

# **The Seeker**

By David J. Robertson

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## Chapter One

### *Stirrings of the Soul*

It was late in the day, the sunlight of the afternoon draped the buildings of the walled town. Shadows were slowly creeping over the narrow streets, dancing, and gradually bringing forth the evening. A mass of people in the ancient town square were beginning to crowd around a large wooden platform in the centre, as the leaders and high priests of the settlement climbed the stairs onto it and were preparing to announce something of significance. The anticipation of the crowd was growing as the town's highest ranking official, shown by his unique clothing and military insignias, stepped onto the podium at the top of the platform. Cheers among the crowd rose, a sign of the official's popularity. He signalled with his hand for silence, which was quickly obeyed by the excited townsfolk. A silent, yet tense atmosphere pervaded the square.

I stood with an old acquaintance whose name I couldn't remember. My mind was hazy, preventing me from reaching into my memory. We saw the reason for the gathering of the town and its leaders - a man in a cage who looked haggard, bloody and beaten. A crown of thorns placed upon his head. My companion and I had only arrived less than an hour before the town gathering. The settlement was built around an oasis in the middle of an enormous, featureless desert with nothing but vast, endless stretches of sand. My acquaintance had told me that a man who was proclaimed to be the messiah and preached a message of unconditional love was to be placed on trial today. I was not sure why I was here, or how we even managed to cross the barren wasteland beyond the walls of the settlement and arrived here safely. The town officials began to speak to the mob, and there was an angered response to what they were saying as intermittent bursts

of rage arose from the crowd at the end of each statement. Though I did not understand the language they were speaking, it was apparent that this man's fate was a foregone conclusion.

Execution.

My companion leaned over to me and stated in a calm, composed voice, "it begins."

The man, who seemed familiar yet I did not know his name, was violently pulled from the cage by two heavyset soldiers in a standard uniform of the Roman empire - crimson tunic, grey scaled armour and an iron helmet. Though he looked wretched, the incarcerated man retained a tranquil composure, allowing the guards to escort him, however painful, and seemed completely at peace with the fate that the city's inhabitants had imposed upon him. I suddenly felt a great sadness overwhelm me. Why destroy the life of a man who can embrace an unjust and horrible fate with such profound peace and acceptance?

I winced as I witnessed the captive man be nailed to a large wooden cross and then be lifted into the sky. The roars of the crowd now drowned out any other sound. The people of the town had succumbed to bloodlust and a frenzied desire to see death. The excruciating pain of six inch nails, driven into the hands and feet of the captive man and used to keep him suspended in the air against the force of gravity, proved to be unbearable and rendered his peaceful manner asunder. The tortured man screamed in agony as blood oozed from the holes inflicted by the nails.

I couldn't bare his suffering and turned my head. What purpose does this serve? How is such intense suffering possible? I soon looked back and the giant wooden cross was now alight, spontaneously engulfed by a bright fire. The screams had stopped, the crowd was silent, I stood in awe, confused by the flaming cross.

What mystery caused this?

I awoke in my bed, the memory of the dream at the forefront of my mind. It took me a while to gather my wits. I was in my small room of two beds, shared with one other novice who was fast asleep with a rather content expression on his face. I looked out the window and saw the faint red and purple light that

painted the sky before the coming of dawn. Stars were still littered across the heavens, but slowly becoming less and less visible as the evening faded away.

Was that a dream or something else? The sequence of the dream remained clear and potent in my memory, the symbolic imagery, the intensely religious content. I'd just witnessed the passion of Christ in a dream. A distorted version of the original story, but a dream of the crucifixion all the same. I'd never had such an intensely spiritual, religious dream... and whilst I was living in a Tibetan monastery, hidden away in the Himalayas, far removed from any Christian influence.

Did this dream mean anything? Is there guidance from the universe or a lesson to be learned from what I had just experienced? Was it a densely layered vision foretelling something in my life? These questions lingered at the forefront of my mind and they refused to leave, each taking turns resurfacing again and again as I lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

The old clock hanging on the wall by the door read twenty minutes to five, the morning bells would ring shortly and the day would begin in earnest. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to doze any longer, I grabbed my towel and *chougu*, the Tibetan word for the robes of Buddhist orders, which I'd tossed onto the floor the previous night before slipping into bed. Even though I was in a remote, cold place nestled between two slopes in the Himalayas, I had a tendency to overheat when I slept - so I wore very little at all, making it slightly difficult to leave the warmth of my bed each morning. Quietly slipping out of the room so as not to disturb my fellow novice, I walked along the dark corridor to the communal bathroom. I was the only one awake, though this wouldn't last long, and I had free choice of the showering cubicles. I chose my usual one, far on the left by the wall. I placed my towel and clothes in the most convenient spot away from the flow of water, turned the taps on and adjusted the temperature to achieve the equilibrium that brought me the most comfort and pleasure.

We are such creatures of habit when we don't pay attention to our behaviour, I thought as the warmth sprawled over and intoxicated me in pleasure. When our minds are subjected to

repetitive activities such as this, it shortly becomes an unconscious process. The mechanism seems to work so that the mind can focus on decisions and ideas that have greater consequence to one's life. But it is also a sign of comfort. We have found a way of doing something that suits us, so we keep doing it in that way. Little do we notice, however, how much of our life gradually becomes habitual and conditioned, which in many ways can restrain our freedom of choice, and our freedom to experience something different to whatever we have personally established as normal.

Living in the mountains is obviously a cold affair and apart from a fireplace in the refectory, there's little source of warmth, and as a result, each morning I've found myself staying in the shower longer, savouring the extra heat on my body. The waters felt so reinvigorating and soothing on my body and I was slightly dreading having to turn it off and face the biting, crisp air again. I shuddered and noticed goose bumps rise just at the mere thought of this. I was seeking pleasure and avoiding displeasure to the best of my ability - exactly what the Buddhist teachings claim. All our lives from birth to death, we spend our time seeking what we personally find desirable or what we think will bring us happiness - be it material objects like cars, houses, the latest gadget; or experiential pleasure such as raising a family, exploring the world, pursuits of the body or gaining power. Throughout this life, we try to avoid anything that goes contrary to our personal desires and happiness. We often dislike anything that does not conform with our conception of the world and how it should be. Thus we experience a variety of mental states, many of which can cause personal suffering and the suffering of others. Anger, fear, hatred, sadness, obsession, the list goes on. Gautama the Buddha taught this twenty five centuries ago and it remains as relevant today. These teachings regarding the operation of the mind and the root causes of suffering were what largely led me to abandon my life in the West and drew me to the monastery. No other school of thought has helped me more psychologically to bring me to a greater sense of peace and happiness.

I braced myself for turning off the shower and the inevitable cold chill that was going to follow. At least I didn't need

to shower every day, since I was in a place that didn't involve too much physical work and sweating. Stopping the flow of water, skin prickling at the sudden wave of iciness, I swiftly reached for my towel and frantically dried myself to soften the sharp embrace of the air around me. I put on my chougu and warming up but still shivering, went back to my room, now seeing a few other novices emerge from their slumber. When I reached the room, I casually tossed the towel onto my bed, and proceeded to grab my pack. I picked up a few books that I thought I might read at some point during the day - a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, one by a Tibetan Lama and a book on the mystical aspects of the world's religions. In a way, these books outlined my worldview. Is my outlook on life just a series of things I've read or heard someone say? I found myself thinking. Had I thought of any of these opinions and viewpoints myself? Does that mean I'm really an independent thinker, or for that matter, is anyone? Are our views just a collection of statements and values we've gathered throughout our lives? A slightly hollow feeling arose as I contemplated the potential truth behind these questions.

