

AN EXCERPT FROM TWELVE DAYS IN TIBET: JOURNALS FROM THE LAND OF SORROWS

BY
MICHAEL WHITE

Inside the Potala, the great palace of the Dalai Lama, one of the architectural wonders of the world, the building seems to rise up out of the hill where it is built. We are in a large ceremonial chapel filled with a long row of life sized statues when Jim, our American guide, runs into a Tibetan he knows. The guy is a lama but is not dressed in robes, they are delighted to find each other and Jim has gifts for him. They embrace and talk for a few minutes and then we continue



on the tour route. We are moving down a long corridor with a stream of other tourists when all at once a door opens and the lama that Jim knows steps out and beacons for us to come through the door. I couldn't be more surprised. Suddenly we are off the tourist track and going into some back rooms of the Potala. He takes us through several rooms where there are no tourists, rooms deep in the interior of the building, until we end up in a room with brightly colored murals and incredibly elaborate wood work and long beautiful Tibetan umbrellas that hang from the tall

ceiling for what appears twenty to thirty feet. This amazing room is where he works. Tenpa, our Tibetan translator tells us that the lama's job is putting together lost manuscripts. The Chinese had scattered many of the libraries in the Potala and he has thousands of pages of manuscripts that he is trying to put back together like a giant literary jigsaw puzzle. There are piles of texts on the floor, all of them wrapped in fabric where he has managed to reassemble the pages. We get to stand with him for a few minutes and he lets us take pictures of the room, knowing full well no photographs are allowed inside the Potala and we take group pictures of all of us together with him. It is a very large room and the walls are covered with ornate murals and the doorways have elaborate woodwork around them with beautifully painted doors and traditional door handles. I get Jim's attention and tell him I have a question, he nods and Tenpa agrees to translate. I feel like this guy has done us a big favor and I would like to do something in return so I have Tenpa ask,

"Is there anything we can get you from American?"

"Yes, I need heart medicine."

I am surprised and assume that he has a heart condition of some sort and needs medicines that he can't get here in Tibet. Then he looks at us and says,

"We need medicine for a broken heart, for all the young people."

It is courageous of him to speak with us privately at all. Here in Lhasa if a Tibetan monk talks to Westerners he can end up being interrogated by the Chinese who want a full report on everything that was said and he can even end up in jail as a result. So I understand the pressure, the fire in the belly of being under constant oppression, of going to classes every month where they are forced to denounce the Dalai Lama and swear allegiance to China. It is

truly heart breaking and my heart goes out to him and the Tibetan people who are forced into this awful situation.

In August of this year I got to spend twelve days in Tibet. Susan and I had been planning the trip for months. The Chinese make it nearly impossible to travel on your own and we hooked up with a group lead by a Buddhist professor from New England and he has a Tibetan guide who speaks Tibetan, English and Chinese. We spend the first four days in Lhasa where we see the Potala, the great cathedral of Buddhism called the Jokhang, the great monasteries around Lhasa and I get to spend a day with a writer named John Vincent Bellezza who has written five big books on Tibetan pre-history and it just works out he is in Lhasa at the same time we are and we spend a day together with him as our guide.

Then it is off to tour central Tibet in a van with eight of us, Susan and I, four young students from American and Jim and Tenpa, our guides. We visit the great Buddhist monuments at Gyantse and from there to Shigatse and then we head toward Mount Everest where we are going to see Base Camp on the north face and visit the highest monastery in the world. It is named Rong bu and sits at just over 17,000 feet above sea level on the north slope of Mount Everest.



We had been traveling on good paved roads but when we take the turn to go to Chomolungma, as the Tibetan refer to Mount Everest, we found ourselves on a rough dirt road that went up a long valley with steep mountain slopes on either side and then we started to climb up a long series of switchbacks. When we finally climbed over the top of the pass it was festooned with prayer flags stretching across the road and just past the flags there is a place to pull over and admire the view.

When we piled out of the van, there it was in the distance, due south of us, many miles away, the great mountain Chomolungma, Mt. Everest. It dominated the skyline, covered in a glistening white coat of snow, it is head and shoulders above the other mountains that decorate the horizon, peak after peak, all snow covered.

From this vantage point we could see five massive peaks all over 8,000 meters, all snow capped giants in a horizon that was one of the most striking in the world. The most dramatic peaks of the Himalayan range stretched out in front of us, the north face of Chomolungma was facing us on the distant horizon and to the east and to the west were the other peaks all standing high above the skyline with Chomolungma towering over them all.



