

CONFESSION OF A BUDDHIST ATHEIST

Stephen Batchelor

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There are not only one hundred, or five hundred, but far more men and women lay followers, my disciples, clothed in white, enjoying sensual pleasures, who carry out my instruction, respond to my advice, have gone beyond doubt, become free from perplexity, gained intrepidity and become independent of others in my teaching.

—Siddhattha Gotama



Stories are impossible but it's impossible to live without them. That's the mess I'm in.

—Wim Wenders

PREFACE

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist tells the story of a thirty-seven-year journey through the Buddhist tradition. It begins with my encounter in India at the age of nineteen with the Dalai Lama and the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, and concludes with the reflections of a fifty-six-year-old secular, nondenominational lay Buddhist living in rural France. Since I was not raised as a Buddhist, this is a story of conversion. It tells of my fascination with Buddhism as well as my struggle to come to terms with doctrines—such as reincarnation—that I find difficult to accept, and authoritarian religious institutions that resist criticism and innovation. My personal struggles may also reflect a broader cultural conflict between the worldview of a traditional Asian religion and the intuitions of secular modernity.

My encounter with traditional forms of Buddhism led me to ask with increasing urgency: Who was this man Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha? What sort of world did he live in? What was distinctive and original in his teaching? I began to realize that much of what was presented to me in good faith as “Buddhism” were doctrines and practices that had evolved many centuries after the Buddha’s death, under very different circumstances from those in which he lived. Throughout its history Buddhism has displayed a remarkable ability to adapt to novel situations and reinvent itself in forms appropriate to the needs of its new adherents. Yet this very ability to present itself in another guise has also served to obscure the origins of the tradition and the figure of its founder. In many schools of Buddhism today, the discourses of Siddhattha Gotama are rarely studied, while the man himself is often elevated to the status of a god.

My quest to trace the origins of Buddhism led me to the study of the Pali Canon: the body of teachings attributed to Siddhattha Gotama in the ancient Pali language. While these texts are not verbatim transcripts of what the Buddha said, they preserve the earliest elements of his teaching and provide glimpses into the fraught social and political milieu of his world. This quest also took me back to India to visit those places mentioned in the Pali Canon where the Buddha lived and taught nearly twenty-five hundred years ago. These studies and field trips, together with G. P. Malalasekera’s invaluable *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, have enabled me to reconstruct an account of the Buddha’s life that is embedded in his relations with his benefactors, family, and disciples and formed by the political and social tensions of his time.

Many of the people who appear in this book are or were Buddhist monks.

Yet the term “monk” (or “nun”) in Buddhism does not mean quite the same thing that it does when used in a Christian context. The Pali word for “monk” is *bhikkhu*, which literally means “beggar.” (“Nun” is *bhikkhuni*, which means the same.) A *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni* is one who has dropped out of mainstream society in order to devote him- or herself to the practice of the Buddha’s teaching. On receiving ordination, *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* take more than two hundred vows (many of them minute behavioral conventions). They commit themselves to a life of chastity and poverty but—traditionally at least—are encouraged to lead a wandering life and survive by begging alms. In addition to pursuing a life of simplicity, solitude, and contemplation, the *bhikkhu* or *bhikkhuni* will also teach when invited to do so, and provide counseling and pastoral care to those in need. Buddhism makes no distinction between a monk and a priest.

I was a Buddhist monk (initially a novice, then a *bhikkhu*) for ten years; since disrobing, I have lived as a married layman. Because I do not belong to any Buddhist institution or tradition, I have no “home” in the Buddhist world. I have become a freelance itinerant teacher, traveling to wherever in the world I am invited to share what I have learned.

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist is written from the perspective of a committed layperson who seeks to lead a life that embodies Buddhist values within the context of secularism and modernity. I have no interest in preserving the dogmas and institutions of traditional Asian forms of Buddhism as though they possessed an intrinsic value independent of the conditions under which they arose. For me, Buddhism is like a living organism. If it is to flourish outside self-enclosed ghettos of believers, it will have to meet the challenge of understanding, interacting with, and adapting to an environment that is strikingly different from those in which it has evolved.

Since this book is intended for the general reader, I have omitted all diacritical marks on Pali terms. These are, however, included in the notes, appendixes, and glossary.

