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Emerging World

The Himilayas meet the 21st century

The mountains and high plateaus that make up the Himalayas and Tibetan plateau have come under more scrutiny in the last few months than ever before. Westerners, who have known the region mostly as tourists and climbers, have increased sensitivity to South and Central Asian politics since September 11. But, for some of us who have made friends and found business and educational opportunities in the region, June 1st was a day of great significance. That was the date that the world heard of Nepal's tragedy: the massacre of the Nepali royal family by one of its own. For Nepal and other Himalayan regions, this was the national equivalent to a September 11 attack.

Those who have visited the region know that Nepal is famous at least as much for its genteel, kind, helpful people as much as it is for its mountains. But, if the royal massacre wasn't enough, the Maoist movement, which had been quietly growing in the backwater districts of eastern and western Nepal started to make news for its bold attacks on the Nepali police force. Those events, along with recent tensions between Pakistan and India, have made us all take another look at our relationship to the world's biggest mountains and its peoples.

It has been my fortune to combine all of these disciplines. During the May of 1999, 2000, and 2001 I had the privilege of taking a total of 197 students to the Himalayas of India, Nepal, and Tibet to study the philosophical, religious, and political dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism. I have traveled through the mountains that make up the home of the people of the Himalayas, reading and discussing their philosophies and stories, meeting the people, experiencing the food, music, and dance, and discovering the political setting and backdrop for the philosophical and political standpoint. Its meant re-thinking the way I think about the Himalayas and the way I think about myself. I have found that it has meant the same for all of 19 of those fortunate students.

We've had the opportunity to trek around Annapurna, view Everest from the air and from its base camp, hike over 13,000 feet, drive across the vast plains of Tibet, visit Tibetan refugee centers in Darjeeling, Kathmandu, and Dharamsala, climb with old Tibetans at the Dalai Lama's monastery in Dharamsala, play with children at the Tibetan Children's Village and talk with representatives from non-governmental organizations which monitor human rights, democracy, and women's issues. We have been blessed by the 175 Karma, two of the students were married by the monk of the Tengboche monastery in the shadow of Everest, and I have been held and interrogated by Chinese authorities when one of our guides innocently handed photos of the Dalai Lama to some monks in Shigatse, Tibet. In 1999 the students met the two climbers who had discovered George Mallory's body on the north face of Everest. In 2000 they met an Italian who was climbing Everest in tribute to his dead friend. And in 2001 they met a young woman who had climbed Everest.

- as any of us who have ventured to make one work - means much listening as well as thinking and lots and lots of giving. Due to the nature of the soul, the psyche, the body, and our experience, the nature of perception (true about any relationship, and even some type of perception) is almost impossible to describe. This is the problem I have with describing my relationship with the Himalayas of Nepal, Tibet, and India. Lots of it is to go beyond the experience of climbing or viewing the highest mountains on Earth. But anyone of any spirit comes back a changed person because of what the region has to offer, spiritually and culturally. The Himalayas are the archetype for places producing spiritual and metaphysical change in their visitors. My history of acquaintance, inspiration of, and visions of the Himalayas began at an early age when I scribbled with crayons my father's first editions of Tenzing, Norgay, John Hunt, and Edmund Hillary's account of the first successful summition of Everest. When I got around to reading them in my early teens they inspired me enough to spend all the rest of my high school free time wandering the High Peak Region of the Adirondacks, pretending that my friends and I were Hillary, Hunt, and Norgay. The first book of my experiences, I sought after I left home was Japanese photographer Yoshikazu Shikakuro's magnificent collection of photos elegantly titled Himalayas. I spent hours and hours looking through that book, fixing the vast collection of images of ice, snow, clouds, people, and color with my imagination, dreaming that it was me who took the photos and met the people.

But that's about as far as I ever got. Like so many other people my life became busy and full of the significant and the unimportant, the important and the forgotten, and my dreams were relegated to the back burner. Yet, now I'm so very glad that it happened like that. Lots of people like to say that there are no accidents, that things happen for reasons. As far as I'm willing to allow for divine intervention I'm willing to say that it happened like that. Whether you believe in one or the other, I suppose is irrelevant. But after all these years of maybe subconsciously I made the decision I gave up my ski boots, never set foot in the Himalayas, and instead I set myself with a P.L.D. in Western Comparative philosophy and teaching at Fort Lewis College. Then, one day I got the call.

