



Many people from across the globe travel to Deer Park in Sarnath, India, to wander the area where the Buddha held his first teaching.

Sunrise and Circumambulation

Awaking to the teachings of a Tibetan friend. BY SARAH STRONG MILLER

The knock resonates through the stillness. I am deliriously happy, preparing to bite into the first piece of barbecue chicken I've had in weeks. The knocking continues, making me pause. I pull myself up from the chair, away from the chicken, to see who it is. One instant, I am strolling toward the door, the next, I am gasping for air in the stifling heat of my room, catapulted out of my dream.

I rake the hair out of my eyes as I reach for the clock, slapping at the mosquitoes that swarm hungrily around my ankles. It's 4:30 in the morning.

I can hear a group of monks below my window on the campus of the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India. Every morning their voices, calm yet powerful, tangle together in prayer for the happiness of all beings. Their morning meditations woke me up at the beginning of the five-week Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan

culture program, but I thought I had become used to it. Until now.

I throw myself back onto the firm mat, exasperated. While in India, my dreams have been the only escape from my forced commitment to well-washed, well-cooked vegetables. My mind wanders to one of yesterday's lessons. "Enlightenment," the professor said, "is when you can no longer tell the difference between the dream state and reality. You no longer maintain a sense of disappointment upon waking to discover that what you had just experienced was, in actuality, intangible. Ultimately, the two states of mind become one."

Another knock. Louder. I slide out of bed, savoring the cool tile under my feet.

"Sarah! Good morning! Have you meditated? Would you like to walk? Have some chai?" Thupten's voice bursts through the door as soon as I pull it open, confidently stumbling over the unfamiliar

language. His robes retain their rich red hue, even in the dark, and his eyes dance as he takes in my sleepy yawn and heavy-lidded eyes. "So many hours have gone by already..."

Thupten Tsering, a young monk from the border town of Tawang, patiently waits outside, as he does every morning before we walk, while I pull myself together. I shrug on my Indian *shawl kameez* and struggle to tie my Tibetan *chupa*, one of many visible interchanges between Tibetan and Indian culture in Sarnath—cultures between which the village maintains a delicate balance. Tibetan temples crowd the streets along with numerous Hindu shrines, *thanka* shops brush against silk *sari* emporiums, and street vendors hawk both Buddha statues and *masala*-flavored Lays chips. It is a constant give and take, leaving the institute's students adept in both Tibetan and various Hindi dialects.

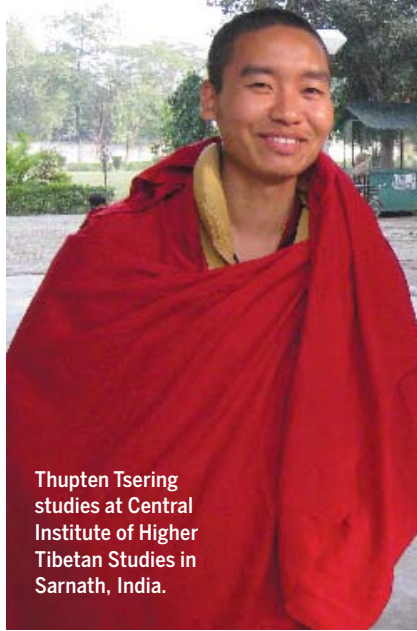
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“*Tashi delek, kushola*,” I whisper minutes later, bowing slightly. I press my hands together to convey my respect to his status as a monk. Thupten grins, bowing in return as I wrap a large shawl around my head. “You are learning quickly.”

We step out into the fleeting cool, the air choked with pollution. Sarnath’s main street is slowly coming to life. The rickshaw drivers have already unfolded themselves from the rickety contraptions that frequently serve as both their home and key to survival. Countless chickens, goats, and dogs weave in and out of crowded chai stalls in a futile search for food. Men in bright sweater vests congregate around a barber’s shop on the street. Cars honk incessantly, swerving left and right due to the lack of traffic lights and stop signs. Women hastily pull their saris across their faces as we go by; cow patties hanging out of their hands, forgotten. A tailor is diligently sewing as we turn the last corner before the temple, his machine propped up on two cement blocks alongside the piles of burning trash and crumbling walls splashed with political propaganda. Children run across the street in front of the temple, bowls out, eyes wide, hands motioning first to their bellies, then to their mouths. No food. Hungry. Please. Money.

“I tried to give three girls a bag of oranges yesterday,” I tell Thupten as I slide off my shoes and prostrate three times before entering the temple. “They had been following me for awhile, asking for food. When I handed them the oranges, they acted offended. They refused to take them. ‘Money’ one girl said. ‘Money.’ I just walked away, I didn’t understand.”

The temple is filled with people, many from the institute, though most are pilgrims from far and wide. “Some do full prostrations all the way from their native place,” Thupten whispers, “as a way to prove their complete devotion.” A hush descends as we draw closer to the statue of the Buddha. Gleaming gold, his inquisitive gaze beams down. This has become my favorite part of the day, this exploration of a physical sense of tranquility brought on by a place. As we



Thupten Tsering studies at Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, India.

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meander past the intricate paintings and carvings adorning the ceiling and walls, Thupten begins to pray.

I had been unnerved by the change in his voice the first time—uncharacteristically deep and harsh for his delicate frame. His usual high-pitched voice is replaced by a low, coarse tone that soothes and sways through each prayer with a steady, precise pace. His eyes close, his head bows, yet he seems to know his way instinctively as we circle the temple three times. It is the highlight of our morning walk for me, a strange, pensive, yet compelling way of starting the day for someone normally woken by a piercing alarm.

Thupten falls silent, and remembering my anxiety about the oranges, he begins to rub the prayer beads looped around his wrist. He launches into answering my countless questions this way, as if hoping to convey to me the importance of the words he so carefully chooses.

“Sarah la,” he sighs, “there are so many bad people. They find girls on the street, girls who are hungry for so many things. The girls are given babies to hold while they go around the village asking for money. The babies are supposed to make people more willing to give rupees, and when they do, the girl and the baby

receive so little of it. They take the rupees back to the bad people, who use the money for...” He sighs again. “Drugs. Maybe. I do not know every detail. We do not talk of...”

He pauses and I turn to ask for more details. “Thupten,” I start, but he’s gone. I brush past one of the many small herds of cows that roam the streets, trying to see past their swinging tails and gleaming horns. I can’t find him. The rest of the village is awake now, and a steady stream of people passes by, jarring me as I stop and scan the street. I panic, trying to remember *anything* from a semester-long self-defense class I took before coming. “Thupten?” I call out.

“Sarah la!” His voice comes from further ahead, and I quickly spot his shaved head. He is grinning when I catch up to him.

“I am so sorry,” he gasps, “I saw the cows coming and became scared. A few months ago, I was running to meet a friend and did not see a bull crossing the street close to me. Seeing the flash of red, he ran straight into me, lifting me completely off the ground.” He smiles at my bewildered expression. “I am still so nervous of cows.”

We are still laughing when we reach campus and part ways. I unsuccessfully try to shake the image of the angry bull from my head as our first class begins. “Today, I want to open it up for general questions,” the teacher states after we take our seats. “Life here must seem quite different to all of you.”

Upon reflection, although my education at the Central Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies provided invaluable insight into countless aspects of Buddhist religion and philosophy, it was my early morning walks with Thupten that left the most lasting impression. Our early morning explorations and conversations challenged both our preconceived images of the other. And they were, ultimately, worth waking up for in the middle of my dream meal of barbecue chicken.

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