

May They Be Happy

By Ursula Popp,

I sat on rocky ground as I pulled my medicine bag filled with acupuncture needles and Chinese herbs from my daypack. Pale and limp, a young Tibetan pilgrim lay next to me. His pants and sweater were dirty, and he wore a warm woolen hat. The pilgrim was barely able to lift his eyelids to look at me. Wondering what was wrong, I gazed down at him.

“This man hasn’t eaten for the past three days,” Tempa, a young Tibetan monk, translated, “and has been unable to move for the past twenty-four hours. He suffers from severe stomach pain and cramps. It has taken him two months to get here. All he wants is to finish this pilgrimage. Could you help him?”

“I’ll try,” I responded, reaching for my patient’s radial pulse, an important diagnostic tool in acupuncture. It felt empty. His pale, flabby tongue confirmed my diagnosis: exhaustion and lack of stomach Qi, a term used to describe illness in East Asian medicine. Gently, I lifted his sweater and shirt to insert a few needles in his abdomen, and then rolled up his pants to find the acupuncture points along his legs that would help his energy return. I filled a small plastic bag with remedial herbs for him to take over the next few days.

As the needles did their healing work, I laid my hand on his shoulder for comfort and to give him some energy, of which I had plenty, despite the altitude of the Tibetan plateau, over 14,000 feet.

It was the year 2000, and I was on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailas with a group of twenty Westerners and an equal number of Nepali and Tibetan guides, cooks, and helpers. I'd chosen to undertake such a physically and emotionally difficult pilgrimage as a prayer for a happier and more fulfilled life for myself and for more peace in the world.

Sitting with this pilgrim gave me a moment to appreciate the incredible setting. On my right, snowcapped Mount Kailas, the holiest of mountains for four major religions of Asia, towered over us. The mountain is sacred to Buddhists, Hindus, Jains and the Bön people, who practice a religion even older than Buddhism. In a perfectly pyramidal shape, Mount Kailash rose magnificently up from the barren, wind-swept Tibetan plateau to a height of almost 22,000 feet. Nobody has ever climbed this mountain except for the famous Tibetan monk Milarepa, who, according to the myth, went to its top on the first ray of sunlight early one morning.

It's believed that to circumvent Mount Kailash erases the collected bad karma of a lifetime. Though I had moved away from my strict Catholic

upbringing in rule-driven Switzerland, with the fair share of guilt that comes with such a background, the thought of ridding myself of all the so-called sins I had committed in my life sounded very appealing. We had started our circumambulation that morning, after trekking over the Himalayan range through Nepal into Tibet for the past fifteen days.

Almost fifty years old, I had just completed my degree in acupuncture and herbal medicine, the education for which I had moved to the United States. Unclear if I wanted to return to Switzerland or stay in the States, I was generally unhappy and a low-grade aggravation permeated my days.

For years, I had been dreaming of traveling to Mount Kailash. It is one of the most remote places on earth very difficult to get to, no matter which way one travels. I was thrilled at the opportunity to make this pilgrimage with a Buddhist teacher, and ready to offer myself up on this arduous trek for a more peaceful inner life. I hoped that travelling to a less materially saturated part of the world would give me direction and clarity. By offering medicine, I was able to bring something to the people whose homeland I'd travel through.

Returning my focus to my patient, I saw it was time to pull the needles. The man looked up at me with a big smile and a sparkle in his eyes. Able to sit up, he put his palms together and bowed in gratitude. I handed him the herbs, and Tempa translated the directions for taking them.

“I am so glad you worked with this man. Hopefully, now he’ll be able to finish his pilgrimage,” said Tempa, the short and delicately built monk who traveled with us and was my translator when needed. “Thank you.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” I replied dismissively and shrugged my shoulders. “I’m not even sure that what I did will help him in the long run.”

“Please,” the monk replied with urgency in his voice. “Do not diminish your work! It is your effort that counts. This man had been in pain, unable to continue on his pilgrimage for three days. Not expecting anybody to help him, he’s immensely grateful to you and will pray for you for the rest of his life. This is how it is in our culture.”

Tempa’s words hit me hard, and I felt deeply ashamed. My cheeks flushed as I recognized the false modesty that my casual comment had revealed. My Swiss Catholic upbringing had taught me never to be prideful. “No need to boast,” the nuns at school would say when I showed excitement about a project. Was my dismissal of my work one of the reasons why it never quite satisfied me? If I had the good fortune to be woven into this Tibetan culture where a person would pray for me for the rest of his life, I wanted to be worthy of such a prayer by appreciating the gifts that I was able to share. Humbled as I was, there was a quickening in my blood of excitement for a life in which I’d find joy and satisfaction in small gestures.