Tom Thomas, who worked at Outdoor Pursuits at Fort Lewis, called me one November morning in the fall of 1999 that I was going to be teaching a class in Nepal to teach about something called Buddhism. I was very pleased to get credit for the trip. The following May, Tim 13 students and I were walking through the outer doors of Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport to encounter what is often the defining moment for Westerners encountering Himalayan Asia for the first time. In five minutes of drving one encounters the iconic chaos that is Kathmandu traffic, the strange mixture of burning diesel and gas engines, poor sanitation systems, and the cloud of smoke that wafted over the hill from Pashupatinath, the Hindu crematory. Crouching down in the middle of a busy street reminds you that you're in a Hindu country (Nepal is approximately 80% Hindu). That's when you see only a couple of stromas of smoke coming up from the funeral pyres. We were almost immediately confronted with the sight of Sadhus, mostly naked holy men with matted hair up to 15 feet long and beards up to 6 feet long with their faces painted in wildly gaudy colors. No matter what one has experienced for how many photos one has seen of the area, there is nothing that prepares one for the miracle of dropping into this other world. Like any intimate relationship worth its salt, entering the world of the Himalayas requires a lot of listening -- to oneself and to others. I suppose it's possible for heads of state and other foreign dignitaries to make visits in which one never encounters the sacred, the strange, and the mysterious side of life in the Himalayas, but I have a hard time imagining how it would be achieved. I also have a hard time imagining how one who escapes it all would.

Anantya Bodeker (one of the heroes of the 1960 Everest tragedy) and I in 2000 they met the young woman who had climbed Everest.
The Himalayas are the archetype for places producing spiritual and metaphysical change in their visitors.

The politics of the world's highest mountains are at the same time dramatic and trivial. For instance, the Himalayas separate the worlds' two most populous countries and two of the most distinctive forms of government—democracy and communism. Yet the Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan, the formerly independent countries of Sikkim (now part of India) and Tibet (now part of China) are the only countries in the world to incorporate these beliefs into their political psyche. The stage of global affairs is often a political stage, but not in the realm of the Himalayas. It is important to remember that the political character of the Himalayan countries is as much born from history, ethnicity, culture, and economy as they are from ideology.

Starting in the 18th century and stretching into the 20th century, mountain kingdoms across the Himalayas, from Myanmar (Burma), through Nepal (India), Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, Ladakh (India), India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan found themselves confronting the forces of European modernity. The age of empire affected all of them either directly or indirectly. India became a colony of England, China's long period of stability came to an end with invasions from Europe, American, and Japanese forces. Afghanistan and Tibet became a pawn in the great game between England, Russia, and China. Subsidiary effects later drove Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Bhutan, and Sikkim into intrinsically controversial and often disastrous strategic and forced border openings with varying degrees of effectiveness.

While some of them have been more successful than others at keeping themselves at arm's length from the forces of modernity, no country, however idealistic or fundamentalist, could keep the world at bay forever. Tibet is not immune to these forces of history which have affected the Himalayas; but it suffers to say that no country can any longer legitimately claim to maintain isolation from a modernized, technologically influenced economy. I have traveled to very few places in the Himalayas where either cell phones or the internet were unavailable. Of course modernity has its benefits and its drawbacks. Modern medicine does wonders for improving peoples health in these regions, but Western attitudes and old indigenous customs toward birth control mean that popula- tions are rising while economic opportunities either remain stagnant and/or contribute to the elimination and assimilation of ethnicity and culture to world culture. I'm happy to see healthy behavior throughout the Himalayas, but I'm not so sure that the ubiquitous Coca-Cola, Levi's, Nike, and McDonalds have contributed in much, though sometimes there are a few non-Maoist out there who are not lamenting the laws of the Kathmandu Coca-Cola bottling plant.

When better health and longer life combine with erosion of culture, increased awareness of outside political and economic forces, and an increasingly young population, the future is bleak for youths to participate in wealth-culture, trouble breeds. People who are exposed to wealth on a constant basis have two ways of coping with it: find a way to participate in it or find a way to escape it. Traditional subsistence thinking that incorporates metaphysical and moral explanations for the division of the classes, the domination of its people by cruelty, and the diminishing castes in Nepali culture—has metaphorically exploded in the twenty-first century through the caste system. Modern politics and economics, on the other hand, is inherent in the breakdown of metaphysical and moral caste systems and provides a secular notion of individual rights and economic advancement.

Of course, this has great benefit when participation and achievement are accessible, but becomes troublesome when it is not.

To continue with that parallel, the increasingly educated and Westernized youth of the Himalayas are not unlike the Russian intellectuals of the 1930's. They have good ideas, and are tremendously motivated, hard workers. It's impossible to walk through a city or village in the Himalayas without noticing that hard work in agriculture and business are keeping people alive. When economic opportunity presents itself, as it does in the areas of Western interest—such as Danfeeling, Kathmandu, Pokhara, Limbe, Dhankhosi, the Khumbu (Everest) and Aramgpa regions people work hard to participate in the economy and achieve wonders. Where economic opportunity is not available and present in the Himalayas, and life is still hard, but at least it is better batted with the incessant advertising of wealth and privilege, political idealism and relative freedom is easy and granting subsidies from economic participation. One only needs to look as the place in which political unrest has taken hold in the Himalayas. Nepali Mount movement emerged in the 1960's against the traditional feudal forces and the culture, presented its biggest challenge to China when food shortages arose because of Communist China's exacting of food tributes to support its occupying forces.

