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A Journey to the Dalai Lama by Dipika Mukherjee

A Journey to the Dalai Lama

Tiny grass, your steps are small, but you possess the earth under your tread.

Stray Birds, Rabindranath Tagore

It was January 2013 and I was going to meet the Dalai Lama. His Holiness lives in exile in India, in McLeodganj, a city in the clouds where the buddhist chants are as clear as the calls of the Himalayan Bulbul. It is a retreat in the perfect sense, and I was writing my third novel.

But I could only reach McLeodganj if the Easy Cab driver would let me get off his taxi.

The taxi driver and I had stopped at a highway in the Majnu Ka Tilla area of Delhi. I had a booking on an overnight Volvo bus to Mcleodganj; access to the Dalai Lama is not easy and the overnight bus service is still the shortest route.



But there was a big problem. 10 days ago, a young woman was brutally raped in a Delhi bus (she was said to be recovering in a hospital in Singapore, but later I would find out that she would not live) and all the buses in Delhi, especially long-distance buses with tinted windows, were suspended. As with all things in India, sab chalta hai (literally, anything goes), so my bus would go, just not from the designated stop. Instead, the driver was going to make an illegal pick-up on the highway, and at the “real” bus-stop, a young boy, perhaps 19 years old, had hopped into the taxi to show me the way.

Now, on this lone deserted highway, the driver of the taxi refused to let me off with my clearly foreign suitcase and this unknown young man, alone.

“I’ll be fine.” I argued with the driver in Hindi, “I travel around the world on my own, no problem.”

The driver folded his hands in a pleading gesture that is completely Indian and hard to resist. “Madam,” he explained, “I am the driver of this taxi. If something happens to you, the taxi company will hold me responsible. As will the police.” Then he added for effect, “And your family also.”

I wanted to tell him that I had sons as old as the boy sitting stone-faced through this conversation. That I wore my age like a shield. That although I was vertically challenged, I was horizontally abundant, and not easily carried away. But I felt his unease, and underlying it all, a genuine concern for my well-being. So I said, “Ok, you wait. There seems to be another passenger waiting here. If he seems ok, I will wait with him.”

Unfortunately, that man wasn’t going to McLeodGanj. His posture suggested that it was none of my business where he was going and I should get lost.

So the taxi driver drove us back to the official bus-stand in complete silence. I mentally waved the Dalai Lama goodbye; like many Indians, I too am superstitious about auspicious beginnings, especially on journeys,

and I prepared myself for more time with my parents in Delhi.

By the time we reached the official bus-stand, quite a crowd of passengers had accumulated, including a group of young foreign students who were headed to Dharamsala to teach English to Tibetan children. I gave my taxi driver a fat tip for his concern and decided to wait it out with this motley group. Soon, we were ferried to the same spot on the abandoned highway at the back of motorcycles, holding our luggage at dangerous angles, inviting every hurtling truck to knock us off our perch. But we reached. And the bus arrived. And despite this inauspicious beginning, I mentally thanked the Dalai Lama for making all this happen...again.

The Dhauladhar Range came into view in the early morning, lighting up the sky with its snowy cape and erasing the darkness with a warm milky glow. First there was one white peak, then another and another, until at every turn the view dazzled even more. Such pure whiteness as I have never seen, against the soft twinkle of the night sky, and the valley glowed with a faint light below.

I had left Chicago two weeks earlier for a series of literary festivals in India – starting with Hyderabad and ending with Delhi. I didn't really have a plan for McLeodganj, unlike my young companions who had signed up for volunteer work months in advance. I had visited Tibet in 2011, and the changing face of Lhasa, where the culture of the Chinese Han people seemed to be wiping out the native Tibetan, had been disturbing. The road signs in Tibet are now inscribed with the rigid straight lines and flailing arms of the pinyin, overshadowing the gentle curlicues of the Tibetan alphabet flowing around the prayer bells and circling mandalas. Soon after the trip to Tibet, a Tibetan monk on the verge of self-immolation started talking in my head, incessantly. As most writers know only too well, the only way you can silence such a voice is by writing the words down.

But I had lived & worked in Shanghai for too long, and mingled with intelligent and humane Chinese academics and writers and students; I could not write an un-nuanced morality tale of good-vs-evil about Tibet. Also, as an Indian, I knew we had our own Sikkim. So I was headed for McLeodganj to make sense of all this, to find a monk like the one talking in my head, but besides that, I really had no plan. A well-connected official in New Delhi had liked my debut novel, then became interested in my subsequent work, and offered to help with my research. Over lunch at a fancy Indo-Chinese restaurant in South Delhi, she had casually asked, “Since you are going to McLeodGanj, would you like to see the Dalai Lama?”



Was that a rhetorical question?

I left Delhi armed with the telephone numbers of the Dalai Lama's chief translator and the Director of the Tibetan Archives. I assumed I would just get into McLeodganj, find my monk, engage him in conversation, meet the Dalai Lama, and be on my way. Nothing to it. 11 days, mission accomplished. Then I could get back to my real life, the routine at the Harold Washington Public Library, poring over books, making sense of this experience, and putting it into a novel. I reached Macleodganj, checked into the Pink House, ordered some ginger honey tea and waited for the universe to deliver.

