

# Sheltered in the Himalayas

June to December 2004

Travel Diary by Efrat Nakash ©

## Part A – India

Preparations .....	1
Developing the idea.....	1
How did Tibetans end up in Dharamsala? .....	2
McLeod Ganj at the Indian Himalayan Foothills.....	3
Settling down .....	4
The monsoon .....	6
Learning yoga.....	8
Volunteering .....	9
Tibetans flee stories .....	15
Tibetan culture.....	17
Indians and Tibetans at McLeod Ganj .....	21
Learning meditation.....	23
Learning Buddhist philosophy .....	25
Traveling around .....	26
Departing from McLeod Ganj .....	30

[Part B – Nepal and Tibet](#)

[Appendix – Volunteering, Compassion in Action](#)

## Preparations

### Developing the idea

During my travel in Patagonia Argentina, I fell deeply in love with a very special man, Rafael. Together we traveled all over Patagonia, visited the Amerindians, and lived together at his wooden house. We spent a couple of months together. Ten days after returning home, I got an email from Rafael saying that his wife was coming back to live with him. No, I did not know he was married.

With a broken heart, I could not go to job interviews or make any other decision about my life. I knew I wanted to change my life style. My kids were grown up, and were responsible for their own lives. I did not wish to continue living in the nouveau riche, snobby Ramat Hasharon. I wanted to have a simple life, to live in a small place with only basic things, in respect to the work I would find. However, I was not in a mental status to make any operative decision.

I wanted to run away. I decided that the best place to run away is India, both from spiritual and simplicity aspects. In India, I can live in a very simple way. I was able to get bonus flight tickets, and in India I would spend less than I would if I stayed at home. I wanted to believe I could strengthen my spirit and emotions by meditating, learning Buddhism philosophy and yoga. Starting to collect information about meditation and Buddhism philosophy, I talked to a friend who mentioned Dharamsala. When I searched for Dharamsala on the web, I found

VolunteerTibet organization (website: <http://volunteertibet.org>). I met Tibetans during previous trips, while trekking in the Nepali Himalayas and in the Indian Himalayas at Ladakh. Their appearance as well as their behavior touched my heart. I found the Tibetans gentle, modest and smiling. I knew I could learn a lot from them. In addition to wanting to fill up my days, as part of my escape, I knew that meditation and Buddhism philosophy would be much more complete if I would give to others. When visiting the Amerindians in Patagonia Argentina I felt I can do so much for them, and I easily switched those feelings to the exiled Tibetans in Dharamsala. I was aware that behind all that was my need to feel wanted and appreciated.

I made arrangements to fly to India, planned on staying in Dharamsala for the maximum of six months my VISA allowed, and corresponded with VolunteerTibet about my work there, offering to share my knowledge in photography, English and computers. I felt good with this base plan.

## **How did Tibetans end up in Dharamsala?**

Traditionally, the Tibetans just wanted a peaceful land to worship Buddha. At times, Tibet extended its influence over neighboring countries and peoples, and in other periods, Tibet itself came under the influence of powerful foreign rulers – the Mongol Khans, the Gorkas of Nepal, the Manchu emperors and the British rulers of India.

Since the revolution in China in 1911, when the government was replaced with a native republican government, until 1949, Tibet successfully avoided undue foreign influence, and acted, in every respect, as a fully independent state.

The turning point of Tibet's history came in 1949, when the People's Liberation Army of the People's Republic of China (PRC) first crossed into Tibet. After defeating the small Tibetan army and occupying half the country, the Chinese government imposed the so-called "Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" on the Tibetan government in May 1951. Because it was signed under duress, the agreement lacked validity under international law. The presence of 40,000 Chinese troops in Tibet, the threat of an immediate occupation of Lhasa, and the prospect of the total obliteration of the Tibetan state left Tibetans little choice.

As the resistance to the Chinese occupation escalated, particularly in Eastern Tibet, the Chinese repression, which included the destruction of religious buildings and the imprisonment of monks and other community leaders, increased dramatically. By 1959, a popular uprising culminated in massive demonstrations in Lhasa. By the time China crushed the uprising, 87,000 Tibetans were dead in the Lhasa region alone, and The Dalai Lama had fled to India, where he now leads the Tibetan Government-in-exile, headquartered in Dharamsala. Following their leader, thousands of Tibetans escaped Tibet and they now live in Dharamsala, as well as other locations.

Meanwhile, in Tibet, religious persecution, persistent violations of human rights, and the wholesale destruction of religious and historic buildings by the occupying authorities have not succeeded in destroying the spirit of the Tibetan people to resist the destruction of their national identity. 1.2 million Tibetans have lost their lives, (over one-sixth of the population) as a result of the Chinese occupation.

## McLeod Ganj at the Indian Himalayan Foothills

Eyal and Amir, the two significant young men in my life, took me to the airport on Tuesday, June 15, 2004. It was at 3:00am, and I loved them for sharing with me the last moments before taking off. Few days later Eyal wrote me in an email that he already misses me, probably because I went for such a long period. He is so adorable.

The airplane landed in the Delhi airport on June 16 at 1:00 am. The Delhi experience was similar to the one I had in Santiago de Chile on my way to Antarctica: when ordering a taxi, the woman behind me, Claudie, asked if I was going to Pahar Ganj Street (main bazaar, similar to the Kawasan road in Bangkok). As indeed I was going there, we shared the cab, and later also the hotel room (Hotel Vivek, OK, 300 Rupees for a room with two beds). What can I say: great luck at 2:00am! Claudie is French, and has a booth in the Toulouse market. She comes often to Delhi for shopping, and so she became my excellent guide for the day. Experienced, she made sure I eat before getting on the bus to Dharamsala, and helped me carrying my backpack on the way to the bus. What a thoughtful and kind woman!

The twelve hours of tourist bus ride to Dharamsala were fine. A young Tibetan guy, Tenzin Dakpa, was sitting next to me. He told me a lot about Buddhism and Tibetan life. I was interested in their meaning of the term "compassion". He explained to me that Tibetans mean putting the other before you. We developed it into a philosophical discussion. Tenzin explained the Buddhism approach where your goal should be the good for others. I tried to express my perception that when I feel good I project it to others. We started to talk about volunteering, Tenzin said that he heard one volunteer say that she did it only so she would feel good, and he found that bad. I tried to explain that making good to others makes one feel good. It reminded me of the psychological discussion about altruism (is altruism an act for the other or for your need to be perceived as altruist).

I asked about the term used by Mahatma Gandhi describing him as: "a humble person". Tenzin explained to me that this means not patronizing. I enjoyed talking to him very much. He told me that many Tibetans are called Tenzin, male and female. Tenzin is one of The Dalai Lama names, and is given by him to those who ask for a name. Indeed I found out later that if you walk in McLeod Ganj and call "Tenzin", at least half the street will turn. Tenzin also explained to me the meaning of the Tibetan greeting "Tashi Delek", which is good luck.

McLeod Ganj is located at the foothills of the Himalayas, in the north of India, Himachal Pradesh State, Kangra District, Dharamsala Municipal Council. In McLeod Ganj there are 10,000 Tibetans plus more native Indians. The center of McLeod Ganj is a bazaar with lined shops of handicraft and jewelry along two parallel streets, about 150 meters long. In Jogiwara road there are Tibetan shops, and in Temple road there are more shops that belong to Indian owners. Both present colorful items and spread exotic incense. Other roads split up from both ends, to the temple and close settlements like Dharamsala, Dharamkot, Bhagsu Nag and Nadi villages. McLeod Ganj is a very small place, where everything is within walking distance. The streets are unpaved, many narrow trails are used for shortcuts, and during the monsoon it is muddy in some places. Many cows and dogs wander around, monkeys gather mainly close to the monasteries (which are everywhere), and I saw only few cats. Interestingly enough, the dogs do not bark during the day, and take an afternoon nap without any disturbance. Sometimes, very late at night, the dogs bark and look aggressive. People

mentioned there were leopards around, but I had not seen one. I am not afraid of predators, as I learned while being in a safari in Africa. We are bigger than them, we stand on our back legs, which mean that we are in an attacking position. If in addition I would spread my hands to the sides, I would look very frightening to them.

It was so great to walk in the narrow streets, where Tibetan people are all around. Shaved headed monks and nuns, dressed in their long dark red robe (or skirt, called Shamtap); dark red, or dark red combined with yellow shirt (called Tongak) or yellow shirt (called Nulen); and over it dark red shawl (called Zen), or yellow shawl (called Chogos). Some monasteries run schools, and Tenzin Dakpa told me that kids who learn there shave their head and wear robes, though only the teachers are monks. Tibetan women wear a sleeveless one color floor length dress (called Chupa), and a blouse in bright colors beneath it. Married women wear in addition to that a rainbow-striped length of cloth rather like an apron (called Ponde). A real celebration of smiling faces and clothes in a rainbow of colors!



The temperature at McLeod Ganj during June-July was nice, around 23-25 Celsius degrees at midday. The Dalai Lama chose Dharamsala for all Tibetan refugees because it is less hot and less humid comparing to the Indian Plains, thus more suitable for Tibetan immigrants. Dressing around Indians and Tibetans had to be conservative, covered shoulders, not exposed belly, and covered legs; otherwise, it is perceived as disrespectful. I was wearing a T-shirt and baggy pants (Sharwals) all day long, though at night it got chilly. When just arrived I was wearing my sandals, but decided to use shoes after watching the mud under the nails of my toes (not to mention the thought of cows shit).

McLeod Ganj is environmental. To avoid dumping too many plastic bottles of mineral water, boiled (for at least ten minutes) and filtered 1 liter bottles of water are sold in many places for 5INR (Indian Rupee). Shops do not pack what you buy in plastic bags. The result is much less dumped plastic bags and bottles comparing to, for example, Istanbul. Garbage is separated into "wet" which includes organics, like food leftovers that would be given to the cows, and "dry" which is all the rest. If you do not separate, your garbage will not be collected.

## Settling down

When arriving to McLeod Ganj (formerly called Upper Dharamsala) on June 17, 2004, I went to meet the VolunteerTibet coordinators – Sonam Choekyi Dekhang (Tibetan female), the managing director, and Brick Thornton (Canadian male), the founder. We set my basic volunteering plan. I would start with English tutoring at McLeod Ganj, in addition to helping with photography. I was planning to invest in learning yoga during this period. From the beginning of August I would help nuns in the Jamyang Chöling Nunnery with computers, English, and whatever they wanted. I imagined this would be the most suitable environment to learn Tibetan Buddhism.