Putting these thoughts aside, I grabbed my bottle of water and went outside. The grounds of the monastery were completely covered in snow, with the exception of the numerous narrow pathways dug by the monks and groundskeepers. The old wooden and stone monastic buildings, mostly painted in red and decorated in a countless number of ways, created an enchanting atmosphere like something out of the myths of explorers from centuries past. Having time to spare before the morning meditation practice began, I climbed a hill that was only a short walk from the residency blocks. A beautiful spot, it allowed a sweeping, majestic view of the surrounding landscape. The monastery was nestled in a higher area of a wide valley, resting at the feet of large looming mountains. The predawn purple and red sky continued to gradually give way to the day, retreating in order to prepare for the next round of the cosmic cycle. The plain below was covered in a thick layer of snow, and a path to the nearest village was barely recognisable. The mountainous valley followed from east to west, so each morning and evening the monastery witnessed the rising

and setting of the sun. A truly beautiful spectacle in this part of the world, but yet again, watching the movements of the planet is remarkable anywhere one goes. I sat on a rock, assuming a cross-legged position facing the direction the sun would emerge from and within a few minutes, the tip of the shining life-giver arose out of the horizon, covering the valley below in a golden light. Staring directly into the sun, whose rays were not yet powerful enough to hurt, I felt a calmness, warmth and clarity absorb my being. A brief state of tranquillity that clears the mind and brings a bit of joy to the heart at the beginning of the day. I watched the sun till it had completely risen, waited a few minutes to enjoy the peace and warm glow of the morning, before descending back down the knoll. Meditation practice was about to begin and the bustle of the monastery in the morning was starting to take shape, dozens of red robes flowing around amongst each other. Silence is observed throughout most of the day, with certain times allotted for discussion, debate and some socialising. It's always an interesting experience watching all the other monks, novice and senior, going about their day without a word being spoken.

I soon reached the main hall of the monastery, a beautiful building of red, covered in elaborate patterns of gold. The entrance was pillared and on each side of the large doorway was an elaborate mural. The one to the left representing the six realms of existence according to Buddhist belief - god, demigod, human, animal, hungry ghost, and the two hell realms, all depicted on a wheel held by a demon that represented time. A deeply philosophical work of art. On the right side was a large *mandala* mural with the Buddha serenely sitting in the centre of the image.

I made my way inside and sat down on a cushion in my usual place towards the back of the hall and close to the doorway. I looked around and noticed a few other early novices, either meditating or reading. The interior of the hall was as beautiful as its exterior. There were numerous red pillars symmetrically placed throughout and large windows allowing the early morning light to pass through, illuminating the place in a warm glow. The front of the hall was filled with depictions of various buddhas with a large golden statue of Gautama in a meditative posture as the

centrepiece. There always seemed to be incense burning but I could never see where it was coming from. The whole room exuded an aura of tranquillity, and I always felt immediately calm upon entering it.

As time passed, the hall filled up which comfortably fitted around a hundred people. Eventually the head teacher, a senior monk named Tenzin, emerged from an alternative entrance to the novices. An old stocky man, who managed to carry himself with considerable grace. He had a slightly chubby face, tanned skin typical of a Tibetan, and a shaved head as is customary of monkhood. He wore a small birthmark on the left side of his crown, somewhat resembling a lotus flower, as though he was destined to become a Buddhist monk. All in the hall rose as a sign of respect, and joined him in prostration in front of the Buddha statue. Before I entered the monastery, I always thought that prostrating oneself was just an act of blind devotion towards a leader, that it was a sign of conformity, a lack of critical thinking, and something in the realm of cultish behaviour. After discussing the issue with a monk early during my time here, I recognised its greater significance.

Prostration, on a spiritual level, does not necessarily indicate a relationship between a subservient subject and a superior lord, but rather it can be seen as a sign of humility. Prostration shows that one is not too prideful, that one does not see himself above others, but rather that he is of service to others. It is a symbolic act of the surrender of the ego, the sense of separation we have from the rest of the universe. When Tibetan Buddhists prostrate, they form their hands in the prayer gesture, then place them above their head, over their throat, and over the heart, roughly representing purity of mind, purity of words and a compassionate heart. They then bend down and place their foreheads on the ground, or even completely lie down, before arising again and repeating the movements two more times.

After prostrating, we returned to our cushions to the sounds of collective shuffling. Tenzin welcomed us on this frosty morning, beginning with a light-hearted joke regarding the snow. He had a kind and soothing voice, yet it was confident with the



authority to effectively conduct the art of meditation and the teachings of the Buddha. Despite living in this remote monastery for most of his years, the monk's English abilities were incredible, comparable to any native speaker. I'd always found it a shame that I came from a country that only really speaks the *lingua franca*, the common language of the world. It generally means less of an opportunity to learn a second language and even less incentive to do so.

Tenzin instructed us in the initial meditation with his calm voice, helping to bring us into a state of tranquillity. Although Tibetan tradition has a wide range of meditative practices, during the first daily meditation for novices, mindfulness is always practiced. It is perhaps the most basic technique, but one of the most effective for many aspects of life, spiritual or mundane. It is simply the cultivation of awareness of the present moment through the observation of what *is* through sensory and cognitive experience. Two general approaches are often taken: one that focuses awareness on a particular point such as the sensation of breathing, and the other that has no particular centre of awareness, instead observing the rising and falling of experiential phenomena such as sounds, feelings and thoughts. Both are effective, but in the monastery we were generally taught to focus on the breath, as this cultivates a concentrated, central point of awareness.

I began my practice by observing the tactile sensations of myself sitting, the pressure of my legs in a crossed position, my slightly clammy hands placed one on top of the other, the softness of the cushions, the light strain on my lower back. I took three deep inhalations, noting the calming effect it had on my body and thought processes. I noted the breath, the inhalation and exhalation, the rising of my shoulders, of the air filling my chest and being expelled, witnessing my body depleted only to expand again in a rhythmic manner. I shifted my awareness slowly to where I felt the breath the strongest, where it enters the body at the end of the nose. I felt my body becoming increasingly relaxed, and my mind and thoughts calming.

I remained in this state for some time, thoughts clear and mind focused on breathing, external and internal distractions at a

minimum. The only disturbance in my attention was the occasional ruffle or cough of a novice and the guidance of Tenzin. I became increasingly absorbed in concentration of the breath, to a point that nothing seemed to exist except the awareness of breathing and its subtle dimensions that are not normally traceable in every day waking. Even the sense of "I" had mostly disappeared, there was no observer observing phenomena, but rather the breath, the act of breathing and the watcher of the whole process were one and the same, and what remained of the hall became virtually non-existent. In this state of absorption, the dream entered my mind with a sudden intensity and vividness that eliminated even the slightest sense of myself sitting in the hall of the monastery. I returned to the dream from the previous night. I could feel the heat of the sun and the intensity of the flames that had engulfed the man on the cross. My acquaintance was standing by my side. I witnessed the cross, disappearing in the flames, the screams of the condemned messiah still audible but fading. Shortly, the writhing fires completely silenced the man. But instead of gradually dissipating and smouldering away, the fire burned stronger, as though the man on the cross infused with it and gave the fire formidable power. The flames grew, became brighter and lighter, akin to the sun. They started to consume the wooden podium, expanding faster and faster, engulfing all in its wake. I looked to my companion and noticed a small smile on his face, his eyes staring at the flames in anticipation. The crowded masses watching the execution did not flee in terror though, but strangely, they embraced the expanding flaming light and were absorbed seemingly without pain. What was initially sorrow for the man and fear for the uncontrollable fire, was replaced by a warmth, a glow, and a strange peace that I hadn't felt before. The flames had almost reached me and I noticed myself surrendering to the fire, accepting whatever fate this bright, seemingly divine, light would bring.

What is happening to me? I thought. I felt my heart pulled towards the flames, it was driving me, instead of my mind or basic survival instincts that would normally tell one to run away and escape this unusual happening. Though it would shortly reach me, I found myself walking towards the ever brightening flames,

allowing a force that spoke within my heart to guide me, to work through me. I had completely forgotten about my acquaintance before he calmly stated in my ear, "walk on and you will find yourself. Find yourself and you will find your purpose and the meaning of it all."

