

Journey to the East, or: A Westerner's Folly

by Kieran Fox

The Ancient Chinese fable *Xi Yu Ji, Journey to the West*, tells the story of the monk Xuanzang's long voyage through China and over the Himalayas to acquire Buddhist wisdom and books in northern India. Books and literacy were so rare, so precious, that it was worth risking one's life to acquire those that mattered and might convey insight.

In a world of mass market paperbacks and Amazon.com, it may seem hard to believe that any such quest need be undertaken today; and it was not without a smile that I realized I was making a similar journey to acquire Oriental wisdom, to my East – risking, if not my life, then at the very least my gastrointestinal health.

After several years of practice and study of Buddhism and yoga, I came to the conclusion that understanding at least one of the vernacular languages of these great traditions was essential – and that the place to do so was Asia.

Wild optimism in my heart, pack on my back, I set off in 2009 for Dharamsala, India, a gorgeous, verdant town nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas, center of the Tibetan refugee population and seat of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. I found a language teacher and access to every Tibetan language textbook imaginable. I started small but soon enrolled in formal classes at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. Hundreds of minor and major works in Tibetan were published here, and virtually nowhere else in the world. And throughout the many small bookshops in Dharamsala, knockoff versions of all the great spiritual classics could be found; innumerable works on Buddhism and yoga for a few dollars apiece.

Printed in India or Nepal, sometimes from faded facsimiles and always under the auspice of the local government's refusal to recognize Western copyrights (assuming such a thing ever occurred to them), most of them are on cheap paper that will not last, with even cheaper bindings that will free the pages from their forced communion long before they themselves turn to dust. In many, the typesetting falls out of alignment and you must crane your neck to read on. They are some of the cheapest, shoddiest books you will ever find; and yet their contents are invaluable.

Via these humblest of physical vehicles, my mind was transported, transformed by the words of the East's great sages: Tsongkhapa, the Dalai Lama, Milarepa, Patanjali.

Absorbed in this bootlegged wisdom, my three months in Dharamsala passed quickly, and soon I needed to return to Canada to work, save money, and apply for graduate schools. Before I left, however, I made a long-anticipated visit to the holy city of Rishikesh, picking up yet more locally printed books from the Bihar School of Yoga, and knockoff textbooks of Sanskrit (which was to be my next linguistic conquest).

Nearly a year passed while worldlier concerns occupied me, but when the time was right I returned to Asia, this time beginning with a trip through Tibet. In Lhasa, Tibet's capital, I picked up Ellen Barteel's locally produced textbook of the particular Lhasa dialect, and was out in the Barkhor bargaining for fruit in no time. Disaster struck the Tibetan people just before their new year, *losar*, in 2010, and so I gave my tent away to Tibetan refugees from the devastating Jyekundo earthquake when I passed through Qinghai province – and let their lore and literature fill my backpack instead.

The local authorities were not keen on foreigners staying long in Tibet, however, and our two weeks there quickly passed. All too soon we found ourselves at the Tibet-Nepal border town of Kodari, where we joined the long line of Westerners leaving the rarefied air of the Roof of the

World for the low, warm valleys of Nepal; and here my nascent collection nearly met its end under the watchful eye of China's propaganda police.

For whatever reason (perhaps I had "Dalai Lama-sympathizer" written all over my face; certainly the thought was on my mind) I was singled out and my bags thoroughly examined. It was not long before the books written in the contentious language of the recently liberated, Tibetan, were discovered. Contraband! Much discussion ensued; other guards and finally a senior officer were called over to examine the goods. My Tibetan guide and travel companions, already across the border, shifted uneasily from leg to leg, waiting dutifully, wondering how I could have been so foolish.

Alas, not one of the customs officials knew a word of Tibetan, and though certainly the books must have contained anti-government propaganda, they reluctantly accepted my explanation that I carried merely textbooks and folk literature; my books were safe. The authorities settled instead for confiscating my *Lonely Planet: China* – its back cover displayed a map of the Far East and clearly showed Taiwan as an independent nation. Though an undisputed issue to some 5 billion of the world's residents, this map was apparently illegal where I now stood, and with obvious satisfaction they told me it had to be taken away, "To be destroyed."

My political reeducation complete, we crossed into No-Man's-Land, where I saw a local woman being harassed by the Nepali border guards, who seemed to be grabbing at her body, maybe molesting her. But then out of her folded robes came two bottles of illegal liquor, purchased at bargain-basement prices on the Tibetan side of the border. One of the guards gleefully smashed them on the ground, and the woman went berserk, trying to claw the guard's face off. I turned and went into the only slightly less chaotic Customs Office to obtain my Nepali visa, thinking of the 'contraband' in my own bag, wondering for the first time whether the nature of what a person smuggled might be a telling indicator of their personality and values.