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CONTENTS

Preface

PART ONE: MONK

1. A Buddhist Failure (I)
2. On the Road
3. The Seminarian
4. Eel Wriggling
5. Being-in-the-World
6. Great Doubt

PART TWO: LAYMAN

7. A Buddhist Failure (II)
8. Siddhattha Gotama
9. The North Road
10. Against the Stream
11. Clearing the Path
12. Embrace Suffering
13. In Jeta's Grove
14. An Ironic Atheist
15. Vidudabha's Revenge
16. Gods and Demons
17. Tread the Path with Care
18. A Secular Buddhist

Appendixes

- I. *The Pāli Canon*
- II. *Was Siddhattha Gotama at Taxilā?*
- III. *Turning the Wheel of Dhamma*
- IV. *Map: The Buddha's India*

Notes

Glossary
Bibliography
Acknowledgments

part one

MONK

A BUDDHIST FAILURE

(I)

MARCH 10, 1973. I remember the date because it marked the fourteenth anniversary of the Tibetan uprising in Lhasa in 1959, which triggered the flight of the Dalai Lama into the exile from which he has yet to return. I was studying Buddhism in Dharamsala, the Tibetan capital in exile, a former British hill-station in the Himalayas. The sky that morning was dark, damp, and foreboding. Earlier, the clouds had unleashed hailstones the size of miniature golf balls that now lay fused in white clusters along the roadside that led from the village of McLeod Ganj down to the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, where the anniversary was to be commemorated.

A white canvas awning, straining and flapping in the wind, was strung in front of the Library. Beneath it sat a huddle of senior monks in burgundy robes, aristocrats in long gray *chubas*, and the Indian superintendent of police from Kotwali Bazaar. I joined a crowd gathered on a large terrace below and waited for the proceedings to begin. The Dalai Lama, a spry, shaven-headed man of thirty-eight, strode onto an impromptu stage. The audience spontaneously prostrated itself as one onto the muddy ground. He read a speech, which was barely audible above the wind, delivered in rapid-fire Tibetan, a language I did not yet understand, at a velocity I would never master. Every now and then a drop of rain would descend from the lowering sky.

I was distracted from my thoughts about the plight of Tibet by the harsh shriek of what sounded like a trumpet. Perched on a ledge on the steep hillside beside the Library, next to a smoking fire, stood a bespectacled lama, legs akimbo, blowing into a thighbone and ringing a bell. His disheveled hair was tied in a topknot. A white robe, trimmed in red, was slung carelessly across his left shoulder. When he wasn't blowing his horn, he would mutter what seemed like imprecations at the grumbling clouds, his right hand extended in the threatening mudra, a ritual gesture used to ward off danger. From time to time he would put down his thighbone and fling an arc of mustard seeds against the ominous mists.

Then there was an almighty crash. Rain hammered down on the corrugated

iron roofs of the residential buildings on the far side of the Library, obliterating the Dalai Lama's words. This noise went on for several minutes. The lama on the hillside stamped his feet, blew his thighbone, and rang his bell with increased urgency. The heavy drops of rain that had started falling on the dignitaries and the crowd abruptly stopped.

After the Dalai Lama left and the crowd dispersed, I joined a small group of fellow *Injis*. In reverential tones, we discussed how the lama on the hill—whose name was Yeshe Dorje—had prevented the storm from soaking us. I heard myself say: “And you could hear the rain still falling all around us: over there by the Library and on those government buildings behind as well.” The others nodded and smiled in awed agreement.

Even as I was speaking, I knew I was not telling the truth. I had heard no rain on the roofs behind me. Not a drop. Yet to be convinced that the lama had prevented the rain with his ritual and spells, I had to believe that he had created a magical umbrella to shield the crowd from the storm. Otherwise, what had happened would not have been that remarkable. Who has not witnessed rain falling a short distance away from where one is standing on dry ground? Perhaps it was nothing more than a brief mountain shower on the nearby hillside. None of us would have dared to admit this possibility. That would have brought us perilously close to questioning the lama's prowess and, by implication, the whole elaborate belief system of Tibetan Buddhism.

For several years, I continued to peddle this lie. It was my favorite (and only) example of my firsthand experience of the supernatural powers of Tibetan lamas. But, strangely, whenever I told it, it didn't *feel* like a lie. I had taken the lay Buddhist precepts and would soon take monastic vows. I took the moral injunction against lying very seriously. In other circumstances, I would scrupulously, even neurotically, avoid telling the slightest falsehood. Yet, somehow, this one did not count. At times, I tried to persuade myself that perhaps it was true: the rain had fallen behind me, but I had not noticed. The others—albeit at my prompting—had confirmed what I said. But such logical gymnastics failed to convince me for very long.