I didn't know why, but I trusted him completely. Though I couldn't remember where or how I met him, I now knew that he was extensively involved in my life, someone who had been guiding me to an unknown destination. He only wanted what was best for me. Simply by the manner in which he spoke, I intuitively knew this man wanted to help me. I nodded at him, and continued to walk. An absolute trust in my companion and the fire brought an assurance and an immeasurable sense of security despite facing an absolute unknown. I walked until I was completely immersed in the white flames, and strangely, a blissful joy and love overwhelmed my being. I had become one with the man on the cross, the crowd watching the execution, the podium, the town, my companion, the white flames, everything.

A sudden snap in consciousness brought me out of the meditative dream state. I was flushing, heart palpitating at a considerable rate, and confusion momentarily clouded my thinking. It took my senses several moments to adjust. The hall was empty. I moved my arms, stretching them over my head, and attempted to move my legs, but they'd fallen asleep. How long was I in that state? I asked myself. I picked up my left then right leg as though they were large sticks, and laid them out in front of me to try and bring some blood circulation back to them. I was shortly able to rotate my feet and I could feel the blood rushing back towards my legs. I had an acute awareness of the activities of my body, working to restore consciousness, a sense of life returning to my lower body. Gradually, I arose and began to walk to the refectory. I had no idea what the time was, but I guessed it was still relatively early in the morning and breakfast should've still been available.

The refectory was empty except for a few scattered monks reading, writing or in hushed conversation. I spotted the serving table and walked towards it, grateful that there was still a little bit

of food left. *Dal bhat*, a staple meal of many Himalayan communities consisting of curried lentils, rice and an assortment of vegetables. A rather palatable and hearty dish, but after several months of eating it twice every day, I was starting to crave other flavours. Occasionally, the monastery received fruits like apples, bananas and oranges, which often excited me more than it normally should. On the whole, I didn't really mind a simple diet, but I did find myself fantasising about chocolate, pizza and other Western delicacies from time to time. I picked up a plate, and served myself what remained of breakfast. A sizeable portion, despite a slightly growing aversion to *dal bhat*. I'm too hungry in the morning after the first meditative session to care about variety in my meals, especially after something as strange as this dream experience or whatever it could be called.

Sitting outside on the balcony of the refectory hall, overlooking the valley and mountains, the glow of the morning sun kept me warm as I ate in silence. My heightened sensory awareness remained from the meditation. Each mouthful of *dal*, each sip of water was a unique experience. I was feeling and noticing each individual lentil and grain of rice, the textures, the flavours, the refreshing wave of water that cleansed the palate, all a rhythmic dance of sensation within my mouth. I had never experienced the simple act of eating in such a profound way. I began to wonder if this newfound heightened awareness was a result of the meditative dream, vision or whatever it was, and whether it would even last long.

What had just happened to me? Had I fallen asleep during my meditation and simply continued dreaming the same dream as earlier? I was totally absorbed in concentration, but I didn't recall a dullness in consciousness that normally occurs before sleep. Its vividness was too real, too concrete. There was no haziness like in other dreams, or the continually changing and distorted locations and people. Strange that it had also continued from exactly where it had finished when I woke up. I didn't want to jump to conclusions and label the experience a vision or a divine communication of sorts, but the nature of the dream was intensely religious. It seemed riddled with symbolism, yet I was clueless as

to what it could mean, whether it was my subconscious trying to tell me something or a message from somewhere else.

A mysterious companion, the crucifixion of Christ, an engulfing white flame, a mass of people immediately going from anger to glee. So much to take from these images. And the feelings of bliss, joy and love, I had never felt so incredible as when I was immersed in the light, neither in dream nor reality. And was it related to this sudden heightened sense of awareness? In the past after meditating, I often emerge with an elevated perception of my internal and external environment, but never to this degree...

I was lost in thought when the bell sounded to mark the beginning of morning teachings. I swiftly got up and rushed to the washing area, and whilst scrubbing my dishes clean, I intensely experienced the sensations of the water, the suds, the scraping of food. Incredible, something so simple, yet it was almost overwhelming. Afterwards, as I was making my way to the main hall, I resolved in my mind to discuss my dream with Tenzin after the teachings. Surely, he might have something to say about all of this.

Slightly late, I entered the hall just in time for the beginning of the old monk's talk and took my seat on a cushion. "Fate and destiny do not mean the same thing," Tenzin began in his soft yet confident voice. "Fate is the inevitable happenings of that which is beyond one's control. An external force that influences and shapes the events in an individual's life. Karma in many ways lays out the fate of a person and of societies. Many people believe the force of fate is God, others believe the movements of the heavens determine one's fate, or that the chemical and subatomic happenings of the world are all predetermined based on the previous assemblage of atoms, particles and the like." He paused briefly, thinking if he had left anything out, "Oh, and of course, some simply believe that there is no such thing as fate."

He halted again for a moment so the novices could absorb the information. "Destiny, on the other hand," he continued, "is the purpose of one's life, why he or she is here on this planet. Most people attempt to pursue what they think is their destiny at some point in their life, many achieve their purpose, but many also give

up. Like fate, many people believe destiny is the path God has set out for you to achieve your highest potential. Others don't believe in destiny, whilst Buddhists hold that karma is inextricably linked with destiny."

A student rose his hand. "A question, Indra?" responded Tenzin.

A small young Nepali man, around twenty years, replied in broken, yet intelligible English, "Yes, I have met people who say that the teachings of the Buddha, especially about karma, are very... um... negative. We are bound by karma and..." he paused a moment to structure the sentence in his head, "and we must accept that we can't do much to change our lives. Could you please explain?"

I looked around and noticed other students nodding, suggesting they also had reservations about karma and shared this concern for the fatalistic understanding of the doctrine.

"Good question Indra," Tenzin replied with a smile, "this idea of Buddhism as a particularly defeatist form of spirituality is one of the biggest misconceptions about it. But that view isn't entirely untrue, it's just, uh... an incomplete understanding of karma. The concept of karma predates the time of Gautama the Buddha, and this fatalistic aspect was used to partly justify the rigidity of the caste system: one has been born a *dalit*, or a member of the untouchables caste due to his karma in a previous life. Therefore, a member of a higher caste such as the *kschatriya* or warrior caste can justify their exploitation." Tenzin said this whilst employing a range of gestures to highlight the ancient Indian social system. "When the Buddha came, he rejected the unjust caste system. Destiny and karma, from the Buddha's view does not mean submitting to the conditions of one's birth. It is a shaping force of one's life, it creates a set of conditions an individual has to work through," Tenzin paused to cough. "And each moment is an opportunity to shape one's destiny either by producing negative or positive karma," he continued. "There's an inevitability to what has been produced by one's karma, but it is the decision of each person on how to act and conduct themselves. So, yes, karma can be approached in a fatalistic way, but there is equal

room to use and act on happenings brought on by one's karma to produce results that will be of benefit to one and all."

Tenzin stopped and closed his eyes in what looked like concentrative thought. He seemed as though he was about to continue, but instead asked, "did that answer your question, Indra?"

Indra nodded slowly and unsurely, maybe because he didn't quite have the vocabulary Tenzin employed, or perhaps he was unsatisfied but didn't want to be a problem.

"Good. Now to continue, destiny can, uh... can be shaped, it can change, according to our tradition's teachings. This is because of the impermanent nature of reality, everything in the material universe is in continual flux, in continual motion. Nothing remains the same, not even the mountains, the oceans, the stars and galaxies. Destiny is no exception. It can change and be vastly different from what it originally was, and this is dependent on how someone responds to the events, people and general happenings that they encounter throughout life and were shaped by his or her karma. As a Buddhist, I hold that the ultimate destiny for humanity is to reach enlightenment and to be liberated from the cycle of rebirth and suffering. But as long as one remains in the cycle of rebirth, the destiny of the current life will be shaped by how one responds to karmic influences. So," he cleared his throat, "so, I would argue there are two types of destiny, an ultimate destiny of the individual, which is unchangeable, and a karmic destiny that is malleable."

