen driving me back

over, stopping halfway for me to get out and take some photos, then driving me all over the place ~ *Besiktas, Taksim, Levent* ~ before returning to the place where we'd started. There, they told me to wait in the car while they went into the station, then came out and drove back over the bridge again, this time dropping me where I wanted to get out. Why they did this, I don't know, as their English was almost non-existent, but when I got out of the car, they requested me not to publish the photos I'd taken on the bridge. It was quite an adventure!

I went to Akbiyit Street to see Ercument again, and he introduced me to two of his friends, and we had a very interesting time, at a sidewalk table drinking tea and eating fruit. One of them, a lady, although she spoke English quite well, got Ercument to translate something for her, not daring to say it herself; it came back: "She wants to know if you would like to spend the night with her." I was shocked, but laughed it off. Maybe she was just joking. I don't think she was a whore. I gave Ercument my sole copy of *BOLEH TAHAN*, as we'd been talking about Gallipoli.

Istanbul has a very good archaeological museum, where I'd been before, but after buying my ticket to visit again, I discovered that galleries I particularly wanted to see were closed for renovations.

Long having wanted to visit Tunisia and Morocco, I got a round-trip ticket, and left for the airport, where baggage screening was very strict; almost everyone's bags ~ even check-in baggage ~ were opened. There was no vegetarian food on the flight for me, even though the travel-agent assured me my request had been noted; I had to make do with bread and cheese ~ the very least of my hassles that were to come. Upon arrival in Tunis, there was no visa-fee, but it took ages to get through Immigration. It was a hassle declaring my currency, and worse trying to get a taxi into the city; it should have been no more than five Dinars to the city-centre, but the meter went haywire, and the driver insisted on seven dinars; eventually, I gave him six.

It was a nightmare trying to find a hotel in the old quarter, especially as it was very hot; the hotel-keepers were rude, and the rooms I was shown were no good. I was helped by a young guy named Fatih, who I met at one of the hotels, and after going with

him to several other hotels, eventually got a room with attached bathroom for 15 D, but without a fan; I settled for it rather than go on looking. Tunis lacked the friendly atmosphere of Istanbul. Almost no-one spoke English, but French; it was very backwards, considering the number of non-French-speaking visitors.

The next day, I went out early to explore and search for another hotel, but got lost in the labyrinth of the *souk* before coming out at clearer streets. I checked several hotels ere deciding on one, and went back to get my bags. Fatih arrived at that point and insisted on accompanying me, only expecting more money (I'd given him 10D the day before). After checking in again, I went to look for a cyber-café, and Fatih wanted to drink coffee ~ at my expense, of course; I refused, and told him I wanted to be on my own; he left, and I didn't see him again; I couldn't do with him hanging around. I wanted to visit the ruins of Carthage in particular, but it was so hard to get information anywhere, so I went to the airline office to change my booking to Casablanca, giving up any idea of seeing the sights of Tunisia ~ too hard to get around. Returning to the hotel, I startled the porter in my room; he wasn't expecting me to return so soon; he assured me that he hadn't touched anything. I'd locked my bags before going out anyway, anticipating this.

Two days later, I flew out to Casablanca, only to repeat the same experience. Fed-up, I returned to Istanbul, and was happy to be back there again, even though my room at the *Sehir* (on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor this time), caught lots of cigarette-smoke drifting up from the sidewalk café below; the bathroom was also not-so-clean).

After shopping around for a ticket, and making a reservation to fly out to Malaysia 10 days later, to fill in the time, I set off to visit several places in the south. The first was *Pakukkale*, where I'd been before, but which was good to visit again; I spent a while in the Roman ruins of Heirapolis, pondering on how a once-proud and prosperous city like this could be destroyed and made desolate by the forces of nature; it was quiet and peaceful there, and I ate ripe figs from a tree I came across. Since my previous visit in '97, most of the hotels and shops that were there at the time had been demolished in order to protect the travertine pools. From Pamukkale, I made a trip to *Aphrodisias*, another ancient Greco-

Roman city, wandering around the remarkable ruins; I could only wonder what it must have been like as a flourishing metropolis. I have a strong feeling for that period of history.

**B**ack in Canakkale, I stayed with Ali and Aiten for a few more days. I joined Ali on the Gallipoli-tour again, with a nice lunch in a restaurant to start off with. He also arranged for me to do the Troy-tour. It was my second time at Troy, and the young guide ~ being a protégé of Ali ~ took good care of me. I returned to Istanbul the next day, provisioned with food by Aiten to eat on the way.

**M**y flight was in the afternoon, so I had time to check my email and make a last visit to the Blue Mosque, where I often used to meditate. The shuttle-bus came and took me to the airport, where the staff at the MAS desk told me I needed an ongoing ticket from Malaysia; but I said I'd never needed one before, and thought that maybe the rules had changed since my last visit; I had to sign a paper saying that I'd understood this, and was allowed to proceed. I changed into my robes in a toilet, and dozed fitfully on the 10-hour flight; I seem unable to sleep well on planes, and always wake up sweating. Because of that, I prefer not to sleep.



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## RESUMED TALKS

**T**here were long queues at the Immigration desks in K.L. (usually, you can just go straight to the desks), but finally, I was through and greeted by DV, who was beginning to wonder where I was. We were soon back in Malacca, another trip over. DV's daughter, Katrina, had moved in, temporarily, with her little brother, vacating her a/c room for me.

I spent 2 weeks in Malacca, during which I got a round-trip ticket to Kathmandu valid for a year, and made my booking, but then decided to delay the flight and make a short speaking-trip up the east coast, which I'd not done for a few years. I emailed Ching



Wei ~ my old translator in K.L. ~ and asked if he could arrange it. After some days, he replied saying that not only had he arranged talks for me in 2 places on the east coast ~ Kuantan and Kuala Trengganu ~ but also in Kelang and K.L. Well, I'd not expected or wanted him to arrange so much, but agreed, and left Malacca at the end of August. DV dropped me at the bus-station, and while waiting for my bus to Kuantan, a young woman came past and put her hands together in greeting; she then came and sat beside me and started to talk; we got into Dharma, and she soon started to cry, but her tears were of joy. If only I could meet someone like this every week ~ every day, it would be too much! It gave me a real boost!

Anyway, I gave 3 talks in the big, new and beautiful Kuantan temple, the first of which was the best; attendance at the others was much diminished; maybe my presentation was not suitable for them. Well, sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose.

From Kuantan, I proceeded on to Kuala Trengganu, five hours away. There, I was accommodated in a house the temple had rented while it was being rebuilt; I had space and time to myself there, and gave two much-better-received talks.

From Trengganu, I flew to K.L. rather than take the bus, and was met at the airport by Ching Wei, who was very happy to see me again. He conducted me to Port Kelang, where he'd arranged for me to stay in a small Tibetan Buddhist Society, and give a talk that night. With his able translation, this went very well. My stay there was also alright, but there was no phone, as they were afraid of visiting lamas making long international calls, as had happened before; so I wasn't able to send email from there, but had to take my laptop to someone's home for that; it was a bit inconvenient, but what to do?

The next night, I gave a talk to a large group of English-speaking people at another center, and this led to other things. After that, I gave more talks in other places, including the Maha Vihara at Brickfields. All but one of them went very well.

There is an active Buddhist center in K.L. by the strange name of *W.A.V.E.*, which stands for *Wisdom Audio and Visual Exchange*. They print huge numbers of books for free distribution, but almost

all are strictly Theravada, and most are very dry. Although aware of my views about Theravada, whenever they knew I was in town, they invited me to talk there, and I generally got a good hearing, apart from the house-holder's wife, Pearly, who was somewhat of a fanatic, while he, Eric, was just the opposite. Anyway, this time, too, a talk was arranged for me there, and while I didn't speak as eloquently as at other times, it was still alright, and I enjoyed it. Afterwards, a young man asked me to bless him, and I asked him if he didn't have enough blessings already that he wanted more. I agreed to do it, however, and sat there concentrating and sending him good vibes ~ which to me is what it is all about ~ while he sat on the floor in front of me. After a couple of minutes or so, I opened my eyes, and asked him if he felt better. He then opened *his* eyes, which he'd closed, and said he hadn't heard anything, to which I replied, "I didn't say anything". Everyone laughed, including him. "There," I said, "you got it".

A talk had been arranged for me at Brickfields Maha Vihara, and Mr. and Mrs. Lim ~ the couple who ran the Center where I was staying in Kelang ~ offered to drive me, but concerned that the traffic might be heavy, as it often is, we started early, and got to K.L. with much time to spare. To use it up, they took me to a shopping-mall to eat and drink something; I'd already eaten, so had just a cup of tea. Then, Mrs. Lim went to the toilet, but was away so long that we decided to leave without her, as it was almost 8 o'clock; Mr. Lim handed a note to the waiter for her telling her to get a taxi to follow us, but just then she reappeared; she'd been shopping, and not merely to the toilet! I was not impressed! We got to the temple just on time, and Dhammananda preceded me into the hall where a large audience was assembled, and introduced me. He sat beside me throughout ~ to monitor me, I knew, as that is his way ~ but I didn't care, and started my talk by apologizing for being a bit late, and said we'd got lost in a toilet. Not elaborating on this, I went on with my talk, but hadn't got very far when he interrupted me and spoke for 20 minutes or so. I did not object to what he said, as it was quite good, but later, when he tried to do it again, I said, "No; you've hijacked my talk, and you can talk anytime". Everyone laughed, because they could see what had happened, of course. He didn't interrupt me again,

and was uncharacteristically quiet afterwards. He'd done the same thing the last time I'd spoken there, so I was prepared this time. I'm sure no-one had ever spoken to him like this before, but he certainly needed it. If you invite someone for a talk, you should let him talk and finish, and then you may say something.

Being so near, I had to visit Dr. Soo, who had greatly helped me twice before, so I went to his clinic without first calling him, and he was not only surprised to see me, but excitedly told me that he'd finally become a Buddhist since we'd last met 5 or 6 years before; he was from a staunch Catholic family, you see, but always leaned towards Buddhism, and had finally committed himself. Knowing that he'd studied in Kashmir, I asked if he'd like me to bring him anything back from my forthcoming trip, and he said, "Just come back safely." Nice man.

About this time, I got an email from someone by the name of *Yen Ha Chau*, who had come across one of my books in a doctor's clinic, and enjoyed reading it so much that she decided to write to me on the email-address inside. Thus began a lively exchange which continues until I write this. She lives in Adelaide.



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### FURTHER TREKS

**B**ack in Malacca again, I prepared to fly out on September 28th. DV was unable to drive me to the airport, so got a taxi to drop me there. The flight was on time, and I changed planes in Bangkok, arriving in Kathmandu after noon. It always takes quite a while to get through Immigration there, as most people don't bother getting their visas in advance, and have to wait in line to pay for them in foreign currency. Passport duly endorsed, outside I was accosted by taxi-drivers and hotel-touts, and spent some time haggling. Finally, I got a taxi for Rs150, and on the way agreed to go to *Dolpo Guest House* in Thamel for a

room at Rs200. Actually, this was better than the Yeti Guest House of my last visit.

One of the first things I did was set about buying a bike, and went to see Dipendra, from one of the bike-shops I'd had dealings with the year before, thinking I could trust him. Alas, my trust was misplaced. He took me to a wholesaler, and I negotiated with him about a new China-made bike, not knowing that he was grossly overcharging me, but Dipendra must have known and colluded with him. And not only had I been overcharged and Dipendra must have got a cut of it, but as I was soon to find out, I'd bought a lemon; the bike was of poor quality, and it wasn't long before it began to give me trouble. I went to Trisuli on it, stopping off to see Milan Lama ~ the young boy who had helped Jivan after his spill ~ on the way. By the time I got there, nuts had fallen off, and the gear-levers needed replacing. Back in Kathmandu, my complaints to Dipendra were to no avail, and whenever I went to see the wholesaler, he was conveniently not there. I fixed up the bike as best I could and had some good rides on it even so.

I sent money through the post-office to Yam Bahadur and Bishal, but it was two weeks before they acknowledged receipt of it.

Then, I came down with a chest-infection, as I usually did when I was in Kathmandu, where the air is so polluted. I felt so ill at one point that I had to sleep for 14 hours; eventually, the antibiotics kicked in, and I recovered. The weather at this time was also quite bad, with lots of rain, so there was little I could do but wait for it to clear before setting off trekking, as such was my intention.

One day, I stopped by a small restaurant to ask if they had dahl-baht, and when told yes, said I'd return later. When I went back after some time, there were a number of young girls lounging around, but being the innocent, I didn't realize it was a whore-house. I ordered dahl-baht, but they asked so many questions that I thought they either didn't know what dahl-baht was or were stupid; I left, and went to look for dahl-baht elsewhere.

The weather cleared up, so, leaving some of my stuff at the hotel, I set off to *Syabrubesi*. We stopped at Trisuli for lunch, and this is probably where my 35mm camera disappeared, as I left my bag on a table while I went to the toilet ~ a mistake, but I was glad it

wasn't my digital. The road from thereon was rough, and we'd not gone far when, at an army-checkpost, someone approached me below the bus-window, and asked if I needed a porter (I was the only Westerner on the bus at this point); I asked him how much he wanted; he said Rs300 per day ~ much less than I expected ~ out of which he would pay for his own food. I agreed, and he climbed on the roof. An hour or so later, halfway to *Dunche*, there'd been a landslide, and we had to get off the bus and walk for 30 minutes to get another bus on the other side; Subha ~ my porter ~ carried one of my bags.

**A**t *Dunche*, I paid Rs1000 for a trekking-permit. It soon became dark, and the road was the worst I've ever been on. Half-an-hour out of *Syabrubesi*, one of the double rear tires blew out; many people got off and walked the rest of the way by a short-cut, although how they saw in the dark I don't know. We continued, which was very risky, given the state of the road. Arriving about 7:30, we checked into *Hotel Lhasa*, and I got a room at Rs100, and then discovered I'd not brought a sweater with me. I'd had two concerns ~ unfounded, as it turned out ~ about my bag on the roof of the bus: 1), that someone would sit on it and burst my water-bottles, and 2), that my porter, who I knew nothing at all about, would make off with it. At the hotel, discussing payment, he said he would like Rs150 on a daily basis, and the rest at the end of the trek; I felt good about this, as it meant he wouldn't gamble or drink it away, as many porters do at the end of the day. Nor did he smoke. At 26, he was the father of three small children, and needed to save all he could.

**M**aybe because of the strong coffee I'd drunk before going to bed, I couldn't sleep much, so got up to meditate, repair my bag and do odds and ends. The sound of the river behind the hotel was conducive to meditation; it was a nice place.

In the morning, when I went down, I met other trekkers, one of whom ~ a guy from Perth named Michael, who was on his way back ~ learning that I didn't have a sweater, immediately took off his fleecy jacket and gave it to me, saying he didn't need it any more and would only have thrown it away. I gratefully accepted.

Our first day was quite a walk, and Subha and I were each to see what the other was made of! Up and down over a rough track of many steps beside a raging river through jungle we went. I kept my eyes open for bamboo, but it was all too thin. At the first stop along the trail ~ a place named *Bamboo Lodge* ~ a porter assisting a Dutch guy on his way down found me a sturdy bamboo, and I cut it to size; it was a great help. I would not have been able to walk half as well without it, but Subha eschewed one, and indeed, for the first two days, wore only flip-flops, like most of the porters and guides; they are as sure-footed as mountain-goats!

Not having slept much the night before, I was tired when we reached *Rimche*, and decided to go no further that day. A room there ~ very basic, of course ~ was Rs50, and the dahl-baht (which in Kathmandu I got for just Rs35), Rs125, but I should say that most of the food and everything else had to be carried up by porters from the lowlands, and before that, brought from Kathmandu by bus; consequently, the prices increase the higher one gets. The lodge-keepers earn their living that way, and perform a useful service; without them, without porters, we would not get very far into the mountains. The toilet here, of the squat-type, was surprisingly clean, but I found it hard to squat at my age!

The next day, we set off for *Langtang*, and Subha was surprised at the pace I set. We overtook everyone, trekkers and Nepalese, and got there in less than four hours. The track had led upwards through forests ~ or jungle ~ and then we rose above the tree-line, where it was too cold for trees to grow. Entering the village of about 500 people and perhaps 20 lodges, one lodge-keeper called out to us to have a look at his rooms. When I asked how much they were, he said Rs10. asked again to make sure I had heard correctly, but it was so, and indeed, many lodges charged nothing at all for their rooms, making up for it in the food-prices. I decided to stay there and avail myself of the solar-powered hot-water for a shower and to wash some clothes.

Because I'd brought provisions like coffee, milk-powder, oats and biscuits, I was able to make coffee, tea and even porridge in my room with the thermos of hot-water I got every evening; I would also make a bottle of coffee, using cold water, for the walk ahead;

I did this every day, and it tasted really good. Because I wasn't able to boil water myself, I added purification drops to the water, and although it didn't taste very nice, I didn't notice any ill-effects.

The next hike generally takes about 3.5 hours, but we did it in 2; this place ~ *Kyanjin Gompa*, was the furthest point we would reach before turning back and retracing our steps to take another track leading in a different direction. But at Kyanjin Gompa (*Gompa* is Tibetan for monastery, of which there was one there), was a peak overlooking the settlement, with prayer-flags erected on it. Needless to say, this beckoned me, and thinking it would afford some great views, I set off to climb it; halfway up, however, I took the wrong track, and climbed and climbed without getting nearer to my goal. Eventually, after 2 hours of hard-going, during which I halted every few steps to get my breath, I reached a ridge above a glacier, and far below me, was the 'peak' I'd originally set out to reach. It took an hour to return to the lodge, by a different path; this one was very steep with few rocks in it to afford places for feet to grip, and it was easy to slip and slide; fortunately, I had no mishaps; my mishap of this trek was a few days ahead.

That night in Kyanjin Gompa, I began to suffer from sleeplessness, as I'd done the year before on the Solu Khumbu Trek, not knowing then that it was a symptom of altitude-sickness, which can be dangerous and even fatal. I could sleep no longer than 5 minutes at a time, and would then wake up, unable to sleep again for hours. As a result, I didn't sleep much at all, but the surprising thing was, I didn't feel tired, just like before.

The young keeper of the lodge we stayed in told me that he'd been a monk for several years, but when his mother fell ill, he felt he should disrobe to care for her, and the next thing he knew he was married; he expressed some regret for not having remained a monk, saying the life of a monk was so much freer than the family life; needless to say, I agreed with him.

Leaving Kyanjin Gompa, we descended in four hours to Rimche. I was even prepared to go further, but Subha wasn't enthusiastic about this, so I told him that if he could negotiate a free hot shower for me, I would spend the night there. I mentioned earlier that porters are not charged for accommodation, and the food

they eat is at a greatly-reduced price than the tourists are charged; I had yet to ascertain how much reduced.

The descent of the peak the previous day had hurt my heels, and upon checking, I discovered they had cracked. I had to put up with the pain until returning to Kathmandu, as I had no ointment with me. Every morning, it was hard to start because of the pain, but after a while, when I got into my customary swing, the pain receded. I also discovered that I'd had blisters that had burst. My trusty sandals served me well, and wearing a couple of pairs of socks with them, my feet weren't cold.

We followed the river down, then took a track that led upwards through the forest away from it, until we arrived at a village straddling a long ridge, and found rooms in one of the numerous lodges there ~ lodges that have sprung up over the less-than 20 years that people have been trekking in these parts. There are really too many lodges, which is why some of them don't charge for rooms, trying to attract people to stay. Bedding is usually provided without extra charge ~ though not always ~ and sometimes it is reasonably clean, and sometimes not; sometimes, it smells musty, or of vomit, but if it has been hung out in the sun as soon as the guests of the previous night have left, it smells fresh. Whatever, one has to put up with what one can get; in my case, I do not carry a sleeping-bag with me, as do most trekkers.

Day Six was a hard uphill slog, and we took what was supposed to be a short-cut. Now, Subha had never been this way before, but I told him we would probably be able to ask directions from people we met; however, four hours passed without us meeting anyone on the way. Luckily, the trail led us to a ridge where there were some tea-shops and small lodges, and we stopped there for some minutes to rest before going on to the next settlement an hour further on. This was a place called *Laurebina*, and in the lodge we chose to stay in, we met a Japanese couple and their 12-year-old daughter ~ the *Sakai* family ~ with their guide and porter. Below us, as far as we could see, was a sea of clouds. It was very cold that night, and there was no hot-water for washing when we got up ~ or indeed, even *cold* water! There was ice a foot thick in the water-tank outside. Solar-panels were not an op-



tion; they would not work there as they did in other places; the water in the pipes would freeze at night and burst them.

**B**y this time, I had somehow come down with dysentery, perhaps because of the unhygienic conditions of the kitchens and people preparing the food in the lodges; cleanliness is not really one of their virtues. This was quite inconvenient and embarrassing, and painful, too. Generally, I was able to control myself long enough to get to the toilet (whether in the lodges or somewhere outside), but there was only a watery issue, and lots of gas. I had no medication for this, but Mrs. Sakai kindly gave me some herbal pills which seemed to help somewhat; however, the condition continued. (I got dysentery when I was in Kathmandu in '74, and lost 35 pounds because of it, and I was only 155 pounds to begin with).

The next day was the shortest walk of the entire trek ~ two hours brought us to a series of small lakes in the mountains at a place called *Gosainkund*, just short of the snow-covered pass we would have to cross. There was a peak overlooking the small settlement, as at Kyanjin Gompa, and again, I felt the urge to climb it; this one, however, took only 45 minutes, and I had lunch upon return. The Sakais later caught up with us and stayed in the same place. It was even colder here than the previous day, but I got two blankets for my bed and passed a reasonably warm night

In the morning, the water in the cup in which I'd put my dentures had ice in it, but fortunately was not frozen solid. After breakfast, we set out for the pass, but contrary to my expectations, it wasn't so difficult, as the snow was firm and not slippery; it took us an hour-and-a-half to reach the top, then we began our descent, but this was the hardest and longest day of all, down ~ for the most part ~ rock-strewn paths. We halted for a while, and I shared a Snickers-bar and some biscuits with Subha, and sat in meditation for 20 minutes. We made it to the next settlement two hours later, but the lodge-people weren't very friendly, so I decided to press on to the next place, another two-and-half-hours on. Needless to say, we were very tired when we got there, almost nine hours after starting in the morning. After checking into one of the lodges, I sat a while waiting for some food and then went to bed, unaware until the morning, that the Sakais had arrived in the same lodge

three hours after we did. This was Subha's record-day as well as mine; previously, the longest he'd done was seven hours.

