

FIRST JOURNEYS

I had first encountered people from Tibet in 1977, when out of curiosity I found myself at the Black Crown ceremony conducted by the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje, spiritual leader of the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, in a small farmhouse in the Welsh borders. As I watched the powerful ritual being conducted by a great master and his small entourage, perhaps a seed was sown – or something re-awakened.

Just when it seemed it may prove impossible due to lack of funds and connections, a first visit to Tibet materialised in the year 2000 when I connected with Chodrak, who invited me to accompany him on a visit to his nomad family in Amdo in late August that year. With barely a month to prepare, I scrambled to gather the supplies and funding I would need: sleeping bags, suitable clothes and a good jacket, loaned from my American friend, Hilary, an experienced camper and trekker; she would accompany us on the trip, linking up with Chodrak and I at Chengdu airport. Fortunately, my old Nikon 35mm film cameras were very light and I was used to carrying two film cameras around in a backpack from my time spent in India.

Our life is shaped by our mind; we become what we think.

With a clear mind, joy will follow our thoughts and actions like a shadow.

The Dhammapada

I was excited, Eastern Tibet in earlier times was greatly feared by travellers for the 'wildness' of its fiercely independent people, who were considered to be formidable warriors and bandits, owing allegiance to no one but their own tribe. The names of the legendary Khampa and Golok tribes would evoke fear among merchants, pilgrims and explorers travelling through the area from China to Lhasa. Alexandra David-Néel, the first European woman to visit Lhasa, referred to the area as 'the land of the gentleman brigands', noting also their chivalry and devotion to Buddhism. I was wondering if I'd still find the wild west – in eastern Tibet.

Having passed a few days in Chengdu, with its curious mix of Western fast-food outlets and neon lights alongside tea gardens, very early one morning we headed north in a four-wheel drive to the grasslands of Amdo. The flat farmlands around the city gave way rapidly to mountains scored by deep gorges, the then brand-new freeway suddenly changing to narrower roads, ever decreasing in quality, hugging the sides of river canyons.



Yeshe combing her hair in the family black tent. South Amdo grasslands, 2000.



Sisters circumambulating Kalden Jampaling Monastery, Chamdo, Kham, 2000.



Nomad sisters, Near Lhagang, Kham, 2000.



In a quiet moment at the family nomad camp, Palmo has her hair groomed by her sister. Traditionally, ladies in this area would have 108 plaits, a sacred number in Tibet. Ramashong Valley, near Manigengo, Kham, 2015.



Palmo's sister at early morning milking. Even though it is July, the altitude (c. 14,000 feet) means that frost is common. Ramashong Valley, Kham, 2015.



Listening to dad Sonam Wangbo telling stories. The sacred Dahu Valley, Kham, 2016.



Nomad friend Sonam Wangbo telling us how he once saw a dragon in his high summer pastures. He used his hands to describe the power of the dragon descending. He related the encounter as if it was the most normal thing in the world and then moved on to the topic of a new road coming through the area. In his spring quarters, Dahu Valley, Kham, 2016.



The nun and fledgling yogini Ani Tenzin Yangchen in her room at Dong Tsang Ritro hermitage. She has long hair as yogic practitioners often grow their hair out during prolonged retreat periods of tsa-lung practice. Nangchen, Kham. 2019.



Ani Tenzin Yangchen ties up her long hair. Dong Tsang Ritro hermitage, Nangchen, Kham. 2019.