

INSIDE OUTSIDE

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A locals' guide to what's really up in the Four Corners

EMERGING WORLD

Story & Photos
by Sean Cridland

The Himalayas 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 that 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 gentle, 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.

One of the great rewards of teaching is watching people learn and knowing that you're partly responsible for someone's learning. Because I, myself, came to higher education late in life (a college freshman at the age of 32), I tend to think of education as a way to teach discovery skills. What I mean is this: I can uncover something for you that you didn't know before or I can uncover for you the technique of uncovering that you can use yourself, over and over. That's what I like most about teaching philosophy, political science and religious studies. They are disciplines which teach people how to ask questions they wouldn't have otherwise asked.

It has been my fortune to combine all of these disciplines. During the Mays of 1999, 2000, and 2001 I have had the privilege of taking a total of 39 students to the Himalayas of India, Nepal, and Tibet to study the philosophical, religious, and political dimensions of Tibetan Buddhism. This has entailed trekking through the mountains that make up the home of the people of the Himalayas, reading

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and discussing their philosophies and stories, meeting the people, experiencing the food, music, and dance, and discovering the political setting and backdrop for their struggle to maintain their identity. It also meant changing my philosophical and political standpoint. It meant re-thinking the way I think about the Himalayas and the way I think about myself. I dare say that it has meant the same for all 39 of those fortunate students.

We've had the opportunity to trek around Annapurna, view Everest from the air and from its Nepal-side base camp, hike over 18,000 feet, drive across the vast plains of Tibet, visit Tibetan refugee centers in Darjeeling, Kathmandu, and Dharamsala, chant 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 17th Karmapa, two of the students were married by the monks of the Tengboche monastery in the shadow of Mt. Everest, and I have been held and interrogated by Chinese authorities when one of the party indiscreetly 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 good friend

Anatoly Boukeev (one of the heroes of the 1996 Everest tragedy), and in 2001 they met the youngest woman to ever climb Everest and the first person to climb it twice.

But the countries, mountains, regions, philosophies, and people of the Himalayas are more than mere attractions and experiences. If they weren't, we wouldn't have been more than tourists coming and going, seeing and snapshotting, laughing and leaving. I think that the best part of learning is still found in intimacy. Learning means listening, considering, putting oneself in the other's shoes, reconsidering, and incorporating. It means getting to know oneself as much as it means learning to know another. Learning implies relationship, which

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— as any of us who have ventured to make one work — means as much listening as talking and lots and lots of giving. Due to the nature of the soul, the psyche, the body, and our experience-laden lenses of perception, just about any relationship worth describing is almost impossible to describe. That is the problem I have with describing my relationship with the Himalaya of Nepal, Tibet, and India. Lots of us go there because of the romance 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.