That day, we had reached the tree-line again, and because of the frequent cloud-layer, many trees were heavily draped in moss and lichens; the forest was dank due to lack of sunshine. We had two very cloudy days, and it tried to rain several times.

Misfortune lay just ahead of us. The next day, I set an energetic pace for two hours uphill, leaving Subha behind. Then we started to descend, and I was doing alright when suddenly, I tripped on a rock on a very steep part and fell forward and down, unable to save myself. A group of teenagers were directly behind me, but they never as much as asked if I were alright or offered to help in any way; they simply continued on their way. I was amazed and somewhat annoyed at this, and later explained to Subha that such indifference towards others is one of the causes of poverty (the day before, I'd stepped on a stone that moved beneath my foot, and, seeing this, he moved the stone and set it so it wouldn't rock anymore, out of consideration for others). Anyway, I picked myself up, fortunately not much hurt ~ only a scraped shin and a slightly bleeding nose and bruised hand; one of the lenses of my specs was scratched ~ and Subha caught up with me; he hadn't seen me fall. I was a bit more cautious after this for a while, but then resumed my regular pace. Actually, though, I was very lucky, as there were thousands of times on this trek where disaster lurked, but then, this is life in general, is it not? One must be careful, and cannot plan in advance the next step; each step must be taken without thinking about it, without hesitation, and it was very interesting to observe how the feet seemed to have an intelligence of their own and knew how to act very quickly ~ rather like a dance somehow; all this, you see, was unknown ground, and you could have no plans for it.

Pressing on, we reached *Chisopani*, having been caught in rain the last 20 minutes; it had been trying to rain for the past three days, and we had quite a shower. It wasn't easy to find a lodge, either they were fully booked or were asking Rs200. I was on the verge of pressing on to Kathmandu, but decided to back-track and try the first lodge we had passed as we came into the village.

This one was empty, but at first the boy was asking Rs200, which I refused to pay. He then asked how much I was prepared to pay, and although it was the best lodge we'd stayed in so far, I said Rs50, and surprisingly enough, he accepted, with bedding and hot shower included. I was happy to get cleaned up, even though the water wasn't very warm, and put on clean clothes. Two hours after this, the Sakais arrived, and hadn't got too wet in the rain.

**A**nd so, we came to our final day on the trail. Having shared the trail with the Sakais, and stayed at the same lodges, a friendship had developed, and before parting with them, we arranged to keep in touch and perhaps even visit (the husband was working in Kathmandu as a physical-education instructor under the auspices of the government of Japan). Subha and I went on ahead, and the first hour or so was uphill, and then we settled into the descent to a small town on the outskirts of Kathmandu Valley, where there are buses to the capital. Going down was pretty hard, especially the last 1½ hours, as concrete steps had been constructed up to the villages, and these were harder on the feet than the rough tracks. Eventually, however, we got down, quite worn out, and had to wait an hour for a bus. It was already full when it started, and gathered more people as it went along. But did you think those standing inside paid half-fare, or those on the roof traveled for free, or those hanging perilously off the sides paid less? Not at all! The bus-companies are only concerned with the maximizing of profits, and care nothing at all about the comfort or safety of their passengers, or of their own employees.

**R**eaching Kathmandu an hour or so later, I paid Subha off, and he seemed happy with the bonus I gave him. I was satisfied with him as he was honest and not greedy. He then went to get a bus back to his home-village, and agreed to return to Kathmandu early the next week in order to accompany me on my second trek, in the Annapurna region; I dared not leave it too late, as it would involve crossing a 5,500 m pass, and before long, deep snow would fall there. My shin was very sore; there must have been a battle going on inside. My cracked heels responded to the ointment I bought. I also had my specs repaired.

Sakai called and came to pick me up; I stayed overnight in their nice home and enjoyed it, even though their English wasn't too good. They dropped me off where I needed to go the next day.

I got my trekking-permit, at a cost of Rs2000, and Subha turned up, so we got tickets for the next day's bus to *Besisahar*. He brought me a bamboo staff to replace the one I'd given away. My bags were stuffed because of the extra food I was taking.



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## THE ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT

Our bus left on time, and we had a good run to Dumre, where we stopped for a while, and I got off to buy some mandarins, not realizing that the woman I bought them from was Ashok's mother! She also didn't recognize me. I then bumped into someone who remembered me from the previous year, and who told me that Ashok was waiting for me, hoping to go with me on the trek (I'd been in touch with him by email, you see). He took me back to Ashok's mother, and I explained that I already had a porter and couldn't take him, but that I might call in and see him on the way back from Pokhara. He should have been waiting in the market, though.

There was a delay on the road to Besisahar and when we got there, I had to get off to show my permit. Then, because the bus was going on to *Khudi*, we stayed on, but the road the rest of the way was almost as bad as that to Syabru, with the bus rocking like a boat on a rough sea! Several times, I was sure we would go over the side. *Khudi* was the end of the road, and from there we walked to *Bulbule*, to stay overnight. It was quiet and peaceful.

November 3rd ~ the day of the dreaded U.S. election, the results of which I did not learn until some days later ~ we set out on our first full-day's trek, but hadn't gone very far when who should catch us up but Ashok; he'd followed us from Dumre the previous

day and stayed overnight in Besisahar, walking from there. This put me in a dilemma, as I already had Subha with me, but he so wanted to go that I decided to take him, paying for his food along the way. He carried some of our baggage, making it easier for us, and we reached *Syange* at noon, where someone tried to persuade me to stay in his lodge; I wanted to continue to *Jagat*, but knew that Subha and Ashok were tired, so I flipped a coin: heads, we go on, tails, we stay. It came up tails. But then we discovered Ashok had forgotten his identity-card, and to proceed without it would be potentially dangerous, as we would pass several army check-posts, and he might be suspected of being a Maoist rebel. Not willing to risk trying to talk him through such check-posts and explain that I'd known him for 10 years already, we decided that he would have to go back; the army did not have a good record as far as human-rights were concerned, and was as guilty of unwarranted brutality and summary executions as their opposite counterparts, the Maoists. I gave him some money for his return trip, and we set off in different directions. On our way, Subha revealed that Ashok had told him during the night that he earned Rs5000 per month at his job at a Dumre furniture-factory, whereas he'd told me ~ as he had done last year, too ~ that he earned just Rs1600; and this was for an 8-hour day, 5½-day week. I'd wondered how anyone could survive on just Rs1600 per month, let alone support a wife and two kids on it! I'd sent him money several times to help him out. Now, Rs5000 isn't a fortune, but many people in many countries manage on that amount and less, as a matter of having to.

The manager of the lodge was named *Naru*, and by joking about the mythical Yeti, I soon found a way to turn our conversation Dharma-wards. Beside his lodge ~ and indeed, almost all along the trail to the highest point ~ ran a roaring river; we were seldom out of sound of this river until we parted company with it on the 7<sup>th</sup> day out. I told him that, in my childhood home there was a grandfather-clock with a sonorous *tick-tock, tick-tock*, but we had grown so used to it, and it was such a part of us, that we didn't hear it unless we made a special effort to do so. Just like this river beside your lodge, I said: you probably don't hear it or pay attention to it anymore, as it is here and you've grown used to it, whereas

visitors like myself, are very aware of it. This river, however, is your guru, constantly teaching and reminding you that life is like a stream, never still for a moment, but always changing. Listen to it now and then, especially when you are sad or things don't go as you would like them to, and try to understand that all things come and go, arise and pass away.

**Naru** ~ like both Subha and Ashok ~ had several small children; he also had to deal with complete strangers on a daily basis and try to satisfy their needs and wants, and sometimes, some of these strangers ~ of different cultures and temperaments ~ aren't easy to deal with; his life was not simply a matter of providing them with what they wanted in exchange for the money he needed from them. When I spoke to him about the river, interspersing my speech with a key Sanskrit word now and then, I could see that he was receptive and could understand, although he didn't know I was a monk, as I didn't tell him, and I wasn't in monk's attire. When I left him the next day, there was a light in his eyes that wasn't there when we'd arrived; I'd touched him.

This is known as the 'Annapurna Circuit Trek,' Annapurna being the main peak of a group of mountains in Central Nepal, many of which rise to over 7,000 meters asl, and Annapurna itself to over 8,000. The Annapurna Circuit is apparently the most-popular trek in the world, attracting people from all over ~ all a little crazy, like me, to want to do this in the first place, otherwise they wouldn't risk their lives so ~ and sometimes, the trails are quite crowded; with most people going up to *Thorung-la*, and few coming down; I was to understand why this should be later. The weather was warm, with clear skies; it was to remain so most of the way.

**We** passed several groups of porters busy cooking lunch beside streams ~ "Oh, we're just in time," I joked, but they didn't invite us. Other times, I asked people what time was the next bus; some realized I was joking, but others didn't.

I held a kitten along the way; it was so trusting and affectionate. You don't see many cats in Nepal; Nepalese don't seem to like them ~ they prefer damn barking dogs!

**High** on a narrow path, with the river far below us, we met a mule-train coming down. Unwisely, I took the precipice-side of the

track, and would have been alright had not one of the mules lurched slightly as it passed me, and one of the bundles on its back caught me just a little off-balance, tipping me over the side. Down I went, but luckily, at this point, the drop was not great ~ only a meter or so ~ and my fall was halted by a tree and some brush and stinging-nettles; only my dignity was hurt. Two mule-teers quickly hurried to haul me back up to the path, and I was left to pick half the jungle out of my clothes and woolen hat!

**We** frequently met or overtook mule-trains, and the paths were littered with their droppings; now and then, we came across mule 'piss-stops,' where the ground was sodden and brown from mule-pee. These animals are docile; hard-working and uncomplaining, they carry huge loads, and in return are fed very meagerly. Often, they are led by boys as young as 12 or 13 ~ no school for them! ~ and they cover greater distances in a day than I did during my 5 - 7 hours. I saw two mule-trains loaded with empty beer-bottles, the result of a demand by mainly trekkers to indulge in what is a distinct luxury in these isolated places; in Kathmandu or Pokhara, a bottle of beer might cost Rs100 or so ~ having no interest in it, I really didn't know ~ while up in the mountains, it would be double that. But at least glass bottles have some value and are recycled, unlike the plastic 'mineral-water' bottles, which are simply thrown away, to litter the landscape for countless years. On my treks, I carried several half-liter plastic Coke bottles, which I filled with water and added purification liquid to each; this was enough, apparently, to kill most of the microbes and harmful bacteria. Before setting out in the mornings, I generally made two bottles of coffee ~ cold, of course, but tasty, nevertheless ~ using Nescafe and powdered-milk; these usually lasted me until I halted for the day.

**The** trails, for the most part, were uneven and rock-strewn, and seldom or for very long did we have the pleasure of smooth and even patches. The rocks on them varied in size from huge boulders, down through head-sized, to pebbles that crunched and slid underfoot; the hardest to deal with I found to be the irregular-shaped, cobble-sized stones, which could twist and roll dangerously when stepped on.

Through and in the vicinity of some villages, people had set flat stones in place to create steps, making for easier walking, while in others, nothing at all had been done to improve upon what nature had created. Once, rounding a bend in the track, I saw an elderly man tossing loose stones from the path. There were no cameras or reporters around to record this; was he doing it because he saw a need and cared about others? It was the only time I saw anyone doing anything like this. Numerous times, I saw and heard people cutting trees in the ever-dwindling forests, but not once did I see anyone planting saplings to eventually replace them. How might it be, I wondered, if the lamas came out of their monasteries ~ such as exist in some places along the trails ~ and set an example to the people by working on the tracks and planting trees instead of merely chanting twice a day and otherwise whiling away their time on frivolous pursuits such as playing cards and flying kites, as I sometimes observed them doing?

Landslides are common in the mountains, and we often had to scramble across debris of scree, dust and shale where once there had been a path, and which, at any moment, could shift again, sending us down a slope or over a cliff to almost-certain death. And at the best of times, the paths we trod were rarely more than a meter wide, with great drops on one or sometimes both sides. From time to time I wondered at my foolhardiness in undertaking such a venture, when limbs may easily be broken, days away from any medical assistance, where even helicopter-rescue ~ very costly, when it can take place ~ is not an option. Moreover, like the people who live in these regions, I have no insurance, and am vulnerable; and knowing this, I still do what I do.

We were above the tree-line by this time, surrounded by snow-capped peaks, with frozen water-falls hanging down their sides. As the sun began to sink behind the mountains, almost immediately it became very cold, even though it remained light for a while. Some lodges had electric-light, powered by solar-panels.

Sometimes, during four or five hours of hard trekking, I might take only one break, although I told Subha to stop and rest whenever he felt like instead of trying to keep up with me all the time, and indeed, he heeded my advice and was often half-an-hour behind



me, although towards the end of the trek, spurred on, perhaps, by me saying that he seemed to be getting older while I was getting younger, he made a distinct effort to reduce the gap between us, so that I joked more with him and said I was having a hard time keeping up with him, even though he was always behind me. It was good to come to a settlement and halt for the day at some lodge, with the possibility of a hot shower ~ such a luxury! Only once did I pay Rs100 for a room, and that was at 'High Camp' when there was little choice; sometimes, I paid Rs50, but usually, only Rs40. Understand, though, that rooms were tiny, often with paper-thin walls or gaps between the boards, but good enough, with a quilt or two, for a night; and fortunately, nowhere did I encounter bed-bugs, fleas, or lice. Also, the toilets ~ mainly of the squatter-type ~ were remarkably clean, if simple, and only once did I come across one that was dirty, and this was in a lodge named *Nirvana*, strangely enough! This toilet-cleanliness is undoubtedly due to the requirements of the trekkers, as the locals aren't noteworthy for their hygiene, and indeed, were we to think too much about it, we would hesitate to eat anything.

**Now**, I don't know what I smelled like at times, but I think not too bad, as I'm pretty sensitive about such things. However, I came to see that Subha, though he'd been serving trekkers for 4 years, wasn't very fond of water, and I had to urge him to take a shower when such was available, as he quickly came to smell decidedly pungent, and was unpleasant to be near. At one point, I asked if he had any soap, and when he said he didn't, I gave him some of mine, just as I gave him some of my socks when I saw his one-and-only pair was worn out. Although he had money to spare from the Rs200 I gave him every day this time (followed, at trek's end, by the full amount), he was reluctant to spend any. He was seldom charged more than Rs50 for his large rice-meals, which he ate twice a day, while I paid upwards of Rs120 for the same thing; he was also served free tea. But if I've noted some of his less-positive qualities, I must hasten to say that he never complained about anything, or asked anything more from me than what we'd agreed upon. I knew he considered my pace fast ~ and indeed, we completed the whole trek ~ from when we started in Kathmandu to our arrival in Pokhara ~ in just 13 days, when

most other people took at least 16. I did this, not because I was in a hurry to finish it and get out of the mountains, but because I wanted to push myself and see what I was capable of, and I felt fit and well because of it.

**N**eedless to say, as we progressed up the trail, it got colder and colder until at night, the temperature fell well below zero. Still, the weather remained fine and clear, and no snow fell. Even at altitudes of 3 - 4 thousand meters asl, however, there were mice in the lodges, and several times, I became aware of them getting at the foodstuffs in my bags.

**O**f course, the views from up there ~ as they had been from other places ~ were fantastic, and worth all the bother we'd undergone. As I mentioned earlier, the weather really favored us, and we hardly saw a cloud until the final 3 days. The mountains were so clear-cut against the empty blue sky, except when the sun, beating down on them, occasionally caused spume. Sometimes, we would see eagles soaring above, and there were the ubiquitous Himalayan choughs. Other forms of wildlife were rarely encountered ~ no snow-leopards or bears, and hardly a yeti in sight! Yetis, to be sure, often came up in my conversations, and when asked if I were married ~ a frequent question ~ I used to say, "Not yet; I'm too young for that; and anyway, I'm looking for a nice young yeti-girl first." Well, since there's next-to-no-chance of finding one, I guess I'll continue to escape, and remain single!

**We** passed through various kinds of terrain, from cultivated areas, thick jungle, oak- and pine-forests, and barren heights above the tree-line, where almost nothing grew ~ *almost* nothing; there was always some kind of hardy vegetation, clinging to and between the rocks, even if it was only moss or lichen, beautiful upon close examination. Numerous waterfalls cascaded from riven cliffs, some of them for hundreds of meters, some raging torrents, and others like fine-combed hair, just drifting down.

**E**ach day, as we ascended, we soon found it necessary to shed our jackets, hats and gloves, and before long, our sweaters, too, which we'd donned before setting out; we became warm from our exertions, as well as from the heat of the rising sun. There was a great difference in temperature between light and shade, and we

knew, as we watched the shadows retreat before the advancing sunlight, that we'd soon be warmer.

**A**fter a few days of paying the menu-prices in the lodges, I found it was possible to haggle, and upon arriving at a lodge, I would first ask about the price of a room, and was usually able to get a small reduction, from Rs50 to Rs40 (I'd had good training in the flea-markets in England, where haggling is expected; everyone likes to feel that they've got a bargain), and then asked how much dahl-baht cost, and when told, the expression on my face often caused them to ask what I would like to pay, and this was quite a bit less than the menu-price. Sometimes, I paid Rs70 or Rs80, rather than the marked price of Rs150/Rs180.

**O**nce, I was stopped by a young hippy-looking guy who claimed he was a Maoist and demanded money, but I concluded he had either been smoking dope or was drunk, so went on my way. Reaching *Tal*, I came to a hotel named *EVERGREEN*, which reminded me of Bet in Manila, so took a room there as the only guest. I had a chat with someone who'd been on the same bus from Kathmandu with us. He wasn't working at Evergreen but was attached to the medical-center as a doctor. Slowly, I was able to open his mind somewhat, and he expressed a desire to accompany us to *Dharapani* the next day. When pressed as to what I did, I told him I am a monk, but on the condition he didn't tell anyone else, as even Subha didn't know. I told him what I thought of Christians trying to convert Nepalese, and he was in complete agreement with me; he said he was an atheist.

**We** met the doctor at his hotel, and his company along the way was quite pleasant; normally, because Subha's English was only rudimentary, I walked in silence. We reached Dharapani in just under 2 hours, and he left us to make a phone-call. I registered at the check-post, then we stopped to rest a while a little further on.

**As** I mentioned earlier, there were many foreign trekkers on these trails, but I noticed, as I'd done on other treks, that a high percentage of them never greeted other trekkers when they met or passed, but went along with unsmiling faces; sometimes, they did not even return one's greeting when addressed first, and I often wondered why this should be, until near the end, I felt like shout-

ing at them: '*Good bloody morning!*' Nor was it only the foreigners who behaved like this, but Nepalese, too, until I calculated that only about 10% of the people met along the way ~ native or foreign ~ would deign to wish others 'Namaste' or 'Good Morning' ~ except for little children, who had learned to tap-into the tourist-trade, and whose *Namaste* was usually a prelude for a request for "*One pen*", "*Sweet/chocolate*", or "*One rupee*".

The campers or people trekking in groups were the most stand-offish ~ as well as their guides and porters, who seemed to have been instructed not to speak to anyone but the people they were escorting. They appeared to be insulated not just by warm clothes, but in their attitudes. Of course, to put together a camping expedition must cost a lot of money and logistical-arrangements, as they carry ~ at least, the porters do ~ all they require, including all their food, cooking-gear, kerosene, and even toilet-tents! Their porters are extremely strong, and commonly carry 50 kgs or more, by a strap around their foreheads. Perhaps they are induced to do this by the trekking-agencies, for extra pay, but it is still inhumane to expect and allow them to do this, as it reduces them to beasts of burden. The agencies in places like Kathmandu or Pokhara who organize such expeditions for foreigners are only partly to blame for this, wishing to maximize their profits ~ something common all over the world ~ but the campers themselves must also share responsibility for seeing it every day and allowing it to go on before their eyes, when they could easily employ more porters to share the loads. Would the campers themselves ~ *could* they ~ carry such loads as they expect their porters to carry all day for even 50 meters? If they could not, then they shouldn't expect others to do it for them, regardless of the fact that they can afford to pay them. The pack that I paid Subha to carry for me weighed no more than 15 kgs at its heaviest, and got lighter as we went along; my own stuff, divided into two smaller bags, weighed about the same.

One day, I greeted a group of middle-aged women, and was so surprised by their cheery response ~ they were Australians ~ that I felt I had to comment on it, and told of my observations; they said they had noticed it, too, and also didn't understand.

I did make some friends on the trek, though. Reaching *High Camp* ~ the last of the lodges before the Pass ~ *The Pass*, which I'd been kind of dreading, and I'm sure I wasn't alone in this ~ I fell into conversation with some Norwegians, somewhat younger than me, but we seemed to have much in common (one was a therapist). I lingered over lunch with them ~ two men and a woman ~ and later had dinner with them. The hours passed quickly in their company, as they tend to do when you're enjoying yourself, and we exchanged books and email-addresses.

The previous year, when I did the second-half of this trek, smoking was permitted in the dining-rooms of the lodges ~ or at least, tolerated ~ where people would gather in the evenings and sit around a fire of some sort before retiring to their unheated rooms; the smoke there was often so thick that I would soon leave in protest. This year, however, it was different; the lodge-keepers must have decided to conform to the standard of lodges on other trails, where smoking in the dining-rooms was not allowed. Progress!

The sandals that had borne me throughout the Langtang trek were in need of repair, but being a veteran traveler, I carry with me things that enable me to deal with such contingencies, and over two days, I had them almost as good as they'd ever been. In my baggage, I had a spare pair, and higher up the trail, I switched to wearing these, and indeed, wore them to cross the pass; needless to say, I wore socks with them, and my feet weren't cold; the sandals didn't let me down.

Again, like at high altitudes on my other treks, I couldn't sleep more than 10 minutes at a time ~ probably because of the thin air ~ and found it very hard to sleep again; some nights, I slept no more than an hour, but the strange thing was, I wasn't at all tired, and in fact, felt energized. After the night below the high pass, we climbed 600 meters to the top, some of the way on iced-over paths, then descended 2,200 meters to our next rest-stop, a total of 6 hours; this was really moving! No need to say that there was quite a change in temperature. Gasping and panting as I plodded upwards, with numerous stops to get my breath, my lips and tongue were so cold that I couldn't speak clearly; it felt like I'd just been to the dentist and the anesthetic hadn't yet worn off.