The mountains in front of us, leading up to the snow covered peaks were all barren, creating an eerie landscape, well above the tree line, with rounded barren mountain tops one after another with ghastly marks of erosion on their sides, row after row of them until the mountains rise even higher and gain their mantle of snow. It is an awesome sight that I was not prepared for, I had no idea of the majesty and the elevated sense that comes with seeing the high peaks of the Himalayas. I quickly learned the Tibetan name for the mountain, Chomolungma, sometimes spelled Qomolungma.

It turns out Mount Everest got its name from an English imperialist who happened to be the British Surveyor General at the Royal Geological Society for the Indian government. He apparently gained a reputation for being a very ill tempered bureaucrat. During his tenure the mountain was referred to as XV and apparently the powers that be in India didn't go to the trouble to learn the indigenous name for the mountain. I was delighted to learn the "real" name of the mountain and vowed to refer to it as Chomolungma. The British were the first to measure its height and they called it 29,002 which has now been updated to 29,029. We all took our pictures in front of it. Clouds started to come in and then it or other peaks in the skyline would become shrouded and then in a few more minutes reappear.

I made inquiries with Jim and Tenpa regarding what Chomolungma means and they said it meant the Great Goddess of the Universe. This didn't make any sense to me since in the old pre Buddhist days in Tibet the great mountains were considered supernatural deities and the mountains were male and the great lakes were their female consorts. Later I read accounts that said the meaning of Chomolungma was unknown or at least in contention. It has been translated as "the mountain no bird can fly over".

One of the early British climbers to try to make the ascent was Charles Bell who was staying in Lhasa at the time he first asked permission of the government to make an assault on the mountain. In 1921 the 13th Dalai Lama agreed and gave him a permission slip to take with him. He described the location as Lho Chamalung which means, the country to the south where birds dwell. Bell noted that the name for the mountain was Kang Chamalungpa which his informant related means "The Snow Mountain Where the Birds Are Taken Care Of". There are apparently records or at least recollections that from the time of the earliest Tibetan kings in Lhasa in the 7th and 8th centuries there was an edict that the birds on the slopes of these mountains would be feed by royal decree. I was interested to see the final syllable of pa which is a masculine ending whereas the name we see now, Chomolungma, has the last syllable of ma which is the female gender. He also described the nearest monastery as Dza Rong Buk which he translated as Inner Rocky Valley. These translations seem more satisfying to me.

Now we are in the Himalaya mountain range and we can feel the difference, the temperature is colder and the air is thinner and it has a more primitive feel to it. We bump along the unpaved road grinding our way over one pass after another. On one there was a car that missed one of the switchbacks and it was sitting at an impossible angle in a narrow ravine beside the road. The sky seemed to come down on top of us with cloud cover that blocked even the tops of the mountains we were traveling over and when we arrived at Rong bu late that afternoon the great mountain was completely shrouded. We piled out of the van to get our first look at the accommodations. The hotel was a three story affair with broad steps and cloth hangings over the doorway. We had heard that there was no heat in the hotel but it was only when we got inside that it became totally apparent what that means. We had arrived at just over 17,000 feet above sea level and could see snow fields in the mountain meadows surrounding us. We checked into our room and realized it was cold and the only way to be warm was to either keep moving or to get bundled up under layers of blankets.

There, just across the road that we traveled to get here, was Rong bu monastery. I had read about it in the guidebooks but didn't realize that it was so close to the hotel. It is right across the road just a matter of a couple of hundred yards. It looked like a cluster of traditional Tibetan buildings with a big white stupa right outside the complex in the front. The monks at the monastery claim it was founded in the eighth century by Padmasambhava who was here and meditated in the caves on the mountain side. Most of the other information I have been able to find say it was founded in 1902 by a Nyingmapa teacher and subsequently entirely destroyed in the devastation of the Chinese invasion. There are pictures of it from the early climbers who were attempting to climb the mountain before the Chinese invasion.



Rongbuk Monastery 1922. Photo: Capt.J.B.L.Noel

It received attention because anyone coming to climb from the base camp on the north face had to go right by it and, at 17,000 feet above sea level, it is the highest monastic institution in the world. The well known photographer Galen Rowen photographed it in 1983 ten years after the Chinese had destroyed it and it was in total ruins. All that remained were the body of the stupa and the foundations of the buildings.



