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THIS STEP, THIS BREATH

My Edge

A Sacred Journey in the High Himalayas

We Went to Our Edges and Came Back with a Bigger Piece of Ourselves.

For two weeks we walked in the High Himalayas, home of the gods, where the heavens gently caress the high mountain tops. Trekking at elevations of 9,500 to 13,000 feet, we walked slowly, allowing our lungs and hearts to adjust to the pristine, mountain air, thin and pure in comparison to the sea level, heavier, polluted air we had left behind. I walked with my Sherpa guide, Kanucha, a 63 year old mountain man, who at age 18 had been a member of Hillary's initial climb of Everest. Kauncha walked a slow pace with me, never in a hurry, praying as he walked with his Buddhist prayer beads. I knew I was safe, no matter how long it took me to walk from camp to camp each day, it didn't matter.

My only task was to take this step and this breath. Often I walked 3-6 steps, then paused to gratefully lean on my chest-high walking staff for 10-12 breaths. At the lower altitudes, I noticed that my physical training had paid off. However, the altitude forced me to slow down. I learned to obey the demands of mountain walking... pausing whenever I needed to, not scolding myself for being the slowest one in the group... just allowing myself to take my time. Part of me thought I **should** be faster, since I was the group leader. But, I allowed the "young bucks", 20-30 years younger than I, to move at their pace, and me, one of the "old yaks", to move at my pace.

I've learned that it's helpful to adjust yourself to the demands of the situation, without inner bickering and self judgments. Since I could walk no faster, I adjusted my mind to my body.

The trail, or High Mountain Interstate as I called it, was three to six feet wide, winding up and down the side of the mountain, the outside falling sharply to the cold, fast running river many feet below. Everything that went from the lower villages to the higher villages, came up "The Interstate" either on the backs of Sherpas, yaks, or an occasional pack pony. The Sherpas, the native mountain people, have an amazing capacity to carry any and everything up and down the mountains on their backs with a strap around their foreheads: 8 foot long lumber for building, firewood, all the provisions for expeditions and trekking parties, sick people, bottled water, and even Coca Cola for trekkers.

I allowed the high mountains to be absorbed into my bones, so I could access this six foot interstate while speeding down six lane interstates.

I walked with Kauncha daily for 2 weeks... praying the Buddhist prayer in my heart that he prayed with his beads: Om Mami Padme Hum. A **very** loose translation is that the jewel in the lotus we seek is the Buddha/God that lies within our very own hearts.

We were on a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage doesn't follow a prepared plan or pursue a fixed aim or purpose. A Tibetan pilgrim of several decades ago, Lama Anagarika Govinda, said that the direction the pilgrimage takes is determined by the urge that operates on the

outer physical level, as well as, on the inner spiritual level. Our spontaneity on the pilgrimage is the same as the nature of life that always starts from an invisible inner core. The pilgrim abandons himself to the life which wells up from his very depths leading him beyond the farthest horizons to an aim which is always present within him, even though it is hidden from sight until the moment it appears.

I wondered just what would appear for me from my very depths? Would I be alert enough to recognize it and respond to it?

Very quickly, I discovered that my pilgrimage was centered about my difficulty with breathing. Daily, I lightened my day pack, prayed for the breath to take each step.

My strong self took me up to 13,000 feet to Thangbouche Monastery, back down and then up again to the village of Khunde. Then my throat became **very** sore. Within three hours, I couldn't speak. All I wanted to do was cry, but my throat hurt too much to cry... I cried anyway. I fell into my tent, grateful for Ken, my co-leader. Thankfully, we were in the village with a western doctor. Within a short time, I had antibiotics and was healing.

As I lay there, I got it! This was my invitation into helplessness, not being in control, and allowing myself to be taken care of.

I surrendered. Again. It's good to surrender when the deeper forces are in charge, when you really don't have a choice... otherwise you really create a disaster for yourself.

So, this was My pilgrimage: Surrender.
Not what I had expected for my journey.
So much for my Expectations.

About 9PM, Ken announced that he and Kauncha had made a decision: either I could go back to Namche Bazaar and stay with Kauncha's wife or they would send for a horse for me! My first thought was "I can't ride a horse when I am supposed to be walking!"

Another voice responded immediately: 'Surrender to the Moment. Allow yourself to be cared for.'

Of course, I chose a horse, even though I have almost no history of horseback riding, other than behind my cousin Betty Jane on Ole Paint. Surrender and trust once more. I knew I wasn't going to sit out the trek in Namche if I could help it.

By 9AM, my pony and her baby colt, were led into camp by a teenage Sherpa boy from Namche. This journey to Namche and back would have taken me two days to walk. Gratefully, I climb on the horse: I adjusting to her, and she to me.

About twenty minutes later, the saddle slipped, and I fell. It happened so quickly, I wasn't able to help myself; I wasn't hurt, just shook up. They secured the saddle and I remounted. I thought of the steep **Interstate** and wondered about my safety.

I knew I must make a shift in consciousness; otherwise, I would be scared for the entire trip. Gratefully, I was able to make this shift and never worried about the saddle shifting. Thankfully, nothing happened.

Upon reflecting, I must have been quite a humorous sight for the villagers – me with my big hiking boots, my beige safari hat and jacket and camera with a big telephoto lens

hanging around my neck, being led by the Sherpa lad carrying his pack on his back and mine on his front. Surrender again.

I found a place of trust in my pony as she carefully picked her way up and down the trail. Learned to help her by leaning forward when we were making a steeper ascent, and leaning backward, holding on behind me, when we descended.

Once again, I noticed how little control I have in my life. I was **supposed** to be in charge. And I was being taken care of. I noticed that my main control in Life is in my choice of my attitude: how will I deal with the experiences which Life, The Great Teacher, presents to me?

My Pilgrimage was unfolding in front of me as I experienced my helplessness and allowed myself to be taken care of, to receive ... experiencing three days of the trek from the back of a small pony whose colt trailed behind. The question is: Can I take this lesson from the Pilgrimage into my greater life? Can I surrender to each moment with grace, gratitude, and a sense of adventure, trusting I can access the needed inner resources, or that they will be provided for me... or do I hold on to how I think it **should** be?

In each moment there is only This Step and This Breath.

Once we surrender to what is and not what we expect, our vision clears; we understand what was hidden before. A new kind of power; strength is available, once we surrender.

First we must let go, experiencing the Initiation ... the loss of control, the vulnerability ... be stripped down, naked, exposed, see that we weren't who we thought we were, who we presented ourselves to be. **This is the Edge.**

It's a rope bridge across the raging river; it's the journey toward knowing ones self. It's the opportunity to release our perceptions and preferences, to go deeper and get simpler. The process isn't ego enhancing. We notice, however, that it is freeing. We wait for the resolution, the Next Step.

This Step and This Breath are all there is. But in this Breath and This Step is Everything ... all of my past and all of my future.

In this moment, I Step and I Breathe.

I Step and I Breathe.

I have gratitude for the breath which breathes me as I step.

Namaste, Judith