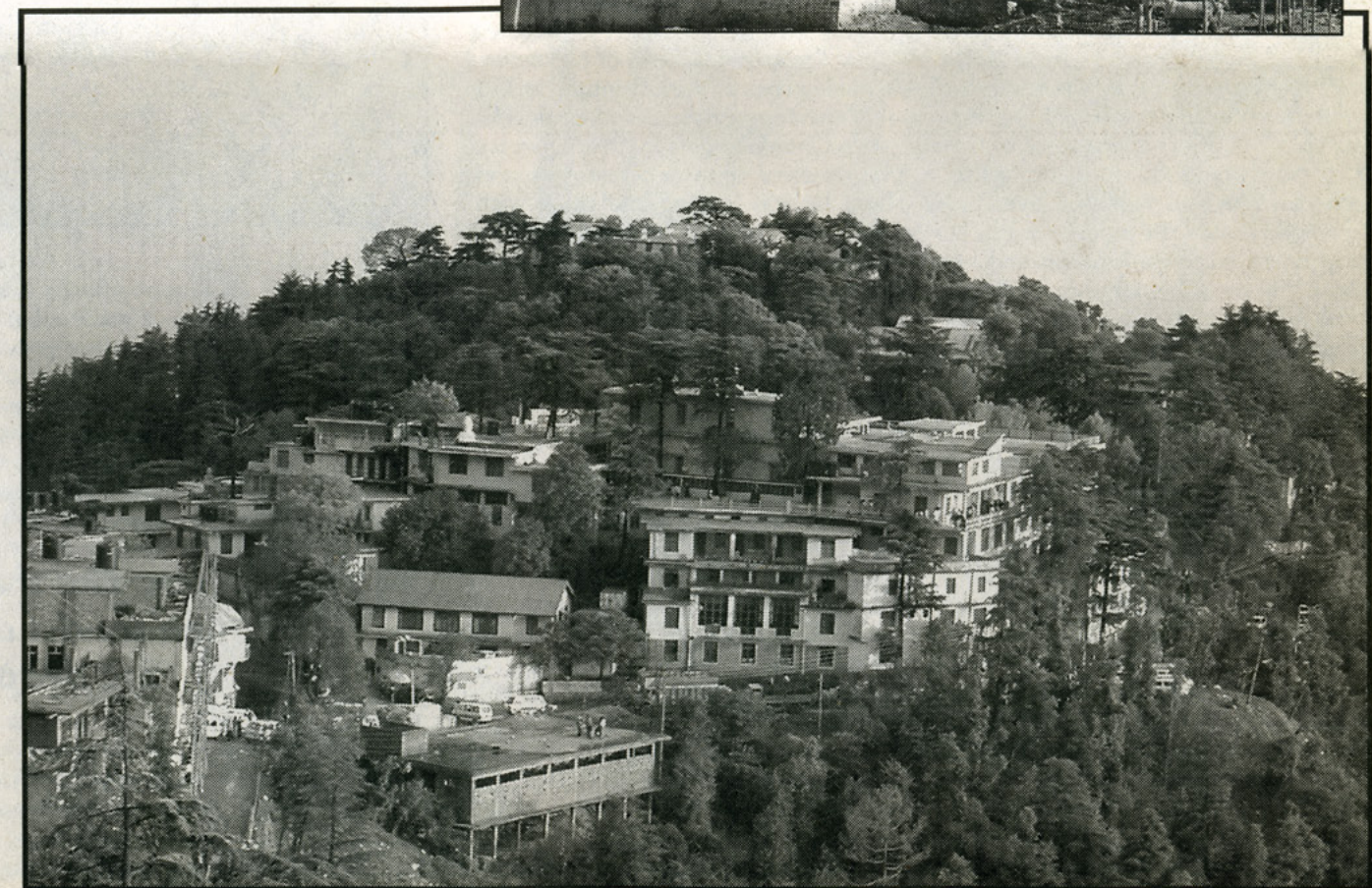
My history of acquaintance with, imagination of, and visions of the Himalayas began at an early age when I scribbled with crayons my father's first editions of Tenzing Norgay's, John Hunt's, and Edmund Hillary's accounts of the first successful summiting of Everest. When I got around to reading them 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 any significance that I bought after I left home was Japanese photographer Yoshikazu Shirikawa's magnificent collection of plates elegantly titled Himalayas. I spent hour and hours looking through that book, fusing 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 with the significant and the trivial, the important and the forgotten, and my dreams were relegated to the maybe someday.... Yet, now I'm sincerely glad that it happened like that. Lots of people like to say that there are no accidents, that things happen for reasons. As for me, I prefer to allow for divine accidents, for serendipity, for cosmic crashes with sparks of unpremeditated magic. Whether you believe in one or the other, I suppose is irrelevant. But after all those years of maybe someday-ing my life away I gave up my ski-bum, river-rat life and found myself with a Ph.D. in East-West comparative philosophy and teaching at Fort Lewis College. Then, one day I got the call.

Tim Thomas, who worked at Outdoor Pursuits at Fort Lewis, called me one November morning in the fall of 1998 while I was pondering a lesson plan and proposed that I come along on his trip to Nepal to teach something about Buddhism so that the students could 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 driving one encounters the manic 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 Pashpatinath, the Hindu cremation. Cows lying in the middle of a busy street remind you that you're in a Hindu country (Nepal is approximately 80% Hindu and 19% Buddhist). That day there were only a couple of steams of smoke coming up from the funeral pyres. We were almost immediately confronted with the sight of Saddhus, 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 garish colors. No matter what one has expected or 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 ugliness of destitute poverty, stench, and immense mortality 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