I suspect my lie did not feel like a lie because it served to affirm what I believed to be a greater truth. My words were a heartfelt and spontaneous utterance of our passionately shared convictions. In a weirdly unnerving way, I did not feel that “I” had said them. It was as though something far larger than all of us had caused them to issue from my lips. Moreover, the greater truth, in whose service my lie was employed, was imparted to us by men of unimpeachable moral and intellectual character. These kind, learned, enlightened monks would not deceive us. They repeatedly said to accept what they taught only after testing it as carefully as a goldsmith would assay a piece of gold. Since they themselves must have subjected these teachings to that kind of rigorous scrutiny during their years of study and meditation, then surely they were not speaking out of blind conviction, but from their own

direct knowledge and experience? Ergo: Yeshe Dorje stopped the rain with his thighbone, bell, mustard seeds, and incantations.

The next morning, someone asked the teacher at the Library, Geshe Dhargyey, to say something about the practices involved in controlling the weather. Geshe-la (as we called him) belonged to the scholarly Geluk school, in which the Dalai Lama had been trained. Not only did he possess an encyclopedic knowledge of Geluk orthodoxy, he radiated a joyous well-being that bubbled forth in mirthful chuckles. The question seemed to disturb him. He frowned, then said in a disapproving voice: “That was not good. No compassion. It hurts the *devas*.” The *devas* in question belonged to a minor class of gods who manage the weather. To zap them with mantras, mudras, and mustard seeds were acts of violence. As an advocate of universal compassion, this was not something Geshe-la was prepared to condone. I was surprised by his willingness to criticize Yeshe Dorje, a lama from the Nyingma (Ancient) school of Tibetan Buddhism. And why, I wondered, would the Dalai Lama—the living embodiment of compassion—tolerate the performance of a ritual if it injured *devas*?

Tibetan lamas held a view of the world that was deeply at odds with the one in which I had been raised. Educated in the monasteries of old Tibet, they were ignorant of the findings of the natural sciences. They knew nothing of the modern disciplines of cosmology, physics, or biology. Nor did they have any knowledge of the literary, philosophical, and religious traditions that flourished outside their homeland. For them, all that human beings needed to know had been worked out centuries before by the Buddha and his followers and was preserved in the Kangyur and Tengyur (the Tibetan Buddhist canon). There you would learn that the earth was a triangular continent in a vast ocean dominated by the mighty Mount Sumeru, around which the sun, moon, and planets revolved. Driven by the force of good and bad deeds committed over beginningless former lifetimes, beings were repeatedly reborn as gods, titans, humans, animals, ghosts, and denizens of hell until they had the good fortune to encounter and put into practice the Buddha’s teaching, which would enable them to escape the cycle of rebirth forever. Moreover, as followers of the Mahayana (Great Vehicle), Tibetan Buddhists vowed to keep taking birth out of compassion for all sentient beings until every last one of them was freed. Of the world’s religions, they believed that Buddhism alone was capable of bringing suffering to an end. And of the various kinds of Buddhism, the most effective, rapid, and complete of them all was the form of the religion as preserved in Tibet.

I believed all this. Or, more accurately: I *wanted* to believe all this. Never before had I encountered a truth I was willing to lie for. Yet, as I see it now, my lie did not spring from conviction but from a lack of conviction. It was prompted by my craving to believe. Unlike some of my contemporaries, whom I envied, I would never achieve unwavering faith in the traditional Buddhist view of the world. Nor would I ever succeed in replacing my own judgments with uncritical surrender to the authority of a “root” lama, which

was indispensable for the practice of the highest tantras, the only way, so it was claimed, to achieve complete enlightenment in this lifetime. No matter how hard I tried to ignore it or rationalize it away, my insincerity kept nagging at me in a dark, closed recess of my mind. By the lights of my Tibetan teachers, I was a Buddhist failure.