**N**ow, I said that no snow fell while we were trekking, but there were some patches of old snow on both sides of The Pass ~ some of them over 100 meters in extent ~ which we had to cross. The actual path in these places was iced over and very risky to cross, and the smallest slip could send one plunging over the edge, so we had to climb onto the snow-covered slope above and make our way very cautiously. Others had done this before us, so there were footprints in the 20 cm-deep snow for us to follow and use, and the snow, though still crisply soft, wasn't wet, so our feet remained relatively dry. I was greatly relieved when we were over these snow-patches, and for the rest of the trek, we didn't have to deal with any more *hima* ~ (Sanskrit for snow).

**D**escending on the other side was harder than going up, and I could see why most people did the trek in an anti-clockwise direction, as the trail varied from rocky through gravel to dust, with treacherous patches of ice and snow to traverse; it was often very steep. Far below us, we could see several small settlements.

**We** stopped an hour short of Muktinath for our first sit-down rest of 15 minutes, then continued, with a short break at the temple to see the 'eternal' flame, and reached the check-post at Muktinath, 5 hours after we set out; we were the first of those who'd left the High Camp that morning, and had made excellent time, considering that the norm was 7 hours. We'd seen the last of the snow.

**P**assing on, we stopped at *Jarkot* for dahl-baht, and might have stayed there if the lodge-keeper had lowered his room-rate. We continued, stopping at a couple of wayside lodges to check rates before settling for *Nirvana*, where I got a bucket of warm water for shaving and washing, and felt greatly refreshed.

It was very windy there but became calm as the sun set; we were near the Kali Gandaki Valley, where strong winds blow from noon until night. I tended my feet, which had become sore again from the long descent; my fingers and thumbs were also cracked. I did not know how Subha felt about my pace, but he didn't complain.

**Down** we went, reaching Jomsom, where I registered at the check-post, and stopped a while before going on to Marpha, just over an hour further on; by the time we got to this picturesque place, it was very windy and rather cold. I checked into *Snow*

*Leopard Guest House*, outside of which was a sign listing the facilities, one of which was '*Modern Ammonites*' ~ a bit of a contradiction in terms! They meant *amenities*, of course. I got a nice room there and washed some clothes. My nose was sore from excess mucus; it seemed to freeze in my nostrils.

I don't remember how many bridges we crossed, but it was a large number. Many were modern steel suspension-bridges of recent construction, and these were easy to cross, but others ~ though also strung on steel cables ~ had only boards to walk on, and in some cases, the boards looked as if they could give way at any time, sending you hurtling into the foaming stream far below. Yet other bridges were simply logs across a stream, and without a steady sense of balance, you could easily fall into the icy water; fortunately, I managed alright, although there were times when my feet got a bit wet crossing small streams running across the path ~ and there were many of these ~ by means of stepping-stones that were not always strategically-placed and sometimes didn't even reach the surface.

Reaching Tatopani, I checked into the hotel I'd stayed in before, and went down to soak in the hot water. For Rs10, you may lie there for as long as you like and soak the dirt off your skin and the aches from your muscles and bones. I soaked for over an hour, during which time Subha appeared, never intending to go in himself, even though it was his 3rd time in Tatopani. After much urging on my part, however, he got in, and as a result, my olfactory nerves were not bothered by his b.o. for a while afterwards.

From Tatopani, we made the long climb, taking 7 hours ~ during which, we rose 1,600 meters ~ to Ghorapani, and by the time we got there, it was wreathed in cloud. I thought it would rain, but this interpretation was incorrect, and it didn't; it was certainly very cold up there, however, on that, our final night out.

Halfway to Ghorapani, a young boy in a village asked me ~ in quite-clear English ~ for medicine. When I asked what for, he indicated one of his toes, the nail of which was torn and infected. Well, having suffered similarly myself and knowing how painful it could be, I gestured for him to sit on a low wall nearby, while I took out my medical-kit, applied some antiseptic cream to the

nail, covered it with gauze, and taped it up. He winced a bit while I was doing this, but when it was finished, he got up and walked away without a word of thanks. Now, I'd known for some time, but never understood, that Nepalese ~ and Indians ~ rarely say thanks; it doesn't appear to be part of their culture, as it is with ours. This boy knew enough English to be able to ask me for medicine, so he ought to have known how to say thanks, too. I'd not tended his wound with the idea of being thanked, but his non-thanks was quite glaring. Gratitude is an admirable quality, and you would expect it to be part of any culture.

(Over many years, I observed that Indians seldom say things like, 'Thank-you; please come again', when I visited their shops or restaurants in countries where they've taken up residence. I saw it so many times in Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, the US and UK; it was/is so rare, that when it does happen, it stands out! If this really is the custom in India, surely they'd notice the contrary manner in other countries, where they adopt ways and adapt to other things different from what they knew before ~ and sometimes negative things ~ so why not this more-courteous way?)

As had happened on my other treks where there were long and steep descents of hours and hours at a time, so, too, on this one: my heels, bearing the brunt of my weight, cracked and became very painful. Luckily, I had ointment for it with me this time, and at our halts, would apply it and bandage the affected parts so that there was some relief and improvement instead of further deterioration. Several places on my right thumb and fingers also cracked ~ perhaps due to constantly gripping my staff ~ and I frequently noticed people looking at the colored electrical tape ~ green, blue, yellow, or red ~ that I used instead of band-aids, as it stayed on longer. Because of the pain from these cracked heels, I could walk only slowly when I first started off in the mornings, but after a while, fell into my usual stride, and the pain receded.

I had no trouble with my weak right ankle until the last day, when, during the long descent of 6 hours from Ghorapani at 2,750 mts to the motorable road at 1,580 meters, it started to ache, causing me to cry out at times. However, it didn't give way, and I was able to maintain a good speed.



**B**efore starting this trek, I had heard that, towards the end, Maoist insurgents were intercepting trekkers and extorting as much as Rs4000 each from them, calling it a 'donation'. As we went on, we continued to hear such tales, and then a new one ~ that the army had been in and cleared them out. This report was later modified ~ that they had merely moved the scene of their *modus operandi*, and were, in fact, better placed to make their 'collections'. As we approached this area, therefore, I was more-or-less prepared to have to pay, as I'd heard that a refusal to do so would result, at the very least, in being turned back and not allowed to proceed any further. I wasn't petrified by fear, though, and as we went on, deeper and deeper into rebel-infested territory, no-one made any attempt to stop us, and we got through without seeing a single Maoist ~ or at least, none who identified themselves as such.

**A**nd so, my longest trek in terms of distance drew to a close, and sooner than I expected. We reached the road all of a sudden, as it were; it was a bit of an anti-climax to get back to 'civilization' and find taxis waiting to take people like us to Pokhara, 35 kms away. That day, Nov 14<sup>th</sup>, happened to be the culminating day of the Hindu Festival of Lights ~ *Deepavali* ~ and if any buses were running, they were nowhere in sight. After waiting in vain for some time, therefore, I negotiated with one of the cab-drivers and agreed upon a fare, but before getting into his battered vehicle, I gave my staff to a tea-shop owner, saying that if he saw another trekker who might have some use for it, he could pass it to him. With that, we started on our first car-journey in two weeks, and within an hour, had checked into a hotel in Lakeside. I got Subha a room at half-rate, but having slept free the whole trek, he wasn't happy with my negotiations on his behalf, even though I intended to pay for his room myself. He spoke about a place down the road where he could sleep for free, but by this time, he'd availed himself of the shower, so I told him he could not leave now. I paid him off, giving him the \$50 bonus that my friend, Victor, had requested me to, and although he was surprised by this, he hardly thanked me. He left for Kathmandu the next day, while I stayed in Pokhara to rest for a few days.

Internet charges had come down to a reasonable rate since the previous year, so I soon began to write an account of this trek, as

I'd done about the other one, and when I'd finished after 2 days, sent it off to a number of people. Some days later, I was surprised to get an email from Betty Dunstan, of all people; we resumed our correspondence for some months, until I grew tired of sparring with her; she was like a dog at a bone in an argument.

When I'd had enough of Pokhara, I bought some pastries from a local bakery, where the young guy was friendly and polite, and with these for the trip, got a bus to Kathmandu. It took ten long hours! There were two stops for food, and several checkpoints, with backed-up traffic; and such is the mentality of these people, that so many try to overtake and squeeze through, causing a greater jam. And all this time, I'd been holding on, careful not to fart, as I'd had diarrhea in the night and early morning. I got to the hotel and dashed for the toilet, just in time!

Fed-up with the bike I'd bought, I went to look at some others, and seeing one I liked, took it for a test-ride, and knew this was the one. I negotiated with the shop-owner, and although the price was rather high, I bought it. The other one I managed to sell at a loss, but was glad to get rid of the cheap thing!

I called the Sakais, and they invited me to visit them the following Sunday. In the meantime, I took several long rides, including up to Nagdhunga and down the other side to Naubise and beyond; the bike went well. I got a new bell for it, but it was a waste of money, as no-one paid any heed to it, and later, when I met a young guy who complained that even with a degree, he couldn't find a job, I told him his degree was like my bell ~ useless!

I weighed myself on the street, but when the dial read 76 kgs, I thought it must be wrong, so went to another, and the reading was 70 kgs; was there a conspiracy of scales against me?

One morning, I scolded someone in a cyber-place for repeatedly sneezing explosively and told him he shouldn't share his bacteria with others. I got stuck in a traffic-jam on my way to Patan, and was amazed at how many people tried to squeeze through, not seeing that they were only making it worse! Kathmandu has become so congested; there are far too many vehicles of all kinds on its narrow streets.

Sakai-san met me on his bike at the agreed-upon place, and led the way to his home nearby. There, they told me it was their 12<sup>th</sup> wedding-anniversary, and invited me to join them for lunch in a restaurant at the museum at Durbar Square; I felt honored that they should share their special day with me. The food was very nice; they joined me for vegetarian. Back at the house, I weighed myself on their scales, and was pleased at the reading of 70 kgs (if only it would remain at this!) I arranged to come a few days later and stay overnight.

Planning to go to India, I needed a visa, so duly got in line outside the Embassy, waiting for it to open. I got talking to a Jewish-Croatian woman from the US named *Vlasta*, who said she'd just done a course at Kopan; we had quite a lot to talk about, and were later joined by a guy from Tasmania named Ian, who said he was captain of a research-ship operating off Palawan. The time we had to wait ~ some hours ~ passed rather pleasantly. We exchanged email-addresses. I was told to come back again in a few days to apply for the visa; that morning was only to pay a fee of Rs300 to cover the cost of a telex which they claimed they had to send to one's homeland to check that one had no criminal record or anything, but I suspect it was just a scam to squeeze more money from us. Anyway, had they not heard of computers?

What could I do but go along with their silly and unnecessary game-playing? I applied for the visa, and paid the fee, and was told to come again to collect it the next afternoon. I went to the Sakais', taking with me a bag of stuff to leave there until I returned from India. I thought I would be back after their upcoming vacation in Thailand, where they would stay on a small island near Phuket. After breakfast on the roof, I took my leave of them, and later went for my passport. I was too early, and had to wait an hour outside, but eventually got it.

Thinking to visit Kopan, and see how it looked 30 years after I was there, I rode to Bodnath, but it had changed so much since I was last there, and had become a night-mare. I took the wrong way and got lost, ending up on a different hill, from where I could see Kopan, but by this time I was tired so returned to Kathmandu. Checking my email later, I got one from *Vlasta*, saying she'd like

to accompany me to Pokhara the next day, and asking me to call her as soon as possible. I'd already got my ticket, so I went to the bus-office again to make another reservation, and call and leave a message for her.

**B**ack at the hotel, I paid my bill, and left early in the morning. The bus was waiting, and Vlasta turned up. My bags and bike were loaded, we left on time, and had a good trip, talking most of the time. She told me that Ian was already in Pokhara and was waiting for us to contact him when we got there. It was a while before I began to wonder why she'd suddenly decided to leave in the middle of her meditation-course and go to Pokhara. Was she chasing one of us? She told me she'd been married twice, and both times ended in divorce; was she on the hunt?

**We** got off the bus in the town, and stopped at a cyber-café to email Ian; I went outside while she did this, and who should come by just then but Ian himself! We were surprised to see each other! We all walked down to Lakeside, where I checked into a hotel, and agreed to meet them later for dinner; Ian was staying somewhere above the lake, and Vlasta found a hotel somewhat nearer. We met at the appointed place and sat talking until our food came. I'd ordered spaghetti, and Vlasta had fish, even though she claimed to be vegetarian. Before I knew it, she had dumped a piece on my plate, saying, "Here, try this!" I told her off. When it came time to pay, I was embarrassed that we all had to 'go dutch'; if I'd known earlier, I would have offered to pay for all. We then went in our different directions. My correspondence with Vlasta ~ as I'd come to think of her by then ~ didn't survive, as I told her I didn't want to continue. She had many fantasies and ideas, and was always changing her mind; she also had the nasty habit of trying to manipulate people; maybe it was her husbands who had pressed for divorce! Ian also escaped her clutches.

**The** next day, I went to visit Santosh, my guide from the previous year; since then, he'd got married, and I gave him a gift of money. It was good to see him and his family again. At the bakery, the young guy was happy to see me again; his name was Liladhar. He said he would make something sugar-free for me.

I contacted Bishal, the boy who'd helped me with my dislocated shoulder, and he came to see me, out of work. His wife had given birth since I last saw him, and he asked me to help him set up a small business, but I was tired of people trying to fleece me, so I bought him some provisions instead of giving him money.

On the way back to town from a long ride one day, a motorbike turned right in front of me without looking to see if anything was coming; another inch or so and I would have hit him. It wasn't the last time this would happen.

After some long rides in and around Pokhara, I got ready to leave for India. As I was about to get on the crowded bus, a young guy somewhat plaintively asked if I wanted a guide-porter; he could see that I was about to get on the bus and wouldn't need a guide, but still he asked, obviously hard-up; he stayed in my mind and I wish I'd given him something). It was a nine-hours' trip, and I was tired when we got there.

I'd passed through Butwal before but without staying. I soon found a hotel, and haggled for a room, before going out on my bike. Then, something happened that would have far-reaching effects: overtaking a rickshaw, my right pedal hit the kerb and bent; the chain also came off. I searched for a place where I could get the pedal straightened, but no-one could do it; eventually, because they were so cheap, I had new peddles fitted, not knowing that, like shoes, they were right-and-left specific.

I caught a bus to *Nepalganj* the next morning, not wanting to go to Gorakhpur again. Like the previous day, the trip took 9 hours, and upon arrival, instead of loading my bike up ~ quite a job! ~ I got a rickshaw to carry my bags to a nearby hotel, and gave him Rs20; he seemed pleased enough, and asked if I'd like him to take me to the border, 8 kms away, in the morning, for Rs40. I told him to come at 6:30. It was much warmer there on the plains than in the hills, and I was able to shower in cold water.



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**LUCKNOW AND BACK**

**I**t was December 18<sup>th</sup>. My rickshaw driver came, and off we went, with me riding behind him. It took almost an hour, and I had to wait at both sides of the border for the officials to sort themselves out, but by 8 o'clock I was boarding a bus to Lucknow with the help of the rickshaw-driver, who was happy with what I gave him. Strangely, the bus wasn't crowded, and I had a reasonably-comfortable seat at the front near my bags. When we got to Lucknow, a young guy named Santosh ~ *another* Santosh, this one a journalist ~ helped me to find the hotel I was looking for ~ *Choudury Lodge* ~ and even invited me to stay at his home, but although I appreciated his kindness, I declined, needing my own space.

Lucknow is huge and congested, but with my bike I was able to find my way around. My new pedals, however ~ as I should have known, being so cheap ~ soon began to give me trouble, and I hadn't gone far when the left one fell off, having stripped the thread inside the crank. This required major 'surgery,' and after much searching, I finally find a machine-shop where the man agreed to 'operate'. His first attempt was not a success, and I had to go back the next day, with a new idea how to fix it. It was rather difficult explaining to him as he knew no English, and my Hindi is almost non-existent, but somehow, he understood what I was trying to say, and turned up a new pedal-spindle on his lathe. It took several hours, but eventually, it did the trick; my bike was ready to ride again, the man was edified, and I was pleased.

All this time, and during most of the time I was in Lucknow, a thick fog covered all Northern India, and the sun seldom broke through. The poor visibility caused cancellations and long delays in bus, train and plane services, and also affected the internet; it was very difficult to get connected, and some days not possible at all. It quite spoiled my stay there, but I went to most of the places I wanted to, including the ruined Residency, the entrance-fee for which had increased to Rs100. I met an Aussie girl named Jill, and showed her around, and she appreciated my narrative.

The ruins are extensive, and it must have been an amazing complex before the siege! I was disappointed that the stairway to the tower had been bricked up. At other places, the entrance-fees were so high that I didn't go in. There was no fee to visit the La Martiniere Public School, and I was even shown around part of it.

In one cyber-place, I got talking with the young guys in charge and one of them asked if I liked cricket; I said, no, of course. "Do you like football?" Also, no. "Do you like f-----g?" At this, I reprimanded him, and he was quite contrite, giving me an opportunity to lead him to other things, which he seemed to understand. I terminated my session to speak more with them. They didn't charge me for the ½ hour I was online, and they promised to email me (they didn't keep their promise).

In spite of the problems encountered in Lucknow, I quite enjoyed it, as I met a number of friendly and kind people, and felt I would have to revise my opinion about Indians. I was surprised ~ or was I? ~ when *Nettin* ~ the young guy I'd reprimanded about his language ~ expressed his poor opinion of Nepalese people (the feeling of dislike between Indians and Nepalese is mutual).

**B**orn and raised in a welfare-society, I'd forgotten my immense good fortune and taken it all for granted. Desperately poor, many Indians ~ and indeed, countless people around the world ~ seek some kind of security in the future through children; these are their insurance, but very tenuous. They struggle to raise in a week what I spend in a day. Taking this into consideration, I should be more understanding and tolerant; life for them is much harder than anything I have known, and they would ~ I'm sure ~ willingly change places with me if they could.

**S**ome slick kid passed me on a motor-bike and said, "Hey, baby!" ~ American influence via movies and TV! And another guy ~ maybe 35 or 40 ~ riding a scooter, came from behind and said, "Hey, buddy." When I didn't respond, he said, "Hey, uncle," and then something I didn't catch. I think he must have been gay, because as he drew alongside, he reached out and said, "Hold my hand," before speeding off! I had to laugh!

**A**t the train-station, I made a reservation for *Jhansi* for two days hence, then stopped to visit the machine-shop-man, who was

pleased to see me and never stopped telling his friends and neighbors about me and his successful job.

**M**y train to Jhansi was delayed by several hours because of the fog, and took about 10 hours to get there, arriving late at night; I waited quite a while in the station to get up and over the stairs, as people were swarming on them like ants, and in crowds like that, you must be careful about pick-pockets (I'd already had my pocket picked in Lucknow, but only some medication was lifted). It was hard to find a hotel at that time, but I succeeded. The room was full of mozzies.

The next day was to be decisive because of the frustration. I had come to Jhansi to visit Khajuraho, which can be reached only by bus, but when I made it to the distant bus-station through the fog, I could find no-one there to give me information, so I returned to the train-station, thinking to get a train to the south. Here again, I was frustrated; all trains were running late, and I couldn't get a booking to places I wished to go ~ like Hyderabad or Bangalore ~ and, unwilling to travel without a reservation, I decided to abort my trip in India and return to Nepal and see what I could do there, so got a ticket back to Lucknow for later in the day. This, too, was late, and we started off just before midnight, arriving around 6 am. There was a sharp wind blowing and it was very cold as I followed a rickshaw on my bike to a hotel I directed him to.

**A**fter shaving and washing in warm-water, I went to the bus-station to inquire about buses to the border, and decided upon one the following morning. It was then that I came to know about the tsunami that had devastated coasts in the Indian Ocean. I thought of the Sakais, who were to have been on one of the worst-hit islands in Thailand; I feared for their safety, and sent them an email.

**T**hat day, a strong wind from the north-west blew away the fog, and the sky became clear, but I kept to my decision to leave, and got the bus. It was dark when we reached the border, and of course, it took quite a while to get across; a new 60-day visa for Nepal cost \$30. It was late when I reached the hotel I'd stayed in 10 days before. It always felt good to return to Nepal from India, and this time was no exception.



Early next day, I got a bus to Butwal, but 2 hours on, we ran into backed-up traffic; there was a bomb-rigged bridge ahead, and we had to detour on a track through the forest, but apart from this and some burned-out vehicles, there was no other sign of Maoists. I stayed in the same hotel in Butwal, and went to a cyber-café, hoping to find word from the Sakais, but there was none.

After a noisy night in that hotel ~ I really don't know why Indians and Nepalese seem unable to consider others ~ I got a bus to Tansen, high in the mountains, having missed going there on my way down. I checked into the same hotel as in 2003, and went out for lunch and a walk around. I decided to go to a place called *Rani Ghat* the next day, and this I did. It involved a hike of several hours over steep and winding tracks, mostly downhill. There were few signs, and I took a wrong turn, but kept going, and it eventually led me there. Built beside the Kali Gandaki almost 100 years ago by some eccentric and corrupt politician, Rani Ghat was an old mansion, with no access-road to it, and was lapsing into ruin; it must have been a tremendous feat to transport the materials over the trails I had just traversed. I had a look around the desolate place ~ a nice spot for nature-lovers ~ and crossed the suspension-bridge over the river ~ one of the longest bridges in Nepal ~ then had dahl-baht before heading back up to Tansen. I'd wanted to do this the previous year, and now I'd done it.



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## I BEGIN MY MEMOIRS

**B**ack in Pokhara, I got a room in a different hotel for just Rs100 per day, and it was all I needed, and reasonably quiet, too. I called the Sakais' home in Kathmandu, but no-one picked up the phone, so I decided to go. Upon reaching Kathmandu, I checked into *Dolpo* and called the Sakais' home again, but there was still no answer. On the way to Patan the

next day, I came off my bike on a wet corner and injured my right shoulder again; it was so painful and hard to shower and shave, and prevented me doing my usual morning exercise after that. At Patan, I was lucky to find the maid there, but she told me she had no news of them, and they were still expected back on the 11<sup>th</sup>. I returned to Pokhara to wait. There, I told Bishal to think about what kind of business he'd like to do, and maybe I would help him, but wouldn't give him money before, as he would only spend it on other things.