After one night at the Seven Hills guesthouse (very convenient, Tipa road, 200INR per night), Sonam took me to a single room apartment where she was living until recently, and I was happy to move there (100INR per night). It was a nice room with two beds, kitchen, and a bathroom with a shower, a sink, and a traditional Asian squat style toilet. The apartment was in a building that belongs to a very warm and welcoming Indian family. The place was very clean, colored white, well maintained with fine nets that closed all entrances so mosquitoes and spiders could not enter. I found in the market a special chalk that blocks insects from getting in under the door. All it took was to draw three close lines near the entrance door, and it worked!

McLeod Ganj spreads along the hillside, at an altitude of 1,768m, and my apartment was at the bottom of the village. More than 300 stairs were leading to my apartment down from Jogiwara road. The great advantage was that in the middle was the Yongling elementary school and kindergarten for sweet Tibetan kids. Every time I went up and down (which I did at least three times a day), I was watching the smiling kids and their family members who dropped them in the morning and picked them up in the afternoon. Close to my apartment was a stream, and at night the voice of the running water was very calming. The view of the Himalayas from the terrace was wonderful. McLeod Ganj is all green, full of trees, plants and covered with grass; the Himalayan slopes are green with exposed high peaks.



I had some funny experiences with my cooking. At first, the apartment owner provided me with a gas stove. After a short time, it stopped working. The apartment owner found it was clogged and that the gas could not go through, so he replaced the stove with another one. This one also did not work for long. This time the tank was empty, so the apartment owner changed the gas tank. After a short while it did not work again. The apartment owner suspected a leak in one of the two components, so he switched back to the first stove with another gas tank, and these held up only for a short time. Therefore, I went to the market in Dharamsala (previously called Lower Dharamsala) and purchased a cooking heater. Guess what? After a short time, it stopped working. I went back to the shop to fix the broken wire, and after two minutes of work at home, it broke up again. Therefore, Sonam, the VolunteerTibet coordinator, gave me an electric element. I was using it to not only boil water, but also to prepare rice and cook potatoes. As I cooked potatoes in water, it was easy to cook with the electric element, and as for the rice, I just needed to make sure to pull out the electric element before the rice absorbed all the water. Still, each time I had to completely remove the electric element from the electric socket before touching the handle, as even if I just switched off the socket, I was shocked when touching the element handle. Therefore, I went back to the store where I purchased the cooking heater, and this time replaced the heating element (spiral) with assumingly a better one. It kept working for three days. As I was in a middle of cooking while it broke, I pulled Sonam's electric element, but this time it shorted out and burned. Therefore, after the heater cooled down, realizing that I needed to accept the quality

of the elements here, I fixed the cooking heater (after all, all it takes is a point-to-point wire), and it became my game.

Most of the items sold in Dharamsala are of poor quality, which enables to lower the cost of manufacturing and therefore sell it at a cheap price. It looks like Indians accept the need to fix things as a fact. Altaaf, a Kashmiri guy, bought a Minolta camera knowing it was not working. When I mentioned that he would need to spend more money for a battery and film just to learn what was wrong, and that it might end up as an expensive repair, he was smiling, saying that he likes the camera, and he was sure he could get it fixed.

The food around was just great. For breakfast, I had pumpnickel bread with butter and cheese (from Osho store). Sometimes I enjoyed the special Muesli at Gakyi restaurant, which included some corn flakes with lots of fresh and dry fruits and local yogurt. For lunch, I was cooking at home rice or potatoes, and had them with fresh tomatoes, peppers and onion, or ate delicious veggie Dhal (lentils) with rice in Sunrise Café. One of my favorite options for dinner was a Tibetan Momo in the street (5 Momos for 10INR). Momo is a dumpling stuffed with vegetables or mutton, steamed or fried. The size of a veggie ball is between a squash ball and a tennis ball. The mutton Momos were shaped as small bananas. In between, I had all kinds of tempting delicious street foods like Tibetan cookies, or fruit such as litchi or mango in season or grilled corn (5INR). I dined at restaurants only on occasions with company, as eating at home made it easier for me to control my diet and my expenses, and I did not enjoy eating in a restaurant alone. At Nick's Italian restaurant at Bhagsu road, I loved the Tibetan soup with "Swimming Momos", called Ruchowtse, filled with spinach and cheese. The dish I especially enjoyed at Dokebi Korean restaurant at Jogiwara road was the Kimchi Sushi. Sunrise Café served the best Indian Masala Chai (spiced tea, 5INR). Masala Chai includes many herbal ingredients boiled in milk. I loved drinking also ginger, lemon and honey tea, which I prepared at home. I sliced pieces of fresh ginger (on a beautiful round decorated Tibetan wooden board), squeezed one lime (using a very effective lime squeezer I found in the market), a spoonful of honey (I found the best one is Him Honey) and added boiling water. If you do the math, my cost of living was up to US\$3 per day. Adding Internet usage, for emails and writing this diary, I might have reached at some days the known Indian average of US\$5 per day.

I loved the simplicity of my life. I had only few very basic things that I used. It pointed out the things I had at home which were of little use, if at all. It was so easy to keep a little place clean. It was so spacious to have only what I need. It was so easy to monitor moderate expenses.

## **The monsoon**

The Monsoon started striking on Saturday, June 19, in full power. After a shiny morning, clouds gathered, there were thunderstorms, and heavy rain was falling directly, creating floods and waterfalls. As McLeod Ganj is located on the hillside, streams of brown water were running everywhere. The stream next to my apartment was flooded and became strong and deep up to the knees, and it became difficult to cross. The monsoon was striking every day, raining heavily during midday for about one hour, following by another hour of drizzling. Often clouds were covering McLeod Ganj, limiting visibility to two to three meters, which added a special atmosphere. One day the monsoon caught me eating my lunch Momos outside a

bookstore. The salesman in the bookstore invited me in, and I had a great time reading books. I also bought "Freedom in Exile", the autobiography of the present 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. While browsing through another book, "My Land and My People", memories of His Holiness (HH) The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, 1977, I read an interesting sentence: "Tibetans would think it a sin to kill any animal, for any reason, but they did not think it sinful to go to market and buy the meat of an animal which was already dead". If you think more about it, not to harm any living creature means you cannot kill any bothering fly or mosquito. All you can do is gently push them away...

Water in McLeod Ganj was an interesting issue. On the one hand, there was no shortage in natural sources, much rain, and many streams and rivers. On the other hand, there were long periods without water being supplied to the houses, and when the water was running, its pressure was not consistent. This was new to me, as I know only two possibilities: either there is water or there is not. Here I experienced something in between. During my first days, I thought there is a problem with the water installation at my home. Only later, I learnt that the water pressure varies during the day, and when it is very low, water will not get up to the shower. Therefore, for washing myself I was using, as anyone else, a bucket and a jug. Efficiency was increasing as I learnt which areas in the body consume more water while removing the soap from them, and these are the groin area (in between the legs), the armpits, and the face. The idea is to wash them first and only afterwards the rest of the body. My skillfulness using the bucket was reaching the ability to shower with a quarter of a bucket. Of course shampooing the hair was the most water consuming, and when I did, I had to start with it, and spend an extra half of a bucket just to wash my long hair twice.

The Himalayan water and climate had a surprisingly positive influence on my body, as I also remembered from trekking in the Nepali Himalayas: my skin got smoother and as stretched as ever, and my hair became softer. It made me think, why do women go through a surgery to lift their face skin? All it takes is one month in the Himalayas! It is definitely cheaper and no need to hide for days indoors. One's skin looks younger naturally in the most relaxed and pleasant environment, while enjoying everything the Himalayas have to offer.

Another new experience was with the electricity power supply, which was cut off often during the monsoon. Again, I know of two possibilities: having light or power failure. Here there is the in between. After resuming power supply from power cut, the current is low, so a fluorescent does not lit, while a normal bulb does!

During the last six days of July, the monsoon reached a new level. Clouds completely covered McLeod Ganj at all times, they were climbing up the Himalayas, and it rained non-stop. When I looked against a dark background, I could see the clouds move. That amount of rain brought flood and damp. The temperature dropped to around 20-22 Celsius degrees at midday, meaning it did not cause sweat. However, as the air was saturated, my towel and laundry could not completely dry. In my kitchen, I had dates inside a paper bag, which were very dry and hard to chew. After two days, they became soft, and the paper bag was soggy. During my early visits to nun Lhadron from Jamyang Chöling Nunnery, I asked her about the big tin boxes in her room. She explained that during the monsoon period everything gets wet from the saturated air, unless it is kept inside the tin boxes. During the extremely wet days of July, I was able to comprehend what she was referring to. As there are no close clothing closets in McLeod Ganj, only built in open shelves, I kept all my clothes and books inside

plastic bags (which were very difficult to find, as mentioned before in relation to the environmental culture). I always went out with my big sturdy colorful umbrella I had bought here.

One of the consequences of the monsoon had been landslides. Parts of the hills around collapsed, making a loud noise. I looked at the houses above a big landslide area in front of my terrace, and was pondering if it is a matter of two months or two years until they will collapse. On April 4, 1905, during the British government, disaster struck McLeod Ganj in the form of a major earthquake. Many buildings were destroyed and numerous lives were lost. When settling there, The Dalai Lama built four Stupas around to prevent such disaster; amongst them, there was one at the TCV temple, and another at the Tushita Meditation Center.

After a month, during the last week of August, the monsoon abated slowly and we had sunny mornings with heavy rain during the afternoon. It made the days much brighter and warmer, and the sunny breaks were often accompanied with awesome rainbows. It stopped raining for a week from September first, the temperature went up, and I was happy to get back to my sandals. I learnt that a year ago it did not stop raining for two months. Fortunately, this year we did experience long breaks, and one week was the longest period of consecutive rainy days. The monsoon finale lasted seven days. It started from September 10 with a non-stop rain, and was followed later by rainy afternoons. On the fifth day of Tishrei (as the date depends on the moon, this year it was September 19, 2004) the Indians started the Monsoon End Festival (called Mela), which continued for five days.

## Learning yoga

On Monday June 21, I registered for daily morning yoga lessons with master Vijay. When I woke up the first day, the sun was shining, and I took my camera and went out, eager to capture all around in the beautiful light. I realized it was Monday too late, and missed the first day. It is so easy to lose concept of time in McLeod Ganj.