A couple of days later, we were to cross Dolma La, the pass that is over 18,000 feet high, the most sacred place on our journey, the culmination of our pilgrimage. We rose hours before sunrise to begin the arduous climb up to the pass. The American Buddhist teacher who had organized the trip had given us a most unlikely mantra for a pilgrimage, “Nowhere to go, nothing to do.” Here it was again, the invitation for simplicity, helping me to find a rhythm of walking and resting.

At that elevation, the air is so thin that it was hard for my body to get enough oxygen. Putting one foot in front of the other, resting after every few steps, I moved slower and slower as I climbed the pass.

As I struggled, Asian pilgrims flew by me with smiling faces. Some of them made this arduous trek of thirty-two miles and an elevation gain and loss of 3,300 feet in only one day, while we took five. It must be a spiritual elation unavailable to me that carries them, I concluded. Then there were the pilgrims, equally dedicated, that I passed by who prostrated around the whole mountain—an inconceivable hardship. With pads on their knees and hands, they prostrated to a full body length. Then they’d put their feet where their hands had been to prostrate again, in this way mapping the whole trail with their body.

Along the trail up the pass, thousands of shoes left by Asian pilgrims were piled up—a custom that symbolized old lives left behind. How was it possible to walk on these rocky grounds without shoes? I wondered. I was reminded of the habit of taking off one's shoes before entering a sanctuary. This simple gesture, one Yahweh demanded of Moses, symbolized the beginning of a new life.

Dimly at first, then more and more clearly, out of the fog trailed the sounds of a bell and monotonous singing. I was mesmerized, pulled up as if on a string. I found a monk sitting on a small mountain shelf amongst mounds of shoe-souls. He did puja, singing his prayers in soft Tibetan, while shaking a bell gently back and forth as snow collected on the rim of his hat. It was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. Deeply touched by this simplicity and purity, I thought to myself: *If all children could hear such sounds, what world would they create?* Nothing existed beyond this sound, this prayer, the silently falling snow, my breath, and the tears rolling down my cheeks.

As I sat there, our crew passed by. Our luggage was bound to the backs of yaks, heavily built, prehistoric-looking animals with long, thick fur that are domestic to the region and able to travel across rugged, snow-covered terrain. The kitchen gear, pots, and pans towered over the heads of our helpers in baskets they carried on their backs.

We continued climbing, each at our own pace. Any thoughts about the past or the future immediately stopped me in my tracks. I apparently could not afford the energy those thoughts absorbed *and* still keep going. Only one thing at a time!

Finally, with great relief, after many more hours I reached Dolma La. I fell to my knees and prayed in gratitude for this moment, for the good fortune to come here, and for all the events that led up to this, in my and other peoples' lives.

Hundreds of strings of prayer flags had been attached to a tall pole and to the ground, creating a shape like a tepee. Layer upon layer, some flags, bleached to a unified soft gray, dragged on the rocks. Others, newly hung, were still in their bright colors of yellow, red, blue, green, and white, prayers on each of them. They were of such flimsy material that they responded with a flutter to the slightest of breeze, leaving no sound at all. Buddhists believe that the wind, moving the flags, sends prayers up to the gods, a thought that made me smile.

I hung up my own flags. They were not just for myself, but for my ancestors, family, and friends. *May my offerings, may this pilgrimage bring peace to my family and to the world.*

Suddenly, the sky tore open, and the sun sliced through the clouds, its rays gradually warming us enough to sit and enjoy a well-deserved rest. A fellow pilgrim in my group read the Kaddish in honor of her Jewish ancestors. Mostly, we sat in silence, perhaps all feeling the same deep sense of elation.

On our way back through Tibet and then Nepal, we trekked through the remote valley of Limi, completely cut off from the outside world by snow at least half the year. During the summer months, the valley is only accessible by several days of hiking on small mountain trails, and only by locals. The Chinese government had forbidden travel to this politically sensitive region.

As we entered Halji, one of the three small hamlets in the valley, Tempa approached me.

“Please come quickly,” he urged. “This man’s daughter is very ill.”

The three of us rushed through the narrow alleys between tall stone houses. Looking along the laneways and up, I could see the gray rock of the mountains towering over the village and the buildings. I felt in a lineage with all the doctors, healers, and medicine people who have rushed through streets for centuries to help the sick, and felt connected to something ancient.

