

April 12, 2004

Hello to all,

I felt like Ralphie.

I couldn't think of a single thing. My mind was as blank as a mid-winter Iowa cloud-covered sky.

Ralphie, hero of the classic film, *A Christmas Story*, in a final act of desperation to ensure his dream of a Red Rider BB gun for Christmas, went to visit the department store Santa, only to freeze up when his moment on the Big Red Lap came.

I wasn't on the lap, but I was frozen all the same.

I stared again into the lama's eyes. Without judgment, black as coal, and as deep as any well I'd ever seen, they looked back at me, neither projecting nor echoing.

This was my big chance. This was as close to asking a question of the wise man on the mountain top as I was ever likely to get. Time froze. It seemed that hours passed as I stared dumbly, unable to form thoughts, much less words.

Here I was, standing before one of the holiest men on the planet, and I was not making efficient use of his time. I felt like a bump on a log. Actually, I didn't even feel that valid, since a log was once alive, and I didn't feel like I was capable of demonstrating any signs of life at the moment. I doubt a mirror under my nose would have tipped anyone off to signs of physiological activity.

"Gee," I thought, "at least Ralphie saved the moment by grasping the top of the exit slide and blurting out a rapid fire delivery of the complete description of the object of his lust and desire to Santa, only to be met with the signature line of the film, "you'll shoot your eye out."

I wasn't even going to get that far. I wasn't prepared for this chance encounter, and was showing every sign of frittering this moment away. People had traveled for days to be in the presence of this lama. We'd just witnessed old women slowly circling a holy site in the monastery by repeatedly prostrating themselves, pausing for prayers with each extension of their bodies, then pulling themselves up to their knees and prostrating themselves again. It had taken them half an hour to cover the distance we'd walked in seconds. For them, it all led up to just being in the same building as this lama, much less meeting him.

I felt like an interloper. I felt like a stupid tourist who had mindlessly wandered into this solemn, 15 day event of prayers and chants for world peace. We just happened to show up for a tour of the monastery while the monks and the lama were taking a lunch break. In true lama fashion, he had stayed at his place, forgoing food, instead receiving members of the crowd for greetings and blessings. Our local guide had seized upon the moment, beside himself with excitement at the fact that we would have the chance to meet this exalted leader of the Buddhist faith.

As we walked to the front of the temporary building that had been built for the event, I struggled with what to say and do. I had no idea of the proper protocol. We'd entered at a quiet moment when there was no one in line, so I couldn't study others' approaches or actions. I was desperate to avoid showing disrespect by either imitating something that I was not qualified to do or by inadvertently omitting a customary sign of respect.

Stupidly, I went first. Although I'd heard Steph and our primary guide, Patrick, discuss the traditional word of Buddhist greeting dozens of times, I couldn't think of it to save my soul.

Patrick had regaled us with tales of the three times he'd had the chance to spend time with the Dali Lama. He'd described him as a real kidder, and someone who loved a joke and to liven up the moment when not performing official duties. I didn't sense any of that in Yangthang Remponche, the 3rd reincarnate, who I was walking up to meet.

While completely unknown to the typical American such as myself, he'd make anybody's list of the 100 most important holy people on the planet. As I approached him, I heard one of the monks ask Steph, Patrick and our local guide if they had any special needs or requests that the lama could address.

"Great," I thought, "I could have given him chapter and verse on questions I wanted answered. I've got a list of personal flaws I'd like to overcome a mile long. My once in a lifetime chance to check in with one of God's main men, and I show up without a pencil and paper."

The lama reached out and took my hands, still looking into my eyes. Not judging, not echoing, not projecting, not reflecting, he held my gaze. My mind, still searching desperately for the right thing to do and say, suddenly came to halt. There was his gaze, there was emptiness, and there was completeness. He nodded his head and released my hands, a slight smile curling the corners of his lips.

The only thing in my mind was an empty resonance, followed by the comforting thought that in the end, Ralphie got his wish.

Be well,
Doug

P.S. – Some photos of our week in Sikkim follow.



Sikkim was an independent Buddhist kingdom until 1975 when it was annexed by India after a referendum. It was an act never officially signed by the King, and has remained in some dispute ever since. Sikkim remains a kingdom of the sky, with its people clinging to the sides of steep mountains, often wrapped in clouds.



A Chorten and prayer flags stand watch over a valley. Chortens are everywhere in this part of the world. They contain ancient holy items of the Buddhist faith, and are venerated by the local population. The prayer flags are hand printed using block printing methods. The flags are used to spread the prayers on the winds so they may reach all living creatures. The colors represent the various elements: Blue – water, Red – fire, Green – forest, White – earth, Yellow – air.