I found myself nodding in agreement to Tenzin's insight, however, I've always had reservations towards the Buddhist understanding of purpose, simply because it negates any purpose for the material universe apart from being a challenge to escape from. I noticed that there was a bit of a contradiction with an unchangeable destiny of humanity, yet reality is impermanent. But I soon dismissed this criticism after remembering that Nirvana - or that state of existence that is unchangeable, infinite, incomprehensible - lies well beyond anything remotely physical.

Tenzin continued his lecture for another hour or so, covering topics linked to destiny and karma. I'd heard quite a lot of

what he'd said before, but it was nice to be refreshed. New initiates from all over the world came to the monastery somewhat regularly, so there's inevitably going to be some repetition in the talks. My thoughts began to wander when Tenzin started to discuss in more detail about the specifics of karma, wholesome and unwholesome acts, some methods on how to approach events without creating karma. Thoughts of the earlier dream experience and other incursions from my life and imagination constrained my ability to focus on the teachings. I spent time watching my stream of thoughts emerge, transform and disappear. Observing the subtle sensations of my body and the sounds and sights of what was happening around me, paying attention to the sounds of the words that Tenzin was saying, but paying little attention to the content. The heightened sense of awareness was beginning to dull but it still remained higher than usual, and I continued to experiment by shifting my attention throughout my body and surroundings.

In due course we were dismissed. The novice monks hurried out of the hall in a hushed manner, eager to begin a few hours of meditation, study, or whatever interested them. As long as it was some form of spiritual undertaking within the monastery grounds, we were given quite a significant amount of free time. In times of less snow cover, we could walk and explore the nearby forest or along the slopes of the mountain. Several students waited to speak to Tenzin, including myself. Instead of joining the queue, I remained seated, ruffled through my pack, brought out the *Bhagavad Gita* and searched for a chapter on liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The story of the *Gita* is about Krishna, an incarnation of God, who gives advice on living a holy life to his friend, the Indian prince Arjuna, before a momentous battle. The teachings of the book often focus on becoming detached from the fruits of one's action, to work for work's sake and dedicating it to the divine rather than for a material reward. One becomes liberated and experiences true bliss when he or she truly engages in selfless action whether there are positive or negative results for the individual. Quite similar in some sense to the Buddhist approach, I thought, except that the *Gita* suggests that we do this because



ultimately we are all God and so we are really just expanding our individual selves to infinity by helping others selflessly.

After reading a few pages, I noticed the line of novices was almost gone. I put the book away, stood up and walked towards the front of the hall. He was just finishing elaborating on an aspect of the lecture when I was in earshot. The questioner walked off, looking somewhat unsatisfied with Tenzin's answer. When it was my turn, elder monk asked in a calm, welcoming voice. "good morning, how can I help you?"

"Good morning sir," I replied, still unsure of what title I should address him with, he didn't seem to notice or care. This was the first time I'd stayed after the teachings to discuss something. "Is it possible that we could go somewhere to talk? I have a rather strange matter to discuss that isn't quite relevant to today's teachings... something personal."

"Of course we can. I've noticed you often frequent that hill nearby, beautiful view of the valley isn't it? One of my favourite spots in the area, especially at sunrise and sunset. Shall we meet there?"

I nodded in agreement and asked, "I go there most mornings, why haven't I ever seen you?"

He smiled, "I've been here for over forty years, I've seen thousands of sunrises and sunsets from that spot. Most people who join the monastery enjoy their peace, enjoy their solitude, so I let them experience those wonderful daily miracles without being disturbed."

I smiled and let out a small laugh. "The hill is perfect. Do you have time now or perhaps some time later today?"

He thought for a snap of a moment, "hmm, what if we speak in the hour before sunset? A beautiful time of day, and it will give you more time to reflect on the nature of your issue."

"Okay, thank you Tenzin," I replied, watching the movements of his face to see if I could notice a response to my utter lack of using respectful titles. Again he appeared not to mind, or at least he didn't reveal it. "See you this afternoon."

I headed out of the hall, slightly disappointed that I couldn't talk to him immediately, hoping that he may have had some insight

into the dream and meditative experience. I decided to head to the monastery library, which, surprisingly, is filled with books not necessarily on Buddhism. Perhaps there I could find something on dreams, visions, or whatever this experience really was.

## Chapter Two

### *Searching for Answers*

The day passed by rather quickly spending most of it in the library, reading and searching for books. I skipped lunch but still went to the main hall for the midday meditation session. It was guided by a different monk, he conducted the practices several times a week in the afternoons. A man from Israel, tall and lean, with gaunt facial features, a slightly hooked nose and a heavyset brow. He was soft spoken with a slight accent, a kindly man who was rather adept at assisting and guiding initiates in meditation. He instructed us in what the tradition calls analytical meditation, a practice that uses the mind to explore its contents as objectively as possible. The practice consists of creating thoughts, feelings and emotions within oneself of a certain type, such as anger, jealousy, and sadness. With the emotion produced, one observes how it makes one feel and think, why it exists, and importantly, the transient nature of the emotion. It is said that there is no real use in allowing oneself to be consumed by an emotion or unwholesome thought, especially when they can change in an instant and holding on to them only brings further suffering. An interesting and effective practice I've found, but I wasn't particularly successful today in conjuring the emotions. I was too distracted by the dream and the heightened awareness I had experienced earlier had almost completely faded.

My explorations of the library proved somewhat fruitful. It was a small, unremarkable building tucked away towards the back of the monastery but it was absolutely packed with books, manuscripts and other documents, some appearing to be centuries old. Narrow, dusty walkways that could only fit the width of a single person allowed the tiny space to contain a wealth of literature from all over the world. I managed to find a number of

books on dreams and one about visions. One of the books was a scientific text, focusing on the neurological and chemical causes of dreaming and consciousness in general. It had little time to spend reflecting on what dreams were, whether they are of significance or have purpose and the like. It's basic premise was that consciousness was a by-product of chemical reactions within the brain. Thoughts and dreams can be considered as akin to the bile that is excreted from the liver. Definitely a perspective to consider, simply rendering my experience meaningless. It would alleviate any concern this dream was giving me. But I found it difficult to accept an explanation that was so reductionist, purely materialistic, and removed all possibility of purpose and meaning. Perhaps my reluctance was a product of my own blind stubbornness.

Another book I found discussed the nature of dreams in more detail - what they were, differing theories on what they mean, symbolic aspects of dreams. It discussed the purpose of dreams as an attempt by the subconscious to convey a message to the conscious mind through images. Or that dreams could be understood as a type of fulfilment of desires in an attempt by the subconscious to resolve conflicts in the mind. There was a large section dedicated to potential meanings of various objects and people, religious and secular in nature. I found a section that interpreted dreams featuring religious figures as predictive that one's goals and desires will be fulfilled. But the crucifix may have symbolised that there could be hardships ahead, that one would have to bear the cross. The light I later experienced could have represented divinity. I entertained these thoughts for a while, holding on to them lightly. I'd dabbled in dream interpretation a little bit in the past, and had been disappointed a number of times. Can dreams foretell the future? Cultures for millennia and all over the world have believed that they were often predictions, perhaps there was something to it. I later turned to the book I found on visions, however it was slightly disappointing. The text covered apparent visions throughout time, from Muhammad to Joan of Arc. It was more of a history of visionaries rather than the nature of visions, an interesting read, although not quite what I was seeking.

As the day progressed, I noticed that the sun's reign was coming to an end, so I returned the books and hurriedly went to meet Tenzin.

Reaching the hill after a short stroll through the snowy grounds, I spotted the old monk seated on the rock at the top, facing the sun, closed eyes appearing to be deep in meditation. He looked exactly like a monk you would see in a picture, painting or a movie, sitting majestically, undisturbed with the backdrop of giant snowy peaks. I approached him cautiously, reluctant to disturb, but he said, "come, sit next to me, I was simply enjoying the last warmth of the day."