Rongbuk Monastery 1981. Photo: Galen Rowell

It is a remarkable feat that they have rebuilt it and its current structure clearly resembles the way it looked in the pictures from the twenties and thirties.

There are caves used for meditation retreats in the slopes of these mountains all along the valley, it must be an incredible place to do retreat where you are looking out on the north face of Chomolungma. One of the caves is the place where Padmasambhava was said to have meditation when he founded the original establishment. The history books, such as they are, record that there are meditation retreat caves that have been in use for hundreds of years. So perhaps the caves served as the base for the community of practitioners until 1902 when a famous teacher named Zatul Rinpoche founded the monastery where it sits today. Zatul Rinpoche became known to the British and other climber who found their way to the north face base camp. The lama



apparently opened the monastery to

Rong bu August 2011

the climbers and helped them with supplies but had some reservations regarding them since they were not Buddhist and did not respect the wild life. There is a long history of the monks living in peace with the wild life of the area and it is said the deer and birds would come and take food from the hands of the monks as they sat in silent meditation. Rong bu became famous to the Tibetans for annual festivals and ceremonies that were very popular and celebrated by a series of monasteries in the area who all came together at Rong bu for lama dancing and teachings. It took until 1974 for the Chinese to make their way up to 17,000 feet above sea level and all the way to the north face but when they did they completely destroyed the monastery leaving nothing, not a single building, intact. Many of the treasures of the monastery, its library and its dance costumes were removed across the border into Nepal and saved, only to be destroyed by fire a few years later. In 1983 the Chinese allowed the Tibetans to rebuild Rong bu and today there are no visible signs of the horrific destruction that took place in the last century.

We gathered in the lobby and as a group walked over to Rong bu. Every step seems to take extra energy as if there are weights tied to my body. It is a short walk but it took a toll on me. There is a beautiful stupa in the front of the monastery and Susan and I stopped there to sit and rest for a few minutes before we enter into the main courtyard. We pay a small entrance fee and proceed across the courtyard and up a set of steps and we are in the main hall. It is not nearly as large as the other monasteries we have visited but has all the majesty of the larger structures but only about four rows of cushions and not as many pillars. There is a solitary monk in the hall and he is sitting in the umze seat, the umze is the chantmaster who leads the chants and directs the recitation of the mantras and texts. He has a large drum beside him and cymbals in his hands and he clashes the cymbals from time to time and strikes the drum all the while reading from a text. Susan and I sit on some cushions against the side wall. I have been trained in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and know some of the chants and join in with him in the recitations that I recognize.

It is a monastery with both monks and nuns, the monks living here in the main complex, the nuns with their quarters in a building just across the road. Jim has taken the young students off to some room where he is giving them their lecture for the day and Tenpa comes in the shrine room and sits with us. In a few minutes the lama seems to finish his recitations and puts down his instruments. He has heavy robes beside him on his cushion and he pulls one of the robes over his shoulder. I lean over to Tenpa and ask him to translate for me and let me give the lama a bag of turquoise. We approach the lama and I give the bag of turquoise to Tenpa and he passes it to the lama. I ask him to explain this is raw turquoise from the Zuni Indians in the deserts of North America. The lama pours it out in his hand and examines each piece and speaks with Tenpa who tells me that the lama is very happy with the stones and will use them to ornament some of the statues in the monastery. The lama then tells me he liked the way I was chanting and I respond that I have been trained in the Nyingma tradition and that I am very happy to get to visit a Nyingma monastery. They have one of the most beautiful and dynamic statues of Padmasambhava I have ever seen. I ask him for a brief history of the monastery and he says that Padmasambhava came here in the seventh century and meditated in one of the caves and founded the monastery at that time and that Padmasambhava's cave is just up the road a little way. That is very exciting news as I was under the impression that it was founded in the early 1900s.

Then I have Tenpa tell him that I have been a student of a Nyingmapa master named Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche who is a famous Dzog chen master and teacher in America. I tell him that I have been studying the writings of Longchenpa and that there are many things that I don't understand and would like to ask him some questions. It is actually a delicate subject, I don't want to embarrass the lama with a bunch of questions that he doesn't know the answers to and I realize that asking questions about Dzog chen is immediately

suspicious since it is a "secret" teaching that can only be learned after many years of practice and you are expected to complete all the preliminary practices and do long retreats before they will even talk to you about the subject of Dzog chen. The lama and Tenpa talk back and forth in Tibetan for a few minutes and then Tenpa translates as the lama tells me,

"Within the Nyingma tradition Dzog chen is the highest, the most advanced of the teachings. There is a teacher in Nepal who is a Dzog chen master and he has given teachings here. What is you wish to know?"

