



JOURNEY TO INDIA

Chapter Two: Dharamsala

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I remember not long after I'd first arrived in Kashmir I would repeat a mantra that went, "descend slowly." What I meant was that although I wanted to live as cheaply as possible, I had no idea of how well I would be able to deal with conditions that seemed as though they could be severe.

Throughout my couple of years in the country I never had hot running water and at times had no running water at all. Food on purchases on the street can be covered in flies, buying a train ticket can mean waiting in line for hours. Busses could be so crowded that people were two deep out of the door, holding on to each other as their only protection from falling into the street.

I've seen villages where the open sewers ran along beside the open trenches that carried the water supply, and boys squatting on the street washing dishes in front of the restaurants, placing the clean dishes on the street where everyone walks and spits.

Despite the hardships and unpleasantness, by the time I'd reached Dharamsala, I relished the slower pace and didn't miss the modern conveniences, except maybe hot water for a shower once in a while. My moments were filled with the reality of the world right up against me. No constant bombardment of news from beyond the borders of my daily life. I would go for long stretches of time having no idea what was happening in the world at large.

Unlike in the developed world, where history was relegated to books or quaint recreations at tourist sites, here every image seemed to coexist with its history; the past lived visibly within the present, and the continuity of survival somehow provided a sense of security. Negative thoughts and imagined fears about the future paled against the vividness of the moment. In India there was a basic confrontation with the processes of life and death that was somehow comforting.

I remember when I was living on my little houseboat on Nagin Lake in Kashmir, having breakfast one morning when a little mouse ran right across the table. I looked up and said, "get outta here!" And he scampered off. I took it so much more in stride than I would have back in the States. In India living so much closer to the natural world, and with oxen everywhere, cows in the streets, chickens, roosters, ducks, goats, all kinds of birdlife, and now this little mouse, I recall thinking that it was as though I was part of the barnyard and maybe "The Farmer" was looking out for me, too.

It seems strange that I had come to India with a one-way ticket, knew nothing about the country, had a very limited amount of money and no idea where I would ever get any more, was surrounded by a culture that was always strange and at times bizarre, and living conditions that would strike horror into the hearts of many Americans, and yet I felt secure. It was a relatively short time after arriving in Dharamsala that I remember saying out loud to myself, "I think I'm falling in love with India."

Dharamsala was very different than Kashmir. The first thing that hit me was the lack of hustle and come-on by touts. It may have partly been the strong Tibetan influence, but I think the main difference is that Dharamsala is truly part of Hindu India, while Kashmir is mostly Muslim.

My first stop in Dharamsala was the Rose Hotel, which I think was about 80 cents to a dollar a night. Perhaps it was more, because the next day I went looking for different accommodations, which I found at the Deepak Hotel. The Rose Hotel was much more difficult, being up a hill with a steep climb. The Deepak was in town, cheap and decent. It probably cost about sixty cents a night. There wasn't a bathroom in the room, but there was one right down the hall, with a toilet and shower, no hot water, of course.

When you think of a hotel in the States being so cheap, not that you could even find anything remotely close to less than a dollar a night, you think of flophouses. These hotels in India were not that. The Indians I met staying at these hotels were middle or lower-middle class. For example I would meet government workers, such as engineers, who were traveling on business.

Dharamsala was an adventure in Tibetan food, such as Momo, baked or fried dough filled with meat paste, and Thukpa, a soup of meat, vegetables and noodles, meeting some interesting travelers, taking walks along the hills and up goat trails, to peer from this 12,000-foot high perch and see the sun sinking below the Earth's horizon line. I would wander out of town and find beautiful mountains and hills that looked like ancient Chinese paintings, with green-tufted, scalloped edges, fast-running streams and gorgeous lacy waterfalls, which I could stand under letting the refreshing mountain water shower down upon me.

The Dali Lama's home in exile is in McCleod Ganj, about a kilometer or so up the mountain from Dharamsala. You can take the bus or walk; the trip takes about an hour whichever method of transportation you choose, since the climb is so steep the bus just crawls along. The hike is exhausting, but incredibly beautiful, both for the views where one can literally see over the Earth's curvature, and the Tibetan presence.

I'd huff and puff along the steep trail beside piles of stones stacked on a boulder as some kind of esoteric marker, while prayer flags fluttered in the breeze, and the deep, echoing sound of chanting came from temples and homes. Stopped old men swathed in orange cloth feeling their way along the trail with walking sticks taller than they were would pass by.

It was in McCleod Ganj that I met Peter. I'm really not sure if Peter's last name was Cooper or Cook. Greg had written to me about Peter, in either his first or second letter. They had met in Dharamsala where Peter was staying at the Tibetan Association Hotel. Greg had said that Peter was about fifty years old, which to my thirty at the time seemed quite old. He was English, but was born in India. Peter was well educated; he had taught in the university, and he had known and traveled with Ram Das, during the latter's first sojourn of discovery in India. By the time Greg had met him, however, Peter had been reduced to what one might describe in the West as a down-on-his-luck intellectual, or perhaps even a bum.

I didn't remember any of this, nor did I know that Peter was Peter when I met him. It was in a café in McCleod Ganj. He was sitting at a table drinking tea with some French and Italian travelers, whom I had joined to also drink tea and smoke some hash. We were all sitting and talking when Peter asked who would like to go and get some Chhaang. I was the only one, perhaps the only other alcoholic, who said yes.

Chhaang is a Tibetan rice beer, thick, bitter and potent. We left the café and I followed Peter through the narrow

lanes. We continued down the dusty road to an old stone house, which we entered and were then led down some stone steps into a cave, where we sat at a table and were served bottles of Chhaang by a wizened, stout, hunched and smiling Tibetan woman.

I extracted the leather tobacco pouch that held my dope, rolled a joint of hash and tobacco, drank and talked to Peter. I told Peter, as I told everyone, that I was a writer.

Of course, all I'd ever really written were poems, and lyrics, and I hadn't published anything except some songs, such as "Come to Me," which had been recorded by Juice Newton and later Kacey Cisyk and Jennifer Warnes.

I had done almost nothing to promote or publish the poems that I loved to write. I think I may have submitted one or two over the years, and I had given a couple of readings, one accompanied by musicians, for the poet Kenneth Rexroth, at the University of Southern California at Santa Barbara.

I'd been waiting to be discovered. Ironically, I was discovered that day, although not in the way I had been hoping.

Peter and I left the Tibetan Chhaang den and walked through the village streets. He asked about my poetry, and as I'm wont to do I began to recite some. He was very complimentary. Suddenly he stopped and looked at me, "Are you Greg's friend?" he asked.

When I heard that, the light went off in my head, and I asked him if he were Peter. I don't remember if I said Peter Cooper and he said, "Cook," or if I said Peter Cook and he said, "Cooper." I couldn't remember his last name then or now.

How incredible it was that I was in India, which at that time still had a population of more than 700 million, that I happened to be in Dharamsala and meet somebody who realizes who I am because of my poetry?

It was after I'd gotten back to my hotel that I realized I'd left my tobacco pouch, which in addition to some hash also held the little bit of opium I had left from Lassa in Kashmir. Could I find my way back to the unmarked Chhaang house hidden deep in the twisting intestines of McCleod Ganj? Would my pouch be there?

Uncanny as it may be, that's exactly what happened. I went back to McCleod Ganj, found the house and was greeted by the old, hunched women who, smiling, handed me my pouch with its contents intact.