ON THE ROAD

FROM THE MONK'S cell, hewn out of the sandstone cliff centuries earlier, where I spent my days idly smoking a potent blend of marijuana, hashish, and tobacco, a narrow passage led to a dark inner staircase that I would illuminate by striking matches. The steep rock steps climbed to an opening that brought me out, via a narrow ledge, onto the smooth dome of the giant Buddha's head, which fell away dizzily on all sides to the ground one hundred and eighty feet below. On the ceiling of the niche above were faded fragments of painted Buddhas and bodhisattvas. I feared looking up at them for too long lest I lose my balance, slip, and plummet earthward. As my eyes became used to the fierce sunlight, I would gaze out onto the fertile valley of Bamiyan, a patchwork of fields interspersed with low, flat-roofed farmhouses, which lay stretched before me. It was the summer of 1972. This was my first encounter with the remains of a Buddhist civilization, one that had ended with Mahmud of Ghazni's conquest of Afghanistan in the eleventh century.

Like others on the hippie trail to India, I thought of myself as a traveler rather than a mere tourist, someone on an indeterminate quest rather than a journey with a prescribed beginning and end. Had I been asked what I was seeking, I doubt my answer would have been very coherent. I had no destination, either of the geographical or spiritual kind. I was simply "on the road," in that anarchic and ecstatic sense celebrated by Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and other role models I revered at the time.

I enjoyed nothing more than simply being on the way to somewhere else. I was quite content to peer for hours through the grimy, grease-smearred windows of a rattling bus with cooped chickens in the aisle, observing farmers bent over as they toiled in fields, women carrying babies on their backs, barefoot children playing in the dust, old men seated in the shade smoking hookahs, and all the shabby little towns and villages at which we stopped for sweet tea and unleavened bread. Yet as soon as we entered the telltale suburban sprawl of the city of our destination, my stomach would contract and I would feel anxious and restless again. I did not want to stop. My craving to keep moving was like an addiction.

My first memory is that of sitting on my mother's lap, nestled in the folds of her fur coat while peering through an airplane window at the miniature houses and cars of Toronto. I was three years old. My parents had emigrated from Scotland to Canada in 1957 in an attempt to save their marriage. They separated a year later and I returned to England with my mother and younger brother, David, where we grew up in Watford, a charmless suburb on the outer rim of London. My mother did not remarry and raised my brother and me alone. I had no further contact with my father.

We were initially supported by my mother's father, Alfred Craske, a businessman who had a photoengraving firm in Covent Garden. Alfred had rejected the God-fearing atmosphere of his childhood and considered all religion humbug, while his wife, Mabel—my grandmother—was the demure daughter of the local Wesleyan minister. My mother adopted her father's views on religion and considered herself a humanist. Emotionally she remained close to her mother and her mother's sister Sophie, a nurse who had served in the Dardanelles and Flanders, never married, and faithfully attended chapel. In the background hovered the enigmatic shadow of Alfred's younger brother Leonard, who had renounced a promising medical career and a young wife to pursue his passion for theater and sculpture in the United States. The Crasokes had nothing further to do with him. A weathered bronze statue of a dancing nymph called "Joy" in our back garden was the only evidence of Leonard's existence.

As a child I did not attend church. I was exempted from "Scripture" classes at the schools I attended, so I did not receive the basic instruction in Christianity that was part of the British educational curriculum. When I was eight or nine, I remember being struck by a BBC radio program that mentioned how Buddhist monks avoided walking on the grass in order not to kill any insects. I have often wondered whether this first positive impression of Buddhist monks played a role in my later adopting Buddhism, or whether I chose to remember it because in retrospect it helped me rationalize the unconventional decision I made to become a Buddhist monk myself.

From an early age I was troubled by how rarely I experienced genuine contentment. I was conscious of how niggling worries were constantly present either in the center or at the periphery of my self-awareness. I remember lying awake at night trying to stop the incessant outpouring of anxious thoughts. I was perplexed by the failure of teachers at school to address what seemed the most urgent matter of all: the bewildering, stomach-churning insecurity of being alive. The standard subjects of history, geography, mathematics, and English seemed perversely designed to ignore the questions that really mattered. As soon as I had some inkling of what "philosophy" meant, I was puzzled as to why we were not taught it. And my skepticism about religion only grew as I failed to see what the vicars and priests I encountered gained from their faith. They struck me either as insincere, pious, and aloof or just bumblingly good-natured.