**R**esolving to begin work on my memoirs, I told the hotel-staff that I didn't want to be disturbed, and made a good start, and the flow continued for some days; I wrote everything by hand, of course, as I'd left my lap-top in Malacca. Every day, I went up into town to do my email and have lunch, and now and then, would go for a long bike-ride, often coming back with new ideas to be set down. I was pleased about the way it was coming on.

Liladhar invited me to visit his village and spend a few days at his home, and at first, I agreed, but then decided not to, as I would only have been an object of curiosity there and wouldn't have got a minute's peace. He was quite disappointed when I told him, but I gave him some money to go with, and later he told me he'd used it to buy a length of plastic water-pipe, with which to connect water to his home, making a great difference.

**O**n the 11<sup>th</sup>, I called Patan, and *Mutsuko* answered; they'd just got back, and she told me of their time on *Phi-Phi* Island. When the tsunami hit, they'd been on high ground, so were untouched by it; their hotel was also spared. I was so relieved, and emailed them next day. I also mailed letters to Santosh and the machine-man in Lucknow, and eventually got a reply from the former; my letter to the latter had photos in it, and there was maybe less than a 50% chance he would get it.

**B**ishal came to see me and said he'd like to get a vegetable-cart, and told me what it would cost. I agreed to finance it so as to provide him a way of supporting his family. I told him to accompany one of his friends on his rounds, to see how it was done, so that when his cart was ready, he would know how to go on. I also

urged him to quit smoking, as it was not just useless, but harmful; he said he would, but I thought, 'Mmh, maybe.'

There were several Maoist-imposed '*bunds*' ~ shut-downs ~ while I was in Pokhara, some of them local, and one nation-wide, lasting 2 or 3 days at a time. It was enough for them to threaten action against anyone defying them for shops to close and transport to cease; people knew from past experience that they were not idle threats; shops and vehicles had been burned and people shot. Although such *bunds* were disastrous for the economy, people had grown so used to them that they seemed complacent about them; "What can we do?" they said. One of them was in protest against the government's 10% hike in fuel-prices. I wrote a poem and sent it to one of the newspapers:

OH, SAD LAND!

I came here from afar,  
 Though didn't have to.  
 Ten times, since 1970, I have come here;  
 It is my choice; I love this land.  
 Does that not make me, in one way,  
 More Nepalese than many who were born here,  
 And over which they had no choice at all,  
 And some of whom would leave right now if they could,  
 While others behave in such a way that  
 Shows they have no love for their country whatsoever?  
 If you really love the country that has  
 Supported you uncomplainingly since your birth,  
 You would try to do nothing that would make  
 Your kind, long-suffering Mother ashamed of you,  
 But only proud!

The high rests upon the low;  
 This we should understand.  
 We may have the foundations of a house  
 Without the walls or roof, but how to have  
 The walls and roof without foundations?  
 Do the people exist for the king,  
 Or the king for the people?

Oh, Lord of the Land,  
Are you the only one  
Who does not feel or see the throne  
On which you sit so high  
Trembling and shaking?  
If it cracks and crumbles,  
Who else will be to blame but yourself?

While brushing my teeth one day, a filling fell out; fortunately, it was the one I'd had root-canal treatment on, so there was no pain; I decided to wait until I returned to Malaysia or Australia to get it refilled; visiting dentists in Nepal and India is not advisable. I also developed back-ache, probably from lack of exercise.

One day, while parking my bike outside the internet-café I usually used, I noticed 2 young guys staring at me, so asked if anything was wrong; still staring, I asked what was the matter. They said nothing, but when I came out from emailing, I found that someone had kicked in my gears. I managed to fix them, getting my hands greasy-black. Bishal came in the afternoon to say his cart was ready for use, so I gave him the money for it, and enough to buy some scales and vegetables, and several days later, he came to proudly show me it ~ a table-top mounted on a framework of four bicycle-wheels. I wished him well.

At Liladhar's bakery one day, I met a Christian convert, and asked him how long he had been so. "Five years," he said. I asked why he'd become Christian, and he said, "Because I am a sinner, and needed a savior." At this, I asked him if he saw anything positive and good about being human. He thought for a long moment, then said, "No, not really." He'd been robbed, cheated, and emasculated, and was quite content with this.

News came one day that the King had dismissed parliament and seized complete control himself. Radio, TV and phones were shut down for several days; his excuse ~ a transparent lie ~ was that he needed to do it in order to deal with the Maoists, who by then were in control of large parts of the country; the King ~ who was very unpopular, and suspected of being behind the palace-massacre of 2001 ~ had the army in his pocket, and felt he could do what he liked. We were cut off from the outside world, and felt

helpless. I had to wait patiently, for the internet to start working again, and when it did, I had much to catch up on.

Another *bund* looming, I bought a bus-ticket to Kathmandu for the next day, and went into town to do my email. After I'd finished my session, and was riding down the road from there, a motorcyclist turned right in front of me and this time I couldn't avoid him, so over I went. Picking myself up and, bleeding from a cut by my right eye, I straightened my twisted glasses, and confronted the fellow. A small crowd had gathered, and the guy said he was only going slowly; yes, that was the problem ~ he was going slowly without looking where he was going. Nothing else to be done ~ useless to call the police ~ I rode on, and got cleaned up at a pharmacy in Lakeside, but my right cheek-bone was crushed, and there was a depression on my face; it was very painful, and I could open my mouth only a little, and it was very difficult to get my dentures out and in, or even to brush my teeth. Then that side of my face became numb; clearly, there was nerve-damage. It was hard to eat anything, and that night I slept very little because of the pain. I decided to return to Malaysia and from there to Oz.

I managed to do other things normally, and emailed people to let them know what had happened; I asked DV about a suitable date to return. Saying goodbye to Liladhar and others, I then went to Kathmandu, but it was a rough ride.

First thing to do was book my flight out, then begin shopping for various things ~ a chore I don't like ~ and try to sell my bike ~ an even worse chore. I finally had to exchange the bike for some *thangkas*, which make nice presents. I also visited the *Sakais* and spent a final night at their place.

Passing Sanjay's shop, I stopped in to see him, and asked the price of one of his *thangkas*, thinking he wouldn't overcharge me. I was astounded when he said, "Could you give me Rs7000 for it?" I told him I'd paid only Rs2500 for a similar one, upon which he said he would let me have it for what he paid, Rs3500. I told him he'd been overcharged. *Some friend*, I thought, and didn't go back to see him again. I'd not bought anything from him in 2003, as I told him I couldn't haggle with friends; how right I was. On that previous visit, I'd given him a shaver I'd bought in Malacca

just before coming to Nepal, and had hardly used; he simply took it, put it in a drawer, and didn't say a word.

**M**y shopping done, and unwanted stuff given away, I was ready to leave the City Of Barking Dogs. My flight wasn't until noon, so I had a last walk around. Then, hotel-bill paid, I got a taxi to the airport, with enough rupees left for the airport-tax. I got there very early, as is my custom, and had to wait quietly in the lounge. The flight was a bit delayed and we reached Bangkok behind schedule, but it didn't matter, as the connecting flight to K.L. was not yet boarding. Going through the baggage-check, a pocket-knife was detected in my back-pack, much to my embarrassment! I'd not checked well enough. It was confiscated, of course.

It was late at night when we landed at K.L., and I stood in a long snake-line to get through Immigration; through after ½-an-hour, I got my bags almost immediately, without needing to wait, as is usual there, so what I lost on the swings I gained on the carousel, so to speak. DV had been waiting over an hour ~ he's a patient guy ~ and said he'd been expecting me to emerge from the gate wrapped like a mummy, so was surprised I had no bandages at all. Was that the impression I'd given people? Had I complained so much and made a mountain out of a mole-hill? The swelling had largely subsided by that time, but the numbness was still there. We were soon on our way to Malacca. End of another trip within the great trip that is my life ~ and *his*, of course, because having been part of my life since 1976, everywhere I've been, he's been there with me.

**H**e soon set about getting me seen to, taking time off his work to bring me to one doctor after another. A CT-scan showed quite a lot of bone-damage, and I was referred to a facial specialist, who said that I'd left it too late for much to be done, as damaged bone soon starts to regenerate in place, and he couldn't hold out much hope that the nerve that emerges from a tunnel in the eye-socket could be reactivated; he said he could try, but couldn't guarantee anything. Well, I try to be philosophical about things, so wasn't too disappointed, and told him that I'd soon be going back to Oz, and it was maybe better to wait until then; he agreed, and urged

me to go as soon as possible, saying there was a famous cranio-facial specialist in Adelaide who I should try to see.



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## OPERATION FIX-FACE

All this time, on a regular basis, I'd been corresponding with Yen Ha, and we had built up a rapport. When she heard that I might be coming to Adelaide, she asked her husband if he would mind me staying in their home while I underwent what would need to be done; surprisingly, he agreed, and the matter of accommodation there was settled.

DV's family kindly got me a ticket back to Melbourne for March 11<sup>th</sup>, and I was met by Hung and his family when I arrived. The next day, he took me to see a *Dr. Phuoc* ~ someone I call '*The Laughing Doctor*' because he laughs loudly whenever I visit him, and everyone waiting outside can hear. I showed him the CT-scan pictures and asked if he could refer me to the specialist in Adelaide, but he took only a cursory glance at them and didn't appear interested, and merely told me to go over there and try to see him myself. Well, this is what I did.

On the 15<sup>th</sup>, Yen Ha and her sister, Yen Hing, were waiting for me at the airport, and took me to her home, where I met her husband, Cuong, and children, Sophia and Nicholas. I appreciated Yen Ha's kindness, but how she'd prevailed upon her husband to let me stay there, I don't know, as he has a jealous nature, which

I was to see as time passed, just as he was to see, and focus upon, some of my negativities, which, as human, I admit having. If he had known me better, he would have seen many more.

The next day, Yen Ha took me to see a Vietnamese doctor ~ Dr. Le Cong Phuoc ~ who was expecting me. I'd known him for some years already, and indeed, Yen Ha had come upon one of my books in his clinic. He's a very busy man, and his waiting-room is always full, so it was quite a while before he called me in. After glancing at my scan-pictures, he picked up his phone and called the specialist ~ Prof. David ~ who was a personal friend of his (lucky for me), and made an appointment for me to see him two days later. Prof. David was a very nice man, too, and after a brief examination, said he could operate on me the next month, and that a cut might have to be made across the top of my head from ear-to-ear, but he would try to avoid that; then, as an after-thought, he asked if I had private health-insurance, and when I said no, he said, "Oh," then added, "In that case, I will get my team to do it," and sent me off to see them. Whether he had expedited it or not, I can't say, but they arranged for the operation to be performed at the *Royal Adelaide* ~ South Australia's top state-hospital ~ on the 24<sup>th</sup>. Things were moving very fast; usually, people must wait months for elective surgery in Australia. Maybe Dr. Le Cong had pulled some strings for me.

Various tests had to be run before the operation, so I was back and forth ~ courtesy of either Yen Ha or Yen Hing ~ between two hospitals and several departments over some days, and actually had a delightful time; every one of the doctors and other people I saw were so nice and friendly. I heard one Chinese doctor speaking, and was so impressed with her beautiful pronunciation and enunciation of English that when I was called to her office I remarked on it and asked where she was from. She told me she had been born in Calcutta but had spent 20 years in England; needless to say, we had lots to talk about thereafter. Then, another lady I got talking with told me that her husband had done the India-thing in his youth, just like me. Finally, I told the woman who ran the ECG on me that if everyone there was like those I'd seen so far, I wouldn't mind coming in at all, and might even apply to stay longer! It would be my first time as a hospital-patient,



and apart from the removal of the spot on my hand some years before, I'd never had an operation.

The team told me that they couldn't be sure if the feeling would return to my face, and it would probably take months if it did; and even at this point, they gave me the option to change my mind, but I decided to go ahead with it.

**B**efore O-Day (Operation Day), Yen Ha got a call from someone in the temple where she regularly goes, asking if she could visit me. It was Caren, who I mentioned earlier, but had never actually met. I wasn't too enthusiastic about it, but agreed, and she came over with some other people. The meeting was quite cordial, and turned into a Dharma-talk, and Yen Ha saw me in action. Following this, she decided to arrange a talk for me in her home after the operation, when she would invite more people.

I duly went to the hospital at the appointed time, changed into a gown, was taken into the theatre where the anesthetic was administered, and the next thing I knew I was in a ward. I didn't even recall being in the recovery-room. Of course, I felt rather groggy, and as two of the nurses adjusted my bed and the i/v drip in my arm, I felt nauseous, and before they could get a bowl to me, threw up over the sheets. I was most embarrassed, but they assured me it wasn't a problem.

**A**n incision had been made along my right eyebrow, and another up inside my mouth; through these, they were able to perform the two-hour operation and insert some titanium plates to correct the damage done to my cheek-bones; a cut had been made on my abdomen to extract a bit of bone for grafting, and this was very sore. I'm glad I wasn't there to see the procedure! Of course, my face was swollen, and my right eye shut, and it was hard to open my mouth; I was in quite a bit of pain and had to be given something to dull it.

**B**ecause of the cut on my abdomen, it was hard for me to get up, and to relieve myself was very difficult, as I couldn't press down because of the pain; I had to take laxatives to help, but even so, it wasn't easy.

I looked a little like the *Elephant Man* of the movie by that name, but there was nothing I could do except wait for the swelling to subside; not wanting to look like Yasser Arafat at the same time, though, I made an effort to shave.

The care and attention of the doctors and nurses was nothing less than fantastic, and I have the greatest love and admiration for them; nothing was too much trouble for them. They even wanted to accompany me to the toilet/bathroom to make sure I was okay, but I begged them not to.

The food served, although vegetarian, wasn't very appetizing, and I didn't feel like eating anyway; I lost 5 kgs during my stay.

I'd expected to be in only overnight, but it was a bigger operation than I'd thought it would be. One of the doctors came to see how I was doing on a daily basis ~ usually a young *Bahrainian* named *Walid*. On the third day, he said I could probably leave on the next, but I'd enjoyed it so much, that I asked if I could stay for an extra day; he consented.

I was able to sleep alright and actually felt very calm and peaceful. The ward was nicely air-conditioned to around 19° C. One night, I asked for a blanket, and the nurse draped a warmed one over me ~ it was so soothing! Any worries I'd had about wearing the standard hospital-gown and sharing the ward with others were completely unfounded. The four other beds in the ward were not all occupied. One day a young shaven-headed guy was brought in, and having bitten through his tongue, wasn't able to say much. I noticed that there was a man in uniform sitting out in the corridor afterwards; the tongue-biter was a prisoner from jail.

And, not that I needed cheering up, it was nice to get a number of visitors, including Jill. Yen Ha and Yen Hing were especially kind to me, even bringing their kids to see me and make me laugh.

Right the way through, it was a heart-warming experience, but I'm not in a hurry to repeat it. I'm also grateful to the Australian taxpayers in general, as their money made all this possible for me; apart from Dr. David's fee, I didn't have to pay a cent! It was all covered by Medicare.

**O**n the fifth day, Yen Ha came to take me back to her home, where I stayed long enough to recover; of course, I had to return to the hospital for a check-up. I also went to see Dr. David again, to thank him and tell him my impression of my hospital-stay. He requested me to write to the hospital-administrator and tell her what I'd just told him, as he said many people were quick to complain but slow to praise. I did so, as everyone likes to be appreciated, and by return post, got a letter thanking me for mine.

**S**omeone from Melbourne named Van came to visit me. He was over in Adelaide on business. He's a devoted Buddhist, and has been quite supportive of me for some years.

**A**bout 20 people attended my talk at Yen Ha's and it went quite well; Yen Ha got some good feed-back from it. Then, soon after, acutely aware that I'd overstayed my welcome as far as Cuong was concerned ~ I would greet him in the morning and when he returned from work, and got only a robot-toned 'hello' in return ~ I accepted Rick and Pat's invitation to spend a week with them before going back to my base in Melbourne. It was pleasant staying with them, like it was the first time, and while I was there, Wilanie invited me over for dinner, and I was not surprised to find a group of people awaiting me, as it is her way to share things. I was asked to give a talk before we all ate.

**R**ick had taken time off from his painting to write a book about his erstwhile work at the abattoirs, and showed me the manuscript; it was impressive. He was in the middle of negotiations with a publisher, and things were going well.

**Y**en Ha used some of her frequent-flier points ~ accumulated not through flying, but from buying things with her credit-card ~ to get me a ticket back to Melbourne, and Rick and Pat offered to take me to the airport. My unforgettable time in Adelaide was over.

**H**ung met me off the plane. During the month I'd been away, he had started extending and renovating the living-quarters at the back of the shop, and although he expected the work to be completed in another 2 weeks or so, it went on much longer. I offered to help him with this, and he knew, from the refugee-camp, that I could do such work, but he seemed reluctant to accept my offer, even though it could have saved him quite a bit of money. Feel-

ing not wanted, therefore, I kept to my room, doing my own thing unless and until he asked for help, which he did now and then, as did the builder, who was a messy worker, never cleaning up after him, but leaving it for someone else. I helped Hung to paint the shop-floor at night, as it was too much to do on his own. I also painted the frame of the new door into the shop he had opened, and cleaned the windows around it, but there was a silence about this, and the next day, I noticed that the windows had all been smeared. What was going on?

Their kids ~ Hai, 14, and Huy, 6 ~ spent a lot of time, unsupervised, playing computer-games, some of which, apart from being violent, have bad language embedded in them. Concerned about this, and thinking to help, I called a family-friend named Dat to come over and translate my ideas about this to Hung and Hien, thinking they might not understand if I told them myself. Dat himself was a school-teacher, and agreed completely with what I said about the addictive-effect of such games on kids, and how they are not really useful, and that it would be better if they spent more time on their studies, as their native-tongue was not English, and therefore they would need to study harder than their Australian counterparts, just to keep up. Well, they seemed to understand and agree with me, and were happy with my offer to help their kids with their English, as they should have been; after all, how many people had a resident teacher with them? People pay a lot for tutors for their kids. I soon came to see that their agreement was only on the surface; they told their kids to listen to me, but they themselves didn't give me the necessary back-up support, and the scheme soon fell through. They might even have taken my concern as a criticism of the way they were raising their kids; I should have simply kept quiet, but it was too late, and I began to feel a change in the atmosphere.

I was in it for some time to come, however, as the process of getting a top denture made preparatory to having all my upper teeth out had begun. It was only a 15-minutes' walk to Jamie's clinic, and he made the impression and sent it to Hoa in Brisbane for him to make the denture from (he advised me not to remove the lower teeth, as it would be very hard to chew, even though they had given me more trouble than the upper). But Hoa was backed-

up with work, and couldn't do it for over a month, so it was not until mid-July that the deed was done. Jamie huffed, puffed and strained to get the teeth out, and I was afraid that some of them might break off in the gum, but they didn't; the denture was then put straight in, so no-one would see me all gummy. I had to go back several times for the denture to be modified as the gum shrank, until the final visit in early September.

All this time, I'd been working on my mss, but progress was slow. Occasionally, I had visitors, and sometimes someone would take me out, but I gave less than 5 talks in the 5 months I was there, and Hung and Hien were not the kind of people I could discuss Dharma with; we had different ideas about Buddhism.

In June, Hung switched to broadband internet, and soon after this, Yen Ha sent me something known as a wireless router, which was a nice present, and would enable me to connect to the internet in my room without going to the main computer outside. Well, it took two people several hours to figure out how to install it, but finally, it was done, and was a boon to me until my computer crashed, and then it had to be installed all over again.

I decided to leave when my dental-work was over, and packed my stuff in readiness. I don't know if Hung and Hien noticed this, but I didn't tell them until the last week; they must have heaved a sigh of relief, as did I, when I left for Sydney on the 10<sup>th</sup>. It's not that I was ungrateful for their hospitality, but had I asked what had gone wrong to account for the change of feeling, they would not have told me; it was just something I had to accept.

I'd intended to stay with Baker Vo and his family in Sydney, but my Lebanese friend, Iman, insisted on me staying with him for some time first, and in order not to offend him, I did. He met me from the plane, and gave me the spare room in his new town-house; he was on his own after his second son had moved out. His wife had wanted to get back together with him the year before, but he hadn't agreed, preferring his solitude to the endless arguments they used to have; the only thing she'd never blamed him for, he said, was the extinction of the dinosaurs!

I settled down to work on my mss, and the inspiration flowed so well that I covered over 100 pages during my 2 weeks there, and

was pleased about that! My wireless-router, which I'd brought with me, couldn't be used with Iman's computer, so I used his broadband-connection instead, and this was alright; I could do my email and anything else I needed to do on the Net with that.

There wasn't much rain at this time, so unless I felt lazy and slept longer, I went out every morning for my walks, and soon found my way around his area; I started to go out at 4 o'clock. No-one else was out walking at that time, and few people driving, too.

**B**ok and Pearl contacted me and took me to their home for dinner one night; it was always nice to see them again, and we had lots to talk about. They also arranged a talk for me at their place to a large group of friends, as they'd done before, and as upon those previous times, I was given a good hearing, and it went well.

**B**y this time, I'd moved from Iman's to Baker Vo's, and unlike the previous times I'd stayed there, I donned ordinary clothes and went out for my regular walks rather than just pacing up and down alongside the house as before. I was soon into a routine there, and had lots of time to myself; I continued work on my mss, and would have got much further on it than I did ~ and would probably have completed it and had it ready for printing ~ if I'd not had more problems with my computer. The wireless-router I'd been using in Melbourne seemed to have jammed things up, and I was unable to create a new internet connection. Only with the help of someone more skilled in these matters than me, was the problem resolved, but it took several days.

**A** family I'd known for some years ~ *Dao Tran* and her sisters ~ invited me for lunch at their home, and as always, spread their best before me. The young son of one of them was fun to be with, asking lots of questions. His name was Henry, so I called him Henry the VIII.

I was also invited to Sangha Lodge for the first-Sunday-of-the-month *dana*, or lunch-offering, and quite enjoyed it, even being requested to say a few words. Tejadhammo was gracious, and solicitous of my welfare, and I had a chat with him afterwards.

**T**hen, there was a talk in Chua Phuoc Hue, but I wasn't pleased with how it went. Sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose.