I sat down and together we watched the sun slowly go down, the surrounding mountains stood solemnly guarding the valley in majestic silence, each one unique with individual personalities. Some sharp and jagged, impossible to conquer, others steep yet with a gentle slope in comparison where the daring could possibly even ski down. All so enormous and imposing, yet they uttered fewer sounds than the smallest baby. For a while we sat, enjoying the moment, the soft orange glow of the sun's rays seeping slowly away from the valley. Shadows softly encroaching over all without meeting any resistance. After a while, Tenzin asked, "so what was it that you wanted to discuss, a personal issue, yes?"

Unsure of how to begin, I said, "yes, it's a bit of an unusual matter to discuss, but it's bothered me throughout the day."

"It has only been bothering you today?"

"Well... yes, it was a dream, you see." I felt slightly ridiculous talking about what would probably be a rather trivial matter to a monk, especially one of such seniority.

"Dreams!" He exclaimed, "dreams are fascinating, aren't they? No one really knows what they are exactly, what they mean, whether they can be prescient." He stopped talking and a slither of a smile appeared on his face, perhaps he was recollecting something or playing with ideas, until he shook his head and continued. "In Tibet, dreams have played a role in medicine, culture and spirituality. We interpret dreams as ultimately illusory in nature, but still an experience somewhat like the *Bardo* state of consciousness, which, we believe is the intermediate phase

between death and rebirth. In some Tantric practices, we use dreams to train the mind to recognise illusion and to also assist with the death process." He paused, bringing a finger to his lips, looked at the sun, and added, "though in your culture, the understanding of dreams is largely in the realm of science now, but I think we can still sometimes interpret dreams as a spiritual experience of sorts. Now, tell me about yours."

I was surprised I hadn't read this perspective in the library today, remaining unaware that Buddhism, and particularly Tantric practices - a deeply mystical and esoteric path of the religion also found in Hinduism - focused on dreams rather extensively. I told Tenzin the contents of the dream in as much detail as I could remember - about the crucifixion, the companion, the fire, the vividness. I paused a moment to gauge his reaction, he was deeply focused and looked fascinated by the dream, his eyes sharply fixating on mine. I then talked about its continuation during meditation this morning. How it felt as though I was transported from the hall to a hot, desert town to watch the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and how I was consumed by an all embracing loving light. "If it wasn't for the extension of the dream into my morning meditation, I wouldn't be as bothered or interested in finding its meaning, its purpose. I would've thought about it, but probably would've continued on with my day as usual," I finished.

Tenzin closed his eyes as though he was processing and analysing the information he had just received. He shortly reopened them, took a deep breath and looked at me squarely, saying, "I don't know what this means, it's rather incredible though, isn't it? Did you fall asleep during meditation? Dreams can sometimes continue from where they left off once the dreamer goes to sleep again."

"No, I didn't fall asleep. I was in such a deep state of concentration this morning, far more focused than normal." I briefly recalled the total state of absorption to Tenzin. "It just feels as though the experience was placed in my mind or my consciousness... it was too vivid, too real to dismiss as a normal dream, and returning to it during meditation..." I allowed the sentence to hang in the air.

"It's certainly a very religious, spiritual dream... but I suppose you already guessed that. It's Christian in nature, that much is obvious. Your companion is an interesting aspect, and the all embracing flaming white light... perhaps it is representative of God. Before you came here, were you a Christian? That may have influenced the content of the dream."

I gave thought to this question, "my relationship with Christianity is... complex. I was raised in a secular household with little time for religion or spiritual pursuits. I used to be a rather staunch atheist, until a few events happened to me and several books came into my life." Turning my head towards the dying glow of the day, memories of my mental transformation starting forming in my mind's eye. "I saw religion in a different light, God in a different light. I wouldn't call myself Christian, though I believe in many of the core aspects of the religion, but, ah, these are also found in all the world's spiritualities anyway. The claim many Christians hold that they are the sole true religion has always stopped me from truly connecting with it however."

I could read on Tenzin's face that he was genuinely listening and interested in what I had to say. I felt I could immediately open up to this kind, loving man. "Your contact with Christianity and your culture regardless of its current secular state give reason for all the religious imagery. It may make it more comprehensible... but the fact that it continued whilst you were in a meditative state is rather unusual, and normal dream interpretations may not apply."

Tenzin looked to the sky making a sweeping gesture and smiled. A few clouds were dotting the firmament letting off a reddish orange glow from the sun. The snowy mountain peaks were capped in the same warm colour, a reminder that the day was almost at an end. "Incredible, yet calming isn't it? What I've never understood about those who ascribe utter meaningless to the universe, is how they can look at such beauty, feel that stirring in the heart, but still argue that there is no deeper purpose behind it all. Why does such beauty exist without something hidden beneath?" He asked rhetorically.

I began to suspect that Tenzin wasn't a typical Tibetan monk. His language almost suggested that he believed God, or perhaps he saw creation as a reflection of the state of Nirvana.

I put the thought aside, as I noticed he was readying a question. "Why did you come here? To this monastery in the remote Himalayas, so far from civilisation and all those who love and care about you?" He asked.

He's trying to learn more about me to make a better attempt at interpreting the dream, I thought. I had read earlier today that the meaning of a dream can only be known if there's an understanding of the dreamer's personal history and psychological makeup. "I guess there's a number of reasons," I rolled my eyes skyward, organising my thoughts. "I'm interested in the different religions and spiritualities of the world, particularly the mystical aspects of them all. Buddhism remains the only world religion that really strongly stresses this part, you know, of looking within to find spiritual knowledge, rather than focusing on external moral codes and rituals, even though it still does all of that."

"So you renounced the world and put on the robes of a monk out of curiosity?" said Tenzin in a mocking but friendly manner. "Tell me some of the deeper reasons behind your choice."

I had to give this some thought, I hadn't really delved too thoroughly into the root causes of my decision to leave everything behind. "I guess another reason is that I rejected the direction the human race is heading, and particularly my culture's attention to the most insignificant things, its philosophy and approach to life... I suppose, I reject modernity in a lot of ways and what its produced and how it's changed us. It's disconnected us from nature, from ourselves, from living our lives to the fullest."

"That's a rather condemning attitude you have," Tenzin responded, "yes, modernity has its unwholesome side, I've never quite understood why we trapped ourselves in giant concrete jungles to simply make it easier to make money and entertain ourselves. But you have forgotten all the incredible things modernisation has brought to the world, like the ability to communicate with anybody instantly, or ah... the revolution in agriculture that has reduced world hunger dramatically and



increased the basic living standards of hundreds of millions, if not billions of people. What is happening in the world isn't perfect, but nothing is ideal and never will be or never was."

"Yes, but um... the normal life that modernisation offers: the Monday to Friday job, the house, the family, engaging in repetitive tasks and pleasuring oneself with all sorts of material things has never appealed to me that much. I've always felt there was something... more to life. I want to understand the universe, I want to know answers to all those big questions of life that you ask as a child, but begin to ignore more as you grow older... I want to experience all there is to experience."

"Full of desires, aren't you?" Tenzin stated matter-of-factly, "but like the Buddha said, desires in themselves are not unwholesome. It is how we behave to attain our desires and how we react when they are not fulfilled... that is what is at the root of suffering." He knew I had already heard this lesson before, but paused to allow it to sink into my head. "Your desires are spiritual in nature... and perhaps they are unattainable living a normal modern life with all its distractions... not a particularly conducive atmosphere for growth. But the journey is largely an internal journey, so you should be able to find your answers no matter where in the world you are, be it in this monastery, or at a cramped office desk." With a colourful variety of hand gestures, he began explaining, "each person is different, and each should pursue his or her journey according to their nature. You know, some renounce society entirely and live the life of a hermit, some undertake a physical journey to unknown lands, discovering people, places, traditions and wisdom that help them understand themselves and their place in the world. Others live and thrive in society that can so often appear to be hostile towards or at odds with spiritual progress, yet it still agrees with them as an individual. No matter what one does, whether one is a soldier, a monk or an office worker, one can approach it spiritually and use it to flourish." Strongly locking eyes with me, he finished his point, "it simply requires the right attitude, the correct mindset. Each one of us is different, there are an infinite number of ways to reach the same goal."