Which it quickly did. The Dalai Lama's translator returned my call to say that His Holiness was on a retreat and would be seeing no one in the next two weeks. He would be happy to talk to me, but bad timing, maybe His Holiness would be available the next time? The proprietor of the Pink Lodge asked if I knew that there was a waiting line for YEARS to see His Holiness and that I needed to apply online. The guy at the local pharmacy told me Tibetans wait all their lives, but alas, most die before they are able to see His Holiness.

I felt like a complete idiot. All the old insecurities, that maybe I was a writer who had stumbled into this calling with no idea of what I was doing, came rushing back. I was in the wrong profession, and clearly too stupid for this.

As I walked along the empty roads of McLeodganj (it was low season), I felt completely wretched. The Tibetan volunteer associations were closed until the summer crowds returned and I had no idea where to even begin looking for my monk. It was biting cold after a slight gray drizzle and I was wearing boots.

Suddenly a man offered to shine my dusty boots for a low price – business was so bad nowadays Didi, he called out to me in Hindi, he had come all the way from Rajasthan but there was no work now. I stopped at his stand and started taking off my boots. As I bent down, I could see, behind the man, a green sign waving in the wind: “English Conversation Teachers Wanted”. It was the headquarters of the Ex-Political Prisoners of Tibet.



I couldn't wait. I told the Rajasthani man I'd be right back and ducked into the low doorway in my socks, following the signs to the "Office". The lone man sitting there spoke halting English and no Hindi. He had to dial someone else. I waited below the pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama. And I waited. And I waited. Finally, I wandered around the building, looking at pictures of the ways in which political prisoners are tortured in China. There were paintings (since pictures were unavailable), of tiny thumb-cuffs used to string up men, and women with fish hooks in their vagina. There was a list of the martyred, most of whom had barely begun their adult lives.

When I had waited for 35 minutes and was about to give up, a very disheveled man called me in. Initially skeptical about why I was at their office, he warmed up after googling my university affiliations while I silently waited again. Tomorrow, he said, you can begin to teach Conversational English. Then he offered me some milky tea.

Over the next ten days, I taught a group of men and women who were all ex-political prisoners and had fled from Tibet. In my class of 9, 5 were monks, four were not (although one among them used to be). I was their English conversation partner and so they told me about escaping on foot from Tibet, walking over the Himalayan ranges with inadequate footwear, trying to avoid the splitting ice and the strong currents on streams. When there were children, they took turns to piggyback the young ones, but inevitably, they would lose some. They talked about walking through the moonlit fog-shaded mountain passes and sleeping through the warmer days. Some were lost in these passes, while the sick had to be abandoned. They were crippled by homesickness and hunger and exhaustion, but hounded by the fear of Chinese bullets.

Every day, from 4.30-6.00 in the evening, I heard their stories. Then I went to a meditation class to realign, to distance my mind from so much human misery. In the mornings I would go to the Tibetan archives, where the Director opened up the ancient Buddhist texts, the Jataka Tales, that say much about the fortitude of the Tibetan people. Other mornings I would go to the Dalai Lama's Temple to speak to the chief translator. I wrote everyday – a well of words sprouted, bursting to be free, but they were not my words; they were the stories of the Tibetans I met going about their business in every street corner.

~~I~~ didn't meet the Dalai Lama. Instead, McLeodganj taught me much about serendipity, and trusting the universe. About ceding control and slowing down. The day before I was about to leave, the lights went out after a relentless storm. My first reaction was *Why doesn't India ever get any better?* but I was forced, in the dim light, to watch the strong winds lashing the trees, which seemed to reach out to each other, the conifers and the shrubbery, all shivering leaves in a dance of solidarity against the elements. Then a flock of kites came. At first I thought they were in distress, wheeling in the wind with raucous cries, but then it was clear that they were riding the wind, like confident surfers on high waves. And meanwhile, the mountains in the background were being slowly dusted with a cloud of white, like someone sprinkling powdered sugar on chocolate.

I have been through storms in many parts of the world, but glued to a TV or a computer screen, I have missed Nature in her glory. McLeodganj held up this Spirit of Beauty in its entire splendor, in nature as well as in the hearts of the indomitable and compassionate Tibetan people. I had thought that this journey would be about meeting the Dalai Lama, but perhaps it was about a larger connection with ordinary Tibetans, whose stories needed to be told.

“Maybe you'll meet the Dalai Lama after your book is published,” said the Director of the Library, “One person blows up a building and the media has pictures everywhere, but our youth are burning themselves and no one cares. Please tell their story.”

So I am starting to tell this story. We all have the same destination in the end, no matter what lives we live. McLeodganj, in just 11 days, taught me the truism of the old cliché – it is the journey that makes ALL the difference.



Dipika Mukherjee's fictional and academic work has focused on Southeast Asia, and especially Malaysia. Her debut novel Thunder Demons (Gyaana, 2011) is based on the current socio-political situation in Malaysia and was long-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize. She has edited two anthologies of Southeast Asian short stories: Silverfish New Writing 6 (Silverfish, 2006) and The Merlion and Hibiscus (Penguin, 2002). Rubicon Press published her first poetry chapbook, The Palimpsest of Exile, in 2009. She was a Featured Storyteller at Eye on India Chicago Festival where she performed this story in An evening of Story Exchange on July 11, 2013.