So I respond, "From my reading and studying with Khenchen Palden Sherab Rinpoche I have gathered that there are two basic techniques for the realization of this level of the awareness and they are known as jumping over or thodgal and cutting through or thregchod. Can you speak to me about these two practices."

The lama actually lowers his voice to almost a whisper and says, "The distinction between the two is subtle. Jumping over is a the direct approach, it is a gesture, a way of seeing that creates visions that are known as spheres of illumination wherein appearances recede and are subsumed into wholeness. Both are ways to shift awareness from the individual perspective to the perspective of vast unbounded wholeness."

He stops and looks at me so I ask, "Is there any specific technique I can use to do these practices?"

He pauses for a few minutes and then, again in a low voice says, "Cutting through is the awareness of emptiness that creates intrinsic freedom from conceptual elaborations. In this way all phenomena dissolve into the basic space of equanimity. This is called dwelling without seeking. It is pure spontaneity without attachment or clinging at any level of cognition, perception or emotion. It is direct intimate awareness. Remaining in the state where you are not seeking releases the energy of primordial wisdom and cuts through to the self clarity of intrinsic awareness. This unfabricated freedom from elaboration is the wisdom of the all pervading essence of nature. This luminous absorption is the diamond summit, it is the primordial purity of emptiness which dissolves phenomena into the basic ground of experience, awareness at this level has no birth and no cessation, this is the basic condition, the ground for all other awareness."

I can't believe I am hearing this, I have my journal and I am writing down what he is telling me and since he is saying it in Tibetan with Tenpa translating I have the time to try to get it down in my journal.

"Are there specific visualizations related to this practice?"

In response he says, "Both these techniques use the self arising intrinsic nature as the path to freedom. They are mountain like perspectives that create an elevated view, they are characterized by spontaneity or equanimity. All you do is remain at rest, doing nothing, dwelling in the unmoving equality of the self-present primordial essence, the ultimate nature". He pauses and he and Tenpa exchange a few words then he goes on, "Unfortunately learning these things has been very difficult even here in Tibet". He says that is no expert. He says the lama from Nepal is great master and that I will surely have to go to him to find better answers to my questions.

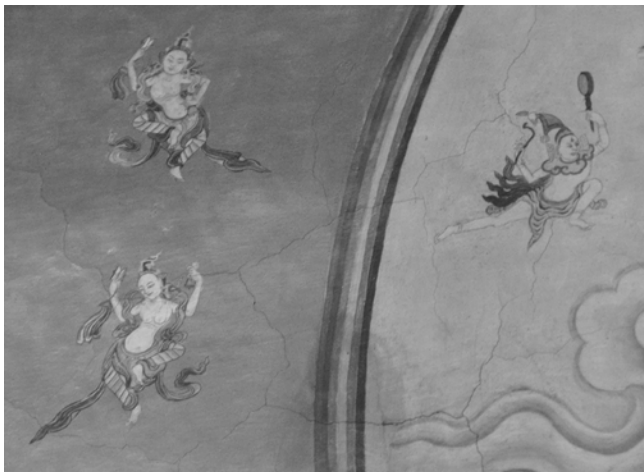
I have lots more questions about specific aspects of Dzog chen, things like the six lamps and the water lasso that I asked the Bonpo lama in Lhasa but Jim and the students appear in the main hall. Obviously their lecture is over and they are looking for Tenpa. I feel disappointed that they are back. I have questions about the history of the monastery, about Padmasambhava being there and about whether Longchenpa ever came here, I want to know if they have sadhanas that relate to the Chomolungma, I feel sure that Chomolungma is a mountain god and they must have images of Chomolungma as a supernatural being. But Tenpa needs to connect with Jim and the others so my time is up and I am grateful that I had a

few minutes of teachings from this lama. I thank the lama for taking the time to share with me and we all go out into the courtyard.

Walking back to the hotel we see a herd of yaks high up on the mountain side and a couple of people trailing behind them as the yaks slowly graze and make their way across what appears from here a barren mountain side. Just walking from the monastery to the hotel the only plants are some very rugged looking small green plants, these even have nice purple flowers, but they are scattered among the rocks and other than some bits of moss there are no other plants, no grass, certainly no trees, but not even any scrubs, growing anywhere in sight.