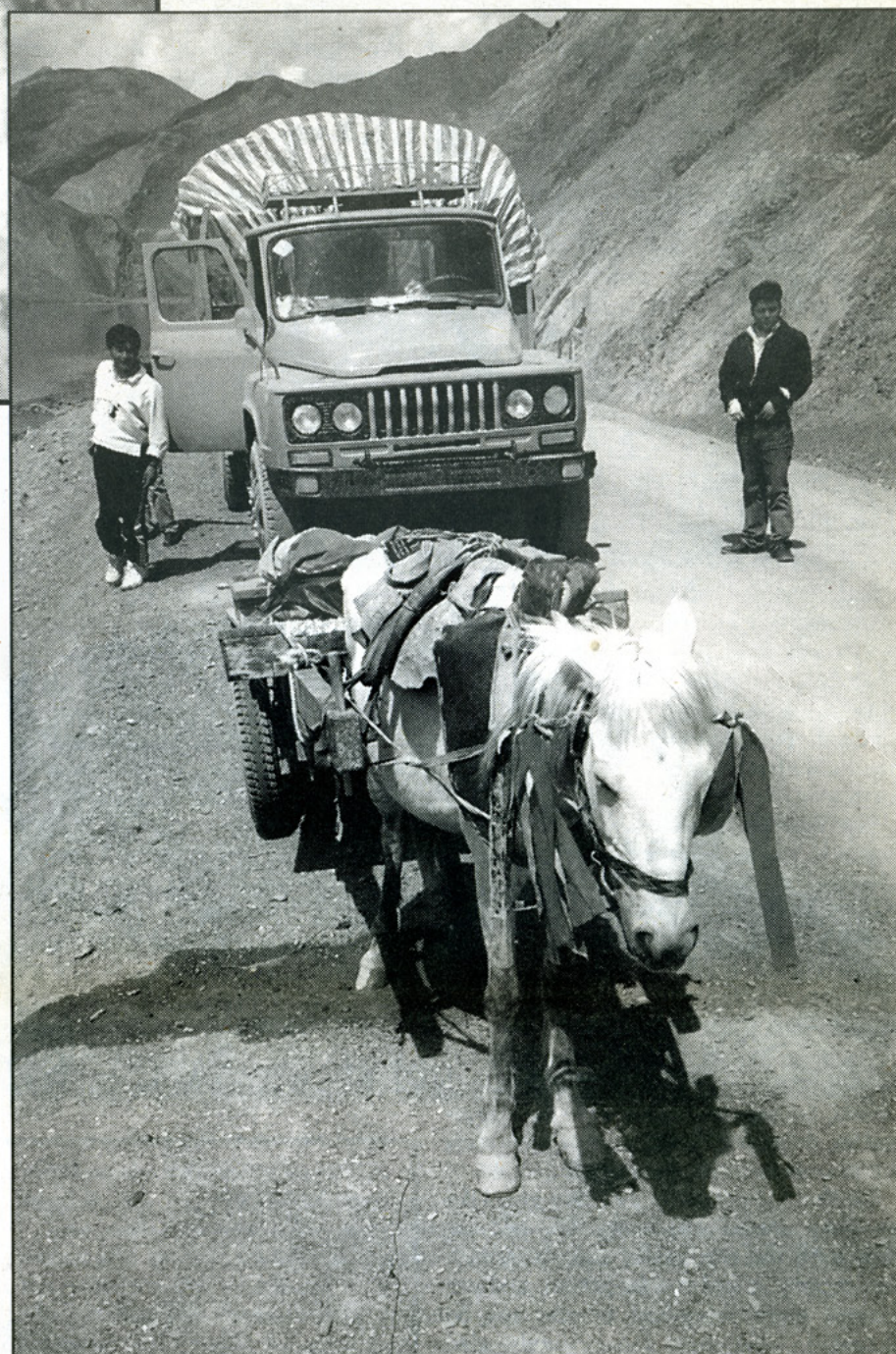
develop the pathos to understand the nature of the beauty of the same places. Without the human context, it's all just another postcard, another calendar shot. So, I can't help wondering if the tragedies and hardships that have come to light recently in Nepal and India, horrible as they have been, might help people to develop a better sense of pathos regarding the mountains and peoples of the Himalayas, just as the recent tragedies in the United States have made us all look at ourselves and each other in ways that we never did before. The Himalayas, like the United States, are more than tourist attractions, they are people's homes.