The yoga style I was learning is called Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, known also in the west as Power Yoga. As Vijay describes in his brochure, yoga is about physical purification through posture, breath expansion, and internal cleaning. We make peace with ourselves, and from this inner harmony peace comes into our relationships (his website: <http://www.vijaypoweryoga.com/>).

The yoga classes were for almost three hours every morning Monday to Saturday. Vijay, a very slim and strong dark Indian person, started and ended his lessons with a loud charming. When he raised his voice, I felt his many long "ooooo" and long "oing" suffixes in my skin, as if his voice vibration mixed with my energy or electromagnetic field. It was electrifying. He concluded his opening pray with teachings he composed: "Be a better human being. God is one, if you believe in it. It is love, compassion, and helping others. This life is not for fighting, but to live peacefully, friendly and brotherly with others. It is better not to separate human unity". With these wonderful thoughts, we started with Sun Salutations. Vijay calmly guided the class through the Yoga Postures (called Asana), explaining exactly what to do and how to position all parts of the body. He linked each movement to the breath, by telling us when to inhale and when to exhale. Vijay allowed enough time to get into the position and stay there,

while he went around and corrected the students' postures (and excuse me, precious Dr McKenzie, but the Cobra Pose is a couple of thousand years old...). I loved this slow and calm rhythm with deep breaths. It felt amazing.

During the second day of yoga, I felt my upper back hurting while doing some of the movements. Vijay said not to worry. I decided to have a massage, and had a great one at the Traditional Tibetan Universal Massage on Jogiwara road. Later I found Dr Tsomo Zonggong, Tibetan therapist, who had finished her studies in China. She gave excellent acupuncture and massages at the second floor of the Mount View Hotel.

I was persistent with my yoga practice, attended six consecutive weeks, my progress was slow, but I still had a long way to go. My muscles were very stiff and short, and yoga is about stretching and flexibility. Vijay paid much attention to the way I was doing the postures, corrected me, and after a couple of days the backaches disappeared. I could not remember all the posture chain, and details for each posture. As I was concentrating in what I should do and did not flow smoothly, I could not experience the promised spiritual feeling of inner harmony.

To complete my workout I did fitness exercises at home for more than one hour. Sometimes I also walked to Dharamsala, 4 km of a very steep road, 35-40 degrees. Climbing up was an excellent aerobic exercise.

Yoga was one of the many courses offered in McLeod Ganj. The courses were for tourists as well as for local residents. Courses included different yoga styles; meditation courses including Vipasana and Z-meditation; Buddhism Philosophy; massage courses and single treatment of many kinds: Tibetan, Thai, Swedish and of course Indian Ayurvedic; Reiki, Acupuncture, martial arts (such as karate and kick boxing); various cooking classes like Tibetan and Indian food; music and astrology. In addition, there were computer classes, language classes such as Hindi, Tibetan and more. Brick (the VolunteerTibet coordinator) called McLeod Ganj "a Spiritual Disneyland".

## **Volunteering**

Upon my arrival on June 18, we had a volunteers' acquaintance sushi dinner at the Lung-Ta Japanese Restaurant on Jogiwara road. I met part of the VolunteerTibet volunteers, and learned that we were almost ten. Most were doing volunteer work for a short term like one or two months. My first project was to photograph the volunteers at work. I visited the guys and photographed them with their Tibetan students and coworkers. It was used for the volunteers to send home, for VolunteerTibet promotion and for the local magazine (read an article in the CONTACT magazine in the [Appendix – Volunteering, Compassion in Action](#)).

I enjoyed the volunteers' get together. When Brick (the VolunteerTibet coordinator) left, we had a farewell party at the Pema Thang Restaurant. Food was exquisite! This restaurant serves avocado, which makes their salads very special. On another time, Sonam (the other VolunteerTibet coordinator) invited us to her room and we prepared Momos. It was much fun to learn the process. Sonam prepared the dough from flour and water, from which we formed balls, rolled them flat on a round wooden board, placed the vegetables with cheese mix Sonam had prepared in the center, and trimmed the sides into balls or banana shapes. After

15-20 minutes in a steamer, we were eating the delicious Momos together with fresh vegetable salad.

On Sunday June 20, I went to the upper branch of the Jamyang Chöling Nunnery, where I was planned to start teaching in August. The upper branch was the first establishment of the Nunnery, and senior nuns lived there, aged between 30 and 40. The lower branch of the Nunnery at Gharoh, down at the Kangra Valley, was a new house, which was occupied with newcomers, aged between 13 and 30. Nuns are not allowed to have long hair, so they all shave their heads. They look exactly like monks, also wearing the same clothes, and I was not always sure who was who. Nuns are not allowed to wear jewelry, and of course - do not get married. Nuns join the nunnery for few years to study Buddhism Philosophy, and after graduating, they go back to their homes to teach others. Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a religion, since it is not centered on God; rather it is a system of philosophy and of code of morality. I learnt that the nuns have 364 rules of Tibetan monasticism (while only 253 for monks). The four root vows concern simple prohibitions: a nun/monk must not kill, steal or lie about her/his spiritual attainment, and she/he must be strictly celibate. The rationale for the last is that sexual desire is a blind desire and can give only temporary satisfaction. If one breaks any one of these, she/he will be no longer a nun/monk in this lifetime. Nuns wake up at 4:00am, and start their day with a pray.

Tenzin Lhadron, a senior nun at Jamyang Chöling Nunnery, asked me for immediate help with the computer. Lhadron was about to fly to Korea to attend a Tibetan Women Conference, and she requested for help in preparing a photo album to show to the nunnery sponsor there. I helped her to write captions for the pictures in English, print them, and then cut and paste the captions under the printed photos in the album... it was fun.

I learned two new religious customs, in addition to the one I knew from trekking the Annapurna in Nepal, which was to walk clockwise (meaning bypass from the left) around anything sacred, like Stupa, Gompa or Mani Stones (rocks with The Buddha of Compassion mantra in Sanskrit "Om Mani Padme Hum"). First new religious custom was if taking notes at the dharma talk (Buddhism lessons), notes should not be placed on the floor, as sacred objects should not be placed on the floor. As most of the teaching is done while sitting on the floor, nuns use a small chair to put their books on. Second was that it is rude to point the sole of your feet at people, like stretching the legs forward while listening to a talk and sitting on the floor, as feet are considered unclean.

Teaching at Jamyang Chöling Nunnery did not start in August the way it was planned. According to Lhadron, the nuns were very busy with Buddhism Philosophy studies (two hours during the mornings and an additional two hours in the early afternoons), which did not leave them time for computer studies. She contacted me whenever needed.

I helped Lhadron by photographing their new constructions, as she sent the photos to the funding organizations to show where their money was being invested. When the nunnery received a Stupa as a present from The Dalai Lama, I went with Lhadron to the lower branch of Jamyang Chöling Nunnery in Gharoh. We went on the back of a truck, jumping through the bumpy roads together with the Stupa parts. The nunnery is located in a most beautiful place, green fields and fruit trees in a hot climate, which reminded me of the tropical landscape resorts at Fiji, Thailand and the Philippines. The nunnery premises were very special, with

vegetable garden and cornfields, surrounded by more greenery. It was great to watch and photograph the happy nuns while they were assembling the Stupa.

Lhadron invited me to stay one weekend at the Gharoh branch, photographing the place and the nuns. It was awesome! What a relaxing silence and peaceful atmosphere. Most of the nunnery students come from India, about seven were newcomer Tibetans, and two were Ladakhis that were not nuns. Gangchub Lhamo, one of the nuns, offered to join me strolling along Gharoh Village. The Indian villagers were so warm and welcoming. Every house invited me in for a cup of Chai, which I accepted, respecting their exceptional hospitality.

On Wednesday, June 23, I started conversation-tutoring lessons at Gu-Chu-Sum school, one hour every day not including weekends and holidays. I had two Tibetan students, who had fled on foot from Tibet. Once the Chinese authorities catch a Tibetan in a political act, the Tibetan might either get a prison sentence or a home detention. Many then decide to exile and runaway to Dharamsala. Kalsang Tsering, a monk, was 30 years old. On 1995, he came on foot together with another nine people through Nepal. 18 days of walking to Katmandu, three days of a bus ride to Delhi, and another day of a bus ride to Dharamsala. His mother died, his father together with his brother and sister were still in Tibet. Gyalmtso Lobsang was 23 years old, and he came on foot together with 21 people on the year 2000. A child, one year old, carried by his mother, could not breathe at the heights, and died on the way. The brave pilgrim refugees who cross the Himalayas carry a little amount of supplies on their backs, such as dried yak meat and Tsampa (milled barley), put on thin-sole shoes, without tents to sleep in. This group walked for 24 days until they reached Katmandu. His eight family members were still in Tibet.



Gyalmtso Lobsang and Kalsang Tsering

Indians know English, as it is one of the formal languages in India, and they start learning it at elementary school. The Tibetans attend free school in Tibet only for four years, not at a specific age, and do not learn English. More education is being offered, but it is way too expensive for Tibetans, and most of them cannot afford it. In addition, Chinese develop the curriculum, which Tibetans feel that does not preserve their heritage. Tibetans respect education, are eager to learn, and it was very rewarding to help them. We went through all the names of family members and relatives; learned the names of all body parts and clothing items; described what we do from waking up in the morning till going to sleep at night, and what we eat; we talked about garbage separation and recycling; described the water cycle; role played a buyer and a seller in a shop and job interviews; and described the surroundings. We also read stories and talked about them. In geography we used a small globe, and described the continents, islands, and different climates. Whenever weather permitted it we went out, walked in the beautiful nature around us, and enjoyed an open and free atmosphere, until the Gu-Chu-Sum headmaster had forbidden going out.

One Sunday, together with my students Gyalmtso and Kalsang, I went to Bhagsu Nag. The weather was wonderful. We went up the Bhagsu River, where locals wash themselves and their clothes in the clear pools. The monks' dark red robes and Zens were spread to dry over the rocks around. The water in the Bhagsu River was very clean. All of a sudden clouds covered the skies, and heavy rain started. We sheltered under a roof by the open swimming pool. It was funny to see the big drops of rain falling into the pool, while Indian males remained inside. I had a raincoat with me, but did not use it as Gyalmtso and Kalsang did not have anything to protect themselves from the rain. We came back home completely soaked.

