

This story is excerpted from my travel memoir, *Two Laps Around the World*.

“Om Mani Padme Hum”

by Bob Riel

The heavens were colored a passionate blue and the earth below was draped in a jagged blanket of white. We were in the midst of one of the world’s most breathtaking plane flights and I lost track of time as we glided in a dream world through shimmering skies above the snow-capped Himalayas. I snapped out of my trance when our aircraft rolled to the right, banking around a stony peak that seemed close enough to touch, then emerged into a valley and began a precipitous descent. Almost before we had a chance to prepare ourselves for a landing, we abruptly tapped the ground and skated to a stop on the runway of the Leh airport.

Back on terra firma, we stepped off the plane and into the sun-soaked but oxygen-deprived air of Ladakh, at almost 12,000 feet. The airport consisted of a landing strip and a small building, just large enough to handle two arrivals and departures per day. We collected our luggage and hired a taxi from the crowd of drivers awaiting our flight. A quick 15 minutes later, we were checking into a hotel on Old Leh Road.

“Julé!” said the desk clerk, mouthing the all-encompassing Ladakhi greeting that can mean hello, good-bye, thank you or please. “Welcome to Ladakh.”

Lisa and I looked at each other in mild wonder. The hotel was only a few blocks from the center of Leh - Ladakh’s biggest city – but it was bordered by trees and had a flower-lined terrace with a clear view to the snowy mountaintops in the distance. We were still in India and our flight here had not been a long one, but this seemed about as far from Calcutta, Varanasi and Delhi as one could get.

Which was, of course, the purpose of this little jaunt. We wanted to experience a different side of India and, by this point in our trip, were also ready for a break from the sweltering, crowded cities that we’d been traipsing through of late. So we arranged our itinerary to include Ladakh, a Tibetan Buddhist culture in the Indus River Valley of northern India, wedged between the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges. This area was once on the crossroads of the overland trading route that linked Lhasa, Kathmandu and Kashgar with the cities of Central Asia.

Today, the Ladakhi landscape and customs remain strikingly different from other regions of India. The heat and humidity that we’d been putting up with were replaced by a bracing coolness, so much so that we often wore a sweatshirt in the early mornings or evenings. As we walked around town, the stone buildings seemed to blend into the slate colored mountains that ringed the city. In restaurants, the rice, lentils, curries, chutneys and

tandoori roasted chicken of India had given way to Tibetan dumplings, noodles, stews, beef and mutton. Even the clothing was different. The colorful saris on the women, for instance, had been exchanged for long dresses, shawls and woolen caps.

In short, Ladakh appeared very much like the Himalayan kingdom it had once been. It has more in common with the mountainous Buddhist cultures of Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan than to the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Ladakh, in fact, is often referred to as “Little Tibet” and some have suggested that it resembles the Tibet of several decades ago, before years of Chinese control began to dilute the distinctiveness of that society.

Leh itself is a small and pleasant town. There are Tibetan craft markets, shops that advertise the sale of carpets and Pashmina shawls, galleries devoted to Himalayan and Buddhist art, and a variety of cafés and restaurants in which to linger. There, we met numerous Indians who were themselves seeking a respite from their homes or trying to learn more about this diverse corner of their country.

One of these individuals, Sanjay from Bangalore, had studied in the U.S. at the University of Virginia and worked for a while in Washington, D.C. He was vacationing for a few weeks in northern India, taking in the lakes of Kashmir and the mountains of Ladakh.

When he heard we were from the U.S., he quipped, “You have better infrastructure in your country and we have more culture in ours. Too bad we couldn’t combine the best of both!”

An even more interesting conversation was with Shanti, from Bombay, who had come to Ladakh to live on a farm for a month or two. When we met her, she was sipping tea and had just been reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Shanti said she was going to spend part of her summer doing farm labor in exchange for room and board. It was a program developed by a nongovernmental organization and was meant to provide Ladakhis with the help they needed to sustain their farms while giving young men and women the opportunity to immerse themselves in a different culture.