Climbing up a narrow wooden ladder on the outside of the house, we passed the stable and came to a landing on the second floor from which we entered the family’s living quarters. The only light came from a hole in the

ceiling through which the smoke from the small open fire escaped. I was led to a woman in the far corner who was listlessly lying on a mattress. She had given birth to a stillborn baby five days earlier I was told and hadn't stopped bleeding since. Her pulse was barely palpable and indicated anemia. She gave me a pleading, weak smile as I set the acupuncture needles to stop the bleeding. Fortunately, I also had some blood-building herbs to leave with her.

"She has to eat meat," I told her father, unsure if it was available and if he could afford it. Still, I hoped that, with some luck, the acupuncture treatment and the herbs would help her recover.

Tempa and I returned to the courtyard. To my astonishment, our group had left on horses they had hired from the villagers. Our head trekking guide was waiting for Tempa and me. He urged us to follow the group immediately.

But more than a hundred people had gathered outside the gates to the village. Waiting for us, the villagers had brought all their sick family members for healing. Surrounding Tempa and me, in ever widening circles, they shouted and waved to get our attention, gesturing toward the weak and ill. The ones who were closest tapped me on my arms and shoulders insistently.

The sense of tranquility I had felt walking into the village earlier that morning when I had admired the families working the field had been deceiving. Then I only saw the healthy, strong ones. Now I was confronted

with what had been hidden; the sick, weak, and decrepit, the toothless and old. What had my fellow travelers been thinking? How could they leave me alone with all of this?

Tempa tried to translate what people were saying: “This little boy hasn’t eaten for a whole week,” he said, pointing at a young boy lying limply in his father’s arms. “This man complains of a terrible headache. The sunlight hurts him so much, he can’t work his field,” Tempa continued, pointing at a middle-aged man. “This woman has injured her leg with an ax and the wound won’t heal.”

Looking into these pleading faces, I couldn’t bear their pain and the hope that I would help. I didn’t know what to do. A panicky feeling crept up my throat, and my eyes began to glaze over. The yelling receded into a throbbing mass of sounds. If there was anything I could do, I’d need many hours, maybe days.

The voice of the head trekking guide trailed through what had become general noise to me:

“These people are okay. This is their life—you can’t help them,” he shouted with his thick English accent. “You must come now!”

Tempa just watched me silently.

For a moment, I considered changing the course of my life and staying. Everything stood still as I considered the possibility. Wasn't this what a healer would do, stay and heal?

I had no supplies, no translator, as Tempa wouldn't be able to stay with me, and no legal grounds to remain behind. I had no confidence that I'd be able to help. And I knew I'd need the support of another Westerner to survive, emotionally and possibly physically. Staying wasn't a reasonable option. Tearing my eyes away from their faces and justified by my own rational, I numbly followed the guide.

The man whose daughter I had just treated rushed toward me, handing me his horse to ride. Looking into his eyes, I understood without words that this was his way of thanking me. How beautiful, I thought, so much more personal than a check that I receive as a health practitioner back home.

But my decision didn't keep me from feeling split apart inside. Had I just missed a most auspicious spiritual calling? All day I found myself in a daze of heightened physical awareness paralleled by a sense of isolation from my surroundings, and strangely from my own feelings. Was it the right response of a healer to suffering? I kept wondering.

That night our group came together for one of our occasional meetings, a council to share the experiences of our day. My fellow travelers talked about

the beauty of the valley and its people, the wonderfully intact monastery, the pleasant rides on horsebacks. Proudly they showed the objects they had bought from the locals.

When it was my turn to speak, in stark contrast to my comrades' cheer, I sobbed uncontrollably as I talked about my encounters in Halji. The pain I had witnessed, the pleading and hopeful faces that I had turned away from were unbearable.

"This is the wounded healer", our Buddhist guide remarked. At that time, I had no understanding of this concept, what she meant by it. All I knew was that my heart was wrenching, and that my encounters in Halji would haunt me for the rest of my life.

A few weeks later I returned home. My experiences in the Himalayas and with the Tibetan people left a powerful imprint. I had learned that putting one foot in front of the other and being present in each one is enough. I continue to find deep solace in this simplicity. This helped me bear the pain I witnessed, in my clients, and everywhere else.

Every now and then in my mind's eye, I see the faces of the Halji people. My heart fills with gratitude and reverence for them. And for the rest of my life I will pray: *May they be well, may they be happy.*