Printing out pictures to give to a mountain family we came across carrying fodder for their animals in baskets on their backs. We believe these were the first family group and individual photos they had ever possessed.



One of the three daughters of the family.



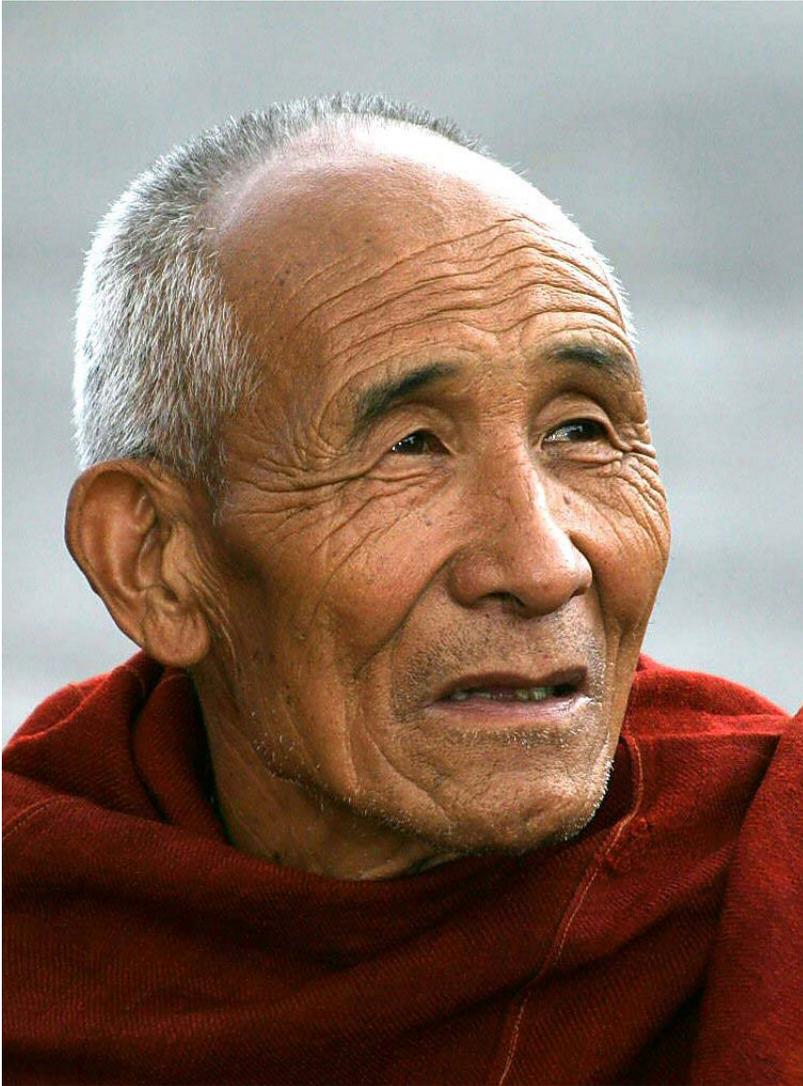
The matriarch of the mountain family. The nose ring is typical of women from the Nepalese tribes who make up about 40% of the population in this area.



A typical terraced valley. Every inch of arable land is utilized for crop production.



Young Buddhist monks. Traditionally, families send their second born sons to the monastery. This practice is still widely observed and it is a high honor to have a son who becomes a monk.



Elderly Buddhist monk.



A contrast of the old and new. A farmer working in the terraces built centuries ago by his forefathers as the power lines of a new age cross overhead.



A woman tosses wheat, letting the wind separate the grain from the chaff.



