

## Buddhist monks

I have found Buddhist monks to be some of the most pleasant people I have ever met. It does not seem to matter what geographical region I am thinking about; my recollections of Buddhist monks are totally filled with kind, gentle, gracious, happy people. For the purposes of this essay I am going to discuss the day of a typical Buddhist monk in the Himalayas. Much of this discussion will be based upon my experiences visiting many monasteries in the Himalayas. This does seem to differ somewhat from the monks I have seen in Southeast Asia; thus, it is important that I focus this discussion on the countries of Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Northern India.

I can recall one of my first visits to the Himalayas. I was in my early twenties and was trekking with a group of friends to Everest Base Camp. This trek was to the Everest Base Camp in Nepal; however, I will talk later about the Tibetan Everest Base Camp as the Rongbuk Monastery there was a beautiful place. Anyway, for this trek my companions and I had decided to trek all the way from the end of the road in Jiri. This was primarily because we were poor college students and had spent all our money on the flight from the US to Nepal. We really couldn't budget another flight from Kathmandu to Lukla. In hindsight we should've budgeted some more money for the flight to Lukla. Being college students we were starting our trek in early June. June is also the month that the Monsoon really gets started. Walking through the rice paddies of the Himalayan foothills during thunderstorms was not what I had dreamt about for my first trip to the Himalayas. However, it did lead to some pleasant surprises. Most trekkers to the Nepali Everest Base Camp fly to Lukla. Thus, the villages between Lukla and Everest Base Camp have numerous facilities for trekkers. The villages we were trekking through had very limited facilities. Thus, as we entered each village it was challenging to find accommodation and food. In several villages the resident monks were kind enough to let us stay with them. This is where I discovered how a monk's day begins.

Early in the morning, at something like 3AM, a monk starts ringing a bell. As I understand it this bell is supposed to wake all the monks to meditate. In some monasteries they all get together and meditate. In others they don't. I have no idea why there is a difference. If you wake up early in the morning it is a really neat sight to see all of the monks meditating together. In the rural monasteries it is easy to forget which century you live in as the candlelight flickers across the faces of the meditating monks. All of the urban monasteries I have visited in places like Lhasa, Kathmandu, and Bangkok have electricity. On a side note, I have been to monasteries in Japan; and, while I know they are Buddhist, they seem like a different religion.

Around sunrise, the monks get up and wander off. During my first trip to Nepal I had no idea why the monks did this. Later, while in larger, more established villages it was more obvious. The monks are moving out into the local community to collect food from the residents.

Eventually all of the monks return to eat their food. In some villages I noticed that villagers would also bring food to the monastery. I have no idea how this food was divided up amongst the monks. Was there a seniority? Some form of equitable distribution? Regardless of how it was distributed, villagers would arrive at the monastery with food; and they would leave without it.

After eating it seems that a variety of different activities commence. The younger monks (aspiring monks?) are clearly engaged in some form of academic instruction. I know that the instruction includes English as many young monks (in the Himalayas) speak excellent English. I suspect that there is also instruction in native languages (Tibetan, Nepali, Urdu, etc.) Also, I am certain that there is also a lot of Buddhist theological instruction. As you trek through the villages of the Himalayas you can often catch a glimpse of the younger monks being educated.

The older monks seem to take on a variety of roles. Some certainly can be found doing maintenance activities around the monastery. Some seem to perform religious rites for the village. One of these roles is to cremate the dead. I am told that throughout the Himalayas the rite of cremation is not universal. Reportedly in Tibet some of the Buddhists leave the bodies of the dead on top of a nearby hill. Apparently the birds then dismantle the body. This seems like a practical response to the reality that Tibet has very few trees. It is an arid land that reminds me greatly of the US state of Nevada.

One of the other rites performed by monasteries is the blessing of travelers. In the Himalayas all movement between villages is carried out on foot. Sometimes one must cross a high-altitude pass along the way. On a recent trip to Nepal I hiked around Manaslu, Annapurna, and then into Mustang. One of the big passes to cross was Thorung La. A few days prior to crossing the Thorung La we stopped at a monastery (Praken Gompa) and were blessed. In a small dingy room, the Lama spoke rapidly (in Nepali?) and waved around one of those handheld prayer wheels. Then, he tied a piece of cord around my neck. As I understand it, the cord was to bring me luck while crossing the Thorung La.

I am not really sure whether the process brought any of us much luck. The following day several of my companions were stricken with bad cases of diarrhea. Regardless, the Lama managed to get many hundreds of rupees from our party. I sincerely hope that they help fund his monastery. However, I find this somewhat perplexing. From my readings for this class I find that one of the 227 precepts for a monk is not to handle money. However, the Lama at

Praken Gompa had a thriving business. He didn't actually handle the money though. You placed the rupee notes onto a plate sitting near the entrance. Perhaps a non-monk handles the money?

This is perhaps a bit of hypocrisy; however, I do not begrudge the enterprising Lama trying to bring some money to his monastery. In the current political climate of Nepal and Tibet it has to be difficult to be a Buddhist amongst the Hindu Royalists and the Maoists. The rumors in Nepal are that the Buddhist monks often are caught in the middle.

Monks also seem to run festivals at certain points during the year. I have only been fortunate enough to see one. While trekking into the Kali Gandaki valley (reputedly the world's deepest gorge), I entered the village of Muktinath. Muktinath is a Spartan place consisting of dozens of hotels and several large monasteries. It is reportedly a sacred place to the Hindus and the Buddhists. Apparently a Buddhist named Rinpoche attained enlightenment here. The Buddhist festival that I saw here was interesting. There were many Buddhist monks with very large horns. There seemed to be no attempt at tooting these horns in unison. Horns of different pitch were continually blown with low sounds coming from each of them. Other monks with cymbals continually clanged them together; again with no synchronization whatsoever. With all of this "music" a procession of oddly-dressed Buddhists proceeded to travel down the path through town. They were dressed in outfits that you do not normally see Buddhist monks wearing. However, the "musicians" were obviously in traditional Buddhist monks' gowns. I have no idea where their destination was as there are numerous Buddhist monasteries in the area around Muktinath.

In the evenings the monks can often be seen getting together again. On many occasions I have seen the entire contingent of resident monks sitting in front of what I assume was the Lama (head monk). I assume that the monks were listening to what amounts to a sermon from the Lama.

There are a few things that I have not been able to puzzle out. First, where do the Buddhist gowns come from? Do they make them? Are they donated by the villagers? How do they make them that color? Also, I wonder how they shave their heads. Certainly they don't stop by the nearby store and purchase razors. Do they shave with a straight razor? I have never seen a Buddhist monk with a nick from a razor.