As the 1960s unfolded, I was magnetically drawn into the counterculture that mocked and rejected the “straight” society of bourgeois, middle-class Britain. For the first time I heard kindred voices express their frustrations and hopes in wistful songs that called for love and freedom and in poorly printed manifestos that incited revolution. And then there were the drugs. Cannabis and LSD provided a more intense and rapturous consciousness than I had ever experienced before. Rather than the dull information gleaned from textbooks, they seemed to offer a direct portal to the shimmering, fractal-unraveling play of life itself. As a pastoral (rather than a cosmic) hippie, I would wander for hours through Whippendell Woods, high on acid, minutely studying spiderwebs and the delicate tracery of leaves, marveling at how a beetle clambered over blades of grass, then lie in meadows gazing at the swirling, paisley-haloed clouds.

My absorption in these extracurricular activities made me more or less abandon my schooling. I nonetheless read voraciously: *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley; *Steppenwolf*, *The Glass Bead Game*, and *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse; *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts—while dabbling in the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao Te Ching, and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I grew my hair long, wore beads, and attended all-night rock concerts with liquid light shows on Parliament Hill Fields, where I would listen to the Soft Machine, Pink Floyd, and the Edgar Broughton Band.

In April 1971, I had a dream within a dream. I had just turned eighteen and was halfheartedly preparing for my A-levels at grammar school. I dreamed that I was camping in France in the rain. When I fell asleep in my tent, I dreamed that I dreamed another dream. This is what I wrote about it:

A grayish carpet in a never ending hallway started going up, the slope became steeper, soon there were banisters, each made from brass mounted on polished wood. The further it continued, the more difficult it became, until it was nearly perpendicular. It [took] an agonizing force to reach the top, but through determination and self-will he managed to hoist himself up. All there was was a small hallway but the light was strange—it was very white and clean, around him were beautiful vases all over the floor and in the corner a white spiral staircase, made from wood. He [climbed] it and there was yet another landing, only this time the light was even whiter and more intense, the air remained beautifully pure but began to compress him and overpower him.

He entered a room; in this room there was one bed. He pulled back the coverlet and saw a girl lying there, she was young, not fully developed and naked, the expression on her face was blank and her hair a mouse brown. He put the coverlet back and went out of the room.

He made his way past oriental vases and jewels, past naked eastern princesses, past all forms of earthly temptation and decided to ascend to the next level. This level was more or less the same as the others in appearance, except that the floor was less profusely garnished. There were three or four simple wooden doors. He went into one of these rooms and here the air was practically unbearable, it was deafeningly sweet and intense.

The air seemed to be colored crème de menthe and it possessed about an equivalent consistency. The walls were colored with exceedingly pale but naturally bright colors, everything was slightly out of focus and the light and the air seemed to be alive with millions of molecules trying their utmost to split.

Slowly the source of this energy was made apparent, one of the four walls began to open like a massive door, through the ever increasing crack a shaft of golden sun came, until the opening was about three feet wide, then there appeared a man, at least it resembled a man. But this being was amazingly tall and he radiated a kind of supernatural power and glowing radiance of life and light. He was dressed in flowing white robes and a saffron cloak. His hair was tied like Botticelli's Venus.

For some reason, possibly because I submitted this as a writing assignment at school (hence the third person "he"), I did not record what this strange tall man said to me. Yet his words have echoed in my mind as a riddle ever since. They haunt me still, nearly forty years later. He said: "I am making your double." Then I woke up.

I failed all my A-levels except French, thereby losing the place I had been offered at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London to study photography. My mother was distraught. Suddenly I found myself freed from the prospect of returning to the drudgery of another educational institution that autumn. I could still take photographs, yet without the constraint of their having to be judged by an academic system for which I had little respect. I decided to spend a year traveling in Europe, ostensibly to study art and culture, before returning to England to retake the A-levels I needed in order to pursue the course in photography. But I dreaded the idea of further classroom studies and exams. The very thought of pursuing a conventional career depressed me.

Later that summer, an American friend of a friend flew in from California and gave me a copy of the just published *Be Here Now* by "Baba" Ram Dass. Ram Dass, a.k.a. Richard Alpert, had been expelled from Harvard with Timothy Leary in 1963 for providing students with psilocybin. In 1967 he went to India, where he lived for two years with Neem Karoli Baba and other gurus, before returning to the United States and writing an account of his journey from psychedelics to the yogic and devotional practices of Hinduism. For many of my generation, this accessible text, written in comic-book form, provided an important bridge from the mind-scrambled aspirations of the drug culture to the spiritual traditions of Asia.