After six weeks of daily lessons, Gyalmtso, my English student, started to talk English fluently. He managed to overcome a barrier, opened up, and started to talk non-stop with confidence, allowing himself to make mistakes. He was raising painful and interesting issues. On the first time, Gyalmtso talked with passion for at least ten minutes, about not having a future. While being happy to discover how he progressed and expressed himself in English, his words touched me emotionally. Gyalmtso did not want to have a future in India. He wanted to go back home to Tibet, to be with his family, and to build his life there. He spoke with anger about his difficulties with Hindi and English languages, and his desire to talk Tibetan. He claimed he does not belong there. India was not home for him. He enjoyed studying in India, but afterwards he wanted to go back home. I was frozen, and only a couple of meetings later I was able to discuss with him reality and opportunities in India. He expressed his wish to become a Tibetan language teacher at the Sarah institute at Bir, where he studied Tibetan for two years.

It hurts to recognize that Tibetans made the exhausting and dangerous escape route across the Himalayas, to find they are homeless, jobless and rootless in India. Two years after my visit, I was happy when Gyalmtso wrote me an email, telling me he got married in McLeod Ganj, and had a baby girl.

Gyalmtso told me about his life in Tibet. His family has a big farm, many animals, and fields of vegetables. During the winter, he went together with his brother to the mountains to pick worms and mushrooms for Chinese medicine, which they sold at a high price. When he told me that they produce butter in the farm, I asked weather it is cow, sheep or yak butter. He laughed and corrected me that in Tibetan, the word yak refers only to the male of the species (the bull). A female is called Dri in Tibetan. In most languages which borrowed the word yak, including English, however, yak is usually used for both sexes.

When Gyalmtso's friend died, he told me that for three days Tibetans kept the body at home, while many monks and Lamas came to pray for a good next life. On the third day, Gyalmtso went there at 3:00am in the morning, to prepare food for guests who were arriving at 5:00am for the cremation ceremony. In traditional Tibetan Buddhism, the monks cut dead bodies, which were eaten by the vultures. It is called sky burial. I remember very well how shocking I was when watching the scene of the vultures swooping down on Kundun (The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama) father's chopped organs.

Gyalmtso was talking at length about life as a refugee. As early as crossing the border from Tibet to Nepal, Nepali police officers catch the Tibetan refugees, and by their mercy sometimes send the Tibetans into Nepali prison, and other times deliver them back to the

Chinese soldiers. If lucky, they stay in prison until the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center in Katmandu pays for their release.

Nepalese are tough with Tibetan refugees also after they escape. When Gyalmtso went once back to Nepal, to escort his uncle who had fled from Tibet to Dharamsala, the Nepali police officers searched him thoroughly, making sure he did not intend to do business in Nepal. The Nepalese took from him everything he had, except one set of spare clothing items. Gyalmtso told me that if the Nepalese find on a Tibetan a camera, a radio or anything else, they will take it away.

I volunteered to become the formal photographer of the International Tibetan Women's Leadership Conference, held during September 3-5, 2004, at the Asia Health Resort close to Dal Lake. I offered my services to Stephanie, an American who volunteered at the Tibetan Women Association (TWA), whom I met in one of the volunteer gatherings. Stephanie Goodell was a faculty member at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. As the TWA did not have a photographer, they happily accepted the offer. The Tibetan way is to allow things to happen by themselves, and magically, it always turns out good. This was one of those cases.

When we went to the temple to see The Dalai Lama, the Tibetan women decided I should wear a Chupa, which one of the participants, Dickyi, lent me. All participants wore Chupas in conservative colors of browns and grays. The one Dickyi lent me was bright red. In addition, Stephanie and I had light colored hair and skin, compared to the Tibetans', and we became very visible to The Dalai Lama, who immediately asked about "the yellow heads". The Dalai Lama gave a 20 minute speech in Tibetan. He approached two Buddhist Muslims from Srinagar in the crowd, talking about Buddhists as representatives of all religions. When ended, we lined up, and walked through The Dalai Lama, while bowing. All bent their heads, while I bent my back but straightened my eyes at his. He smiled and replied with "Tashi Delek". We received presents including a blessed long white silk scarf (called Khata), a poster of The Dalai Lama and a poster of The Buddha of Compassion, a few blessed eatable seeds for healing, and a red thread to tie around the neck for protection (called Shandue). Putting Khata around ones neck is the traditional Tibetan gesture on departure and signifies not only propitiation, but also implies the intention of return.



Stephanie, Dickyi and I

The conference was in Tibetan, except Stephanie's part in her workshop, so I was unable to understand the content of the sessions. The conference was managed as any western conference. When mobiles rang during sessions, women answered. One of the speakers at the conference was Penpa Tsering, who was the executive director of the Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Center. He distributed the book "Self-Governance through an Autonomous Arrangements", which was half in Tibetan and half in English, so I could read

the English while he was talking. I was also reading an article written by B. Tsering, who was the head of the TWA, about the political situation of Tibet. B. Tsering, who was heading the conference, holds a PhD degree from the University of Virginia, USA. She is a remarkable person.

The Dalai Lama assessed that time is running out for the Tibetan culture's survival in occupied Tibet. The Chinese invasion in 1949 catalyzed the process and made it more rapid. Chinese authorities are systematically destroying the very identity of Tibetan people by religious persecution, consistent violations of human rights, and the wholesale destruction of religious and historic buildings, destruction of environment, militarization of the country and the transfer of millions of the Chinese population into Tibet. The six million Tibetan people have been outnumbered by the 7.5 million of Chinese population in Tibet. Chinese own 98% of the stores in Lhasa, while Tibetans work only in service jobs. The Chinese brought western development and culture, which affects the Tibetan people as a distinct people and culture.

On 1965, The Dalai Lama decided to agree with China on the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) at Ü-Tsang and part of Kham provinces of former Tibet, as he believed this would be achievable (former Tibet included three provinces: Kham province of south-eastern Tibet, Amdo in north-eastern Tibet and Ü-Tsang in western Tibet). The book "Self-Governance through an Autonomous Arrangements", which addresses options for Tibet's future political status, is based on a thorough study of 33 autonomous arrangements around the world. I learnt that the Tibetans removed the historical or territorial claim based on past independence, as history is subject for interpretation in many different ways. Tibetans hold the right to self-determination, as being a distinct people.

But, when breaking down the TAR governmental power into factors, and describing the current situation for each ministry, it becomes clear that even with the few governmental powers that the current TAR government controls, the ultimate control rests with the PRC's central government. In addition, members of the PRC's Communist Party, many of which are Chinese, control the TAR government. Furthermore, the Communist Party's policies are based on an atheist philosophy, which is not suitable to the Tibetan culture. I was able to learn from it about The Dalai Lama's Five Points Peace Proposal and the Strasburg Proposal for a permanent, mutually beneficial, negotiated settlement of the Tibetan issue. The proposal suggested autonomy to all Tibet, not just TAR, which would allow Tibetans to have control over all governmental powers, except defense and some aspects of foreign affairs. It was very interesting for me to learn about different aspects of autonomy, and the various autonomous arrangements around the world.

When the conference ended B. Tsering thanked my volunteering work, and awarded me with a beautiful and rich Khata, and with a dedicated copy of the book about Tibetan autonomy I mentioned above. As if this was not enough, after receiving the photographs, the TWA were so happy with the results that they gave me another Khata, and two Tibetan decorations: Silk Tashtragil with the eight signs of good luck, and a fabric with a "Never Give Up" quote from The Dalai Lama. Photographing the conference opened for me more volunteer work with the TWA, and I helped them with computer stuff, such as updating their website and using applications.

## Tibetans flee stories

Looking north, I could see the Himalayan peaks, which have in summer only few snow patches. Tenzin told me about families who send their children from Tibet, China, over the Himalayas to Dharamsala, leaving their parents behind, to get good grounded education in Tibetan and in English. The kids come on foot, crossing the Himalayas during winter, as in winter China reduces security control. They walk at night and sleep during the day, to avoid Chinese border guards. Books describe in details alternative paths. The shorter routes are risky due to more Chinese soldiers' presence. I was deeply touched. It seems that Tibetans believe that receiving Tibetan education and being close to The Dalai Lama is more important than growing with parents' love. On the one hand, I wanted very much to give the young kids my love, but on the other hand, I was afraid it would boost their separation anxiety at the end of the term, and it would hurt. Later I found out that indeed Tibetans do not take short term volunteers to work with young kids.

One evening Stephanie invited me to join her together with Tibetan friends for dinner at the Mc'LLo Restaurant and Beer Bar. Stephanie, a beautiful person, knows many Tibetans in person, and seemed very close to them. We sat on the roof, watching the amazing sunset. After tasting several Indian beers, I decided that I like the Thunderbolt Beer the most. I could not resist asking our Tibetan friends personal questions. Kunchok was a tourist guide back in Tibet. Tourism in Tibet should be politically correct. One time, while he was guiding a group of English tourists, Chinese police officers watched him. He explained to me that when he talks about Tibetan culture and The Dalai Lama, he can not sound less then emotional. Chinese police officers caught him, interrogated him at a police station, and shouted at him. He decided to run away, leaving behind his family. I am sure the English tourists, as well as others, do not imagine they jeopardize the Tibetans by simply asking them to serve as their guides.

Jigmey came on foot with his younger brother four years before, to get Tibetan education. Jigmey was 26 years old, and left his father, mother, and three brothers in Tibet. His 24-year-old brother who escaped with him is a monk. Jigmey explained to me the situation in Tibet. Tibetans are denied freedom of expression and freedom of movement (it is extremely hard for them to get a passport), the right to a proper education, the right to have a free and fair trial and the right to a fair wage. There are even limits imposed upon when and where Tibetans can practice Buddhism. Before 1959, a Tibetan could choose to become a monk at any age, and it was costumed to start studies very early, before becoming 10 years old. Now they have to wait until they are at least 18 years of age to have the opportunity. Hundreds of Tibetan monasteries have been destroyed, and The Potala (HH The Dalai Lama's Palace) is now a tourist attraction which makes money for the Chinese Government, while The Dalai Lama lives in Dharamsala. Tibetans constantly live under the microscope of the Chinese police. If Tibetans dare to stand against the Chinese, they pay a heavy price, facing imprisonment and torture like being beaten black and blue with electric batons and even having the electric elements inserted into their mouths and vaginas.