In Kathmandu, I found the world's best bookstores, almost as if personally tailored to my interests and passions: the Himalayas and their peoples; Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism; meditation and yoga; histories of Eastern art; compendiums of Asian poetry; and travel guides, stacked high, for every corner of the globe, inviting contemplation of the next, or perhaps a return, journey.

I soon realized the best place to find both books and wisdom of the type I sought were the many Tibetan monasteries around Kathmandu, established amongst the enormous Tibetan refugee population in the valley. Based on my prior experience with meditation and the Tibetan language, I was accepted to spend two months at a monastery that often welcomed foreigners, *Kopan Gompa*, perched high on a hill overlooking the Kathmandu valley. A language tutor, Tenzin Choeyang, was also provided for me, free of charge. A young monk who'd escaped from occupied Tibet as a child and grown up in the monastic life at Kopan, he was fascinated by science, the English language, and the Western world in general. Our mutual interest in one another's cultures and languages made us fast friends, and Tenzin promised to help me build my library of Tibetan works so that I'd have more to study when I returned home.

A few days before I was to leave Kopan, Tenzin took me down the hill to Bouddnath, a town skirting Kathmandu and center of Nepal's Tibetan population. Here there were many small publishers printing books exclusively for the local Tibetan population, everything from liturgical texts to exercise books for young schoolchildren. My reading proficiency was probably around that of a Tibetan five-year-old, and so we focused on the school bookstores. I was able to acquire, for pennies apiece, books printed nowhere else in the world: abridged, children's

versions of classics such as *The Life of Milarepa*, comic books in Tibetan depicting the life of the Buddha, an illustrated history of Tibet's great kings, specialist Tibetan-English dictionaries of Buddhist terminology compiled by Western monks living in Nepal and India. I bought too much, more than I could possibly carry back with me – but I thought: I would pare down the collection later, and leave what I couldn't carry with the monastery library.

Making my way back home circuitously, with a two-week stop in the Middle East to visit Jordan, Israel and Egypt, I lugged my now 49.5 lb. backpack with me. August in the Levant was enough to make you sweat just from sitting; hauling the second installment of my Tibetan library with me, I was constantly soaked. Joe Wilson's *Translating Buddhism from Tibetan* was probably the worst offender – and the greatest giver. An 800-page brick weighing in at 3.2 pounds, it was one of the few books that I'd paid handsomely for, an actual import of the American edition for desperate Tibetan language students. For what I'd paid for it, and for the wealth of material it contained, I was determined not to let it go.

Crossing the border into Israel at Aqaba, my collection was again subjected to scrutiny, this time by Israeli customs officials. As border guards stood around, bored, nonchalantly holding submachine guns, my Tibetan books were examined to be sure they posed no threat. A hostile young woman, probably still in her teens, began paging impatiently through each book, searching for what, I don't know.

“What language is this?” she demanded.

“Tibetan,” I assured her.

“Where did you get all these?”

“At a Tibetan monastery in Nepal, before I came to the Middle East.”

“You were in a Tibetan monastery? How did you get in?”

“They welcome everyone at this particular monastery, including Westerners.”

“But not women, of course.”

“No, women too!”

“Jews?”

“Everyone is welcome there! You could go. Really!”

She finished her search and apologized for making such a mess of my well-ordered (crammed) bag, and helped me stuff everything back in. I offered her the contact information for Kopan Gumpa.

Finally, I found myself lugging my library through the terminal at Pearson International in Toronto, almost home. As I showed my customs form to the final officer blocking my exit, he explained that a ‘random’ search of my bag was necessary. Waiting in a short, humiliating line for my ‘random’ search as dozens of people glided out past the final security check unmolested, I wondered what, in this liberal country of ours, could possibly have worried them about a backpack full of books.

A customs official opened up my bursting bag (for the last time) and rummaged through the books and stinking clothes until he came across the brick that was *Translating Buddhism from Tibetan*, saying “Ah, here it is.” Apparently Wilson's tome had set alarm bells ringing (figuratively, anyway). After a cursory glance through its pages, he told me I was free to go. I asked whether he could tell me what he'd been looking for. Under his breath, perhaps so the next big-book-bearing person behind me wouldn't hear his secret, he confided to me that the spines of large hardcovers were ideal places to hide low-weight, high-value drugs, such as heroin. I tried to

explain to him that I'd never used low-weight, high-value drugs, but he sent me on my way. My two journeys to the East were over and I had returned with a collection of works that would serve others and me for years to come.

This collection of books is worth hardly anything, in monetary terms. But each book has been carefully chosen, read and reread with devotion, highlighted and annotated for easy reference to the choicest material within. They contain hints of ancient languages – and ancient teachings. These books have probably traveled through more countries than your average person has. Hell, they have probably been meticulously examined by more customs officials than the average person has. But now they are home, safe. They can rest on my bookshelf and wait until I, or my descendants, choose once again to open them with open eyes.