By the last thing he said, I guessed he meant self-realisation, attaining Nirvana, the ultimate goal of life for the Buddhist. I noticed we'd diverted significantly from the original intent of our conversation. "We've gone quite far away from our discussion about my dream, haven't we." I said, stating the obvious.

"Oh, but I don't think we have," Tenzin retorted playfully, "it's all related to your deeper desires in life and your understanding of the world and place in it. It gives me some insight into a potential meaning behind this dream experience of yours... but first look." Tenzin stretched out his arm and pointed towards the sun. Most of it had disappeared behind the valley. Dusk was beginning to settle. "The last moments of the day. The setting sun never ceases to bring amazement to my being. The beauty of our nearest star, dancing across the sky, changing its colours throughout the day, always to make a spectacular exit for the following act: the heavens of the night sky above in their infinite glory!"

I could sense that Tenzin held nature very dearly in his heart. We watched the sun's final moments, beheld the changing hue of the sky from blue to purple. The growing darkness across the land, and the first few stars of the night. I could feel a chill creeping up on me as the warmth of the sun receded and let out a small shiver. Suddenly, I remembered my hunger. I forgot to eat after midday meditation practices, being too engrossed in reading. "Could we continue this discussion after dinner?" I asked.

"Certainly, we will meet in my quarters once you've finished eating, before the evening chanting begins."

I nodded. "Thank you, Tenzin, you've been a lot of help already." I stood up and walked down the hill towards the refectory, turning my head back to see Tenzin in meditation, completely at peace with himself. A living example that the teachings of a religion can have an incredible positive impact on someone's life and aren't necessarily a bunch of mumbo jumbo.

Dal bhat yet again. I ate my meal in silence in the corner of the refectory, observing the monks around me. In the evenings, the residents of the monastery, particularly initiates, tended to use

dinner to converse. As a result, the loud humming of conversation made this time of day the noisiest in the monastery, especially combined with the clanging of cutlery and the shuffling of chairs. I overheard fragments of discussion on Buddhism in general, meditation, personal lives prior to monkhood, and topics that would not be considered 'monkly'.

Spoonful after spoonful, I rushed to finish my dal to maximise my time with Tenzin, looking at the clock on the far wall above the refectory entrance, I didn't have long to talk with him. I took a small sip of my green tea, enjoying the warmth and clarity of mind the drink brings. The tea at the monastery was different to others I'd had before, the base of flavour fairly standard, but slightly sweet and with the noticeable presence of a few flowers in the leaves. My mind drifted to thoughts of tea around the world, its history, the countries that grow it, until I was interrupted by a fellow foreigner monk who sat next to me. He looked of African descent with very dark skin and was lean and tall. He had full lips, a snub-nose, a few pockmarks on the right cheek and a rather weak jaw line. Being the only tall African in the monastery, he stood out considerably amongst the hundred or so Nepali and Tibetan monks and the scattering of Westerners.

"Can I sit with you?" He asked in a quiet voice that was slightly husky. He failed to make eye contact with me as I looked up at him. He appeared rather shy.

A little surprised, I responded, "ah sure, of course."

He smiled and sat down opposite me. I continued to eat my meal, conscious of the passing time. The man began to eat his dal bhat without cutlery, as the Tibetans and Nepalese do. We ate in silence for some time until he said to me, "I saw you earlier, speaking with Tenzin on the hilltop. How come?"

I was slightly taken aback by his directness and lack of concern for my privacy. I began to feel uncomfortable, but I did admire his ability to simply ask a personal question without care. "Why would you like to know?" I replied.

He finished chewing his food, swallowed and answered, "like, I've been here a few years now, I noticed in your months here that I've never seen you speak directly to Tenzin or any of the senior

monks. And then to see you talk on the hill at sunset with him." He scooped some dal and rice into his mouth, looking as though he was literally chewing on his thoughts and continued, "I guessed that for you to do this, you must have something that's bothering you. I'm just curious."

I wondered if other monks were aware of my slightly unusual behaviour. I assumed so. Though I largely kept to myself at the monastery, everybody I'd met had been very kind and caring to me. First arriving here several months ago, I was warmly welcomed and shortly felt like I was part of a large family. So I decided to open myself up to this man, "I had a very strange dream last night that somehow continued during meditation this morning... like I was transported back into my dream. Both experiences were so real. Um, I guess I'm trying to figure out the meaning behind it, and also, I'm a little superstitious that it could be more than a normal dream... as crazy as that sounds."

"Huh, well did you ever think that dreams may simply have no meaning, that you're giving meaning to something that may have none?" He didn't sound condescending, simply blunt.

"Yeah, but I've largely dismissed that. It could be my beliefs clouding my judgement, but my intuition is saying there's a purpose behind it all. It wasn't simply a dream either." I summarised the entire experience, emphasising in particular the continuation of it during meditation.

"Strange dream," was all he replied with, though he looked as though he was thinking about it, attempting to discern it.

"What's your name by the way?" I asked.

"Djimon."

"Where're you from?"

"Originally from Sudan but immigrated to England... Religious dreams are unusual," he said, returning to the subject, "I've never had one, and the only time you hear about them is when some prophet, visionary or zealot has one. Even if you don't believe that messages from God exist, religious dreams look like they have a meaning in some way or other... but I guess most dreams do."

The same view I'd taken. I was happy to know that two people I'd spoken with also thought there could be something significant about my experience. I suddenly became aware of the time and I was running out of it to see Tenzin. "Sorry I have to go, Djimon. It was nice talking, but I have another quick meeting with Tenzin to get to before the evening chanting starts."

"Better hurry then, I'll see you around," said Djimon, "and don't worry, I'll wash your dishes."

I thanked him, stood up and walked out of the refectory at a slightly hurried pace. I shivered as I opened the door, it was lightly snowing and dark. The moon was beaming despite the clouds, managing to illuminate the monastery and the surrounding mountains. Himalayan weather is unpredictable, I've come to know, one hour it'd be a sunny day, the next moment it would be snowing. I walked towards Tenzin's quarters swiftly, my shoes kicking up snow, catching on my robes, a delicate sprinkling gathering on my shoulders. I arrived there with only a quarter of an hour to spare, and wished that I had a bit more time.

I knocked on the door, hearing Tenzin from the other side saying in a muffled voice, "the door is unlocked, please enter."

The wooden door creaked open as I walked into his room and looked around curiously. There was a strong smell of incense and a light haze. It was a small room, around the same size as mine, with the exception of a personal bathroom. The walls were draped in the standard red that was common in Tibetan monasteries and there was a little shrine to the Buddha in one of the corners. There wasn't much light in the room except for a few candles on the shrine and a couple on the walls. Tenzin was sitting on a cushion facing it and beckoned me to sit on his bed. There was a warm and peaceful ambience to the room and I felt immediately comfortable being there.

"You're a bit late, but that's okay," he said with no hint of animosity, "now, what did we finish on earlier?"

"Um, we were talking about the purpose of the dream in the context of some of my desires and beliefs," I answered.

"Of course. Well, I think it is you who is the best person to unfold the meaning of this dream. It has a purpose, I am convinced

of that. Whether it is your psyche or a divine message or whatever else it could be does not matter. Hmm, due to the Christian imagery and your prior interest in it, I would suggest that your path may lie in that religion. Perhaps its purpose is to remind you of your culture's spiritual roots. Or perhaps that through Christian imagery, your subconscious is conveying its message in a language that you can most simply decipher." He paused and closed his eyes as though in thought, "yes, I think regardless, the dream is telling you to seek a higher purpose, to go beyond the realm of living that you are accustomed to. It is perhaps telling you to embark on a journey inwards. I am not overly familiar with the story of Christ, his teachings, or the symbolism surrounding his life according to your culture. But I am aware of his saying: 'the Kingdom of Heaven is within you', perhaps there is something to find in there."