My neighbor Wangdon was sentenced for three years by the Chinese at the age of 16, just for a quiet demonstration in Lhasa. She suffered isolation, was bitten, electric shocked in her neck and mouth and was humiliated by the Chinese. Sonam told me the Chinese raped Wangdon on a regular basis. When Wangdon felt a terrible pain in her tummy while in prison, the Chinese operated on her, but she does not know what they did to her. She suffered from cold, slept on a concrete floor wearing only a Chupa in the cold of Tibet, and became very sick. This did not stop her from escaping on foot through the Himalayas to Dharamsala, together with other 27 people. In India she was diagnosed as suffering from Hepatitis B. Only 27 years old, and she went through so much suffer in her life. She has no family in India, and misses a lot her family in Tibet. She is a model for her spirit and livelihood.



Rinchen Tsering had an amazing story. He escaped Tibet in a harrowing difficult journey over the Himalayas in 1997. When realizing the sad state of adult education in Dharamsala, he built The Dogga Adult Education Center, together with the help of a Belgium girl, and dedicated the offering of free education to everyone who wants to learn (read about it in: <http://www.idealists.org/if/cac/en/av/Org/105614-47>). With the help of various Belgium donors, he run The Dogga classroom, which offered many courses all through the day, and The Dogga Internet Café, which was not managed for profit. Teachers were volunteers from all over the globe. The computers were used by the computer class students during the morning, and then in the afternoon and in the evening they were used by the Internet Café. All of the earnings were re-circulated into the organization and provided money for rent, supplies, upkeep, and other overhead expenses. The Internet Café was the most beautiful one in McLeod Ganj. It had big windows facing the Himalayas; a high ceiling with spacious computer stations; boiled and filtered water stations and snacks for purchase; and a very tidy toilet.

When Rinchen told me he was buying a new digital camera, I offered him photography lessons. Rinchen had a great vision and he caught composition factors very fast. His photographs improved dramatically from one session to another.

With each Tibetan runaway story, I was amazed how Tibetan education is more important for Tibetans than living close to their families. Tibetans perceive education as power. Kunchok, who worked in The Dogga Internet Café, made an interesting note, stating that it is easier to trust eastern people without education than western people because of their education. I invite you to think about it deeply.

Dharamsala means in Hindi guesthouse or rest house for the traveler. Tibetans believe that Dharamsala (the place) is their dharamsala (a guesthouse). Tibetans miss Tibet. Whenever we spoke about Tibet, they got glossy eyes. No doubt, it is the homeland along with the family, which they had not seen for years. They send letters, they call, but they can not get together.

In India Tibetans get an identification certificate of a foreigner, which is used also as a passport when departing and entering India. It is not easy to get one, personal relationships and baksheesh help. Lucky Tibetans who have one, need to renew this certificate every year, and must carry it at all times. They also receive a fake Indian birth certificate, which declares they were born in India. Tibetans without papers have many difficulties to travel outside India. Luckily, in India the authorities are not that restricted (yet?).

Twice I went to the TCV, the Tibetan Children Village, close to Nadi village. My first time was with Stephanie, and the other time with Sonam (the VolunteerTibet coordinator) and a few volunteers. In the TCV's babies room there were 26 babies with no parent around. Most kids in the TCV were orphans; others were left in the TCV while their parents went back to Tibet. The Tibetan babies were so cute and sought for love. I did not hear any Tibetan kid cry. The TCV is a well-organized village with facilities such as buses, a bakery and a laundry, and is very clean. Sonam's father left and married another woman, her mother died when she was six years old, leaving her and her brother to grow up at the TCV. The TCV is the home of all the kids until they graduate, find a job, and can make it on their own.



Two beautiful paths lead down from the TCV back to McLeod Ganj, both from the football yard. One goes directly down through the amazing forest. The other starts by climbing up through the old Tibetan home, the Tibetan monks meditation corner, and then down through the forest.

Among many documentary films about Tibet, I watched "Escape from Tibet" from 1994, where I watched The Dalai Lama request the newcomers to go back to Tibet after having some education, in order to preserve the Tibetan culture. Only few do go back to Tibet.

## **Tibetan culture**

On June 26, I went to the birthday festival of The 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. The Karmapa is the third significant incarnation for the Buddhists, whereas The Dalai Lama is the first and The Panchen Lama is the second. In 1995 the current Dalai Lama named a 6 year old as the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. This child and his family have gone missing, while the PRC named another child as a "Panchen Lama" (sometimes refers to as the China's Panchen Lama). The PRC wants to have a full control over this individual, as The Panchen Lama is the one to discover the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama, after the death of the current one. Without a real Tibetan Buddhist Panchen Lama, something will change in the Tibetan culture after the death of the current 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (some say The Dalai Lama will choose not to reincarnate, and The Karmapa will become the Tibetan leader).

The celebration of The 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa birthday was in the Gyuto Monastery at Sidmbari. I got there with a matchbox taxi (rickshaw, 200INR). The festival was so beautiful. The Himalayan peaks were sticking out behind the yellow temple, Tibetans were dressed with colorful special holiday dressings, monks and nuns in dark red and yellow, and all rainbow colors of umbrellas to protect from the sun. The weather was great. The show included dances in many various costumes,



singers, and instrument players. Tibetan ceremonies are very slow, with a high risk for dehydration of the crowd while standing in the sun. In this event they broke for lunch, served free tasty food, rice and many different cooked vegetable dishes, followed by bananas and pieces of cake. As I was close to the dancers, busy photographing them, they invited me for soft drinks such as a coke. It was a real celebration of happiness and colors.

I missed at least two of the Tibetan events, where The Dalai Lama participated. Due to security reasons, there is no public announcement about the appearance of The Dalai Lama, and the information is spread only at the last moment. The Tibetan calendar is very complicated, and no one was able to explain the rules. It is based on a lunar month, with a sixty-year cycle. Sometimes it skips days, other times it repeats a specific day, in both cases the days can be somewhere in the middle of the month. Sometimes it skips a full month. Events are not scheduled in advanced, there is no formal publication of expected events, the Tibetan calendar does not specify all events, and I was unable to receive such information. I had to rely on getting event information from friends by coincidence.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's 69<sup>th</sup> birthday festival on July 6, 2004, was wonderful. The inner yard of the temple was not big enough to include all participants, as many Tibetans and tourists were crowded to pay their respects to HH The Dalai Lama, though he did not participate in person. Tibetans looked happy, kept smiling, were dressed with amazing costumes and colorful clothes, and all family members participated. Gyalmtso (my English student) had prepared together with his friends many prayer flags. On July 6 at 2:30am in the morning, he climbed together with additional 23 guys up high to Inderhar Pass (4,350m) at the Himalayas, to put the prayer flags and pray, paying their respects to The Dalai Lama.

HH The Dalai Lama is living in the Potala (a palace named after the one in Lhasa) inside the Tsuglagkhang complex, where also the Kalachakra temple and the Namgyal Gompa are. The buildings, in a relatively modest structure, enshrine sacred items such as statues and texts. The Dalai Lama is very busy with raising awareness of the fate of Tibet in the hands of the Chinese. He does so by meeting with people who visit him or by traveling all over the world. This is his way of fighting, as Tibetans do not use violence. In 1989, The Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, presented to him primarily for his endeavors to find a peaceful solution for the liberation of Tibet.

Cinema is a pleasant experience at McLeod Ganj. Entrances to the three little cinemas along Jogiwara road are through narrow corridors and down narrow stairs. The cinemas' halls are about 3x4 meters. Each has about six rows; in some of them, each row is on a different stair level, other halls are flat, divided into two columns with 2-3 seats on each side. Screens vary from a 1m monitor to three meters of hanging white cloth. They are cool and nice inside. Movies run four times a day, everyday, and include a wide selection. Until everyone gets in, instead of commercials (used in the west), they show a video clip of an Indian song.

I went to the cinema to watch "Kundun", the amazing story of The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (called Kundun in addition to Tenzin Gyatso and many other names given to him at different stages of his life. Tibetans do not have family names, and they use the same names for males, females and pets). Watching documentaries and authentic Tibetan movies in the cinema was very powerful. Once again I got very emotional about the fact that once The Dalai Lama is discovered, he is taken from his parents and does not have a regular childhood. In his book "Freedom in Exile", the autobiography of the XIV's Dalai Lama of Tibet (I read the 1998 edition, printed in 2002), The Dalai Lama describes his childhood in relation to seeing his parents. Unhappy periods were when he was away from his parents; one intense quote is "it is very hard for a small child to be separated from his parents". Happy times were when he could see his parents, another strong quote is when his parents were not far, and he used to sneak away to spend time with his parents. "This was not really allowed, but the Regent, who was responsible for me, chose to ignore these excursions". The movie, as well as the book, emphasizes the Tibetans peaceful way of life. Tibetans are against violence and war no matter what the consequences are. The Chinese had no problem to invade Tibet, as there was almost no resistance from the Tibetan side. When the Chinese invaded Tibet, they claimed they had come to liberate and bring progress to Tibet. My association was the arrogant attitude of Argentina when invading The Falkland Islands, as it was fresh in my mind. The Argentineans succeeded the invasion for a similar reason – there was no army in The Falklands at that time.

On Thursday July 22, HH The Dalai Lama started his Buddhism or Dharma Teachings, for the duration of ten days. Due to security reasons, participants were required to issue a special badge, and went through thorough security checks. I felt that the armed security guides, who filled the palace grounds, were out of context in this occasion. Translations into English, Japanese, Chinese and more were broadcasted via FM radio (which I had to buy, together with earphones). I went the first day, and tried my best to follow the teachings. There was no guidance where to sit, and in several places where I checked, the radio reception was very bad. After an hour of catching only a few words through the noise, never a full sentence, I gave up and left. Later I learnt that there was a special place on the second floor for foreigners, but as usual, info was not offered in an orderly manner in McLeod Ganj. They didn't even issue notifications about the changes in the teaching hours to the registered participants. It upset me to know that I missed things just due to lack of information.

After a couple of days, I decided to try again The Dalai Lama's Teachings. This time I went straight to the second floor, and indeed the radio reception was good. I followed and enjoyed some of the ideas. They were a collection of beautiful humane idioms, which felt good to listen to. The doors of the temple were open, and there was a holly atmosphere while watching The Dalai Lama on his lifted Chair. When the teachings ended, The Dalai Lama walked along the path close to me, and I felt something in the air with his huge glowing smile.