Jamling Norgay's recent book, *Touching My Father's Soul*, is perhaps the best piece of literature that I have read about the land and peoples of the Himalaya. Norgay,

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son of pioneering Sherpa climber Tenzing Norgay, was chosen as sirdar (managing Sherpa) on the 1996 IMAX Everest expedition. In a bittersweet series of events, the IMAX expedition was successful on the mountain just days after witnessing the 1996 tragedy in which eight climbers lost their lives. Norgay's account is most poignant for the way in which he personalizes the adventure. For Norgay, it wasn't just a chance to become a second generation climber of the world's highest mountain, but to intimately acquaint himself with his deceased father's concerns for his people, his culture, and the spiritual forces of the mountain. As much as Norgay was responsible for the logistics of the adventure, he felt himself personally responsible for maintaining the appropriateness of approaching the powerful feminine spirit of the mountain Chomolungma (Mount Everest), Miyolangsangma. To do so, he had to visit his relatives, sponsor ceremonies, and maintain constant vigilance over those whom he was leading and those with whom he shared the mountain. His adventure wasn't one of conquering, but one of compassion towards others and a working out of conflicting personal feelings about his own, his family's, and his people's relationship to the mountains. It becomes clear, after reading his book, that the ascent of Mount Everest or the mere visiting of the region, should always be at least as much about searching modes of intimacy as it is about achievements or checking it off one's "things to do" list.

It is fitting, therefore, that any new relationship begin with some kind of disruption of old understandings. My Ph.D. dissertation was a comparison of the Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre with the Zen Buddhism of the Kyoto School thinkers of Meiji Restoration Japan. It primarily focused on a comparison of the notion of Nothingness in the Western mode of thought with that of Emptiness in the Buddhist mode of thought and how that affects the ways in which we build our worlds. As I readied myself for my first trip, I was confident that I would know something about what I was seeing. But I had studied a form of Buddhism in which the metaphorical imagery is subtle to the point of invisibility (think Zen rock gardens and flower arrangements) and I had just landed in a part of the Buddhist world in which Bodhisattvas can have eleven heads, a thousand arms or be circled by rings of fire, wear necklaces of severed human heads and be practicing unabashed tantric sexuality with voluptuous consorts. Needless to say, I was aesthetically and philosophically unprepared! Tibetan Buddhism, I have come to learn since, is essentially the same Buddhism as Zen Buddhism, but is the Tantric Technicolor version. It's imagery evokes the same sense of spiritual



enlightenment as the subtle flower arrangement in the empty, quiet zendo or the spatiality of the Zen rock garden, but does it on a Himalayan scale, evoking the natural forces and dynamic Bon gods of the Himalayas that we might associate with the Greek pantheon of Homer and Hesiod. Lives lived in this place are subject to tremendous forces and require tremendous imagery and meditational fortitude. That strength is reflected as much in its version of Buddhism as it is in the lives of the gentle and strong people who eek out a meager living on the mountainsides of their mountains. Yet, the pathos of the beauty and the tremendous force of its spiritual imagery still don't tell the whole story of the Himalayas.

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The politics of the world's highest mountains are at the same time dramatic and trivial. For drama, consider that the Himalayas separate the worlds two most populous countries – India and China – and it's two most dichotomous 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 those beliefs into their national and political psyche. On the stage of global affairs, they are almost irrelevant. But for a more subtle understanding, it's important to remember that the political character of the Himalayan countries are 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 Nagaland (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 European, 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 alternately into isolationist strategies and forced border openings with varying degrees of effectiveness. While some of them have been more successful than others at keeping themselves at arms length from the forces of modernity, no country, however idealistic or fundamentalist, could keep the world at bay after World War II. There is not room enough here to describe all of the forces of history which have affected the Himalayas, but it suffices 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 and/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 populations 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 healthier people throughout the Himalayas, but I'm not so sure that the ubiquitous Coca-Cola, Levis, Nikes, and Snickers are really necessary. I'm sure there are a few non-Maoists out there who are not lamenting the loss 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 influences, and little or no opportunity for youths to participate in wealth-culture, trouble brews. 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 accept it. Traditional cultures incorporate metaphysical and moral explanations for the divisions of the classes. Hinduism – traditionally the dominating force in Nepali culture – has metaphysically explained away disparities in wealth and opportunity through the caste system. Modern politics and economics, on the other hand is insistent on the breakdown of metaphysical and moral caste systems and proselytizes a secular notion of individual rights and economic advancement. Worth is gained though participation and achieve-

ment. Of course, this has great benefit where 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 1800s. 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 Darjeeling, Kathmandu, Pokhara, Lhasa, Dharamsala, the Khumbu (Everest) and Annapurna regions – people work hard to participate in the economy and achieve wonders. Where economic opportunity is not as available and people have to work hard just to subsist but are still bombarded with the incessant advertising of wealth and privilege, political idealism and/or religious fundamentalism are easy and gratifying substitutes from economic participation. One only needs to look at the places in which economic and political unrest has taken hold in the Himalayas. Nepal's Maoist movement emerged in the poorest of regions. Tibet, which has traditionally been a gentle

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.