I knew something of the symbolism behind the crucifixion, such as the dictum of bearing one's cross, or having to know suffering to reach holiness, to reach God. Before I could reply, Tenzin continued, "do you see yourself as a Buddhist?"

I gave this some thought. I'd been at the monastery for over three months now, and could in some respects be considered a monk. All external appearances would say that I was a Buddhist. "No," I replied honestly, "I love Buddhism. I love its teachings, the culture it's created, its basic understanding of the world, and particularly its psychology. The words of the Buddha has been of so much help to me in life... but there is one critical aspect that I find it lacks, and it prevents me from truly embracing Buddhism in its fullest."

"And what is that?" Tenzin asked.

"A belief in the soul of the universe, or God you could call it. I know there is an ultimate reality in Buddhism, the state of Nirvana, of Emptiness, which one could interpret as an understanding of God or a universal consciousness. But a personal God gives meaning to the universe, to the destiny of humankind. It might be delusional of me to believe in that, but it's what the three Abrahamic religions believe in and it's also present throughout Hinduism and other faiths. And my, uh, my personal experience in life has also given me this conviction... It's tough though, I feel a

strong connection with the Buddhist way, but such a fundamental aspect for me is lacking... I'm not sure what to do. I love it here, but it feels incomplete. I haven't really thought about leaving, I thought Buddhism was the closest I would get to a religion that answered my needs... but this dream, it has shaken me up quite a lot."

"Do you want to leave the monastery?" asked Tenzin.

I thought for a moment. Until today I had largely accepted that even though I wasn't completely satisfied by Buddhism, it was the best opportunity I had to pursue a spiritual life. At the end of the day, I could always incorporate the teachings and practices of the tradition with my belief in a higher power. "I'm not sure, I suppose a part of me wants to stay, but there's something coming from within that is pulling me towards leaving... but I feel like I'd be quitting or giving up on this place, even though I've only been here for little more than three months." I hadn't realised until now how torn I was both in heart and mind in what I wanted out of this life. Should I simply accept things the way they are? Which aren't too bad for me at all. Or take a leap and try to figure out exactly what I should be doing with myself?

Tenzin looked at me sternly yet with soft eyes, "according to the laws of our school, a fully initiated monk is a monk for life... but you're still a novice, so you can choose to leave. If there is even a part of you that isn't completely committed to the monastic life in our tradition, this place is not for you. But meditate over this, I've watched you over these months, you work hard and you've progressed well. You would make a good monk."

I was touched by that last remark, I didn't think I'd really progressed much at all. "I'll think about it over the next few weeks and see if the thoughts of this dream experience go away."

"Try to hear that inner voice within you, your intuition. Listen to what it says, it will always guide you in the right direction, whatever that turns out to be. In our way, we call it *prajna paramita*: wisdom that transcends intellectual understanding. We all have it within us, trust it, and cultivate it. It's that gut feeling that might not always seem rational, it might even be dangerous, but if you follow it and follow it to the end, you'll

achieve your purpose and be able to do things you can't even imagine."

"But how do you know what your intuition is saying?" I asked.

"It is difficult at first, often one will get it wrong and end up following what was their emotions or normal rational mind. Intuition is that instinct, it is knowledge beyond reasoning, it's a feeling, a direction to follow before thinking comes into play. When one is fully present in the moment, and not distracted by the habits of the mind, then one's intuition can be fully realised and followed. The first sense that arises over a choice to be made in this state of present-centred awareness is always right. It might not seem this way at first, but the decision will lead one closer to one's purpose so they can fully realise their potential."

There was a moment's silence between us as he allowed me to absorb his words. I was beginning to sense that I was supposed to leave the monastery, to continue a journey of which the purpose I was still unsure. I wanted to think over it though, uncertain that following my instincts, my heart at this moment was correct. I didn't know if my heart was even speaking to me, or this desire to leave arose from another part of my mind.

Tenzin looked at his clock and spoke, "it's almost time for mantra chanting, we should go... I hope I've helped you with your problem."

"You have, thank you Tenzin." Smiling and nodding, I stood up and left the room. On departing the residential area, I noticed the snow had stopped, and the sky had returned to a partly cloudy evening. Thousands of stars blanketed the heavens, more than I'd seen anywhere else in the world, so untainted by the effects of modern living and industrialisation, even with a full moon brightening the firmament. I often envied the night skies of ancient peoples, so full of mystery, wonder and beauty. The stories created by connecting the illuminated dots together and having to navigate themselves with nothing but the knowledge of the skies. With my head looking up at the stars, I meandered to the main hall, tripping over occasionally, uncaring of the ground beneath my feet.



Arriving slightly early, I sat down in my usual place and closed my eyes for a few minutes of meditation before the hall filled up and the chanting began. I noticed the calming of my mind when I inhaled deeply, the stream of thoughts gradually slowing. I felt the subtle sensations of my body that are usually ignored when one is constantly distracted by thinking. A light itch on my leg, a small throbbing in my fingers to name a few. A peace came to me, as I enjoyed observing the sensations, feelings and the occasional thought emerging out of nothing and dissolving just as quickly.

The hall was shortly filled. Chanting in the evening surprisingly became one of my favourite times of the day. I used to associate it with mindless dogmatic repetition, but after participating a few times and becoming more confident about singing with other people around, I learnt to enjoy it thoroughly. Most Buddhists believe that chanting a mantra evokes enlightenment, but I've personally found it as a powerful, collective meditative technique. Something special happens, something energetic, indescribable when a large group of people come together to chant the mantra with the same intention. Sometimes one loses his or her sense of self as they are immersed in the collective harmony of voices, creating an atmosphere of peace, contemplation and community.

Though we used a number of mantras, the most common one we chanted was *om mani padme hum*. It roughly translates to 'may wisdom and compassion unite within me', a summation of the Buddha's teachings of cultivating a pure body, a pure mind and selfless love. If one travels through lands influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, one can see the inscription of the mantra all over, on stupas, in temples, on flags. Collectively chanting the mantra seems to evoke a powerful aura, especially in the presence of such spiritually driven people.

A different senior monk conducted the chanting this evening. I recognised him, but was not familiar with his name. As he entered, we all stood up and prostrated with him in front of the Buddha statue. He took his place and after he settled, he began to chant *om mani padme hum* with a melody that we were all familiar with. In fact, many who have visited countries such as Nepal will

recognise the melody because of the abundance of music stores that blast the chanting from their loudspeakers. In a way it subtly connects regular travellers to the esoteric nature of Buddhism and mantra chanting. It reminded me of myself walking down the streets of Thamel in Kathmandu, listening to the sounds of monks, feeling happy and at peace despite the chaos of the city unfurling around me.

I closed my eyes as the rest of the hall joined the senior monk in chanting. I focused on the sounds themselves, rather than the words, and the vibrations throughout my body that were created as a result. Reverberations from my stomach through to the lungs and up to my throat. My whole being became enraptured in the mass of singing voices, I felt as though I was one with everyone and we were a single organism creating beautiful sounds and emanating a spirit of peace and love. Mantra recitation for me created a strange effect, an almost trancelike effect, especially when sung passionately with a group of people. The passage of time can become a non-issue and when it comes to an end, I often have no idea what time it is or for how long the chanting lasted.

Eventually, the senior monk stopped, but many continued to repeat *om mani padme hum*, seemingly unaware that it was finished, so absorbed by their focus on the mantra. Once the senior monk had left the hall, I snapped out of the state relatively quickly, aware that there was a subtle change in the atmosphere. I stood up, stretched my legs and left, slowly weaving through monks and other obstacles. I found my way to the residential quarters and to my room, again enjoying the night sky and the looming shadowy figures of the mountains around the monastery. I arrived before my roommate, and immediately removed my chougu, went straight to bed and tucked myself under the blankets, mentally exhausted by the day's events and falling asleep to thoughts of the previous night's dream.