**B**efore I left Sydney, I got an email from my 'Diamond Lady', Ping Kim Suor, in Los Angeles, saying that a large mass had been discovered near her spine, and she was about to go into hospital for an operation to remove it. It sounded ominous, but she was prepared for the worst. I encouraged her to lean on the Dharma and contemplate on Impermanence. I also requested her to ask one of her friends to keep me informed. She did this, and I received two emails from another lady, saying that the operation had resulted in uncontrolled bleeding, and that she was in a coma. The next one brought the sad news that she had gone. I had known a courageous lady, whose adversity would have crushed most other people. I'll never forget her.

**F**lying back to Adelaide, Yen Ha and Yen Hing met me, and took me to Wilanie's, where I spent the next week. Almost as soon as I got there, the phone became hot with outgoing and incoming calls; Wilanie, with her usual flair began organizing things, and before I knew it, I was fully booked up with invitations for lunches, talks, and meetings with individuals. It was nothing I'd not done before, but it meant I didn't have much time to work on my mss, so any hope of getting it ready for printing before leaving Malaysia for Nepal disappeared; too much remained to be done on it.

**I** was urged to get travel-insurance before leaving Oz, just to be on the safe side, so got a policy covering me for seven months, not thinking I would need it. Equipped thus, I flew out to K.L. for the umpteenth time, and Old Faithful DV was waiting for me. I stayed in Malacca only a week, to get my round-trip ticket to Kathmandu valid for a year. I was thinking only as far as this trip, and even that was quite a projection, amounting more to wishful thinking than anything else. I had no plans or ideas beyond that.



## THE SUBCONTINENT

**O**n October 26th, I flew from Malaysia to Kathmandu, where I contacted my old porter, Subha, with the idea of him going with me to India, as translator and to help me with my baggage; he agreed to this, but first, I had him go with me on some treks around the valley; we even walked most of the way to Daman and down the other side to Hetauda, in order to get fit for the longer trip. During this time, I came to see that his Hindi was very limited; he wouldn't be of much use as a translator after all. I then sent him home to his village while I got my visa for India.

In the meantime, I met someone whose English ~ *and* Hindi ~ was better than Subha's, and asked if he'd like to go with me. He readily agreed, as he had only a part-time job in a restaurant, for which he was paid virtually nothing. His name was Dawa, but I later called him Jack, as in Jackdaw. He said he'd spent over ten years in school in India, and assured me that I would not regret employing him, as he was honest and trustworthy. I had then the unpleasant task of telling Subha that I'd changed my mind, and when he came, I broke it to him, but, needless to say, he was disappointed. I gave him some money instead.

**A**fter the usual ridiculous procedure of applying for the Indian visa, my passport was endorsed for a double-entry, 6-months' stay, and we left Kathmandu for Pokhara. In my eagerness to be started, I overlooked what soon became clear in Jack: that he was not as honest and trustworthy as he'd claimed to be ~ and in fact, was just the opposite. I would ~ and should ~ have dismissed him early, but I'd already paid him a month in advance, as he'd begged me to do this in order to help his cousin pay the rent on the room they shared. He'd also asked me to pay him at the end of the trip, clever fellow, which meant me paying for all his needs, apart from food and transport. In retrospect, I should have cut my losses and gone on alone, because apart from carrying one of my bags, he was a distinct liability.

**M**aybe I should mention that days of traveling light are a thing of ancient history; I seem to need so much now ~ especially in the



way of medication ~ that I never needed before. I also carry stuff that I think might be useful, and often is.

I intended to retrace my footsteps and visit places I'd been before, and also go to places I'd not been. I know India much better than I know England, and could even be a guide there. I'd told him we'd be walking a lot, but despite the claim that he was a trekking-guide, he really wasn't a walker at all. I reminded him, numerous times, how I'd urged Subha to walk with me instead of behind, but it had no effect. I thought he'd be interested in the sights I had to show him, but a sack of rice would have cared as much. He slept most of the time in buses and trains.

He requested me, many times, to help him with his English, and I willingly agreed to, as we had plenty of time, but when I set him simple exercises on things I'd explained to him, he refused to do them, saying he couldn't. Of course, my efforts to help him in this area didn't last long; I felt I was dealing with a donkey.

In India, we went first to Lucknow, where he complained of sickness, so I took him to a hospital for a blood-test, which showed he had mild jaundice. I left him in the hotel to rest, and got him food and medicine, but later discovered that he'd stopped taking it when he felt better. I was careful to keep his eating utensils and mine separate.

We proceeded from Lucknow to Allahabad, to visit Mughal tombs and Raj-era buildings. Then, while boarding a crowded train, Jack's wallet was ~ almost predictably ~ lifted from his back pocket. There was nothing to be done; he just had to accept it.

On we went to Khajuraho, where I'd never been before; I decided not to miss it this time. It is famous, world-wide, for its tantric-temples carved with figures in erotic postures depicting the teachings of the Kama Sutra, a Hindu treatise on sex. Because of the explicit detail, they are known as 'the Love-temples', some of which are over 1000 years old, and their art is marvelous. Of course, Khajuraho is a major tourist-spot, and there are hotels to suit every pocket. I chose a cheapie, paying just Rs60.

Further west, we spent several days in *Orchha*, a small place that had centuries before been a mighty city; there were fortifications,

temples and tombs in abundance to remind one of its former glory. Its water-source, a placid and unpolluted river ~ something rare in India ~ ran nearby, and I found it conducive to meditation. Hotels here were very cheap; I got a room for Rs100.

**B**ecause he very much wanted to see the Taj Mahal, I took him to Agra, but gave up showing him around other places there as his interest was of brief duration. I gave him money to go to the Taj ~ Rs20 ~ but saved \$20 by not going in myself; I had been several times before when the entrance-fee was much lower and the lines of people waiting to go in not so long.

**We** boarded an overnight train to Hyderabad, and reaching there, we found it hard to find a hotel-room as it was New Year's Eve, and I had to settle for one at double what I usually paid. This far south, it was already very warm. We stopped only long enough for a quick look around. I particularly wanted to see the old British Residency, built at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in palatial style, and paid for ~ probably under thinly-veiled pressure ~ by the immensely-wealthy ruler of Hyderabad, known as the *Nizam*. It is now used as a women's college, but is grossly neglected and rapidly falling into ruin. Unable to find anyone to unlock the front door and let me in, I wandered around and found the back-door open, and went in, to be confronted by a splendid double staircase, mounting which, I was able to see the upper rooms and view the great hall from above. Everywhere was a thick layer of dust and pigeon-droppings. No-one challenged me or asked to see the ticket that I didn't have. I felt sad that such a magnificent building should be so uncared for.

In the middle of a man-made lake stands an 18-meter-tall monolithic Buddha-image of recent sculpting. Size took precedence over beauty in it, however. And, while getting it into position, it fell into the lake and remained there for several years until a way was devised to salvage and erect it on its pedestal.

**We** got an overnight train to Madras, which was even hotter. It used not to be so hot at this time of year, but then, we shouldn't be surprised by anything like this these days.

**Jack** had never seen the ocean before, and his inability to understand was amusing. I told him that Thailand was on the other side

from where we were standing, but because he couldn't see any land, he found it hard to imagine; the largest body of water he had seen until then was Lake Manasarova in Tibet. He had me take photos of him with the camera someone had given him; he always had to be in his photos, and if there was no-one to take them for him, he wouldn't take any, no matter what was to be seen. He was also in love with mirrors, vainly preening himself.

**M**adras had never been a place I liked; in spite of its wide roads, it is hot, humid, dirty and smelly. I went to an overgrown British cemetery, the graves thereof are used by locals as perches to let their feces go. Have I not said that India is one big open toilet?

**F**rom Madras, we went next to *Rameshwaram*, a place of some significance to me, as one of the turning-points in my life took place there. I went into the temple to meditate beside one of the bathing-pools, and take photos of the mandalas on the corridor-ceilings; but nothing is free, and I emerged to find my sandals gone. I had to walk barefoot back to the hotel to get my spare pair. From then on, whenever I went to a temple or mosque, I would put my sandals in a plastic-bag and carry them with me. If only I'd been more cautious with other things.

**H**aving made contact with my old Austrian friend, Erwin, the year before (after losing touch with him since '77), we exchanged emails, and since he and his wife also intended to make a trip to India, we planned to meet. When the time and opportunity came, however, neither of us, it seemed, was prepared to go out of the way for the other; perhaps we'd changed too much in the intervening years, and were afraid of what we might find. We didn't meet, and the communication lapsed yet again.

**R**ameshwaram was our furthest-south point, from where we went to *Madurai*, to see its stupendous temples; we stayed only one night there before going on to a hill-station named *Kodaikanal* that had been established by American missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The road up was long and steep, climbing through thickly-wooded hills, and I wondered how they'd decided upon this place to establish their settlement. Again, we spent just one night there, then descended to *Coimbatore*, ready to catch a *toy-train* the next day to Ooty (the most-favorite hill-station of the Brits

in the south during their Raj; its complete name is *Udagaman-dalam*). The engine of the train ~ at the rear, in order to push ~ belched thick black smoke as it chugged and puffed its way up-hill; it was over 100 years old, while the carriages had been constructed in 1931; no need to say that they were not the most-comfortable seats I'd sat on, but then, we were along for the experience, and I marveled at the feat of engineering needed to push this line up through jungle and over ravines.

The Brits came here to unwind, trudging up by bullock-cart before the train-line was laid. What a relief it must have been for them to escape the heat of the plains! For me, it was just a brief stop-over on the way to somewhere else, and I had not the feeling here that I'd had in hill-stations of the north, where there was a distinct melancholic atmosphere of old ghosts. We stayed here only one night, too, and then descended by bus (there's no train down the other side), to *Mysore*.

I'd been to Mysore only once before, in 1970, and remembered little about it. It is now much more crowded and congested, of course, but nicer, in some ways, than most other Indian cities. There is so much to see in and around the city. It is from here that you can visit *Somnathpur*, an intricately-carved temple built 750 years ago. Although small as Indian temples go, the wealth of detail is simply staggering; the type of stone used allowed the artists to carve it like butter. This was the high-water mark of the *Hoysala* dynasty that flourished in this region for several centuries. Similar temples lie further to the north, the most-famous of which are found at *Halebid* and *Belur*.

In the vicinity, too, is *Sravanabelagola*, a pilgrimage-site of Jains, where stands an image of one of their saints, almost 18 meters tall, and shown naked to demonstrate detachment from worldly things. I did not go there.

Apart from the maharaja's extensive city-palace, which is open to the public, and other places, I found the old British residency of great interest, because unlike the one in Hyderabad, this is well-maintained and even used at times by VIPs. I was shown around by a polite old caretaker, and noticed on a wall a photo showing some Buddhist caves at a place called *Melkote*, not far away. I

resolved to go there, but first, went to visit *Srirangapatnam*, a heavily-fortified town that had been the capital of a Muslim ruler of Mysore state named Tipu Sultan at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Far-sighted, he realized what the British in India had in mind, and opposed their encroachments; of course, he was demonized by them, although by other accounts he was quite a benevolent ruler, and treated his non-Muslim subjects fairly. Allying himself with the French ~ who were also there, with similar colonial aims ~ he defeated British armies several times, but was finally overthrown in 1799, and the British grabbed Mysore. Tipu's beautiful summer-palace is well-preserved but only the ground-floor is open to the public; I'd seen the upper portion in 1970.

**N**ext day, I made my way out to Melkote with Jack, but only to find that there were no caves on the rocky outcrop; maybe I'd read the words on the photo wrongly. Even so, I enjoyed it there, but loss was near. While meditating on the steps of a temple-tank, I put my camera down beside me, and then forgot it, only to remember it two minutes later, and rush back, but it was too late, and it had gone. What to do? I wasn't happy about it, of course, as it contained all the photos of my trip in Nepal and India so far, but I accepted it and let it go.

**A**nother day, we went to the Tibetan monasteries to the west ~ *Sera-Je* and *Namdroling* ~ huge and beautiful places in traditional style, lodging thousands of monks and nuns. They had been built from scratch by refugees granted land by the Indian government in the '60's; being mountain-people, they must have found the hot climate very trying, but with hard work and determination, they succeeded to a remarkable degree. Many good things came from the Chinese take-over of Tibet, and not just pain and sorrow.

**L**eaving Mysore, we went to Halebid and Belur, mentioned above. More tourists visit these amazing temples than Somnathpur. I'd visited Halebid in 1970, but missed Belur at that time.

**P**assing on, we got a bus to a place called Hospet, but the road was bad and the bus slow. At one point, I stood up to give a woman my seat (in India, it is rare to see anyone do this), but 40 minutes later, I got another. An hour out of Hospet there was a traffic-jam, with one-way traffic for almost an hour; it was hot sit-

ting there. At Hospet, hordes of people were waiting to get on the bus, and we had to force our way out. We got another bus to our destination of that day: *Hampi*, the capital of a Hindu dynasty some centuries ago; the ruins of which are spread over a vast area among huge granite boulders; there was no shortage of building material here. I'd come here mainly to sit beside the river and meditate, as I'd done during a visit in 1987. In the meantime, a sizeable village had sprung up to cater to the influx of tourists, and had I known it would be like this ~ a hippie-place ~ I wouldn't have come again. Getting a room in a cheapie, I discovered I'd lost my padlock ~ must have left it at Belur ~ and was more upset about this than the loss of my camera! I always carry my own lock in India, to use on the hasps on most hotel-rooms; that way, no-one can enter your room when you're out.

I spent some time ~ as intended ~ sitting beside the lovely river, and even crossed it by coracle ~ another first; never been in such a boat before. On the way back, I went into a cyber-café, and while doing my mail, an old English guy two chairs away from me started to smoke, so I eventually asked him not to. He argued that there were ash-trays, and the owner, who was standing by, said some people liked to smoke. I said I didn't, and it's the law now. As I went out, I told the owner he should have signs up so everyone could see. Later, I met the English guy on the street, and he apologized to me, saying he realized he should have thought about others. I told him I had to say it as I tell Indians about it, and if I tell only Indians but not others, it would mean I am racist. We shook hands.

**B**y this time, Jack had become uncommunicative, and resisted my scolding about this, saying he didn't know what to say; some days he would speak no more than 100 words to me. I gave up expecting much of him, and looked forward to parting company with him. If I could have put him on a direct train to Gorakhpur, I would have done, but there was none, and he was so afraid of going alone that I dared not send him on a journey that required changing trains; I felt *that* much responsibility towards him, at least. I began to give him advances on his pay, even though he didn't want it, preferring to let me pay for everything. I told him he needed money to buy whatever he needed beyond his food and

transport; I should have done this from the start, as he only took advantage of me.

**M**oving north, stage by stage, we stopped briefly at other places in Karnataka ~ *Badami*, *Bijapur* and *Bidar* ~ places of Muslim kingdoms in the past, with extensive fortifications. Then on to Maharashtra, which is perhaps my favorite state of India because of the numerous Buddhist caves there. Using Aurangabad as a hub, I went out several times to Ellora, leaving Jack to his own devices, as he was clearly not interested, and I wanted to be on my own anyway. There, I sat beside the rock-pools of a stream that runs at one side of the caves, a tranquil spot that captured my heart years before. Although there are hordes of tourists at the caves themselves, few of them come here, and the smaller caves beside the stream here are sometimes used by sadhus.

**A**fter a few days in Aurangabad, we went to Ajanta, three hours away in the other direction. Since my last visit there, things had changed, and the stalls selling crystals and trinkets had been re-located from near the caves to a place near the road-junction. Many people remembered me, and I them, but I soon learned of the demise of *Mahmoud*, someone who'd befriended me before. His younger brother, Sharif, took me to visit his widow and children to extend my condolences, and as I was leaving, I gave him some money for her, but the way he quickly pocketed it made me think that she would never see it.

**S**tocking up on 'thunder-eggs', as I usually did whenever I was there ~ and getting cheated by some of the stall-holders in the process ~ we returned to Aurangabad to send most of them off by post to Malaysia, to await my return. I also bought a cheap Kodak at Ajanta, to replace my lost camera; it took quite good pictures even so.

It was the beginning of February, and unseasonably hot, and whereas in the north, people had been dying of cold in January, the sudden heat-wave also took its toll; it lasted about two weeks before the temperature dropped considerably. February used to be a pleasant month, cold enough at night for the use of blankets, but just right in the daytime. Not any more!

My account of our journey on from Maharashtra I will condense by saying that I revisited a number of places and went to others I'd never been before: Surat (centre of India's diamond-industry), Ahmedabad (former capital of Gujerat state), Junagadh (the Muslim maharaja of which had a passion for dogs, some of which he bedraped with jewels, and even held *weddings* for them, until, at the time of Partition in 1947, he chose Pakistan over India; what became of his dogs, I didn't learn!), Diu (a former Portuguese enclave), Mount Abu, with its salubrious climate and exquisitely-carved marble Jain temples (and where a dog suddenly ran up behind me and bit me on the leg, necessitating five anti-rabies shots spread over several weeks; better to be on the safe side), Udaipur (famous for its lake-palace), Chitoorgarh (with its immense and almost impregnable fort, where, unable to withstand the protracted siege of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, the *Rajput* warriors rode forth to be cut down, while their women and children ~ 13,000 of them ~ threw themselves into a pyre rather than face capture and dishonor), Bundi (where, upset by his denunciations of the Hindu gods and his attempts to convert them, people had hung an effigy of an American missionary in an archway; he'd wisely fled their wrath), Kota (where I was invited to join a wedding-feast in a courtyard of the old palace), Ajmer (renowned for its Sufi shrine), Pushkar (a major Hindu holy-town centered around a lake; I sat in meditation in the only temple to Brahma in the world here), and Alwar, dominated by the fort crowning the hills above the town.

I'd had more than enough of Jack and his surliness by then, so, being only a few hours from Delhi, went to the capital, and finally got what I had looked all over India for: a baggage-trolley. If I'd had this from the start, I wouldn't have needed Jack's help, but could have managed on my own. I then got tickets for Gorakhpur, but didn't tell him until almost time to leave, that I'd be on the same train. We reached there after an overnight journey, and caught a bus to the border, where I paid him off, although he really hadn't earned what I gave him. He was surprised that I deducted what I'd advanced to him ~ a sum of \$50 ~ and thought I'd been giving it to him, as I did at first; but even so, he showed no gratitude. He got a direct bus to Kathmandu, and I, relieved of my



burden, went to Pokhara. I never saw him again. *Hoorah!* It was March 1<sup>st</sup>.

After unwinding for a few days in Pokhara, I went to Kathmandu, running the usual gauntlet of frequent police and army check-points, with the consequent delays. But there, I decided to return to India for more *penance*, for such I'd come to regard my fatal-attraction to that strange land. It is a country where our Western standards of efficiency, hygiene, manners, punctuality and so on, must be suspended if we are to retain even a tenuous hold on our sanity. Every time I've been there I said to myself, "Never again will I come back to this hell", but it's not long before my thoughts return to it.

At the border, I met two Koreans who were also going to India, and although ~ like me ~ they were wearing ordinary clothes, I had a feeling that they were monks, too, and when I encountered them again on the train from Gorakhpur to Delhi, I asked them, and they confirmed my feelings. I wasn't the only one to travel this way, feeling it less of a hassle to do so. I bumped into them several times again in Delhi, where they spent quite a while. Their English was almost non-existent, however, so we were unable to talk much; they didn't respond to the emails I sent them, so I gave up trying.

Upon returning to India, I'd not, as yet, decided to go to Pakistan, much as I'd wanted to go since my last trip in 1998. I was in two minds about it, feeling that the situation there since 9/11 would be much more risky for Westerners than before. As I went to other places in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, however, the idea grew stronger, until I returned to Delhi to apply for a visa. Before doing this, however, I tried to get my Indian visa endorsed for another re-entry, as the visa was valid until June, but I'd already used the re-entry on it. Well, after waiting four hours in a crowded office of the Ministry of Home Affairs, I finally heard my name called, only to be told that the officer I must see was absent, and that I should come back the next day, something I was not prepared to do. The *babu* (derogatory term for a bureaucrat) who saw me asked why I wanted to go to Pakistan anyway; I answered, "Why not? There's no law against it, is there?" (With mind-sets such as his, is there

any hope of rapprochement between India and Pakistan?) Without a re-entry visa, I would need to get a completely new Indian visa in Pakistan; there was no other way.



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### UP THE FABLED SILK-ROAD

The next day, getting a visa for Pakistan was not as lengthy and complicated as I expected ~ and nothing like getting an Indian visa! At the window for foreigners at the High Commission, I was told I first needed to get a 'letter of introduction' from the nearby Aussie High Comm, for which I was charged A\$30! With this, I went back to apply for the visa and was told to collect my passport the next day; easy. Then, I made a reservation on the next night's train to Amritsar, and the following morning ~ April 1<sup>st</sup> ~ got a bus to the border. It doesn't open until 10 a.m., however, and it's the only crossing-point between India and Pakistan (or was, until one in Kashmir opened recently, as a trial, and only for Kashmiris) I had to wait, therefore, and then crossed without much hassle; it took 30 minutes, which was unusually fast, as there are various offices and desks to pass. Then I got a bus into Lahore, an hour inside Pakistan, and here, the usual search for a hotel began. I wanted to be near the railway-station, but most hotels in that area were asking Rs400 – Rs500 for a single room (US\$1 = 60 Pakistan Rupees), and looked for quite a while until I got one for Rs200. While searching, I fell into conversation with a young guy who was *appalled* to learn that I wasn't the slightest bit interested in cricket. "How can this be?" he said, bewildered. I replied, "Must I be like others? Am I not allowed a mind of my own?" Many Indians and Pakistanis are so devoted to cricket, that it is tantamount to being a religion; they're fanatical about it!

The next day, I walked the 6 kms to *Shalimar Bagh*, the Mughal Gardens laid out in 1637 by Shah Jehan of Taj Mahal fame.

Upon reaching there, however, I was disappointed to find them closed for renovations. I'd been there during my last visit to Pakistan in 1998, which is why I wanted to see them again; they are the best-maintained of the Mughal Gardens, either in India or Pakistan. The Moghuls, who came from Central Asia, had a passion for gardens with fountains and streams; the culture they developed in India was distinctive and influential. The Brits adopted their architectural-style and used it in other parts of their empire.

