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## **SACRED JOURNEY TO TIBET OCTOBER 1997**

Wide silent valleys, cut by ancient glaciers and primeval rivers, sit at 12,000 to 16,000 feet elevation, protected on either side by ancient, voluptuous mountain ranges reaching even higher above the 16,000 feet, the first snow of the season, pristine and glistening, resting like a white silk khata of honor over mountain shoulders.

Prayer flags flying in the winds from housetops, mountain tops, and tops of high passes. Everywhere is sacred.

Flocks of sheep, herds of yak, fields of grain being cut and stacked, yak patties picked up along the roads, streets, and fields, to be used later for fuel, are drying on the sides of buildings, poplar trees turning golden in the late autumn coolness, warm days still producing fresh, succulent vegetables and fruits.

Cars, trucks, busses, yak drawn carts, motorized tractors, bicycles, small horses ... People in the fields, and villages along the way waving to us as we traveled between Lhasa and Gyantse, Shigaste, and Drak Yerpa. Smiling, friendly children greet the strange foreigners stopping along the roadside... hoping for a treat of food, gum, or a pen ... or just a smile and hello.

Wide rivers flowing from sources even higher up in the Himalayas, the headwaters of all major rivers in Asia!

And the big blue sky, blue of the clearest, most vibrant blue, stretched over the valleys, mountains, rivers, monasteries and prayer flags.

Flying through the blue sky en route to Lasa, we soared above the clouds, glimpsing Everest as it peaked above the cloud line, pointing its crown toward the ever-rising sky.

In the early morning twilight, we climbed Chakpo Ri Hill, Lhasa's holy mountain, the former site of the Tibetan Medical Institute, combining the study of Buddhism and medicine, before its destruction in the Chinese invasion. We'd come to watch the first rays of the sun hit the Potala Palace. The early morning clouds lifted and re-formed, revealing that wondrous blue sky, the sparkling roof of the expansive Potala ever changing with the rising sun. Immense, majestic, it sits high above the valley, 1000 rooms of devotion to Buddhist ideals. Huge stones forming thick walls to protect against the icy winters, architecture blending structure and mountain. For hundreds of years its walls housed both Tibetan government led by the Dalai Lamas and regents of the monastic community, as well as monasteries for the lamas pursuing their studies and devotional practices. Again and again, we were astonished at the devotion that creates such beauty of painting, statuary, and brocade.

A few blocks away, we entered Barkor Square, the ancient market surrounding Jokhang Temple, built in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century by King Songtsen Gampo and his devout Buddhist Nepalese wife, Queen Tritsun, who along with Songsten Gampo's other wife, Chinese Buddhist Princess Wencheng (who built Ramoche Monastery), brought Buddhism to Tibet. In

monastery after monastery we saw the statuary honoring their contributions, side by side with other deities honored Tibet.

Lamas, nuns, pilgrims, traders, everyday people meet in this ancient place, shopping, circumambulating the temple as the devout have done for centuries. Tibetans from near and far, Ambo and Khan, dressed in their marvelous traditional clothes, long haired braided, adorned with red and silver and turquoise, babies in slings on their backs, faithful in their devotion regardless of the difficulty from political upheaval. I bought traditional prayer beads, yak bells, and much to the delight of everyone, we bargained robustly with a Tibetan woman to buy a traditional Ambo hat with red fringe. Me with my hiking boots, carved wooden walking stick, and red-fringed hat brought gales of laughter and wonderful connections as we continued our stroll around The Square.

Perusing the vendors' stalls, we made our way through the square to the entryway of the Jokhang Temple where we bought sweet smelling juniper for an offering in the large earthen oven kept hot all day by the offerings and blessings of pilgrims. We walked toward the entrance, across large stones worn smooth with centuries of pilgrims prostrating themselves before entering into the most sacred temple of the Tibetans. Deeply moved, I watched the pilgrims in the vestibule doing their prostrations, their meditative acts of humbling themselves before The Sacred.

We walked to the giant doors and stepped across the threshold into the Temple. The raised threshold of the doorframe reminds you to notice that you're entering into a sacred place and that attention is appropriate.

Into the great hall...

The great hall whose pictures I've often seen. Long, slightly raised platforms covered with maroon cushions for the lamas, warm maroon robes with rabbit fur lining folded on their seats, drums standing silently, the great horns waiting for the ceremony, lofty silk brocade banners hanging from the high ceiling heralding the eventual triumph of the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings) over evil.

Sunlight streaming in through the high windows leaving its trail of golden particles falling through the light. Yak butter candles giving golden flickers to the various sacred statues, yak butter constantly replenished by the offerings of the pilgrims. Such walls, such strength of character these monasteries... built to stand the test of time... built to nurture and provide direction for generation after generation.

That night, our last night, we entered the Jokhang, to hear the chanting of the lamas at evening vespers. Crossing the threshold, our energy shifted as we heard the low tones already beginning to resonate in our bodies.

Most pilgrims were gone, leaving a few foreigners as our selves to experience evening in the temple, Lamas moving about tendering to their responsibilities in each of the

small chapels. The maroon cushions in the center of the great hall were filled with lamas wrapped in their warm robes deeply engrossed in evening meditation, drums resonating, candles flickering. Lamas with giant brass pitchers pouring yak butter tea for the chanting lamas to warm them on this cold night. We circumambulated this central area peering into each of the chapels around the perimeter of the great hall.

I moved to the chest-high wooden room divider separating the lama's space from the rest of the great hall, placed my arms on the top of the divider, leaned into it, closed my eyes, and opened to the resonance of the chant, a chant designed to open and balance the energy centers of the body and attune one to the sacred. My heart center pounded as the energy moved directly to it. I thought my heart would burst as I invited the vibration to enter, open me, and attune my being to its vibration.

I opened my eyes, saw the lamas still immersed, their eyes closed, I sensed them deepen into their mediation process. Yak butter candles glowed in the darkness, their golden glow punctuated with a half dozen electric lights around the perimeter.

Then, for a few unexpected, magical moments, the electricity went off... the room darkened, and we were charmed by the gentle glow of the yak butter candles. An old familiar place.

Oh, if the lights would just stay off for a while longer... let me remember the temple as it used to be. My heart opened more. I sank into the chant ... a chant to Tara... Tara, the symbol of long life, of compassion, of the divine feminine Protectress. I tried to remember this deep feeling seeking remembrance. For moments I could catch it. It seemed so familiar to walk through these great hallways carrying a yak butter light. I felt comfortable, warm, and at home.

Too soon the lights came on. But I still remembered.

The chants were over.

The lamas began their closing process.

I joined them as they entered the small chapel behind the great hall where the ancient Jowo Buddha sat receiving pilgrims, a symbol of so much wisdom, reminding those who cross the threshold into the chapel of the impermanence of life, of the need to seek within to find the light, of the necessity of waking up to the truth of who we are.

I leaned against the ancient wooden pillar and felt all those who'd leaned here before. I remembered every thing I could remember so that later I could remember more. Grateful that these brave lamas were holding the Monastery and Temple in place, I said goodbye to the Temple, walked back across the threshold, out into the quiet night.

My awareness was bigger now: the encounter with this ancient tradition had enlarged my mind and opened my heart. I wondered how it would continue to affect me. As I walked across the smooth stones of Barkor Square, I moved into the quiet of my soul to allow the deep process to do me as they would.