The List: Superlative works of the subcontinent by Kieran Fox

All of the following were brought back from India and Nepal after two trips in 2009 and 2010, in my backpack and by my own efforts (none were mailed). After their journey, none are in particularly good condition, but all remain readable, which is what counts.

- Anonymous. (2007). *Sang-gye Nam-thar* (“The life of the Buddha”). Kathmandu, Nepal: Pod-jong Mi-mang Pe-trun-khang (Tibetan People’s Educational Publishing House). [A paperback comic-strip re-telling of the Buddha’s life, in Tibetan, published locally for Tibetan refugee schoolchildren and available nowhere else, to my knowledge. Purchased in 2010 in Bouddnath, Nepal.]
- Anonymous. (2009) *Mi-le Nam-thar* (“The life of Milarepa”). Kathmandu, Nepal: Pod-jong Mi-mang Pe-trun-khang (Tibetan People’s Educational Publishing House). [A cheap paperback, locally produced copy of Tibetans’ favorite story, the life of the great yogi Milarepa. Purchased in 2010 in Bouddnath, Nepal, from the publishing house.]
- Das, Sarat Chandra. (2000) *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Gagan Offset Printers. [A cheap, cardboard-cover reprint of an ancient Tibetan-English dictionary originally compiled in 1902 and still invaluable today for its innumerable Sanskrit cross-references to Tibetan Buddhist terms. Purchased in 2010 in Bouddnath, Nepal.]
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. (1991) *Essentials of Modern Literary Tibetan*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. [An almost certainly unauthorized hardcover reprint of one of the finest (and my first) textbooks of the Tibetan language, purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Hodge, Stephen. 2009. *An Introduction to Classical Tibetan*. Bangkok, Thailand: Orchid Press. [An apparently legitimate paperback copy of Hodge’s textbook, purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu, Nepal.]
- Iyengar, B.K.S. 2008. *Light on Pranayama*. Uttar Pradesh, India: Thomson Press (India) Ltd. [A cheap paperback reprint of Iyengar’s work, purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Iyengar, B.K.S. 2009. *Light on Yoga*. Uttar Pradesh, India: Thomson Press (India) Ltd. [A cheap paperback reprint of Iyengar’s most famous work, purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Iyengar, B.K.S. 2003. *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. Uttar Pradesh, India: Thomson Press (India) Ltd. [A cheap paperback reprint of Iyengar’s work, purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Matthiessen, Peter. (1983) *Le leopard des neiges*. [Apparently published in Nepal, an unaccredited and incredibly shoddy paperback facsimile of the French translation of Matthiessen’s work, widely available in Kathmandu. Originally published by Gallimard in France, and purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu, Nepal.]

- Preston, Craig. (2003) *How to Read Classical Tibetan, Vol. 1*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications. [Paperback purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu (imported from USA).]
- Preston, Craig. (2009) *How to Read Classical Tibetan, Vol. 1*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications. [Paperback purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu (imported from USA).]
- Rigzin, Tsepak. (2008) *Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology (Revised and Enlarged Edition)*. Dharamsala, India: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. [Hardcover, purchased in 2010 in Bouddnath, Nepal.]
- Samuel, Geoffrey. (1995) *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. [A well-kept hardcover, apparently legitimate and imported, of Samuel's definitive work, purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu, Nepal.]
- Saraswati, Niranjanananda. (1999) *Dharana Darshan*. Munger, Bihar, India: Yoga Publications Trust. [Paperback purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Saraswati, Satyananda. (1983) *Meditations from the Tantras*. Munger, Bihar, India: Yoga Publications Trust. [Paperback purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Saraswati, Satyananda. (2002) *Sure Ways to Self-Realizationn*. Munger, Bihar, India: Yoga Publications Trust. [Paperback purchased in 2009 in Rishikesh, India.]
- Saraswati, Satyananda. (2009) *Yoga Nidra*. Munger, Bihar, India: Yoga Publications Trust. [Paperback purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Sopa, Geshe Lhundup. (2004) *Lectures on Tibetan Religious Culture*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. [An intermediate textbook of readings in Tibetan, transcribed from lectures given by great Tibetan teachers in Dharamsala. Purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu.]
- Tsering, Sandup. (2008) *Lonely Planet Phrasebooks: Tibetan*. Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd. [A used, but apparently legitimate, copy of a Tibetan phrasebook, purchased in 2009 in Kathmandu, Nepal.]
- Tsong-ka-pa, the Dalai Lama, and Jeffrey Hopkins. (1987) *Deity Yoga*. [A cheap, hardcover, unaccredited facsimile version published somewhere in India. Originally published by Snow Lion Publications in Ithaca, NY. Purchased in 2009 in Dharamsala, India.]
- Wilson, Joe B. (1998) *Translating Buddhism from Tibetan*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications. [An expensive, legitimate, weighty, imported hardcover edition, purchased in 2010 in Kathmandu, Nepal.]