That afternoon, after wandering around the 2<sup>nd</sup>-hand book-market near the museum, and while looking for a cyber-café, an elderly man asked if I needed some assistance. When I told him where I wanted to go, he offered to show me; my experience from my last visit of Pakistanis as hospitable and friendly was rapidly being confirmed. On the way, he told me he was a communist, and was happily surprised when I told him I am a Buddhist; he said *he* was, too. A *communist Buddhist*, in *Pakistan*? Most unusual! He invited me for tea, and as we sat drinking it others joined us; he seemed to be regarded as something of a sage. After some time, he invited me for lunch, and when I said I was vegetarian, he said so was he. So off we went, and had lunch of *naan*, *dahl* and vegetables ~ alright, but very oily. He took me to his place, and we sat talking for about two hours until I broke away and went for email. At first, the connection seemed okay, but soon became bad, so I ended up sending a "To Everyone" message, and got off with an hour. In the evening, because my new friend had urged me to come to meet other people there, I went to his place again, and got a clearer idea of his teachings, but didn't agree with some of the things he said, although his story was remarkable. He was apparently already well-known as an advocate, but hit the news when he wrote and published a book explaining his ideas, which were so radical for his time and place that he was almost stoned by a mob on the street! Surrounded by people urged on by *mullahs* calling for his death, he calmly sat cross-legged, prepared to meet his end, but was 'saved' and arrested by the police who put him in jail. He was tried for heresy and apostasy ~ things that carry the death-sentence in fundamentalist Pakistan. He languished there, his life ticking away, until protests from around the world resulted in him being freed.

Many times, he requested me to stay at his place, saying I should treat it as my home, but I didn't accept, as I need my own space. Finally, one of his supporters, a doctor, offered to drive me back. I didn't see him again, although I will if I'm back that way again.

I spent a few days in history-rich Lahore, going out to *Jehangir's* Tomb, only to find that the entrance-fees for such places had increased ten-fold since my last visit, just as in India. Nor did I feel as I'd felt there before, probably because I'd gone with expectations, unlike the first time, when it was new and a surprise. It was so at other places I revisited, like the great mosque constructed by Aurangzeb, the fort that had been rebuilt and enlarged by Mughal emperors from Akbar on, and the museum, where the exhibit I mostly wanted to see again was that of the *Fasting Siddhartha*. But I was surprised; it was less than life-sized and not as I remembered it, and yet, it was the same. My perception playing tricks again!

Although there are very few *Sikhs* in Pakistan now (most of them fled to India when Punjab, their state, was cut in two by a line drawn on paper by the last Viceroy, resulting in massacres of hundreds-of-thousands of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and others who found themselves on the 'wrong' side), the main Sikh temple in Lahore is still operated by a few families who chose to remain, at great risk, and the traditional 'free kitchen' is maintained. I had lunch of dahl and chapatties there. Because of a thaw in relations between India and Pakistan in the last few years, people from both sides are able to get visas to visit; let's hope this continues and improves further, and won't regress to what it was.

At the Tourist Office, after getting some brochures and information, I had a Dharmic conversation with two people there; I gave the lady a stone, and the man ~ Saheed ~ a bookmark ("We look, but we do not see..."). I could see that I'd touched them, and after a cup of tea, I left with a light step.

My next stop, after Lahore, was *Jhelum*, to the north. I wanted to see a fort near there, and had to take several rides to reach it. Many people were kind and helped me, including auto-rickshaw drivers who refused to charge me. The immense fort was built to control the route that invaders from the northwest had used, but

alas, it was much too late; India had been over-run and subdued centuries earlier by the ancestors of those who built it.

The bus from Jhelum to Peshawar later that day was slow and took almost 5 hours, but fortunately, it was air-conditioned. When I got there, I found that the hotel I'd stayed in last time was no longer taking foreigners, so I had a long search for an alternative, and eventually found one ~ helped by a kind person who accompanied me for an hour ~ not far away, for just Rs100. Of course, it was very basic, but good enough, except that the room had no power-point, so I was unable to cook or boil water. I lived mainly on naan, tomatoes, cucumbers, and beans ready-cooked from stalls on the streets, which were very tasty; I sufficed with cold coffee, such as I'd done on my treks in the mountains.

Peshawar is now very congested and polluted, but I enjoyed it anyway, wandering back and forth through the bazaars, visiting several friends from last time; everywhere, people were friendly, and called out greetings.

The internet-connections here were even worse than in Lahore ~ in fact, all over Pakistan, they were slow and unreliable. A tour-guide calling himself *Prince* tried to persuade me to take trips; he was so persistent, going as far as to take me in a car to his office for tea; I had some misgivings, and thoughts of being kidnapped ran through my mind. Finally, he sent me back by auto-rickshaw, but had ascertained where I was staying, and visited me there another day, intent on getting me to sign up to go up the Khyber Pass, but I was adamant, and he finally gave up hope.

I visited an old British cemetery, an overgrown place of not just dead people but dead trees, standing with jutting branches like fleshless arms. I went on to *Islamia College*, built at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Indo-Saracenic style, and one of Pakistan's most prestigious; I walked around a bit but without meeting anyone. Checking my email, I was surprised to receive one from Jack; I didn't think he'd have the audacity to write to me, and I'd not had his address, but now that I did, I wrote to him a few days later and clarified a few things.

Ascertaining from the Tourist Office that the pass into *Chitral* had just opened, I got a mini-bus to *Timagarha*, where, while waiting for another one to *Dir*, an old man tried to convert me; although his English was quite good, he was wasting his time. I spent that night in *Dir*, as it was too late to cross the pass by the time I got there. I found the people not as friendly as I'd become used to.

The next day was a long one. First, I got an early mini-bus bound for *Chitral*, but we'd not gone far when there was the smell of something electrical burning. We turned back to get it fixed, then started again, but soon there was the same smell, and I was apprehensive. We kept going, uphill; the road was unsealed and muddy, and two hours out, we pulled up suddenly and everyone hastily scrambled out; smoke was pouring from the hood; the brakes had failed. The driver got a ride back to get help, leaving us waiting for two hours; it was cold and windy, halfway up the pass. Eventually, the driver returned, just as an empty van came down the road. Our fares were returned, the baggage was transferred, and we all got in, paying just 40/- for the ride back down. By this time, I'd given up my idea of going to *Chitral*, and decided to go to *Mingora* instead, back the way I had come. While waiting for the bus to leave *Dir*, a middle-aged guy with very long dreadlocks, some of his hair red near the scalp, also got in. From *Oz*, of Lebanese stock, he was a friendly enough chap, and talked a lot once he started. Of course, everyone regarded him curiously, and attention was diverted from me. It was over three hours to *Chakdara*, where we waited quite a while for a van to *Mingora*. I met a young teacher there who accompanied us; he was nice to talk to, and I gave him one of my remaining stones; he was very pleased, and insisted on paying our fares. Coming into *Mingora*, we had to register in the police-book, and in the town, the van stopped and everyone got out, although it was at a gas-station, not the bus-station. A large police-van with several fully-armed cops was waiting there ~ for us, I was told. Concerned for the safety of tourists, they would take us wherever we wanted to go; I was very surprised, but it was as they said: they took us to my chosen hotel ~ the *Rainbow* ~ and left us there to check in. The bathroom of the room I got for Rs150 was dirty, but I was tired, and it was 7:30, so I didn't make a fuss. I went out and ate *keer* ~

rice-pudding, the same as what Sakyamuni ate just before his enlightenment ~ and bought bread and beans, to bring back to eat. The water smelled unpleasant, and my coffee tasted awful.

In and around Mingora and its older twin-city, *Saidu Sharif*, there are the remains of numerous Buddhist sites, as this is the Swat Valley green, fertile, and said to be the most-beautiful valley in Pakistan ~ where the Tang dynasty pilgrim-monk, Hsuan Tsang, noted over 1,400 abandoned or destroyed monasteries in 630 AD. Buddhism in this area never recovered from the ravages of a people known as the White Huns, who originated from somewhere near Mongolia, and like the later Mongols under Genghiz Khan, burst out of their steppelands in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, conquering everyone in their path. Raging through Central Asia, Persia and Afghanistan, they came down through the Khyber Pass, and proceeded to lay everything to waste. Buddhism came in for especial persecution. Overthrowing the Kushan Empire of the North-West, they moved relentlessly onto the Gangetic plain, slaughtering all before them. The capital of the Gupta Empire, Pataliputra (modern-day Patna), was reduced to rubble, its population decimated.

Although the destruction had been complete, there was still a lingering feeling of peace around the several stupa-sites I visited. The caretaker of one site, though not a Buddhist himself, had studied Buddhism in Peshawar University, and didn't charge me the entrance-fee; he later made tea for me and we sat and talked.

Then to the museum, where I refused to pay the entrance-fee of Rs200 as too high. I spoke with the curator, who agreed with me, and offered to let me in for 100, but I didn't accept, having been there before. Down the road, I told the man at the Tourist Office, who also agreed with me and advised me to write to the Ministry of Tourism, as other people had complained.

Alexander the Great had crossed the river not far from Mingora; near the end of his conquests eastward, and fought a desperate battle on the other bank. A watchman led me to a fort high above ~ strange place for a fort, so isolated and waterless! ~ where I sat for a while contemplating the vista. The watchman was pleased

with what I gave him and didn't ask for more; this was so different than in India, where no matter what you give is never enough.

In the bazaar at Mingora I met a man who quietly told me he was a Sikh. I wouldn't have known otherwise, as he was not wearing the distinctive Sikh turban because it was advisable not to stand out there. So, too, I'd met a Christian in Lahore, who felt free enough to confide in me. It is often hard to belong to a minority. Fundamentalists feel threatened by anyone different ~ verily, signs of insecurity and uncertainty. Compare and contrast how Buddhism says there are 84,000 Dharma doors or paths. Confident and unafraid to be challenged, it can afford to be tolerant.

Feeling very tired and unwell, I came down with fever that night. I'd wake up, look at my watch, drop off to sleep, and wake again, only to find that it was only one or two minutes on. I had to get up many times to the toilet, and felt unsteady, so decided to stay another day rather than moving on. Later, I didn't feel like eating, and slept again, to wake several hours later with the towel on my pillow sweaty-wet; the fever had broken, and I felt better. I had some good periods of meditation.

While waiting for the bus to start on the next stage of my journey, I saw a man without hands, begging; amputations like this were punishment for theft, according to the *Syariah* law; people were sympathetic and responded to his pleas. The road to *Besham* over the 2350 mt *Shangla* Pass was bad, and we were delayed for two hours by road-works/landslides. At Besham, we joined the KKH ~ short for *Karakoram* Highway ~ an engineering marvel tracing the old silk road from Pakistan into China, and the highest paved international road in the world, opened in 1986. It connects *China* and *Pakistan* across the *Karakoram* mountain range. I got a minibus to *Dasu*, and was thrilled to ride high above the mighty silt-laden Indus river; the winding road was precipitous and scary. At *Dasu*, I looked for a hotel, but was deterred by the rates and also by some kids who followed me, tugging and pinching. Just then, a van came along going to *Shatial*, so I jumped in; it was 4:30, and by the time we got there, almost dark, only to find there was nothing going further. A policeman advised me to wait in a *chai-khana* ~ tea-house ~ until a bus came along; I had tea and



bread, was inspired to write something and sat for a while; I was resigned to sleeping on a charpoy there, but after some time was summoned for the bus. We joined a convoy headed by a police-car with flashing lights ~ there was danger on the roads, so they said, though I was unable to ascertain its nature. I was dropped outside the town of *Chilas*, where I managed to prevail upon some policemen to drive me to the hotel I'd read of in the guide-book ~ *Diamond Peak*. They stayed with me until I'd got a room ~ dirty, smelly, and nothing diamantine about it, but I couldn't back out now ~ and negotiated the rate down from 150/- to 120/-, then left me. There was no running water in the bathroom, only a bucketful, but I made tea anyway, and wrote my notes and slept without the dirty covers at 12:30.

Since my fever, I didn't sleep much, but wasn't tired, and felt very well; my thoughts were also clear. Waking at 5, I got up to find no power as well as no water. I went to the toilet and then the light came on, so I boiled water for a shave and hot coffee.

Near Chilas, are *petroglyphs* ~ images of the Buddha and stupas *pecked* out on rocks near the river that I wished to see, so made my way down the road, but the people I met weren't friendly, and hardly muttered a response to my greeting of *salaam-a-laekum*. Kids, like yesterday, were positively rude, and I felt lucky not to have stones thrown at me!

At the river, I was joined by a young guy who insisted on showing me some of the glyphs; I'm rather suspicious of people like that, having been conned before, but I think he was genuine. Because of my negative impressions of Chilas, I saw only a few glyphs and took few photos, then came back, catching a free ride up to the bazaar. Quickly, I got my stuff and caught a minibus to Gilgit, and after being stopped three times for road-clearing ~ landslides are very common ~ who should I see at the bus-station but Dread-locky, Ahmed Ali? He'd been moving fast, and was on his way *down* the highway, while I was going up. We spoke for some time, and I got a photo with him before getting a minibus into town, alighting near a hotel where I intended to stay, run by a Japanese woman who'd come here years before and had never left. I was soon to learn that Gilgit had a severe problem with

electricity, with one day on and the next day off. And even with the power on, internet connections there were very slow and erratic; it was frustrating trying to write and send mail.

I explored the town during the two days I stayed there, but there wasn't a great deal to see; it was a polyglot place, where people of various tribes had settled, but I understood nothing of their tongues. In an old British cemetery, I saw a grave inscribed with words from "*The Light of Asia*" on it: "*Perfect service rendered, duties done in charity, soft speech and stainless days. These riches shall not fade away in life, nor any death dispraise*".

The next day being a power-on day, I had a hot shower before leaving Gilgit. My next stop ~ and the furthest I would go up the KKH ~ would be *Karimabad*. I had to wait for the minibus to fill up, and fell into conversation with my seat-companion, someone named *Sherbaz*, the principal of a college in Karimabad, cultured and educated; we talked all the way, so the time soon passed; the only drawback was that, although I was next to the window, I didn't see much, and the views were really great ~ best so far. The weather was good, too, so the mountains were clear and sharp. By the time we got there, he had invited me for dinner the next night; I made sure he knew I was vegetarian.

Reaching Karimabad, I found the hotel that Dreadlocky had recommended ~ *Old Hunza Inn* ~ where I took a room, pleasant, clean and cheap at Rs150. After washing some clothes and hanging them out, I made coffee and ate some biscuits, then sat outside until the sun went down. It was so beautiful there, and I knew I would stay for a few days.

**Karimabad**, at 2440 m, is the capital of *Hunza*, a remote region which may have inspired James Hilton to write "Lost Horizons." The *Hunzakots* were renowned for their longevity, but alas, the KKH was a mixed-blessing and transformed their lifestyle; their long-lives are now just a legend. Because of their fair-skins and blue-green eyes, they are considered to be descendants of some of Alexander's soldiers who remained instead of returning home to Greece. The beauty of Hunza is matchless; from the soft blossoms of the apricot trees to the lovely ice-covered mountain of Rakaposhi (7788 m.)

Beginning my explorations the next day, I went up to the old fort overlooking the town, then decided to walk to *Aliabad*, 10 kms away, to get something for my cracked heels, which were quite sore. The friendly owner of the pharmacy I found recommended Vaseline, and served me tea. Outside, looking for somewhere to eat, I met some teachers who took me into a small restaurant where I got naan and curry, and sat talking with them for over an hour, during which others came in; it seemed to be their regular 'watering-hole.' We spoke of many things; one of them was very sympathetic towards Buddhism and had read "Siddhartha". Back at the hotel, I met a German and his Chinese girlfriend who were waiting for the *Kunjerab* Pass to open; it's an all-weather road, but foreigners are allowed to cross it into China only from May 1<sup>st</sup>.

When Sherbaz hadn't come at the stated time, I walked up the road a way, thinking to meet him as he came down, but at 7, there was no sign of him, so I went back, to find him waiting for me; somehow, we'd missed each other. He led me to his home, where his family were awaiting us, and his wife, *Nilam*, was preparing dinner of several kinds of bread. They were Ismaili Muslims, who do not worship in mosques but meeting-houses, where men and women are not segregated. The head of their sect is the *Aga Khan*, an international figure who stresses the importance of education and the need to modernize. The food was tasty, with *lassi* and tea, and I enjoyed the evening. Nilam invited me to stay overnight there, but I declined, saying I'd not brought my comb; they all laughed, especially the third of their four sons, who rolled on the floor! I gave Sherbaz a stone, which they appreciated so much. Before I left, Nilam, gave me some walnuts and fried bread to take back, and the second son accompanied me, as the way was dark; Sherbaz also asked this son to take me to *Eagle's Nest* ~ a rocky point high above the valley ~ the next day.

In the morning, I met the second son and a friend on their way for me, and we retraced our footsteps to the path that led to Eagle's Nest, which we reached after a 2-hours' climb on dusty tracks. There were great views from the summit, and I could see where I'd like to go over the following days. I took some photos and would like to have stayed longer, but had to consider their time,

so after ½ an hour, we began our descent; it took just over an hour to the town, where we parted; I appreciated their assistance.

The following day, I walked down to and crossed the river ~ no longer the Indus, but a tributary ~ and up the highway some way to a place of more petroglyphs that included Buddhist-texts among the figures. Then I took a dusty track up a bluff and climbed for another hour until I'd had enough; there were great views from here, too, although I wasn't as high as yesterday, but alas, I had forgotten to bring my camera!

Energised by my previous days' walks, I set off with the aim of reaching a valley on the opposite side of the river that had intrigued me since I arrived, but didn't know how to get there. My ignorance cost me quite a bit of time, but I eventually found a path that led along the cliffs and brought me to a village at the bottom of the valley. It was a steep climb on a dusty and rocky track, and after an hour, I'd accomplished what I'd set out to do, so turned back and descended the way I'd come. There were no vehicles running from the village to the Highway ~ not unless I was prepared to pay Rs800 ~ so I walked the 8 kms, and was pretty tired by the time I reached the footbridge over the river. Climbing to the highway, I waited only five minutes for a ride to Aliabad, where I got another back to Karimabad. I must have walked at least 30 kms that day, but felt good, even though I was somewhat dehydrated from sweating so much.

My sojourn in this pleasant place had to come to an end sooner or later, and with fond memories, I left and got a minibus back to Gilgit. There, at 8:15, I caught a bus ~ and the buses of Pakistan are so much better than in India, air-conditioned and very comfortable. I was making good time, and calculated that, at that rate, we would reach Besham by 6 pm, where I intended to spend the night. But alas, an hour out of Gilgit, we were halted, as Pres. Musharraf was visiting somewhere down the road, and nothing was allowed to run. While waiting, I got talking to another passenger, and the time passed. When it became too hot to sit in the bus waiting, I got out and stood in the shade of a barber's shop, until they invited me to sit inside; this became the source of some jokes. 3:30, and still no sign that we would be allowed to go. A

man approached me and asked, point-blank, "What is the level of your education?" A bit surprised by his abruptness, I thought for a moment, then said, "I can read and write ~ A to Z ~ and can count from one to ten." He then told me he was a teacher of mathematics, and I said, "That's good; maybe you can teach me to count from ten to twenty". His next question was, "What is your religion?" a question that should never be asked, as religion is a most personal and private matter. I would usually answer this cryptically, in order to lead the questioner to see the error of asking, but decided, for the sake of simplicity, to say, "Buddhism". At this, he said, "Well, I'm sorry to tell you, sir, but it's wrong."

"That is your opinion," I said, "and you are entitled to it; but I am a guest in your country, and it is rather rude of you to say this. Tell me, though, what do you know about Buddhism?" What he told me ~ though I forget what it was ~ revealed his ignorance, and I told him so.

"But I am an educated man," he said, somewhat indignantly.

I replied, "You are educated in a particular area, but in others, you are quite ignorant".

"So are you", he retorted.

"Yes, I know", I said, "but then, I didn't claim to be an educated man, did I?", and went on to say that if he'd been born in Japan or Thailand instead of in Pakistan, he would probably call himself 'Buddhist', or 'Christian' if he'd been born in the U.S. "It will never happen that everyone in the world would embrace your religion and become Muslims, any more than everyone would become Buddhists or Hindus or Christians, so we must learn to accept the existence of other religions, and live with them".

By this time, a small crowd had gathered around us, and he said something I didn't understand, so I decided it would be unwise to reason with him further, and walked away. Not long after this, we were allowed to proceed, nine hours after we'd been halted.

Two hours down the road, we halted at Chilas, and my new friend, Mohd Sharif Butt, invited me for dinner of naan and curry. I gratefully accepted, then told him that I would spend the night

there rather than go on and get to Besham at 2 or 3 am, so took my bags from the bus, but it was only with some difficulty that I got a refund on my fare; the conductor had taken my money without giving me a ticket. Two policemen escorted me to a grotty hotel where they tried to charge me Rs200 and only came down to Rs150 when I was walking out. In the room, however ~ noisy, as it was above the highway ~ I discovered there was a water-problem ~ just as in Diamond Peak ~ only a trickle. I went down to complain, and a boy came and filled the bucket. Just then, the power went off, and I resigned myself to spending a powerless night, but after a while, it came on again, so I was able to use the fan ~ it was quite warm ~ and boil water.

**A**s soon as I could, the next morning, I got a van to Shatrial, and from there, another going through to Besham, reaching there at 2 pm. Again, I enjoyed the ride down the KKH, reaching Besham around 2 am, and getting a connecting bus to *Abbotabad*. My seat-companion was a friendly young man who had memorized the whole Koran, and who pressed me to stay at his home. I declined his invitation, however, as I need my own space. I found a hotel in Abbotabad, and slept well, tired after the long journey.

**W**hen I awoke, there was no power, but I managed to pack my stuff and leave, and got a bus to Peshawar, three hours away. It was much hotter since I was last there. I checked into the same hotel, then went out to eat *keer* and check my email. The sky turned a funny colour; something was imminent, but I wasn't sure what; I even thought it might presage an earthquake! That night, there was a dust-storm which lasted over two hours, with dust infiltrating everywhere. On top of this, there was a power-cut, so it was a hot, long and uncomfortable night, with many mozzies. I didn't sleep much, waiting for the dawn.

**B**ecause I needed a new visa for India, I had to go to Islamabad, so caught a bus to Rawalpindi, the old city which is the transport-hub for the capital; I then made my way to Islamabad and found a hotel not too far from the diplomatic enclave, ready for an early start on Monday, the next day. Islamabad is a new city, and was officially declared the capital in 1967. It is well laid-out, with broad boulevards and open spaces.