Maximilian American tends to downsize issues of ethnicity mostly because to be in the mainstream of American culture means to supercede ethnically based political participation. Our mind-set, advocates, again, participation and achievement in the world's strongest economy at the expense of retaining our deepest ethnic sympathies. In our context this will work because our strong economic base supports participation at all levels.

It also supports that ethnic differences can be overcome through participation in an economic system which offers greater benefits for individuals and families from participation.

Ultimately, it is important to remember that the political character of the Himalayan countries is as much born from ethnicity, culture, and economy as they are from ideology.
The valley of the ancient Buddhism of the Himalayas remain distant from materialism. For the Gaithians, the material world is fleeting, superficial and attached to it is one of the root causes of suffering. Furthermore, the individualism of self-presentation by democratic capitalism also leads to ego attachment, a further deception which also leads to suffering. That is not to say that all its inhabitants are monks and nuns tucked away in monasteries or that all monks and nuns shun materialism. It means that, traditionally, Buddhist cultures interpret modes of economic interaction differently than materialist ones do. The conflict between the Tibetan Buddhism and the Chinese in Tibet stems from the fact that Maoist Marxism is deeply materialist and denounces Buddhist Dharma as anachronistic superstition and suppression of material freedom and growth. Marx, Marxism wholesale excoriated all things old and superstitious as impediments to material progress and Chinese nationalism. As Mao told the Uighur Lama during the meeting in 1945, ‘of course, religion is poison.’ The Tibetans, for their part, realize that there is no escaping modernity, but they have traditionally sanctified the choice of their secular leaders through long proven methods of divination and political intrigue. When you compare that process with the intricate workings of the Chinese Communist Party, you have to wonder why that would be so problematic — it is not for the blinding point of materialism versus spirituality.

In Nepal, the new king and prime minister have realized that the Maoist insurgency was bad for the tourism economy and have taken action. The Maoists had gone too far, attacking the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Kathmandu and the police station in Solukhumbu, the gateway to the Everest region. The government responded by putting the army into action against the Maoists. Virtually overnight the Maoist movement has disappeared. The news from Kathmandu has been that everything is quiet and Nepal is more ready for tourists than ever before. Just recently the government opened more than a hundred new peaks for climbing, hoping to bring more visitors and revenue for the coming year. And, probably, at first, but more and more, they will come. But, since September 11 and last winter, it is as if nothing has changed. Although Nepal will not be the sweet, exotic, and innocent country that it was perceived to be so long ago, it will reflect a desire on the part of the peoples and cultures of the Himalayas to emerge into the 21st century with a new maturity. The Himalayas, from Bhutan to Kashmir, are moving into the 21st century as Saris and suits as in New York and Kabul. Nepal can no longer hide its problems from the world, but it problems are surely not as in the sensibilities media would have us believe. Perhaps we are on the verge of forming a viable relationship with the real Himalayas rather than the one of our dreams.

Nepal can no longer hide its problems from the world, but it problems are surely not as dire as the sensationalist media would have us believe.

Grounding in the greater economic success of the nation, and that diversity can be supported by economic gain. Many of the United States most successful businesses (IBM) have come to realize that they benefit as much from ethnic participation in their workforce as ethnically diverse groups benefit from becoming part of the mainstream. Ethnicity also plays a larger role in the formation of the cultural psyche of the Himalayas. Nepal alone contains more than 30 cultural groups. Even a shallow study of Tibetan history will show that until the Chinese liberated Tibet in 1959 it was loosely made up of a number of tribal regimes governed by warlords and was only loosely confederated under the spiritual prestige of guidance of the Dalai Lama. His spiritual leadership was subject to belief in the diverse traditions and power skirrmishes within and between the sects of Tibetan Buddhism and their more secular patron, Buddhism, more than any other influence, unifies the people of the Himalayas. As a result of Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche) bringing Buddhism into the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau in the 8th century, most of the Himalayas from Burma to Afghanistan and reaching up into Mongolia and Southern Siberia are traditionally Tibetan Buddhist or at least influenced by Tibetan Buddhism. This means that the most significant clash of ideologies in the Himalayas is not one of capitalism and communism, as some critics of the Maoists suggest, but one of materialism versus non-materialism.

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