Mainstream American tends to downplay issues of ethnicity mostly because to be in the mainstream of American culture means to supercede ethnicity with economic participation. Our mind-set advocates, again, participation and achievement in the world's strongest economy at the expense of retaining our deepest

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ethnic sympathies. In our context this works well because our strong economic base supports the theory that political individualism is viable. It also supports that ethnic differences can be overcome through participation in an economic system which offers greater benefits for individuals and families from participat-





ing 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 (including IBM) have come to realize that they benefit as much from ethnic

The only Americans in favor of mass immigration, and against immigration control, are those agri-industrialists and other conservatives who love cheap labor, and those doctrinaire liberals who love their cheap cause."

minority participation in their workforces as ethnically diverse groups benefit from becoming part of the mainstream. Ethnicity also plays a large 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 1949 it was loosely made up of a number of tribal regions governed by warlords and was only loosely confederated under the spiritually prestigious guidance of the Dalai Lama. His spiritual leadership was subject to behind the scenes intrigues and power skirmishes within and between the sects of Tibetan Buddhism and their more secular patrons.

Buddhism, more than any other influence, unites 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

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The conflicts that are ongoing in Nepal, Tibet, Ladakh, and Bhutan are over the extent and ways in which materialism and spirituality should govern the lives of the people of the mountains. Some of these conflicts, such as those between the Maoists and the Parliamentary Monarchy in Nepal, and the Tibetans and the Chinese, are notable for their international attention in the arenas of governmental structure and human rights issues (framed in a Cold War situation). In the Kingdom of Bhutan, the monarchy is trying to preserve its Buddhist ways and its environment by enforcing strict controls on industry and tourism while promoting environmental and cultural conservation as a form of economic development. Nepal, on the other hand, allows for a free range of Western-style capitalism which promotes a wild range of e-commerce and tourism. This is a strange knot for Westerners to unravel. Communism and Capitalism are both ideologies

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grounded in materialism. One allows for a subsidiary freedom of spiritual expression, the other doesn't. Both communism and capitalism emerged in an industrial setting with a surplus of goods. Both have taken strange turns in Asia and the Himalayas. The countries of the Himalayas are not industrialized, and are ambivalent about becoming so.

The values of Tibetan Buddhism of the Himalayas remain distant from materialism. For the Buddhists, the material world is fleeting, impermanent and attachment to it is one of the root causes of suffering. Furthermore, the individualist notion of self presented by democratic capitalism also leads to ego attachment, a further delusion which also leads to suffering. That is not to say that all its inhabitants are monks and nuns tucked away in monasteries or even 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 Buddhists 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. Mao's Marxism wholeheartedly rejected all things old and superstitious as impediments to material progress and Chinese nationalism. As Mao told the Dalai Lama during their meeting in 1954, "of course, religion is poison." The Tibetans, for their part, realize that there is no escaping modernity, but 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 internecine workings of the Chinese Communist Party, one has to wonder why that would be so problematic – if it weren't for the dividing 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 Solokhumbu, 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

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been that everything is quiet and Nepal is more ready for visitors 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, slowly at first, but then more and more, they will come. But, since September 11 and June 1, we are both changed. Although Nepal will not be the sweet, exotic, and innocent country that it was perceived to be for so long, 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 surely as are New York and Kabul. Nepal can no longer hide its problems from the world, but its problems are surely not as dire as the sensationalist media would have us believe. It's just that the world is listening a little closer than it did before. Perhaps we're on the verge of forming a viable relationship with the real Himalaya rather than the one of our dreams.

Former ski racer and river guide, Dr. Sean Cridland teaches philosophy, political science and religious studies at Fort Lewis College and takes students to the Himalayas of Nepal, Tibet and India each May and June. He can be reached at www.adventurestudies.com.



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