After dinner it is just turning dusk and I want to visit the monastery again before dark. Susan has had all she can take for the day so I head over by myself. I make my way past the stupa and into the courtyard which is deserted now. I go back in the main hall and am surprised to see the same lama still there in the same place still reciting his texts. He smiles when he sees me come in. I line up in front of the big statue of Padmasambhava and decide to do some prostrations. It turns out to be quite an ordeal, the floor is slick stone and I'm sure it has been worn smooth by thousands of prostrations by other pilgrims and monks but when I get down and am flat on the floor it is an amazing feat of endurance to get back up on my feet, it is as if my body is tied to the floor so I only do seven prostrations before I am totally exhausted. The monk can tell I am tuckered out and he points to a nearby cushion when I finish. I happily plop down on the cushion to recoup my strength. While I am sitting there an old nun comes in and brings tea to the monk and when she sees me she pulls another cup out of a pocket in her robe and offers me tea. I am delighted and it turns out to be milk tea not yak butter tea and I am surprised and even though it is boiling hot I start sipping it with relish. The tea really helps and in a few minutes I feel somewhat recovered. I pull off my mala and start doing recitations. In a few minutes a couple of young boys, the older one maybe six or seven years old, comes in to see the monk. When they see me they come running over. I pat the cushion next to me and they sit down. I point to my chest and say "Pema Dorje" which is my name in Tibetan, then I point to the older boy. I point back at my chest and repeat it, "Pema Dorje, Pema Dorje here" and then point to him. He catches on and gives me a big grin and says "Tenzin". I reach over and rub his head and say "Tenzin here" and then point to his chest. So then the two boys jump up and start running around the chapel calling out, "Pema Dorje's here, Pema Dorje's here". Then they run out the door still yelling out, "Pema Dorje's here". It's all I can do to keep from laughing.

I then tour the shrine room again looking at the murals, they are among the finest I have seen anywhere, it is a delight to see them, the painter seemed fond of flying monks and dakinis and there are a bunch of monks in their robes surrounded by rainbow light flying in the sky among the clouds along with topless dakinis all under rainbow arches.



Beautiful stuff and then the usual array of deities and saints. There is a table on one side of the room that is covered with tormas, these are offerings made to the mountain gods so these are for Chomolungma, they are made of ground barely flour, tsampa, mixed with yak butter and then some sort of red food coloring, There is a table full of them, several rolls of small ones and one larger one in the middle, the big one is decorated with other colors as well, then in front of those is a skull cup and it is obviously a human skull make into a cup but

it is empty and alongside it offering bowls, some filled with water, others with grains of barley, one has a conch shell on top of the barley, and some butter lamps all lit. But back behind the table leaning against the wall is a leg of an animal, it appears to be dried meat and is one full leg, the hoof still on it, all the way up to the shoulder. It is bizarre looking but somehow fits in with the offerings and the human skull cup.



I circumambulate the room again this time looking at the statuary. The hall is dominated by one of the most spectacular statues of Padmasambhava I have ever seen, he is ornamented with lots of turquoise in his head dress and in his necklaces. He has a stern look but is larger than life size and is ultra realistic, totally human and at the same time, beyond human, a human who is transcending the human condition.

Around the statue is a frame of other statues, over his head is a garuda and on either side of the garuda are nagas, the nagas have women's bodies from the waist up, topless with their breasts exposed and snake bodies from the waist down, amazing looking, Below them are other fabulous creatures, with animal heads and human bodies, all in a flowing arch that frames the statue. Plus there are lots of other statues of all sizes, various Buddhas, one with a white shell held between its hands which are in a prayer like gesture at its chest with the



gleaming white shell suspended between its hands. Others are enrobed, dressed in beautiful brocades and fabrics draped over their bodies. There are hundreds if not thousands of images on the walls, it isn't a huge hall but the amount of art work is astonishing. Some of the murals are large but most are quite small and the walls are filled with them, there are all the standards, the wheel of life, and there is the dark purple being that I saw in the foyer of the Potala, this fat guy with a big sword, surrounded by flames, then all the standard deities, some of them obviously done with gold paint and

some with a paint that is thicker and gives their body and clothes another dimension. The artist here obviously had total control over his ability to depict the human body, he could contour the body perfectly and even make it fly and the faces and bodies are perfectly proportioned no matter what posture they assume. The paintings are strangely Blakean in form and while perfectly realistic in their facial features they are totally visionary in every way. Then there are beings called Momos, they are demonic like creatures, with human bodies with animal like heads but they are fantastic animals, not anything that has ever existed on earth, some bird like, others animal like, but again not any animals I can recognize, all dream like visions of other worldly creatures and they are dancing with lines of energy projecting out of their bodies.