Expecting to find long lines of people outside the Indian High Commission, as in Kathmandu, I left the hotel while it was still dark to walk there, but upon reaching the diplomatic enclave, discovered that I could not just go inside, but had to go to a nearby shuttle-bus station to get in line for a ride in. There were already many people ahead of me, and we had to wait over an hour for the ticket-counters to open. Finally, we boarded buses, to be dropped at various embassies inside the compound. At the Indian place, there was another wait, as it doesn't open until 10, and was tardy about that, too. But I was surprised to find a special window for foreigners like myself, and I was first in line, with a Frenchmen who I met outside. I filled in the application-form and paid the fee of RS3,300, and was told to come back the next Monday ~ a whole week later! What to do with this time? I didn't want to stay in new and historically-sterile Islamabad, so decided to return to Lahore.

Consequently, I got a bus early the next day, and found myself sitting beside a young guy for the 5 hours' ride. Before long, he struck up a conversation with me and said he was a professor in a university. It soon became clear, however, that he was hopeful of converting me, but he had no more success in this than the old man of some weeks earlier. I told him what Islam had done in preserving the science, astronomy, medicine and philosophy of the Greeks and Romans during the Dark Ages when Christianity had discarded them, and later made them available to others; we must give credit where credit is due. But I resent efforts to convert me. I do not try to convert others to Buddhism, not wanting that; I want to help others discover what it means to be human, not change one name-and-form for another. Efforts to convert others to one's point-of-view require contempt or even hatred for their ways, often with no knowledge or understanding of them. It is extremely arrogant!

It was overcast as we came into Lahore, and it tried to rain, but gave up. I got a room in the same hotel I'd stayed in before, but it had no window, and was very warm; the fan only succeeded in stirring up the hot air! I had to find somewhere else, and made

that my priority the next day. Eventually, I got a room nearby ~ much bigger and better, and only Rs50 more expensive.

By then, the temperature had soared, and reached 49° during the time I was there. It was hard to take, and the fans in my room ~ one stand-fan and the other on the ceiling ~ were practically useless. I also came down with amoebic-dysentery, such as I'd had in Kathmandu in '74. Fortunately, I've always had pretty good control over my stomach, so didn't suffer any mishaps while I was out ~ and I needed to go out for things like medicine and to check my mail. I lost my appetite, and even the thought of food put me off. I started to lose weight, and although I'm always happy when that happens, I don't like to fall sick to do it. I carried on anyway, because what else could I do? There was no-one to take care of me and do what needed to be done.

I felt better in the morning, chanting my new mantra, "*Owa-Tana-Siam*", and returned to Rawalpindi by train; the ride was smooth and uneventful, in a/c carriage. I got my passport, and together with the French guy I'd met the week before, caught another train back to Lahore that evening. The a/c carriages were already full, so we had to go economy-class, but this was fine, as the train was so modern and good, I could hardly believe it. It left on time, and later, we were served refreshments! Halfway, we were hit by a dust-storm, which was unpleasant, as the dust poured in. We reached Lahore just after 10, and the wind was still quite strong; there was thick dust everywhere, including my room.





~ 27 ~

## THE NATURE OF THE BODY

**N**ext morning, I got a bus to the border, where I watched long lines of porters in single-file ~ like ants ~ carrying boxes of what I learned was dried fruit from Afghanistan; wearing long blue shirts, Pakistani porters passed the packages to their red-shirted Indian counterparts at the barrier dividing Pakistan from India; they were not allowed to cross. The Indian porters then loaded the boxes into waiting Indian trucks.

I crossed back into India without much delay. I'd decided to go to Kashmir, in spite of the fact that it was still a troubled place. After spending the night in Amritsar, I took a bus to Jammu, the winter-capital of Kashmir, and from there ~ again by bus, as there is no train-line ~ to Srinagar.

The road had improved considerably since my visit in '98 ~ probably because the military needed it for its repressive operations. As we climbed, it became cooler, which was one of the reasons Kashmir always attracted people; and now, at this time, there was an influx of people from further south; the situation there had become less dangerous and permitted this. We got to Srinagar at 4 pm, and then my hassles began. I allowed myself to be hussled by a young guy into going with him by auto-rickshaw to look at houseboats on the river, but wasn't impressed, so dismissed him, and was then persuaded by someone offering a room on a lake-boat for Rs150, but when he dropped me by car, and his elder brother took me by *shikara*, I wasn't impressed by that, either. Just then, someone else got into the shikara and persuaded me ~ I'm a fool! ~ to accompany him to *his* houseboat on the connecting lake, undertaking to pay the boatman and promising me a room for the same price. Well, I'd really let myself in for a long ride ~ it was the last boat on the lake, but fortunately connected to the land by a walkway. It was hard to pin him down about price, but I agreed to pay 200/-, including breakfast of bread and tea. I wasn't happy, as the boat wasn't very good and was weed-choked, with no mountain-view. There was no power,

so they gave me a kerosene lamp until power came on late, when I slept. It wasn't cold at first, but early morning, I got under the covers. The next day, I moved to another boat, but the houseboat owners are notorious for finding ways to cheat their guests, and this rankles; you feel like a sheep to be shorn; moreover, on the houseboats, you are dependent on shikaras for getting back and forth, and they are not always available when you want them. I searched for a hotel, but because it was now the hot-season, there were many tourists from the plains, and most hotels and house-boats were fully-booked. I was lucky to find quite a nice room in a hotel and moved from my boat. The boat-owner wasn't pleased, as he thought I would stay longer than two days.

Contrary to what I'd expected, Internet-connections in Srinagar were surprisingly good, and at Rs30, not very expensive. In one cyber-cafe, I bumped into the Korean monks, who told me they were leaving for Ladakh the next day, the *Zoji-la Pass* having just opened; they would be among the first to cross it. We might meet in *Leh*, I told them, as I would also be going the day after.

My bus left on time, 8 am, but we stopped at *Sonamarg* for three hours, waiting for the traffic to come down the pass, as it was one-way only. We then began our ascent, which was very slow and involved many halts; the narrow road switch-backed up and was quite perilous, with great banks of snow towering over it, threatening to collapse at any time. At the 3500 m summit, we began our descent, but going down the other side was also slow, as the road there was no better. We reached *Drass* before dark, and the foreigners had to register at the Tourist Office. *Drass* is said to be the second coldest inhabited place in the world, but I found that hard to believe; in summer, it is quite pleasant, and the land around is fertile. After a break there, we started off again for *Kargil*; reaching there at 8:45, but it took a while to get my bags from the roof, and then began the usual hassle of finding a hotel; eventually, I got one, and dashed to the toilet. I'd been bursting to go for hours; what a relief! I slept quite well after that.

The bus would be starting at 5 am, so of course, I got up early, but that wasn't a problem for me. I had time enough to do what

was necessary, and made some coffee, too, to have with biscuits until it was time to go.

Not far out of Kargil, we left predominantly Muslim Ladakh and came to the mainly Buddhist part. From hereon, stupas and hill-top *gompas* are common sights. The land is dusty, rocky, brown and barren, but, as along the KKH in Pakistan, here and there are cultivated patches irrigated by the Indus, which we were again beside; it has its source in Tibet, and recognizes no international boundaries until finally it merges with the ocean near *Karachi*, and loses its identity there.

“A wave in the sea, seen in one way, seems to have a distinct identity, an end and a beginning, a birth and a death. Seen in another way, the wave itself doesn’t really exist but is just the behavior of water, ‘empty’ of any separate identity but ‘full’ of water. So, when you really think about the wave, you come to realize that it is something that has been made temporarily possible by wind and water, and is dependent upon a set of constantly changing circumstances. You also realize that every wave is related to every other wave.” (Extracted from “*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*”, by Sogyal Rinpoche).

Along the way, we stopped several times for tea and food, and reached Leh at 3 pm. At the bus-station, a hotel-tout offered me a room for Rs200, but I said I expected to pay Rs150, and he said okay. He took me by van (for which I would later be billed); the room was good, but the water had a bad smell and I couldn’t use it for coffee. After a short nap, I went out to get more medicine for diarrhea, as I was still down with it, and also had *giardiasis*, with a taste like rotten eggs coming up from my stomach; I felt weak, and although I didn’t feel like eating, forced something down anyway. Tired, I returned to my room. Leh is 3,500 m asl, but wasn’t as cold as I’d thought it would be. There were quite a lot of tourists who’d either flown in or come in as soon as the pass opened; it was just the beginning of the season.

For centuries, Leh was almost-completely Buddhist, and there are monasteries, temples and shrines everywhere; but in recent

years, there has been an influx of Muslim Kashmiris; the future will see the Buddhists being outnumbered.

Many people use Leh as a base for trekking, and I could see why; the landscape was spectacular, and I might have gone myself had I not been so debilitated. My general lassitude mitigated against me doing or seeing much, and at this stage in my trip, my interest was at low ebb anyway. But, since it would have been a pity to come all this way and see nothing, I walked up to the old palace above the town, but there wasn't much inside, and I thought: Poor king ~ when there was one! I then hiked further up to the gompa overlooking everything; it was quite a climb, but I sat down at the top to rest a while, and took some photos from there. Later, I went in search of some medicine for the giardiasis, and the man in the pharmacy suggested I see a doctor in the hospital just opposite. The doctor there gave me a prescription for which I didn't have to pay anything but the Rs2 registration-fee, and advised me to return the next day with a stool sample.

The stillness of the night was broken by barking dogs, and I had to resort to using *blu-tack* in my ears ~ it makes effective ear-plugs, better than those commercially-available. I'd discovered this use for it the previous year in *Dogmandu*.

With my stool-sample in a plastic container bought for the purpose, I went to the hospital, where I waited in line before being sent to the lab, where I was told that I should have brought the sample in a match-box! I envisaged doing it in such a container! They asked me to return for the results later.

To fill in the time, I got a bus to *Spituk Gompa* not far away, and was tired after climbing the hill on which it sits. There are good views from the top, of the city and airport on one side, and on the other, the Indus river and the cultivated areas on both banks; and all around were stupas, made of mud and probably containing the ashes of lamas; most of them were poorly made, misshapen, and in various stages of disintegration. I sat for a while on the windy summit, then walked down and got a bus back to the hospital, where I was told that my stool was normal, and no parasites

therein. There was no charge. I was very tired after walking back up the long slope to my hotel.

Internet-usage in Leh was Rs100 per hour or more, so I refrained from using it; I would wait until I got back to Srinagar. I didn't meet the Koreans there or elsewhere again.

The night before I left, there was a power-cut and by morning, there was still no electricity, so I had to do everything by candle-light. It was still dark when I left the hotel to walk to the bus-station, and the bus left promptly at 6, less than half-full. We stopped for tea an hour out, and after another two hours, for lunch. By that time I was hungry, so ate my fill of dahl-baht. We reached Kargil at 2:30 and stopped there for 30 minutes, then, not far out, we got stuck in some kind of jam for an hour; I didn't discover what it was all about. I got talking to a Brit from N.Z.; he was on his way to Pakistan for trekking. It was 5:45 by the time we reached Drass, and by then, all the hotels were full; I resigned myself to sleeping in the bus, but just then, someone came and told us we could get a room nearby. We went to see it and well, I almost turned it down, as there were no beds or anything, but just mattresses on the floor, and the blankets were rather suspect, but after such a long journey, we settled for it, paying Rs50 each.

I didn't sleep much, and got up before 3 am. The bus left at 4, and two hours later, we were at the top of the pass; it was an easier ride than it was coming, and there was no delay in getting to Sonamarg an hour later. We halted there to eat, but from then on, ran into heavy traffic, with long strings of military vehicles rumbling past; we reached Srinagar at 10:45. I got a room in the hotel where I'd stayed before, and after washing my clothes and showering, went for two hours of emailing, but the connection was poor and I only just managed to read all my mail and reply to most of it. I got a ticket for the next day's bus to Jammu; there was no point in staying longer.

Security was tight in the city as we left Srinagar, as the PM was coming, and we had to go by back streets until we reached the highway. It was a long and tiring journey back to Jammu; we got there at 6:30, and stopped near the train-station, but oh, what a

hassle trying to get a ticket! There were armed police everywhere, and all bags had to go through x-ray machines! Finally, I gave up, and went for an a/c bus instead. A tout demanded *baksheesh* for helping me, and, not content with what I gave him, asked for more, so I said, “Baksheesh is what I decide to give you, not how much you ask for.”

The bus was comfortable enough, but the ride to Delhi seemed interminable. We finally got there just before 8, and I got an auto to *Paharganj*, near New Delhi railway-station, where most backpackers stay in budget hotels. I checked into my regular place ~ *Star Palace* ~ and got the same room as before; this time it had an air-cooler ~ a box-like device that blows air through wet straw ~ but it was hot, even so. After washing my clothes, shaving and showering, I went to eat masala-dosa, did my email, and made a reservation for the next morning’s train to Jhansi; I wanted to revisit Orchha not far from there. While in the station, I weighed myself, and was surprised by the reading ~ 66 kgs! My sickness had taken its toll!

In a newspaper that day, I read that shortly after I’d left Srinagar, there had been a number of bombings to protest the visit of the PM, causing several deaths. People who’d gone there on vacation ~ even children ~ were among the dead.

By then, of course, I’d resigned myself to the heat, as there was nothing I could do about it. At the station, I struggled up the stairs with my bags and reached the appropriate platform; at 6 am it was already hot and humid. But oh, how nice it was in the a/c compartment for 7½ hours; moreover, there was only one other person in the compartment, and we were issued with nice clean bedding, so I slept a little. At Jhansi, I emerged into the heat, but didn’t start to sweat immediately. I had to wait almost an hour for the Orchha *tempo* to fill up ~ and boy, do they cram people into such vehicles! ~ and was hot and sweaty by the time we got there. I soon got a room for Rs100, and then had lunch of *chappatti-thali* nearby. Later, I made an effort and went to the river; I was surprised at how much the water-level had fallen. It was so warm that I didn’t stay long.

By this time, an inexplicable pain had developed behind my right knee; had I pulled a muscle at Delhi train-station or something? I really didn't know, but it was so bad ~ and I'm not a wimp where pain is concerned, and can stand quite a bit if I must ~ that upon starting out anywhere, I had to limp along on my toes; it was quite obvious. I called in a masseur, but his ministrations did nothing to alleviate it, and it lasted for a week or so before disappearing as mysteriously as it had appeared; some pains are like that.

Even so, it didn't prevent me doing what I wanted. I revisited certain places and took some photos. I also went into Jhansi to do my email, only to find out after the event that my pocket had been picked, probably while I was getting out of the tempo; the thief was Rs600 worse off, because although he doesn't know it, a thief steals more from himself than from the one he robs.

The power-supply was erratic, and my room was hot without the fan. It rained quite heavily at times, presaging the monsoon; I expected to be caught in it along the way, either in India or in Nepal.

The duration of my stay in Orchha was determined by a mysterious rash and maddening itch, starting on my backside. At first, I thought I'd picked up a flea or louse from being in close proximity to someone in the tempo, but the 'bites' spread so rapidly that no flea could have done that. It spread to my nether regions and around my waist, and even to my upper inner-arms; I was driven to distraction, and it was only with great effort that I could resist scratching the raised lumps. Was it a heat-rash? Hardly likely, as it appeared so suddenly and spread so quickly. Prickly-heat I'd had before, and it wasn't that. Was it caused by something I ate or drank? Hard to tell, and it was doubtful I'd be able to get anything like Calomine Lotion for it in the village. Perhaps it was an allergy of some sort, even though I'd not been allergic to anything so far. I couldn't sleep from it. The power went off, but fortunately returned after half-an-hour. We are vulnerable and susceptible, and I'd been thinking earlier how lucky I had been to travel as I've done without coming down with much sickness, as there is no-one to care for me. It is the nature of the body to get sick and feel pain; we are not beyond that condition. Reflection on this may give rise to fortitude, and enable us to better deal with things.

The itchiness became somewhat less, or maybe I got used to it, and managed to sleep a little, but by then I'd decided to return to Delhi, giving up my idea of revisiting Khajuraho. My leg was no better, but the rash had subsided by morning.

Paying my bill, I got an auto-rickshaw to the station, and tried to get a reservation for the afternoon train, but couldn't. I had to settle for a general-ticket, and wait for the train to come. It was so hot on the platform, even in the shade, and I filled and refilled my water-bottles, each time adding purification-drops! The train came at 1:45, and I got the conductor to upgrade me to an a/c carriage ~ of course, at a steep extra charge, but it was worth it ~ at least, I got a berth to myself, with a pillow, so I was able to nap as I liked. How nice is a/c after the ordeal of the heat!

One of the passengers in my compartment started to play with his cell-phone ~ at full volume! ~ until I refused to take it any longer ~ why are Indians such noisy people? Everything has to be at full-blast with them: horns, loud-speakers, radios, phones ~ and said: "Oh, come on! Stop playing with your toy! Give us a break! You could at least turn the volume down!" He complied, meekly, but why the heck do they need to be told about things so obvious?

The train was late, and when I got off, the large pocket on my backpack got snagged and tore open, and my *Lonely Planet* fell out; someone picked it up and gave it to me. A porter wanted Rs50 to carry my bags, but I struggled up and down the steps with them myself, and made it alright. I reached Star Palace at 10:30, and made coffee, unable to sleep for a while.

My fasting blood-sugar-level had been falling for a while, and in Leh reached 4.7, which I was delighted with. Imagine how I felt in Orchha when it got as low as 3.1, and in Delhi 2.5! I was so incredulous that I thought something must be wrong rather than right, as I've tried for years to get it down, without success. What was happening? I could even eat chocolate without it sending my sugar sky-high! It remained way below the desired max of 7.0 for two weeks, before climbing above again. I no more understood the drastic fall that I did the leg-pain or the rash, but how I wish it would come down again! Over the years I've tried so many things



~ tablets, capsules, pills, powders, teas and so on, but nothing seems to work. Even my strenuous treks in the mountains didn't have the desired effects. Roll on, stem-cell research!

The weighing-machine in the railway-station read 64 kgs when I fed it a rupee and stood on the plate. Doubting its accuracy, I went to another, with the same result. I'd not been this weight for many years!

With no reason to stay any longer in India, I reserved a berth on a train to Gorakhpur, and the next night was on my way. The train was very crowded, and the carriage was hot and stifling; the 14 hours' journey was bad enough even *with* a reservation, as the carriage was hot and stifling; it would have been terrible without.

Upon reaching Gorakhpur at 9:30, I decided to get a taxi to the border rather than make the trip by crowded bus, but even the taxi was slow and made two detours to avoid police checkpoints. It took 2½ hours to reach the border, and as always, I felt good to leave that exasperating country!

Getting the visa for Nepal was as easy as getting the Indian visa was not; simply pay \$30 and fill in the forms, and you're in. While looking around for a bus to Kathmandu, the sky suddenly turned black and a terrific dust-storm blew up, sending me scurrying for shelter; I'd never seen anything like it. It was followed, 15 minutes later, by a sharp shower. Someone then led me to an agent, from whom I bought a ticket, unaware that he had grossly overcharged me. I also agreed to stay in a hotel ~ *Blue Horizons* ~ in Jatha, and paid 250/- for the first day. The bus left at 2 pm, and thus began a very bad ride lasting 15 hours, bad, in the sense that when we reached *Narayanghat* five hours later, the blasted driver stopped there almost two hours, without any explanation. (Fortunately, the rain had cooled things down, and it wasn't the hot ride I'd expected). Then, five minutes after starting again, he stopped for food, another 45 minutes. We stopped again the other side of *Mugling* and the driver and his crew disappeared for another hour, by which time I was annoyed and tried to get others to complain, but to no avail, except for someone sitting beside me, who'd got on at Mugling; he agreed with me and translated for

me; the rest were an apathetic lot who deserved what they got. I got off to search for the driver, but couldn't find him, so had to wait until he returned.

Just before *Naubise*, he stopped once more and disappeared to sleep for two hours! Again, I got off to search for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. When he finally returned at 2:30, I gave him a slow hand-clap to show my dissatisfaction of his behavior. Uphill to *Nagdhunga* went okay until 1 km from the top there was a jam that inched forward, taking us an hour to reach the check-point; that was the cause of it. Most checkpoints had been abolished since the tyrant-king was forced to step down a month before, but this one remained. Clearing it at last, we quickly went downhill; there was no delay at Kalanki, except to let people off, and we reached *Balaju* bus-station. I was not surprised to find no one from the hotel waiting for me, as had been arranged, as we were so late on arriving. It had taken us 15 hours to make the trip that would normally have taken 9. I gave the driver a final piece of my mind, asking him who he thought he was ~ "Gyanendra II?" I said, "You are a servant of the people, not a king, and have a responsibility towards the passengers. You've wasted five hours of my time, and of all the other passengers. You should not be driving a bus!" He kept quiet and said not a word; maybe he didn't understand English, but he must certainly have understood my tone.

Calling the hotel, I was asked to wait until someone came for me, which he did after half-an-hour, saying he had no car because of the huge Maoist rally in the city that day, and none was available. We had to go by minibus, which fortunately started from there, so we had no problem getting in with my baggage, but it soon became horribly packed. When we got out, we had to walk some distance to the hotel, and I insisted that my check-out would be 12-noon next day, not that, as it was already 6:30; they agreed. The next day, I moved to *Millennium Inn*, where I'd stayed during my last several visits; my preferred room on the roof was taken, but the one I got was also good.

The people of Kathmandu were still celebrating their victory over the king; I totally agreed with them. I had come across this in an opposition-newspaper, entitled,

“OUR PRODIGAL KING:

“Kathmandu, 30<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2005: While King Gyanendra is in his joyful trip killing his time in feasts and whimsical tours, poor commoners are dying in bed because of scarce service delivered by the state-controlled hospitals. The Bir Hospital, which is situated at the heart of the capital, is itself an obtrusive example of this. Talking the plight of the hospital, there are only two doctors in the Emergency Ward. Not to talk of other wards. Still, Kanti Bal is on the verge of closure.

“The reason behind the shortage of money in hospital is not only because this nation is poor. The king’s frequent ‘esoteric’ trips have been a great economic setback for the country.