Interestingly, Shanti had recently spent four years living in London, the last two of them working for a major bank there. But she’d recently decided to leave her job in England in order to return to India and was now debating what to do next in life. This summer job on a farm was a diversion while she considered her future.

“Wow, this is quite a switch for you,” I said. “From a bank in London to a farm in Ladakh.”

“I wanted something different,” she responded. “I needed a change of pace, and also wanted to have new experiences in my life. And this is a good cause. I can feel I’m helping these villagers, but it also gives me a chance to learn about the Indo-Tibetan culture and

how the lives of the indigenous people here are being affected by the economy and tourism.”

I asked Shanti about her experiences living in England.

“Oh, I loved London. I loved the buzz and the culture. It was sad to leave, but I felt it was time for me to come home to India. There was one aspect of London, though, that I never quite adjusted to, which is that I felt isolated there. In India, you know, there is less privacy, people are together more, friends drop by your house. But in the U.K., that wasn’t the case. Everyone respected each other’s space, yes, but I’m used to the Indian way and I was often lonely.”

“That’s interesting,” I said, “ because I think Lisa and I feel the other way here in India. To us, it seems as if there is almost no zone of privacy and we miss that. I know part of it is just being a tourist and having to deal with street vendors who want to sell you their products, but it’s still quite different from walking the streets in most Western countries. This sense that our space is being encroached on is something we’ve had to adjust to.”

That night, sitting on the terrace of our hotel, I drank a cup of masala tea and ate a slice of butter cake that we’d bought at a Ladakhi bakery. I stared at the black Himalayan sky, which was filled with more stars than I ever knew existed, and thought about our chat with Shanti. Two things occurred to me.

One, that our conversation provided more support for Global Rule #2, which I’d written about in Kenya. That is, that “we are all silently and permanently molded by the assumptions of the culture in which we are raised.” Shanti had been uncomfortable in England because others respected her space, whereas she preferred to be around more people. Lisa and I, though, were sometimes ill at ease in India for the opposite reason, because we weren’t always given enough space, not even when walking down the street. In the end, we were merely products of different cultures and missed the comfort zone of the worlds we knew best.

Second, I reflected that Shanti was engaged in her own version of a life sabbatical, just as Lisa and I were. It was a different choice of activities, but she was also taking time off from work to have new experiences and gain new perspectives on the world, which she would then carry with her to a new chapter in life. I gazed up again at the stars and silently wished her an interesting summer.

As much as we enjoyed our time in Leh, the more interesting attractions of Ladakh are at the region’s many Buddhist temples, or gompas. The biggest challenge in exploring these sites is that many of them are perched high above local villages and require a hike uphill.

That isn't the easiest activity in the thin air of Ladakh, so visitors tend to do a lot of slow walking, one unhurried step after another.

One of these shrines, the almost six-century-old Namgyal Tsemo Gompa, is located above Leh and is visible from almost anywhere in the city. To reach it, Lisa and I first walked back in time through the winding, muddy streets of the old town. The lanes there were barely wide enough to accommodate three people and a cow standing side-by-side and the mud brick homes almost teetered into one another. In the absence of any street signs or a discernible path out of the neighborhood, we kept turning to and fro, striving to maintain an uphill course, until we finally found our way out of the maze and spotted Leh Palace above us. This nine-story fortress is halfway up the hill to the gompa. It was built in the 17th century and was once the home of the Ladakhi royal family, though it now lies in disrepair, its walls crumbling and its floors pockmarked by holes.

From the palace, the gompa is clearly visible up a steep path worn into the rocky mountain and so we trudged upward. It may not have been the wisest choice of our trip, because by the time we reached the top Lisa was feeling faint and I was marginally dehydrated. Ladakh is not only in the mountains, you see, but it's also a high desert. The Himalayas block monsoon clouds from reaching the region, meaning the area gets little rainfall and relies on the melting snowcap for its water. For visitors, the increased dryness intensifies the effects of the altitude because dehydration is already a risk at higher elevations. We learned this the hard way. When we reached the temple, high above Leh, Lisa sat down and put her head between her knees and I guzzled water.