The Dalai Lama has a heartwarming smile; a smile that comes from within, it is a powerful smile. The last teachings day on Saturday July 31 was special, and I went there again. Huge number of Tibetans gathered there, and the temple and its surroundings were full of people. I felt sorry I could not bring in my camera, due to security reasons, to capture the faces. People got red ribbons to put on their forehead, and repeated loudly some prayers. At the end, monks went through with buckets full of Tsampa Balls, and gave them out to everyone. Tsampa is a traditional Tibetan food, which is made of roasted barley and sugar. Tibetans roast the barley with sand, then filter the barley, and grain the barley into fine flour. Tsampa can be served in different ways: adding butter and preparing solid balls, adding milk and serving it as porridge, or just adding liquid like tea and eating it with a spoon. Tibetans near me explained that eating the Tsampa would bless me with long life, love and compassion. I had six balls...

When the teachings ended, The Dalai Lama went out, and this time he walked very slowly, holding with both hands the hands that were stretched towards him, dropping personal comments to everyone. I watched his magnifying smile, and noticed that all parts of his face were smiling; actually, his whole body was smiling. He projected so much warmth and light. Young Tibetans who escape from Tibet and arrived here by foot perceive him as their father, which I am sure puts a heavy emotional load on his shoulders, and he really acts as the loving father of all.

I went to concerts at TIPA, the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, where the atmosphere was non-formal and very joyful. Tibetan performers wore colorful traditional dresses. As The Dalai Lama wrote in his autobiography "Freedom in Exile", "we are simple people who like nothing better than a good show and good party". Though concerts included traditional shows, the globalization influence was clearly there. Off stage, young Tibetans dressed and behaved as westerners. Young Tibetans searched for immigration opportunities, which resulted in many marriages between Tibetans and western people.



Young Tibetans did not accept The Dalai Lama's decision to agree on TAR, and they talked about taking violent actions in the future, to gain independence. It was common to see Tibetan youth make choices that go against the Tibetan tradition. After reading The Dalai Lama's characterization of Tibetans in his autobiography "Freedom in Exile", saying "Tibetans are by nature quite aggressive people and quite warlike", I fear Tibetans would use terrorism out of frustration and anger. No doubt, it would not happen during the current Dalai Lama's lifetime.

On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Tibetans celebrate their Democracy Day. At this date, The Dalai Lama declared democratic elections for Tibetan government candidates. The colorful ceremony took place in the temple, and included performances of singers and dancers. The TCV kids' dance was marvelously cute.

Another precious place I visited in McLeod Ganj is the Dip Tse-Chok Ling beautiful Gompa, where traditional Tibetan articles are presented. The Gompa lies at the bottom of a steep track, which leads off the lane past the Om Guesthouse. In addition to images, they present a superb butter Mandala sculpture. The butter is mixed with wax and sculptured into symmetric forms circling one center. Sand Mandalas are also made here once a year in honor of Losar, the Tibetan New Year. They keep the Mandala for the full year, and disperse it before the next New Year, to symbolize detachment. The Gompa resides on a small peaceful place, with rich vegetation.

## Indians and Tibetans at McLeod Ganj

In McLeod Ganj, there are many little jewelry stores with gemstones. After being captured by a colored Chrysocolla ornamental stone, solid blue-green member of the quartz clan, presented in one of the little stores, I entered to chat with the owners, Muslim Kashmiri Mushtaq and his elder relative Gul Katto. As tourism is low in Kashmir, they stay in McLeod Ganj to support their families in Kashmir. Mushtaq prepared for me an amazing Mala and bracelets. Gul invited me a couple of times to dine at their small room, together with Gul's nephew Altaaf. We dined sitting on their big bed, where all three of them slept. They kindly offered me a spoon as they ate with their hands. They were so warm and welcoming, shared their room, a cup of Chai and their food. I felt great with them. Altaaf, 22 years old, was making his independent way. His goal was to make enough money to send his parents to Mecca and Medina. Later I visited him during his lunchtime, and he invited me to share his morsel of food in his new small rented room half way to Bhagsu Nag.

On one of the light-out evenings I entered The Taste of India restaurant to have some soup. As this restaurant had excellent food, it was full. The waiter asked me to sit together with two Sikh Indian guys, Jagdeep Srangal and Mohit. Jagdeep immigrated to Canada, and worked on projects in the USA as a programmer. When I met him he was visiting his family in Chandigarh. His cousin Mohit owned a garment factory at Kathua (close to Pathankot), and exported his T-shirts. They were waiting for their take-away order, and when heading to their hotel room, they invited me to join them. As I enjoyed talking to them, I accepted their invitation. Both had great English. In their hotel room, they opened an exquisite Australian Merlot, it was my first wine in India. They preferred drinking whisky. We kept talking, eating and drinking until 2:00am. On the next day we went together to Bhagsu Nag, and tasted from the Israeli food section of the Ashoka Restaurant Menu, the schnitzel with veggie salad and potato chips, which were OK.

After two months in Dharamsala, I was able to comprehend the observed cultural differences between Tibetans, Indians and me. While volunteering I felt Tibetans appreciate very much the knowledge I shared with them. As I mentioned above, Tibetans, as Buddhists, highly evaluate education and knowledge. It is even concealed in The Dalai Lama's name, who is their spiritual leader: Dalai is a Mongolian word meaning ocean, and Lama is a Tibetan term corresponding to the Indian word Guru, which denotes a teacher. Together the words Dalai Lama are loosely translated as "Ocean of Wisdom". Monks, nuns, lamas and yogis devote themselves to learning the Buddhism Philosophy.

On the other hand, Tibetans do not value time and money the way I do, and for me time is money. They missed lessons without giving any notification, such as leaving a note on a

closed door, or letting the neighbors pass a message. A couple of times I arrived at the nunnery, and the nun who was expected to wait for me was simply not there. I did not know if I should wait, whether she was going to come. A few times other nuns would tell me that the nun was away for a couple of days. Naama, an Israeli who lived in McLeod Ganj and volunteered to teach Tibetans Reiki, was deeply hurt when they occasionally just did not show up for appointments. Tibetans could say in the simplest way, "we can do it when you come next year", as if it is natural to come again. I felt they do not appreciate my time and money it costs to arrive and live out there. It looked like in McLeod Ganj they did not think that getting an education worth money. As I mentioned within the Tibetan flee stories above, Tibetans send their kids to Dharamsala as education in Tibet/China is too expensive for Tibetans to afford and in Dharamsala it is free. They behaved as if the facts of life were that Tibetans were those who should get everything for free, get donations, funds and sponsorships, and westerners were those who were loaded, had an unlimited amount of money.

The way I observed it, Tibetans in India live inside a glass house. They get free education, as all institutes are being sponsored, and India funds a great part of the Tibetan education program. Tibetans perceive donations and sponsorships as part of reality. A poor family would seek for sponsorship (I volunteered to picture such families, to be sent abroad for sponsorship).

Tibetans live in a very modest and simple way. Most of the families live in one small room; the toilet is shared and is outside, with a shared small room attached to the toilet, which is used for showering using a bucket. Few Tibetans live in the type of room I lived. Tibetans' personal belongings can fill one bag.

I also observed differences between Tibetans and Indians in McLeod Ganj, not only western people. Tibetans did not keep their shops open at all times. It looked to me like they close their shops once they had made enough money for their immediate essentials. Indians, on the other hand, kept their shops open during the whole day until very late at night, except on Monday, which is their weekly shops-sabbatical day.

Most Tibetans were selling at a low fixed price, while Indians would easily raise their prices ridiculously to the western shoppers, and accept bargaining. Once I had about ten limes in my hand, and I asked the Indian guy in the market how much I need to pay. When he said 25INR, I was shocked and replied: "25? Why not 15?" and he immediately concluded with "OK". The real value should have been 10, only 15 was the first number that popped in my mind when he said 25.

Many annoying Indian beggars were wandering the streets, kids and moms with their babies. These untouchable Indians, which means from the lowest caste, live in homeless tents in Dharamsala. As Indians do not have mandatory free education, Seda, a Turkish volunteer who lived in England, decided to sponsor the studies of a five-year-old girl from that neighborhood for ten years. I did not see even one Tibetan beggar in the streets, though I know they constantly apply abroad for funds and sponsorships.

Another observation is that Indians worked all day long and very hard in physical jobs like building construction and road repairing. I had not seen even one Tibetan work hard at any job. Tibetans had a short working day: they took long breaks, and played during working

hours. I was told that Indians rarely hire Tibetans, as one put it "you are welcome here, but do not take our jobs". Tibetans did not mix with Indians. There were no mixed marriages, and I observed only few Indians in Tibetan concerts. Tibetans chose to preserve their culture and identity when it came to Indians, but looked forward to marry westerners in order to get a passport. On the one hand, Tibetans perceived their life in India as temporary. On the other hand, the Indians gave their land and opened their hearts to strange Tibetans who escaped in thousands (there are more than 80,000 refugees in India) from persecution and pain. Dhull, an Indian friend, wrote to me "tell your Tibetans they are not refugees, they are at home". India assists Tibetans in spite of its own enormous economic difficulties.

## Learning meditation

It seemed the right time for me to take a break. On Thursday, August 12, I started my six-day meditation retreat at Z-meditation (Z stands for Zenith). For preparation I had to exercise each day one hour the following: say "Om" while inhaling, start counting down from 100 while exhaling (in-Om, out-100, in-Om, out-99, in-Om, out-98 etc). At first I lost concentration, meaning I had parallel thoughts, and I had to write down the number I reached plus the thought that crossed my mind. First, I got to 59 when I was just puzzled out. Next, I went down to 54 when I got sleepy. This exercise made me feel dizzy and I stopped after 15 minutes. However, at the following exercises it was clear that when I was determined to make it, I would make it down to zero. When I did it just out of duty, I lost it around 40-50. Still, I was ready to learn towards having peace in my mind.

The retreat days were peaceful and calm. Ajay Kapoor, a wonderful Indian who seemed very peaceful, conducted the meditation. Usually he runs retreats with his wife Suruchi Dayal, who was not present in our retreat. Ajay's definition of Meditation is mindful action; allow only one stream of thoughts to flow in the mind, do things with awareness, identify and release noise like parallel streams of thoughts. To reduce noise and help us work on our minds, we kept silent, meaning that we did not talk for six days, avoided eye contact from each other, and ate light vegetarian food. No caffeine like that in black tea or coffee, no garlic, onion or strong spices. Following the retreat I added to my breakfast menu Munnka raisins and almonds that had been soaked all night in water, and sliced banana with honey.