For the next six months I worked as a cleaner in an asbestos factory until I had saved enough money to be able to flee the British Isles, which I then regarded as the exclusive source of my discontent. I took a map of Europe, closed my eyes, and let my finger fall where it would. It landed near Toulouse in southwest France. I booked a flight there and departed in February 1972. I hitchhiked to Italy, where I dutifully visited famous churches and art galleries in Florence and Rome, but despite the beauty of what I saw, the entire exercise felt hollow and false. I soon abandoned the conceit of pursuing any

lofty cultural goals and simply went wherever the next ride was heading. Inevitably, perhaps, I started drifting eastward. From Athens I went to Istanbul, then via southern Turkey into Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan. I crossed the desert to Baghdad, went south to Basra, then hitched into Iran. I passed through Shiraz, Isfahan, Teheran, and Meshed until I finally reached Afghanistan in June.

The farther east I went, the further I entered into a time that was no longer that of twentieth-century Europe. At two crucial points—when I crossed the Bosphorus into Anatolia and the Afghan border into the town of Herat—it felt as though centuries were erased in less than an hour. The retreat from my homeland became a flight into the past, as though the past were a place where nothing could ever go wrong. In Herat, I lay on my hotel bed, delighting in the clip of ponies pulling tongas that rang with a shimmer of bells, the cries of street vendors, and the joyous shrieks of little boys, all entirely cleansed of the background cacophony of motorized traffic. By Western standards the Afghans were poor and “backward,” but they possessed a dignity—they did not flinch when you looked them in the eye, they seemed to have nothing to conceal or be ashamed of—that somehow, despite my privileged upbringing, I had never really known.

After seeing the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan, I returned to Kabul and continued east into Pakistan. From Peshawar, my traveling companion Gary Zazula and I rode in a jeep, piled high with swaying bodies and backpacks, to Chitral, a hill town in the Hindu Kush that was still home to a prince, who let us camp in his palace grounds beside the tumultuous river that came down from Mount Tirich Mir. From Chitral, we hiked all day until we reached the remote valleys of Kafiristan, a tribal area without roads, electricity, or Islam, whose people were said to be descendants of the Greeks who passed through there with Alexander the Great. But we miscalculated how long it would take and ran out of water in the heat of midday, just as we reached the pass that looked down on the thin green valley of Bumburet, far below, which wiggled through the barren mountains. After we stumbled and slid down scree to the valley, we were too parched for caution and drank copiously from an irrigation channel. By evening we were violently ill.

There were no doctors, no clinics, no clean water, no sanitation, and hardly any food available in Kafiristan. For days we lay sweating, feverish in a dark, filthy room, getting weaker by the day. We would emerge from our lair only in the cool of evening and sit beneath a mulberry tree, the eagle eye of a mountain peering down upon us, to watch the girls and young women of the valley link arms and sway together, intoning songs, while goitered crones crouched along a mud wall, glancing at us suspiciously. We wondered how on earth we would get out of the place. We lacked the strength to climb back up to the pass. The only alternative was to follow the river downstream to Chitral, but a crucial bridge had been swept away in a recent storm. One morning, a trio of hippies in flowing silks and turbans, their eyes blackened with kohl, appeared in the doorway of our room. The local people had told

them that the river path was now passable. To give us the energy to walk back, they handed each of us a small purple pill of LSD, laced with “quite a bit” of speed.

When we reached where the bridge should have been, only the stanchions remained on each bank. The river churned and frothed blithely past toward a narrow defile between two perpendicular walls of rock. We grinned foolishly and stumbled around, trying to gather our splintered senses. As though out of nowhere, a wiry man with sun-burnished skin, dressed in a short woolen smock and rough leather sandals, manifested before us. He laughed and beckoned with his staff for us to follow him. He walked straight to the rock face and started climbing nimbly up a barely visible crevice. We dumbly followed. Halfway up, I paused and looked straight down at the river far below. Its waters made only a faint hiss now. I looked up and our guide was gone. We were alone, like two flies with red nylon backpacks stranded on a wall. Then the rock to which I was clinging began to feel very rubbery. I found it hard to distinguish my hands and feet from the cliff face. I was fascinated to see how my limbs seemed to be merging with the stone. Then, with a sickening jolt, I knew that I was just about to die. I saw myself peel away from the cliff and slip downward, mouth agape.