I am taken away, I feel tears about to stream out of my eyes and I want to laugh at the same time and feel full of emotions that I can hardly comprehend in myself. I recognize a few of the characters, there are several depictions of Padmasambhava, one with Yeshe Sogyal and Mandarava on either side of him, Yeshe Sogyal naked from the waist up beautifully done. Then

I come to another table and this one has two of the most beautiful butter lamps I have ever seen, they look like gold and are covered with very fine designs of the auspicious signs that stand out surrounded by flowing floral designs that run around the cups. I am overcome with the art. I look at the pillars in the room and they are equally nicely done in bright paints with pictures of garudas and of some demon creature that has devoured itself such that all that is left is its head and its hands, the image of our greed that devours us in our materialism and commercialism.

August 19, 2011

We are up early looking out the window and we are still totally socked in by low laying clouds, not much different from the night before, it looks bad in terms of getting to see Chomolungma. After breakfast we gather in our group in the parking lot and talk about what to do, I am pessimistic and assume that it could be like this all day and all we will see is clouds, although I would really like to spend more time in the monastery. But the students all want to go on to Base Camp which is about two miles up the road from the hotel, primarily so they can say they have been to Base Camp whether they get to see the mountain or not. We load into our van and head up the road. It is a rough dirt road and winds up the narrow valley beside a small river that flows off the slopes of Chomolungma. Then we come to a parking area and pile out of the van. There is a little tent city here, consisting of a line of black nomad tents. We are standing at about 17,000 feet above sea level and in a matter of a few minutes the clouds begin to clear away and we can see all the way to the very top of the mountain which is at 29,000 so there are still 12,000 feet between us and the top of the mountain. We all start taking pictures like crazy, it is incredibly awe inspiring, the highest mountain in the world right there in front of us. We are at a place where there is a stone monument that says "Qomolungma Base Camp 5200 meters". It is about the size of a typical grave stone and the lettering is painted red. But you can stand beside it and get your picture made with the great mountain looming behind you. So we all troop up to the stone for our portraits.



Now the clouds are entirely gone and the mountain stands out against the blue sky that is a deeper shade of blue than I have ever seen before and the contrast between the gleaming whiteness of the snow clad mountain peak and the heavenly blue of the sky is incredibly dynamic and dramatic. We are all taking pictures over and over again. There were lots of people around and after a bit we all started talking. One Chinese woman came up to us and spoke English, she had been working in Canada and was visiting here now and then going back to Canada. The first thing she said

was, "How long have you all been waiting to see this?" I had this feeling of being in the presence of something unusual and rarified, something of beauty but something also imbued with terror. She said other people had been waiting for many days, that it is monsoon season and it is very rare for the mountain to unveil itself and appear in the clear blue sky. We knew that Susan's brother had been here just a couple of days before and had hardly gotten to see it at all. The actual Base Camp for the climbers is still another mile or so ahead but we are not allowed to go there and it is nothing but a tent city for the climbers who are going to attempt the assault on the mountain top.

Standing there looking up at the north face of the mountain silhouetted against the deep blue sky I remembered reading about one of the first British expeditions to visit this spot. The author was the photographer, a Captain Noel, with the British on an expedition in 1921. He took photographs of the monastery with the great mountain peak in the background and he had a passport that included a provision that he was not to kill any of the birds or animals in the area. He noted how the animals in the area were unafraid and would come right up to the people on the expedition and take food from their hands. Noel was quite enamored with the local Tibetans and the monks at Rong bu, he described them as extremely kind and gentle and full of good humor and laughter. Noel took his photos and toured in both North America and Europe and was enthusiastically received by his audiences who were eager to learn about the highest mountain in the world. In fact the famous novel by James Hilton *Lost Horizon* which came out a few years later depicts a hidden valley in the Himalayas where the people live at peace with the animals.

After a couple of hours Jim calls us all together and we are ready to head back; we stand in line and wait till the next bus rolls up and then back track to our van and head out. I feel very strange driving by the Rong bu monastery as we are leaving. I want to get off the bus and explore more, to visit the caves and see all the different rooms in the monastery and watch with a sharp sadness as it disappears in the distance as we drive by.