“A study conducted recently has brought forth the remuneration of Nepalese king is one and a half times more than that of Japanese Emperor, and the queen of the Netherlands. Similarly, the Nepalese king has beaten hollow a score of presidents of prominent countries in this regard. The report says that our King’s salary is 173 times more than that of Russian president, 57 times than President of France, 318 times than Indian president, 301 times than General Musharaff of Pakistan, 15 times than English premier. Most specifically, our King’s salary totally supplants the salary of Chinese president in amount. It is a whopping 2426 times greater than that of Chinese president whose annual salary is Rs1,35,648. One can imagine how can a king of a country like ours can afford such a luxury?”

**Although** the English of this tract leaves something to be desired, it clearly shows that the monarchy of Nepal is anachronistic and needs to be abolished. The crown-prince is reported to be even worse than his father!

**M**y trip was rapidly coming to an end, and I tarried some days in Kathmandu, waiting to hear from DV, so I could make a booking convenient for him to pick me up at KL airport. Nothing much of interest happened in this time, other than visiting my Japanese friends, the Sakais, and staying overnight with them in Patan.

I made a reservation for a flight on Sunday, the 11<sup>th</sup>, and spent some time buying a few gifts and other things.

**O**ne night, some hooligans ~ Brits, by their sound ~ come into the room opposite mine around 2 o'clock, talking loudly and turning the TV high. I heard the concierge call them and they agreed to be quiet, but still kept it up. I put blu-tak in my ears, and when I went for my early walk, put a post-it note on their door, saying: "This is quite a decent hotel, and other people stay here. Please consider them and their desire to sleep at night, and don't make a lot of noise." I later saw them downstairs ~ a couple of skin-heads, like soccer-yobboes! They left that morning.

**O**n the Friday evening, I got that rash again, but not too bad, and by morning, it had gone.

**S**ubha and his brother-in-law (who had kept in touch with me by email on Subha's behalf) visited me the next afternoon, but only for a few minutes; I gave Subha a bag of clothes and things I no longer needed, and money for his bus-fare home.

**T**hat night, the rash struck me again, and this time much worse than before, so that even my lips were affected; they looked like fish-lips! And I was to fly the next morning! Nor had the swelling abated when dawn came. I felt so self-conscious. It remained like that for some hours, but by the time I got to the airport, it had gone down somewhat, and when I reached KL late at night, was almost back to normal.



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**SIXTY TRIPS AROUND THE SUN**

**D**V and Joan were shocked at my general appearance when I came through the doors, and described me as haggard! We were soon on the way to Malacca, where they left me in my room above the shop and went home. Although tired, I didn't sleep immediately, as I first had to unpack; moreover, my biological-clock was still on Kathmandu time, 2½ hours behind Malaysian.

I soon settled into a routine, and was given a vacant desk in DV's office as my work-station. My first job was to type out an account of my trip using my diary-notes; it took two weeks, as I had over seven months to cover, and also, I wasn't at full-strength yet. This was clear to everyone, and they were so solicitous of my welfare.

My appetite soon returned and I began to regain the weight I'd lost, as always happens; it wasn't something I wanted. Although I exercise in my room as much as 3 hours a day, I don't walk much because of the humidity; five minutes, and I'm wet with sweat!

Two years ago, I told DV that as we'd met on my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday when I arrived in Malacca for the first time, I'd like to observe my 60<sup>th</sup> with him and his family. I don't celebrate my birthdays myself, but Chinese people consider the 60th auspicious, 60 being the multiple of the twelve signs of the zodiac by the five elements ~ earth, air, fire, water and wood ~ and regarded as the beginning of wisdom. Well, such things are unimportant to me, and I don't live by them; nor do I believe that wisdom begins at a particular age; many people grow old without becoming any wiser than when they were born! On the other hand, some children are quite wise from very young. And as for me, sometimes, I think there's no hope, as I often say to myself, "Oh, you stupid man!"

Anyway, he kept this in mind, and by the time I got back from Nepal, the idea had formed in his mind of doing it on a grander scale than with just his family, and, knowing that I intended to resume work on my memoirs with the aim of getting them printed,

saw it as an opportunity to raise funds for it. The pressure was on, therefore, for me to get down to serious work. But what I'd written the year before was so voluminous that I wondered how I could get it all ready in the space of two months. One night, just before I fell asleep, the solution came to me: cut it into parts and get them printed separately; as one book, it would simply have been too thick, and people would have been deterred by the size. This decision galvanized me, and I settled down to work on the first part, which I called, "So Many Roads", in answer to the first question of Bob Dylan's famous song of the 'Sixties, "*Blowin' in the Wind*": "How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man?"

Preparing a book for printing is not a simple matter, and involves much more than just writing it. Although the contents are more important than the container, you want the appearance to be as nice as possible anyway. I spent many hours adjusting the text to get it how I wanted it, trying not to leave the last line of a paragraph with just one word, for example. DV's accountant, Kenneth (Kenni-ji) was ~ and continued to be throughout the three books ~ most helpful, and I exploited him for all kinds of assistance, but he didn't complain, and in fact, even seemed to enjoy it. I learned several things from him in the process, and owe him a great deal.

I'd not got very far with it before I came down with some kind of urinary-tract infection, which meant going to the toilet frequently, only to have a dribble come out. This was quite disruptive, so DV took me to see a doctor-friend ~ Goh Tiong Peng. His questions and my answers thereto convinced him that my prostate-gland was enlarged, a common complaint in men my age; he said that medication might alleviate it, but ultimately, an operation was the only way. I didn't want this, and tried the medication he prescribed, plus *Saw Palmetto* tablets that other friends had urged me to try. When this brought about no improvement, I went to a urologist that Dr. Goh had referred me to. Dr. Yang Jin Rong ran the standard tests on me ~ somewhat embarrassing for me, but that was his job ~ that confirmed my prostate-gland was greatly enlarged; he also advised an operation, and explained what it would involve. Dr. Yang kindly charged us a nominal fee of just

RM1 for his services. I considered going for the operation, and got DV to take me to see an insurance-agent friend of his, a Mr. Leong. He advised me on my policy, which was about to expire, saying that if I made my claim before the expiry-date, I should be covered. I decided on the op, visited Dr Yang again to arrange the date ~ August 7<sup>th</sup>, a Monday ~ and began negotiations with the insurance-company, via email. These, needless to say, were somewhat protracted. First, they sent me the claim-forms for both me and the doctor to fill in, and we faxed these off. Now, it is well-known that insurance-companies ~ though quick to take your money ~ drag their feet over claims, and so it was with mine. O-Day (Operation-Day) drew nearer, and they still hadn't come through, so DV told me to go ahead and he would underwrite the costs ~ a sum of over RM6000.

**M**y book was finally ready for printing. We'd had quotes from several printers, and decided upon the cheapest, although it turned out to have been false economy. She requested a CD of the book, and we duly gave her one. A week later, she produced a proof-copy, but I wasn't happy with it, as the last line on many pages had jumped to the top of the next page, throwing the whole book out. She did a second proof-copy, but it was no better than the first. I'd never had such problems with previous books, which had all been done by *off-set*, so I decided to print out the manuscript myself and give her that. This was a lengthy job that took me two days doing little else, as the printing-machine I was using was rather slow. The printer then assured me that it would be done exactly as I wanted it. *If only!* I was unaware that since my earlier books had been printed, the technology had changed, and not for the better, either. DV undertook to monitor the printing.

**B**ecause this stay in Malacca was longer than my other recent stays, it was suggested that I might like to give a few talks in and around the town ~ something I'd not done for some years, when I'd 'quit' in frustration ~ and I agreed; after all, I needed to hone my skills. Several talks were arranged and needed translation, which was not always satisfactory, but I had to make do, and they turned out alright even so. I have almost no control over Chinese translation (as I do over Vietnamese or Indonesian, for example,

but there are various ways by which I can tell ~ or feel ~ if the translation is accurate or not). The audiences were generally receptive and kind. Sometimes, because of the distance, I would get back at 11:30 or thereabouts, so the next morning, didn't get up at my usual time; my routine was disrupted, but it was for a good cause, so I didn't mind.

The pre-op tests ~ x-ray, blood-test and ECG ~ were done, and I was all set for O-Day. On the Thursday before, I received an email from the insurance to the effect that after due consideration, they felt they were not liable to pay the costs of my operation, since I should have returned to Australia for it (I'd already told them, several times, that I had no return ticket to Australia, nor did I intend to return anytime soon, but if they would like to pay the costs of a ticket, I might consider it). I wasn't disappointed or surprised at their decision, as I'd been expecting it. The next day, however, I got another email saying that, after further consideration, they had decided to pay after all. Well, to say the least, this was welcome news; why else had I taken out travel-insurance?

I'd been instructed to fast from the night before the operation, so I checked into the hospital with an empty stomach, and was pleased to find that a fax had arrived from the insurance-company undertaking all costs. I was taken up to my private room ~ since the insurance would be covering it, why not? ~ and told to change into the gown ready for surgery. DV left me, saying he would return after the operation to see how I'd gone on. When the time came, I was wheeled along on a gurney to the operating-theatre and prepared for what I'd come for. The anaesthetist gave me a long shot in my spine and waited until the lower part of my body was completely numb, and oh, what a strange ~ almost terrible feeling ~ or non-feeling ~ that was! Supported by arm-rests, my arms were stretched out beside me, in a crucifixion-posture, with electrodes attached to monitor pulse and blood-pressure.

Without going into the intimate details of the procedure here ~ known as *TURP* (I have my own interpretation of this, but anyone can check it for themselves on the Net), let me just say that I was able to observe what was going on inside my body on a CCTV,



and was fascinated to see the greatly-magnified instrument ~ a tiny super-heated blade ~ 'shaving' pieces off the whitish prostate which was restricting the canal from the bladder; these pieces then floated away into the bladder to be sucked out later. As the knife sliced through the tissue, jets of blood spurted out, but the doctor quickly cauterized the wounds as he worked on. I felt no pain ~ or any other sensation ~ whatsoever during the 90 minute operation. Then, fitted with a catheter to drain the urine from my bladder, and an intravenous drip to replace lost fluids and flush out the detritus, I was taken to the recovery-room until my blood-pressure had stabilized (it had fallen considerably), then, an hour later, wheeled back to my room.

**DV** and his mother had been waiting for me, and because the operation and time in the recovery-room had taken longer than expected, he'd wanted to go, as he had other things to do, but his mother insisted on staying. After assuring themselves I'd come through alright, they went home, leaving me to further recover. The anesthetic took some hours to wear off, and then the pain set in. Panadol administered by the nurses had little effect.

**Because** I was unable to sit up at first, an orderly had to feed me lunch with a spoon ~ I felt like a baby! Other kind visitors came and went, and I was allowed to raise my bed, and later to sit up, but not fully, in case the injection-point on my spine burst open.

**That evening,** Leong, his wife, Lye Guat, and son, Yuan Jia came to visit me, and while recounting my ordeal, I described the loss of feeling in my legs, and how I'd wondered, "Where are my legs? I've lost my legs! Give me back my legs!". The boy had been listening, and after some minutes, he slowly and quietly came to the foot of my bed and lifted the blanket to see for himself whether I'd really lost my legs or not. We laughed so much!

**After they'd gone,** I was left alone, apart from the nurses checking on me, bringing antibiotics and changing the drip-bags. There was blood in my urine as it drained through the tube, as was to be expected, but it became pinker as the hours passed. The pain had not subsided, but I tried to bear it, until, at 10 o'clock, unable to sleep because of it, I called a nurse to ask for more pain-killers.

She had nothing other than panadol, however, and I refused it, saying it had no effect. I didn't sleep at all that first night, and it was good that I had a room to myself, where no-one could hear me moaning and groaning.

In the morning, when the nurse came to check on me, I told her that I needed to go to the bathroom. "Oh, you can't," she said.

I replied, "But I *must!*" I didn't want to lie there smelling of b.o.

"Well, in that case, I will accompany you."

"Oh, no, thank-you, I'll manage", not sure that I would.

It required quite an effort to get up, and I was unstable on my feet, but slowly made my way to the bathroom, with the nurse pushing the drip-stand ahead of me. I closed the door and divested myself of the gown and the towel I'd wrapped around my waist, and proceeded to shave and shower, understanding why she'd not wanted me to do so; the blood in my urine became redder from the strain of bending over. I returned to my bed, mission accomplished, and when the doctor came around later, I told him of the pain and he prescribed stronger medication which worked; he also gave me a sleeping-tablet for the second night. More visitors came during the day. I slept alright that night.

The hospital food was not bad ~ better, in fact, than had been the food in Adelaide hospital the year before, and all-vegetarian, of course. There were mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks of tea and buttered-bread, too. More visitors came: Maggie, Hong and mother, friends from Muar, the printer-lady, and in fact, quite a number of well-wishers. I felt like a celebrity.

On the third morning, the catheter and drip bags were removed, and later, I was told I could leave. I asked if I could stay for an extra day, however, as I'd done in Adelaide the year before, and when asked why, said it was because I liked it so much there. (Actually, DV had suggested it, as he would be away in KL and wouldn't return until Thursday morning to check me out) Permission was granted, and I relaxed with a book I'd brought with me.

As it turned out, DV was delayed the next day, so called to say Leong would pick me up, which he duly did. I was ready, waiting for him. I was told to take it easy for several weeks and not do anything strenuous (as if I would!) Leong signed me out, and I was given various kinds of medication.

DV had been and continued to be concerned about me, wondering if I'd be sufficiently recovered for my birthday-bash on the 19<sup>th</sup> (we'd decided to hold it on that date rather than the 18<sup>th</sup>, as it was a Saturday), so things were not yet finalized. When he saw how I was, however, he set the wheels in motion, and so much had to be done in the remaining days: notices printed and sent out, food ordered, the venue to be arranged, and so on. Ronnie Lim ~ a good friend of DV who I also knew ~ suggested holding it on the third-floor terrace of his condominium-block on the sea-front just outside the town. I thought this was a better idea than having it in a restaurant, where seating-capacity would be limited. I'd not yet seen it, but when I did, I knew it was the best place. The lengthy terrace included a swimming-pool with a waterfall running into it, and a lily-pond at the other end. DV went ahead and reserved the whole terrace for the event, although we would use only part of it.

The final few days before the Big Day, there was a flurry of activity, and the Gohs excelled. DV came up with the idea of a slideshow, and I had hurriedly to select photos of places I'd visited over my travels; Kenni-ji arranged it all on CD, replete with music to accompany the slides. Then, Sister Maggie came up from her desk in the shop to suggest a large poster ~ or scroll ~ to hang in the venue; and was so enthusiastic about it that I couldn't refuse, even though it meant more work for me. I chose some photos of myself at various stages of my life, and had Yen Ha in Adelaide make me a collage of them; as always, she got back with it very fast ~ in fact, she did several for me to choose from ~ and finally, after asking her to alter some things, I was satisfied. Maggie had the poster professionally done nearby, and proudly came to show me. I was amazed! It measured 2 x 1 m, on pvc, and looked really good. She then asked what topic I would talk about at the time. Well, I rarely put a topic on my talks, but one suddenly came to mind, and I said, "The topic will be: 'How *Hock-ky* I am!' "

(*Hock-ky* is the Hokkien word for lucky, and the Gohs, like most Chinese people in Malacca, are Hokkien speaking).

We were hoping to get "Roads" printed before the 19<sup>th</sup>, but the way things were going, this wasn't at all sure. The printer gave us a sample, and I was shocked by the number of errors. How could it be so different than the mss I'd given her? DV moved into damage-control mode and through his diplomacy as a businessman, over several visits to the press, was able to get most of the errors corrected; nothing more could be done about the rest. 200 copies were delivered on the 18<sup>th</sup>, enough to distribute the next day; we would get the rest later.

Apart from people in Malacca, I'd invited some from interstate ~ some of whom I'd known since 1973. Some confirmed that they would come, while others weren't sure they'd be able to make it, and in fact, due to sudden illness, one family didn't.

To cut down on the details here, the day came and everything was prepared, with stools for seating (we'd decided to dispense with tables). DV was hoping to start on time, and actually, we were not far out. The food was brought and laid out, buffet-style, and people began to arrive, some early, some punctually, and of course, some late. Eventually, over 120 people turned up, most of whom I knew, many by name. I felt both honored and humbled to think that so many should remember me.

DV opened the show by introducing me and explaining why we were all there, and although he'd prepared his speech and read from his notes, his delivery was impressive, and I was quite touched by what he said. He spoke in English, and Harry Teoh ~ someone who had translated for me many times over the past 30 years ~ did the same for him. This part over, it was time to eat, and I was requested to lead the way to the buffet-tables to help myself from the many dishes that had been nicely prepared by caterer-friends. Then, while everyone was eating, the slide-show began, and ran for about 30 minutes.

It was then my turn to speak, and I began by saying that I'd just completed sixty trips around the sun ~ even though ~ like everyone else ~ I'd simply sat on the Earth as it hurtled through space!

Mentioning people gathered there by name, I related how they'd come into my life and changed it. Although we don't realize it, our lives are not simply ours, but are made up of the stories of countless other people and things. We depend so much upon others that not only do we need them so much, but simply could not exist without them.

Everything went well, and we parted, going our different ways. The next day, when I awoke, it had the substance of a dream.



Above, backing me up, as they had done so well and for so long, are the Goh Family. Back row, from left: Hock Leong (DV's brother), Ming Wei (aka '*Tiger*', Maggie's second son), Yee Hong (DV's second sister), Ming Yao (aka '*Peanut*', Maggie's eldest son), Chee Keng (his father), Joan (DV's wife), DV (Dharmavira Hock Guan), Shin, (Yee Hong's youngest daughter). Second row, from left: Lye Guat (Leong's wife), Katrina (DV's daughter), Matriarch-Diong See, Mei (Yee Hong's eldest daughter), Maggie (DV's first sister); and, flanking me, two young bodyguards: Leong's son, Yuan Jia, and DV's son, Yuan Cheng. (Unable to attend were Yee Hong's husband, Sah Tee, and son, Siang).

Many things have happened since then, to me, to you, to everyone and everything, but I set my 60<sup>th</sup> as the goal for my memoirs, so will draw them to a close at that point, and leave you to go on with *your* adventures while I go on with mine. Who knows what will happen next? Should we not just *go for the going, and enjoy the trip* as far as we're able to? Adieu.

Malacca, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006.



Printed in Malaysia, 2006, the third and final  
part of my autobiography, following-on from  
*SO MANY ROADS* and  
*NOT THIS, NOT THAT.*

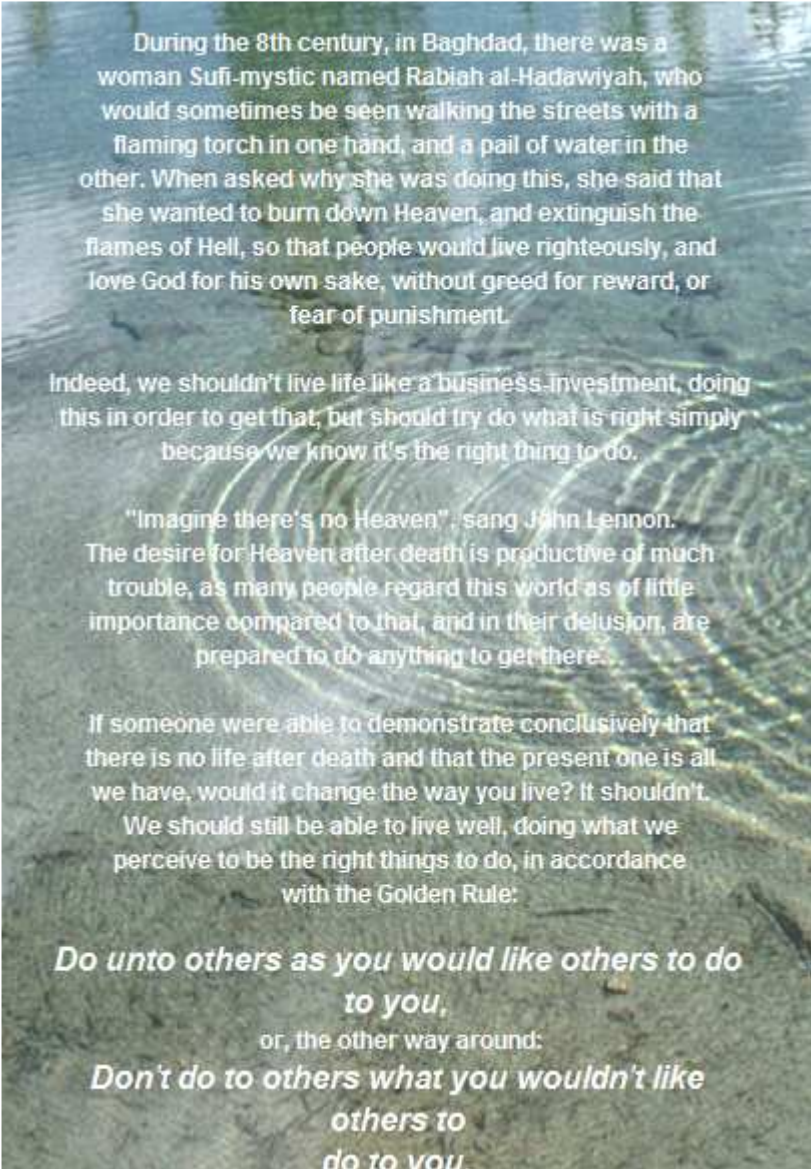
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During the 8th century, in Baghdad, there was a woman Sufi-mystic named Rabiah al-Hadawiyah, who would sometimes be seen walking the streets with a flaming torch in one hand, and a pail of water in the other. When asked why she was doing this, she said that she wanted to burn down Heaven, and extinguish the flames of Hell, so that people would live righteously, and love God for his own sake, without greed for reward, or fear of punishment.

Indeed, we shouldn't live life like a business investment, doing this in order to get that, but should try do what is right simply because we know it's the right thing to do.

"Imagine there's no Heaven", sang John Lennon. The desire for Heaven after death is productive of much trouble, as many people regard this world as of little importance compared to that, and in their delusion, are prepared to do anything to get there.

If someone were able to demonstrate conclusively that there is no life after death and that the present one is all we have, would it change the way you live? It shouldn't.

We should still be able to live well, doing what we perceive to be the right things to do, in accordance with the Golden Rule:

***Do unto others as you would like others to do to you,***

or, the other way around:

***Don't do to others what you wouldn't like others to do to you,***