After what felt like an eternity, our savior’s head reappeared. He climbed down and helped each of us, step by trembling step, to reach the top. Still shaking with fear, we thanked him profusely. He smiled, waved, and trotted off ahead of us. It was shortly after this, as we were walking slowly back to Chitral, that Zazula remarked, “It’s like the Buddha said. Life is suffering.” Despite all we had just been through, I was troubled. My limited reading about Buddhism had somehow failed to impress this point upon me. I found the remark puzzling and shocking, true but unacceptable. It aroused in me, for the first time, a curiosity to know what this man, the Buddha, had meant.

I arrived in India at the end of August. From the border city of Amritsar, I went straight up into the mountains, to Dharamsala, where I had heard the Dalai Lama lived in exile with his community of fellow Tibetans. It was still monsoon season. Clouds drifted up from the plains, enveloping the trees and paths in mist. As I walked into the quiet, sleepy village of McLeod Ganj, the white dome of a stupa, from which clanged an intermittent bell, loomed into view. Stooped Tibetan women with colorful aprons and plaited braids of wispy hair circumambulated this architectural symbol of enlightenment, turning creaking prayer wheels mounted in its wall.

A couple of days later, I attended the weekly audience with the Dalai Lama. About fifteen of us lined up before the steps of his green-roofed residence on a hillock below McLeod Ganj. There were some Tibetans from other settlements in India, dressed in all their finery and holding silk scarves to offer to His Holiness, along with a cluster of fidgeting, unkempt Westerners. The young Dalai Lama suddenly appeared and came down to greet us, arms outstretched,

smiling and chuckling. His eyes darted from person to person. He seemed intensely curious about each one of us. Having accepted and returned the scarves to the Tibetans, some of whom were now sobbing uncontrollably, he turned to the foreigners. “Where you come from?” he asked. We dutifully mumbled the name of a country until the long-haired man with a stoned grin at the end of the line blurted: “That’s what I came here to find out, man!” Puzzled, the Dalai Lama asked for a translation, then erupted with laughter as he clasped the hippie’s hands in his own. “Ho! ho! Very good. Very good.” I was smitten. I had imagined that he would be a remote and severe prelate, not this joyous vortex of intelligent calm.

My wanderings came to a halt. My brush with sickness and death had unnerved me. I had a disquieting need to think about what this brief, fragile existence was for. On September 4, I enrolled in Geshe Dhargyey’s two-month introductory class on Buddhism at [the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives](#).

My conversion to Buddhism was more or less immediate. I did not have to be persuaded either by philosophical arguments or religious polemics. Geshe Dhargyey radiated a kindness that was neither pious nor patronizing. He could be stern one moment, only to burst into peals of laughter the next. He seemed to care unconditionally about me, a complete stranger from a distant land about which he knew nothing. What I heard him say, often in a garbled translation, instinctively rang true. I had found someone who talked without reservation or embarrassment about what mattered most to me. The word *dharma*, he explained, came from the Sanskrit root *dhr-*: “to hold.” The teachings of the Buddha were like a safety net that “held” one from falling into hell and other painful realms. I may have had doubts about the literal existence of hell, but I had little doubt that my life was in a kind of free fall.

Throughout this time my camera and lenses had lain untouched in the bottom of my rucksack. The journey to India had opened my eyes to the world in ways that I could not capture on film. With Geshe Dhargyey’s encouragement, I found myself peering into the invisible regions of my soul, where art appeared to have little purchase. So I decided to sell my photographic equipment in order to help finance my studies in Dharamsala. I shot off a last roll of film, then gave the camera to my friend Ray James to sell on the black market in Delhi. Before he could find a buyer it was stolen from his room in a cheap hotel in Pahar Ganj.

It was not only Geshe Dhargyey who impressed me. I was moved by the faith and courage of the ordinary Tibetan men and women, who lived in shacks made from discarded slats of wood and flattened cooking-oil cans and survived by working on road gangs and selling sweaters donated by Western charities to the Indians. They had followed the Dalai Lama over the Himalayas into India with little more than the clothes they wore, many were sick and exhausted, all had found it hard to tolerate the heat and humidity of the plains. Now they lived in poverty in one of the poorest countries of the world. But despite all of this, they radiated an extraordinary warmth, lucidity,