Ajay's teachings were beautiful ideas about love, peace, balance, freedom and independence from extrinsic attachments, happiness and joy. It is always great to listen and think about these. As I also hold some of these beliefs, it was good to devote time and concentrate on them. Most meaningful to me was to be free of expectations from others; to be able to have pure observations, without giving interpretations and being judgmental; and accepting things as they are.

I learnt a technique to help unbound negative thoughts. The technique includes an inquiry, which should help to understand if and why I should abandon a specific thought. The inquiry includes questions such as is it relevant or useful in this moment; is it conducive to peace; will it make me complete and peaceful for good, is it permanent, what is my history with such a thought, what is reality, is it my business; how do I feel when I am attached to the condition, any distressful reason to hold it, any reason to drop it?

I was inquiring my deep agony due to my love to Rafael. I missed Rafael and was thinking about him all the time. Dharamsala was a beautiful shelter, but I could not run away from my powerful love to Rafael. I knew I should let it go. The above inquiry allowed me to add reasonable weight, to make it clear why I should set it free. Thinking about my love to Rafael was not useful, and had no relevancy to the present, as he is with his wife, and this is not my business, not under my control, and I do not wish to have any control over it. Keeping my love to Rafael would not bring me peace. Continuing to love him would not make me complete and peaceful for good.

A relationship with Rafael was not part of my reality and could not be permanent. While attached to my love to Rafael I felt much pain, I was frustrated and sad. There was no reason to hold it; I certainly had to drop it. Not that there was a miracle, and hocus pocus it would be gone. But I wanted to believe that such awareness would help me detach more quickly from it (and indeed, slowly it did).

During one of our conversations, when I raised my perception of the cultural differences between Tibetans, Indians and myself, Ajay confirmed it. In his terminology, Tibetans' and Indians' culture are more lethargic, not keeping appointments, not arriving on time, not completing the job on time, are all very common. According to the ladder of evolution Ajay presented, western culture is more sensual, aesthetic and creative, which are all at higher levels. Ajay added that Indians do not attend spiritual courses, and in all his years of providing meditation courses, he had only ten Indian students. This is not due to money, as Indians do stay in very expensive hotels in McLeod Ganj, paying 3,000INR and more per night, where you will not find even one western person.

While attending the retreat I had some free time, which I devoted to reading and physical workout. While reading "Illusions, The Adventure of a Reluctant Messiah" by Richard Bach, I was smiling from "there is no problem so big that it cannot be run away from" (was he quoting Snoopy the dog?). Dale Carnegie in "How to win friends and influence people" was putting in clear words Ajay's teachings: "Finding happiness is by controlling your thoughts. Happiness does not depend on outward conditions. It depends on inner conditions. It is not what you have or who you are or where you are or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about it".

I enjoyed sitting on the roof of the meditation center facing the Himalayas, admiring the beautiful view, while thinking about the mantras: pure joy is pure observation, mindful balance, total acceptance, peaceful completeness, loving kindness, here and now. I watched the clouds climb up the valley, reach the bottom houses of McLeod Ganj, and then slide back down. At times, the clouds would form on the peaks of the Himalayas, slide down, reach the top buildings of McLeod Ganj, and evaporate. On other times, the clouds would arrive, cover McLeod Ganj, so they completely blocked all visibility, and sometimes after a while they would bring a heavy rain. I enjoyed the rain. When the rain stopped and it cleared, big drops were hanging at the tips of the pine needles, glowing in the light. I watched the Rhododendron trees, imagining them covered by blooming flowers around April. Few clouds were floating at middle height, exposing Moon Peak (4,930m) and Matter Horn Peak (5,130m), sailing slowly across.

## Learning Buddhist philosophy

On Monday August 23, I joined the Buddhist philosophy course at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, in Gangchen Kyishong, 3/5 of the way from McLeod Ganj to Dharamsala. As this 3/5 part is the most beautiful part of the steep road, with shortcuts through nature, I enjoyed very much the daily walks down and up. A monk, Geshe Sonam Rinchen, gave the lessons in Tibetan language, and Ruth Sonam translated them into a very clear and easy to follow English. Geshe is a degree, equivalent to PhD, in Buddhism studies. Only 10 monks a year graduate and become Geshe. There was an excellent chemistry between Gyen La (as Ruth called him. Gyen means teacher, and La is a respectful way to call someone) and Ruth, who had an extensive knowledge in Buddhist philosophy and practice, translated and edited several books of Geshe's teachings on Buddhist philosophy and practice.

Geshe Sonam Rinchen was born in Kham province of eastern Tibet. He began his religious studies at the age of 12 at the local monastery in Kham, where he completed seven years of basic studies in logic. At the age of 19, Gyen La made a three-month journey on foot to central Tibet to enter the monastic university of Sera. One day he told us about that journey. They carried tents, which they built in a circle, socializing in the center. After the first night, they kept the same order of tents in the circle, to avoid the tense caused around catching a good spot (what a brilliant idea!). Few young pilgrim girls who run away from home before getting married accompanied them. This was a custom known to the parents, but still without their consent. The girls joined the monks so they would be protected through the dangerous way, and were beggars on the way. The girls stopped at farms that were waiting for them, as they were perceived as good workers. They helped harvesting, and got barley in return. They sold part of the barley, and kept the rest as their food, preparing Tsampa. Once they arrived in Lhasa, they visited the holey temples. When they had no more money and barley left, they would beg again. Later they joined monks who finished their studies on their way back home. Gyen La talked in much detail about these girls, and mentioned that these memories were very happy for him. Gyen La was forced to flee Tibet in 1959, and he completed his studies in India.

Gyen La laughed often, and enriched his teachings with examples from every day life. The first few weeks of teachings were from Aryadeva's "Four Hundred Verses on the Yogic Deeds of Bodhisattvas". One becomes Bodhisattva when attains enlightenment for the sake of all human beings. Later we moved to Shantideva's "The Bodhisattva's Way of Life". The teachings were full of love and compassion, which served as a daily injection of positive energy, my daily reminder of detachments and training of my mind.

During the retreat, I asked about intra-human relationship, but could not get a satisfactory reply. During my weekend at the nunnery, Lhadron said that Buddhism definitely relates to the community, a person to person relationship, Sanga as spiritual friends, more to the level of serve and support, sharing and depending on each other. Gyen La added that in Buddhism we concentrate on what is happening in our own mind. As we have no control over what is happening in other minds, most of the teachings related to controlling our mind.

Buddhism is about reasoning. One should think about an idea, try to understand it, and only if it makes sense, accept it. There was a peaceful atmosphere, when Gyen La was talking

about an awakening mind, conscientiousness, patience, happiness, enthusiasm, wisdom, dedication, compassion, generosity and kindness. The two ideas I found profound were to follow the middle way and reject extremes of pleasure and pain; and we suffer because we are attached to people and things in a world where nothing is permanent.

## Traveling around

One Sunday I went with another two volunteers, Esther and Frank from the Netherlands, to trek around the neighboring villages. Esther Sulkeis is a nurse, working mainly in research, and Frank Brokken, who holds a PhD degree, is the security manager in the computer center of Goningen University. Esther and Frank are married. We went to the sacred Dal Lake, continued through Naddi village and went along water pipes in a beautiful forest towards Dharamkot village. After a steep climb up, we got to the "Rest a While" teashop at the bottom of the Galu temple. I felt a strange itch close to my ankle, and when I looked to see what it was, I found a leech (bloodsucker), firmly attached to my vein. The teashop owner helped me take off my socks and get rid of the leeches from the inside of my shoes. Though it drizzled all the time, we enjoyed the hike.

One other Sunday when the weather was not so clear we decided to have a riding tour using local transportation. Together with Esther, Frank and Rinchen, my photography student from The Dogga, we took a local bus from McLeod Ganj to Dharamsala, and another bus to Palampur. The scenery on the way was magnificent, crossing many rivers, all so green, a tea factory and plantations close to Palampur. We dined in Palampur at the Highland Regency Restaurant, and enjoyed it very much. After walking to the train station at Maranda, we climbed on one to Chamunda Marg. We managed to find a small room on the train, with one bench just for the four of us, little windows on both sides and a private toilet. The train crossed the green and beautiful views of the Kangra valley. A local bus brought us back to Dharamsala and a cramped jeep filled with fourteen passengers took us up to cloud covered McLeod Ganj.

On another Sunday, we went again by local buses to Palampur, where we took another bus to Baijnath. After visiting the Baidyanath temple, we walked through the market to the train station, where we climbed on one. All day long the weather was great, and once we sat on the train, it started to rain heavily. When we got to Chamunda Marg at 19:40, we realized that due to the late hour, the next bus would only be at 23:00. We took a local taxi to Chamunda, where the six of us squeezed into a small Suzuki Maruti 800cc, two on the seat beside the driver, and four on the back seat. Rinchen sat up front in the middle, with his legs open, while the driver steered the gear stick in between his legs. There is always room for one additional passenger inside an Indian car. We got back to McLeod Ganj at 23:00.

Transportation in India is funny. Tens of Indians packed on the roofs of the buses, which are old and the wetness helps speed their corrosion. The reason is that the vehicle goes anyway, meaning that the gasoline cost is fixed, so why not squeeze more people in, to raise profit. Western people look for comfort, and are ready to pay for it. Indians have a different perception of comfort, and squeezing does not seem uncomfortable for them, as well as using the gear in between a passenger's legs. They do not see any reason to pay more in order to make sure they can sit in a bus ride.

On Sunday July 18, together with Gyalmtso (my English student) I climbed for the first time to Triund (2,975m). Equipped with five fresh Paales (Tibetan round bread, which looks like a pita bread but is thicker and does not open) from the bakery at the top of the steps from my home, and Nutella cocoa and nuts spread, we started our way. A great view of the Kangra Valley (where Dharamsala is located) accompanied us during four hours of climbing up 9 km of steep and straightforward ascent to the Himalayas, at the foot of the Dhamla Dhar. Many plants with beautiful flowers grew along the way. While on top clouds covered us, and we could not see the northern view of the Himalayas. I knew I would have to get back there! It took us three hours back down.