Once we recuperated, though, we were treated to a stunning panorama of Leh and the surrounding villages, which were sprawled across a valley between two mountain ranges. The view was framed magnificently by colorful lines of prayer flags that were strung downhill from the gompa. These patches of blue, white, red, green and yellow cloth are imprinted with prayers and mantras. They are a common sight in the Buddhist Himalayas and locals believe the wind carries the written prayers up to the heavens.

On another day, we hired a driver to take us to a few of the many temples that are strewn throughout the Indus valley. The most memorable experience we had was during a dawn visit to the Thiksey Gompa, a monastery about 10 miles south of Leh, where it's possible to observe monks performing their morning *puja* (prayer ritual).

We left our hotel before sunrise in order to reach Thiksey for this observance. Once there, we took a seat on the cold stone floor of a dimly lit room. Dozens of saffron-robed monks sat on low benches and chanted, some of them rocking meditatively to the murmur of morning prayers. The chants were occasionally coupled with musical notes when one of the monks would crash a cymbal or blow on a horn. At periodic intervals, the younger men of the monastery dutifully rose and fetched containers of butter tea, which they poured into ceramic cups for the other monks. Outside, daylight crept over the snow-capped peaks and

illuminated the village below. The chanted prayers seemed to float away through the open door on a light breeze, drifting over the valley and river to the distant mountains, where they joined the sun in greeting another day.

After the puja, Lisa and I strolled quietly through the rest of the gompa. Inside, a temple contained a colorful two-story Buddha sculpture, crowned by a golden head. The exterior walls were painted a dark shade of red, with splashes of blue, orange and yellow, presenting a vivid contrast to the grey-green backdrop of the countryside. Staircases were lined gracefully with potted plants.

We stopped along a pathway at one point to gaze at a row of prayer wheels. These are metal cylinders that contain rolls of thin paper coiled around an axle. The paper is printed with copies of a sacred prayer and the wheel is meant to be spun whenever someone walks by. As it spins, the prayer is released to the universe, which is supposed to have the same effect as if it were recited. It's also meant to symbolize the turning of the wheel of the dharma, or the setting of the Buddha's teachings in motion.

An elderly monk walked up to the spot where we stood, slowly spinning the wheels and chanting words under his breath. He stopped in front of us and smiled. The man appeared to be in his 70s, with a thin head of gray hair and a circle of wrinkles on his weathered but radiant face.

"Om mani padme hum," he said, in a soft, slow cadence.

We looked back at him, not quite sure what he had just uttered. He then repeated the words, carefully enunciating each syllable.

"Ohm mah-nee pahd-may hoom."

He nodded to us to repeat after him.

"Ohm mah-nee pahd-may hoom."

He corrected my pronunciation of the last consonant, which seemed to be an impossible combination of an 'm' and an 'ng.' I don't think I ever said it exactly right, but he smiled, spun one of the wheels and then gestured for us to do the same.

"Om mani padme hum," he whispered. "Om mani padme hum."

It was our own private lesson in Buddhism, although we didn't grasp it all until later. This chant is perhaps the most important Buddhist mantra and is meant to invoke the blessing of the bodhisattva of compassion. The meaning is not easily conveyed in other languages, but some have translated it into English as, "Praise to the jewel in the lotus." It is said to refer to

the awakening of the spark of divinity within each person, resulting in compassion for the welfare of all beings.

The Dalai Lama, who himself is believed to be an incarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, has written that the meaning of the mantra "is great and vast." At least in part, it signifies that with the correct intention, practice and wisdom "you can transform your impure body, speech and mind into the pure body, speech and mind of a Buddha."

That's a lot of meaning for six syllables. Although part of me wished I had the words and the opportunity to discuss the prayer with this monk, I also realized that any conversation would have distorted the beauty and simplicity of the moment. So I focused on the mantra.

"Om mani padme hum," the monk said, one more time.

Then, apparently satisfied that we had memorized it, he smiled serenely and ambled away, gently spinning the prayer wheels and chanting as he disappeared into the distance.