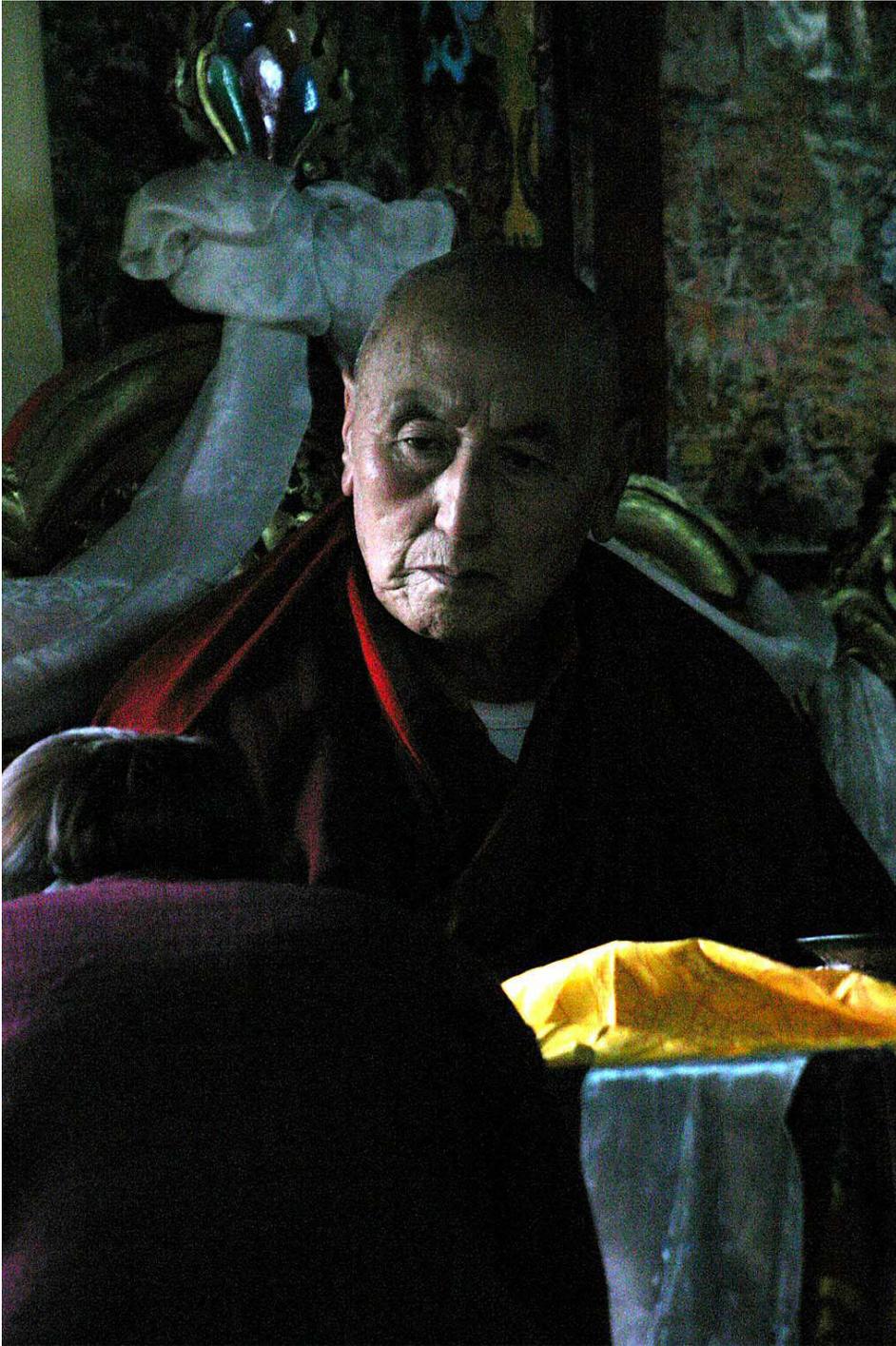
The view from our hotel balcony of the local Himalayan mountain range. Pelling, Sikkim, India



The view from our hotel balcony of Mt. Khangchendzonga, the 3rd highest mountain in the world. Pelling, Sikkim, India.



A laborer carries rocks up a cliff for a retaining wall. The typical laborer in this region makes about 2,000 Indian Rupies a month, or about \$50. The bottom line is, you cannot work your way out of poverty. The only route up and out is education. We met a Nepalese high school student living in a refugee camp who was working on a hotel project in this town to pay for his college education. He knew he could never work hard enough or long enough to buy his way out of poverty. He, like most of his generation, has his sights set on a college degree and a brighter future. Pelling, Sikkim, India.



Lama Yangthang Remponche administering blessings. Pemayangtse, Sikkim, India.



Young Buddhist novices receiving lessons. Pemayangtse, Sikkim, India.



Our guide, Patrick Moffat, shooting two members of a family we spent a couple of hours with at the ruins of the second Sikkim capital. There were six sisters and one brother who had come to the ruins for a picnic. They had no fear of interacting with us, having escaped the indoctrination of the American media about the dangers of children playing unsupervised and exploring their world. After playing games, singing and dancing with us for a few hours, they walked the three miles home to their parents. Pemayangtse, Sikkim, India.



A batsman passes on a pitch during a sandlot game of Cricket. India and Pakistan are currently engaged in a series of Cricket test matches between their national teams, each match lasting up to five days. The details of the matches fill the newspapers and dominate conversation in restaurants and other social gatherings. It is a remarkable example of the power of sports to bring together two countries that were on the brink of nuclear war only a few years ago. Naya Bazar, Sikkim, India.



Cabbage seller at the market. Naya Bazar, Sikkim, India.



Butter wrapped in leaves, for sale at the market. Naya Bazar, Sikkim, India.



Seller at the market, Naya Bazar, Sikkim, India