My second climb to Triund was the first part of a four-day trek, during September 6-9. I met Sophia, an English volunteer who studies English literature at Cambridge, and after a short talk, we decided to trek together. Sophia did the research among the travel agents based on the Lonely Planet's recommendation, and we chose to trek with Eagle's Height Trekkers (website: <http://www.eagletreks.oxs.in/>) from McLeod Ganj up high to the first Himalayan mountain range. We paid 800INR per day, which included the guides, food, mattresses and tent. We had to carry our personal stuff including our sleeping bag and mattress. Normally a guide and a porter should accompany two trekkers. We were fortunate to enjoy Ashok and Sunil, experienced guides, and Sanjeeb who trekked for the first time, being trained to become a guide. Ashoka, as called by Sunil, prepared delicious food including well spiced Maggi noodle soup (instant soup) with vegetables, porridge, Chapatti, Aloo Paratha with butter (fried chapatti stuffed with potatoes), dhal, rice, cooked vegetables with soy balls and Chai.

On the first day we climbed about 1,100m to Triund. The sun was shining, and we enjoyed the wonderful scenery. The monsoon rain triggered out bright green grass and blooming flowers. The flowers' fragrance was intoxicating. We stopped to rest at the Chai shops on the way, where Ashok was able to use their cooking facilities. The Chai shops on the way are open during the season, which is April to November, depending on the snow, and cater trekkers. Local shepherds cannot afford the prices. Trekking guides have a special business relationship with the Chai shop owners. The trekking guides keep tin boxes with supplies in the Chai shop, which are brought up by donkeys, so they do not need to carry food along the whole way. We filled our bottles with fresh water from the springs, waterfalls and rivers.

I liked my trekking partners very much. After a short walk around Triund we experienced a colorful and amazing sunset on the Dhaula Dhar mountain range, which was followed by a gorgeous sunrise. On our second day, we continued climbing up about 500m along 7km through a beautiful forest. We stopped at Snow Line Café, where Ashok took food, dishes, and kerosene stove for the night and the next day. We crossed laka green meadow where we met shepherds with Pashmina Himalayan Goats and shepherd dogs. From that point on there was no clear path, and we followed occasional Chortens (manmade pile of stones called also Cairns or Stupas) crossing Laka Glacier over Gaj River to Lahesh Rock Cave (3,350m). The first two trekking days were very easy for me, but Sophia felt very tired.

The third day was strenuous to all. We started walking at 6:00am after having porridge and Chai. We left our sleeping gear in the cave, Ashok and Sunil carried for us all we needed for one day. During our 3 km of steep ascent climb to Indrahaar Pass (4,350m), we enjoyed a colorful sunrise. Pashmina herds were on their way down, where pregnant sheep were to give

birth to their lamb. We had to hide as the Pashminas pushed stones from above towards us. Prayer flags crowned the pass, fluttering freely in the wind. From the pass, we had breathtaking mountain views. We were on the Dhaula Dhar, the first Himalayan mountain range, which goes from west to east; Pir Panjal mountain range, the middle Himalayan range, provides an impressive backdrop to the north; and in the south the Himalayan foothills towards the Indian plains. On the pass, there were small Hindu temples, and few Tibetan prayer flags. The prayer flag colors represent the five elements into which man's body is resolved after death: yellow – earth, green – water, red – fire, white – air or wind, blue – sky or space.

We continued down and west to the other side towards Nag Dal Lake (4,100m), 3 km of a difficult way over sharp boulders. A lonely trekker shouted to us: "where is Triund?" While approaching him, I recognized his accent, and I replied in Hebrew. One day before we got there was Krishna's birthday, and many Indian pilgrims went to Nag Dal Lake. Ofer (the trekker) joined an Indian he met at Triund, owner of one of the Chai shops there. As the Indian wanted to get back as soon as possible to his Chai shop, he went very fast, and Ofer was left behind and lost the way. Fortunately, he met shepherds who gave him food and let him sleep with them. The wonderful shepherds are ones who have nothing but share everything. I invited Ofer to join us, and he gladly agreed because it is very easy to lose orientation in this area, and he already went through this terrifying feeling of getting lost. Around noon, clouds were covering the area, and it was very difficult to find the way, which was not clearly marked. When a storm suddenly stroked, it was drops of huge hale balls. Sunil told me about two Israelis who decided to trek to the Indrahaar pass alone, in spite of warnings from Indian guides, and were never seen again. All the guides we met during our way told Ofer how lucky he was that we found him.

The clear water of the Nag Dal Lake, with the stunning rocks around it, was rewarding. Unfortunately, the high altitude affected me, and I started feeling very bad. Sunil said that the god of the sacred Nag Dal Lake is angry I pictured it. He told me that people who pictured the lake did not get any photos. Sophia was exhausted and kept drinking Oral Dehydration Salts; Sanjeeb also suffered from altitude sickness; Sunil had a terrible headache and only Ashok was fine. Ashok gave me half a lime to ease the altitude sickness. I licked the lime, and when it started to help, I squeezed drops to my mouth, and at the end I ate it. It helped immediately. Ashok, Sunil and Sanjeeb washed in the ice-cold water of the sacred lake. The way back was very difficult for me, due to the altitude sickness along with the very hard walk. Ashok and Sunil were wonderful, and helped me through the difficult places. I hardly got back the 8 km to Snow Line café. After a very good night sleep I woke up feeling like a new person, ready to go on and on and on. However, we only had the easy 14 km down. It was mostly cloudy, which made it pleasantly cool. The trek was brilliant and the weather just loved us. Three consecutive rainy days and nights from the moment we returned to McLeod Ganj emphasized our luck.

During the trek, I was thinking about the information we received before and during the trek compared to what we found out in reality. Sophia chose the travel agent who gave her the best information. However, the information we received was far from being satisfactory. This is probably another cultural difference. Indians do not understand what information we were looking for. I did find the guides professional, but it looked like they expected us to trust their experience without reasoning, and this was difficult for me. Examples are when I asked about

the route, I was not told about the Chai shops arrangement. I discovered it only while trekking, and found it very wise. Another one is when I asked about the third day, the guides repeated we must start very early, but did not tell us in advance about the clouds that cover from noontime, making it difficult to find the way, or about the strenuous walk on boulders. Needless to say that there are no topographic maps, we could only receive a drawing of the route including names, altitudes and approximate distances.

More fun was traveling with local transportation to the Norbulingka institute. The Norbulingka is located at Sidhpur, near Dharamsala, and it preserves the Tibetan culture (website: [www.norbulingka.org](http://www.norbulingka.org)). It includes a museum, an arts and handicrafts center, a temple, a library and a cultural research center, an academy of Tibetan culture, a guesthouse, all surrounded by a beautiful green garden. My second visit there was with Rinchen from The Dogga, his



sponsor from Belgium, Paul, Paul's cousin Daniel, Jo and Elisa, English volunteers. As it poured heavily, we entered the local Norling restaurant. Our discussion turned fascinating when Daniel started talking about earth veins. Earthquakes cause cracks, which cause an erection of radiation in the earth veins, with a width averaged of 70cm. If one stays inactive on an earth vein, such as sitting or sleeping, he will feel restless. Earth veins also spark off cancer. Houses and support pillars should not be built on earth veins. Egyptians built their obelisks on a cross of earth veins. The concrete support base, 4m square, was put on four earth tiles. The beta radiation that goes straight up without deviation meets the power of the cosmos at the sharp top of the obelisk. Daniel detects earth veins using a pendulum. While walking slowly with the pendulum hanging from one hand, straitening his other palm fingers as an antenna, the pendulum moved back and forth. When he is on an earth vein, the pendulum circles counter clockwise. When he gets a hotel room he would always make sure his bed is not on an earth vein.

Cats always sit on earth veins, as it produces acid, which helps them digest meat. Dogs, horses and camels cannot stand veins, actually horses shit on earth veins. Using this knowledge, Egyptians, while walking in the desert, would send their camels to find a place to sleep, and afterwards they would move them and put their tents in that place.

Paul is a mechanical engineer, and Daniel is a pharmacist, who specializes in homeopathic medicine, producing Kambusha to cure cancer. Paul and Daniel were on their way to Nepal, to trek in the Everest region.

## Departing from McLeod Ganj

While discussing with Daniel and Paul their trek in Nepal, raising issues and advising from my trekking experience in Nepal, I threw a question: "how do you feel about the idea of me joining the trek?"

On the Next day Daniel told me that together with Paul they made an analysis. The "pros" were a long list, while at the "cons" they raised two issues. First Paul was afraid they would lose their freedom to trek as they wished. Second Paul felt it would be unfair to his wife that another woman, stranger, will win this trip. Paul's wife could not join as she just started an Ayurvedic massage business, and had to take care of her customer base. Daniel did not have any problem with his wife, as she anyway would not have chosen to live in the trek conditions without proper facilities, western toilet and toilet paper.

I fully accepted, and closed the case. After additional evening discussions on how trekking in Nepal works, and what they should do, they requested me to reopen the idea, and consider joining them, expressing that they really wanted me to join them. Paul and Daniel said that after they got to know me better, they had changed their minds and believed that they will not lose their freedom. As far as his wife, Paul expressed that he believed she would understand, and concluded that he has no problem with this issue too. After a couple of hours, considering my need for a break from my volunteering work at McLeod Ganj, and being eager to trek, I decided to join them. I perceive Nepal as a trekking paradise.

The decision was taken on Wednesday night September 22, to depart on the next day afternoon. During that night, I was planning the next day, while doing all my laundry. Technicalities went smoothly, such as a bus ticket for the same day, on the same bus Paul and Daniel had tickets for, closing the room rent, and getting rid of some of my things.

Meeting all the warm people and saying goodbye was very emotional. Odelya, Itai and Ynon shared with me their lunch, which saved me during this hectic day. It was hard to depart from Wangdon, my sweet neighbor. The day before we left, Daniel gave her homeopathic medicine, and we all wanted to know how it affected her. Unfortunately, later on we learnt it did not change her medical condition.

When I went to say goodbye to Gyalmtso at Gu-Chu-Sum, he suggested getting to the bus stand together with Kalsang. When I arrived there in the afternoon, Gyalmtso and Kalsang were already there waiting for me. Each honored me with a Khata, and a bottle of mineral water for the way, which was a brilliant idea. These wonderful warm people brought tears into my eyes.

I felt like I would be able to close a circle in my perception of the powerful Tibetan flee saga. When Tibetans flee from Tibet, they go to Nepal, and stay there temporarily at the Tibetan Refugee Transit Reception Center nearby Katmandu, where they get money and papers to continue on to India. I wanted to go there.

Continue to [Part B – Nepal and Tibet ...](#)