## Chapter Three

### *The First Morning*

I was walking through a dense forest, unfamiliar and strange. I couldn't see far, the trees, shrubbery and thickets were blocking my view ahead. The sun pierced through the overhanging branches, its rays dancing on the green, slightly transparent leaves. It was hot and dry but the shade offered some respite. In the distance, I could hear a river, the sound dominating the land, enormous and raging. I felt compelled to walk towards the noise by an unseen force. I looked at myself and noticed I was barefoot, shirtless, wearing something that resembled a white loincloth. I was covered in bruises and cuts, but I was feeling no pain. I walked for what seemed an eternity, the forest hardly changing in features. Occasionally, I thought I heard an animal of some sort, watching me or running away, twigs and branches snapping under their feet, but I never saw anything except a few birds, who appeared to be observing me as I walked, curious and cautious of the intruder who had entered their realm. Slowly, the covering of the forest thinned out more and more, the river became louder, and my desire to reach it stronger. I began to run, not out of fear, but of anticipation to discover what was drawing me there.

I arrived at the banks of the river. I was close to rapids, water smashing against rocks strewn throughout the river, only to continue ultimately unimpeded. On the opposite bank lay a cliff face, jagged with a small scattering of bushes and dead tress attaching themselves within small crevices. The roar of the river was deafening and its power inspired awe. It would've been at least twenty or thirty metres wide. I found a rock on the shoreline, sitting down, I watched the river pass by. Without myself noticing, an Indian man appeared by my side clothed in the saffron robes of a *sadhu*, a holy man in the Hindu faith who has renounced the

material world in pursuit of God. He wore long dreadlocks that were tied in a topknot and had a grey unkempt beard. He adorned an enormous necklace of *rudraksh* seeds, spectacles, and a wooden staff, twisted at the end as if it was a small tree with large roots growing into the sky. Though I had never seen the man before, there was a familiarity about him, as if he was a companion of mine earlier in life.

He smiled at me and spoke in a foreign language, possibly *Sanskrit*, the ancient liturgical language of northern India. I didn't understand the words he was saying, but I grasped the meaning intuitively. The sadhu was telling me to go into the river, to drown myself in it, allow myself to be swept up by its current, and to trust utterly in the turbulent waters. A surge of fear gripped me and I became immobile. The river looked deadly, the incredible speed, the jagged rocks protruding out of the waters. I couldn't move, let alone blindly agree to the request of the sadhu. But there was something inside of me that was saying to trust this man. I knew him somehow. He was telling me to have faith in him, everything would be alright, I simply needed to believe that I would live and be safe. I found myself taking one step closer to the river. Then another. Then several more until I could feel the waters lapping against my feet and legs. The cool waters on this hot day felt refreshing, rejuvenating on my body and I remained standing in place, enjoying the healing sensations of the flow.

The sadhu continued to communicate with me, his message telling me to go forward, to submerge myself and embrace the currents with no resistance. I took several steps further into the river, I was beginning to feel the strength of the river and was starting to find it difficult to remain upright and walk in a straight line.

A few steps further. Waist deep. I was resisting the force of the current, barely managing to maintain my composure with considerable effort. I heard a voice coming from within, telling me that I must give up all resistance and allow the flow of the river to take control, that I must embrace it and go with it. Despite the pang of fear, I walked on, submerged myself in the water, lifted my legs

so I was floating, and the current of the river swept me up and carried me downstream.

I did not struggle, I forced myself to trust the river. I was not crippled by any rocks, instead I was completely taken in by the movements of the waters. Occasionally, my head would bobble above the surface for enough time to allow me to breath. I eventually shifted my position, working with the flow, and ended up comfortably on my back. The fear was gone and for some reason I felt safe in the cool embrace of the river. Drifting through the rapids, miraculously unscathed, but I soon became aware of a waterfall that was fast approaching. A voice in my head emerged in the language of the sadhu saying, "you will die, you will always be dying. It is nature, accept it, embrace it, and you will become like us... infinite. Seek me and you will be shown how."

Before I had realised, I had fallen off the edge of the waterfall, plummeting to the depths below into the frothy, white water, sharp rocks jutting out of the abyss. I was going to die. My death had arrived, but I was afraid, terrified. I did not heed the lesson.

I jolted upright in my bed, stricken by panic. I was panting slightly and sweating. I looked to my right and saw my roommate quietly sleeping. After some of the fear subsided and I registered where I was, I stood up and walked towards the window. Day was still several hours away. The clouds had cleared, and the stars and moon were shining in their resplendent glory.

Another dream full of spiritual symbols, I thought, just as vivid as the previous night's, just as real. Not as intense, but it again seemed full of meaning.

"Another message from my subconscious?" I asked myself under my breath. I was confused, two such strange dreams over two nights, both spiritual in nature. One influenced by Christianity, the other by Hinduism. I went back to my bed and lay down, attempting to go back to sleep. I tried for a while but my mind wouldn't relax, it was trying to decipher the purpose of the dream... it seemed more convoluted than the previous night. I couldn't sleep, my mind was too active and couldn't stop tossing and

turning, so I decided to put on my robes, strap on my boots and go outside for a walk.

I strolled around the grounds of the monastery, the oil lamps on the side of the buildings illuminated the pathways and added to the already rather bright night. There were only a few solar power generators in the monastery, so electricity was in limited supply. The continuing use of natural fire gave a feeling of mystique to the monastery, as though it was giving a glimpse into an era that the world had passed by long ago. I navigated my way through the well-trodden snowy paths to the hilltop, to the little knoll that always helped to bring clarity to my mind. A cold wind swept through the monastery, and I shuddered a little as I walked. I could hear the soft chiming of bells being gently pushed around, a perfect addition to the already ancient and mystical atmosphere. I sat on my usual rock when I arrived and felt the chill of the icy stone that was exposed to the stars above, though it was shortly warmed by my body heat. I looked to the skies, to the moon and its illuminated face. It appeared larger than normal and I observed the various craters and dark patches of the earth's only natural satellite, pondering over how incredible the simple fact that a giant beautiful rock in space is flying above me. So normal it is in our daily experience that we often forget how magnificent it is.

The dream snuck back into my thoughts. "What did all that mean?" I asked myself aloud. Lost in a forest, the river, was it a real place? I was dressed like a reclusive hermit, I was cut up and bruised. The sadhu and his guidance. How I understood him without understanding his language, it was as though I had previously known the man. And then it clicked. The sadhu was the same man as my companion in the previous night's dream, though they were of different physical appearance. They were both giving me a similar message and I felt I could trust them. Did both come from the same part of my subconscious? Are both the mouthpiece of something else?

I sat there, staring at the blanket of stars, wondering about the dreams, about the world, about the universe. The big questions of life started popping into my head, why are we here? Is there really a God or something divine, sacred behind the universe?

What is life and how do we live it? And so on. The stars always bring these questions to my mind. The grandeur, the scale, the mystery of the universe, it is no wonder they have inspired people throughout the ages to question their existence and purpose on earth. In the grand scheme of the universe, our lives are short and insignificant, our daily problems seem to mean nothing at all on the scale of the planet, let alone all of reality. Yet, we're all infused with this sense of purpose, something within us drives us forward towards some unknown goal, and it often leads us to destruction, leads us to do things that are so at odds to our personal wellbeing that we could easily be labelled crazy or delusional. But if we push on and don't give up, we may just break through and fulfil the destiny laid before us.

Lost in these thoughts, I didn't notice the initial tremor of earth, and soon the full rumbling of the ground beneath me and all around the valley. I didn't register immediately what was happening, but soon the whole world around me had lost its solidity. The earthquake felt as though I was standing on top of the sea, the waves cresting and falling beneath me. Any moment it seemed like the ground beneath could split apart and I would plummet into a dark chasm. I stumbled as I looked around to see what was happening. A loud roar from the mountaintops came and I saw avalanches all around the valley, exposed by the moonlight. A few monks were staggering out of their quarters, appearing distraught, confused, afraid. I heard the collapse of one of the monastery buildings, then another, and another. Fires began to break out from the oil lamps crashing to the ground, catching the wooden structures alight.

There were screams of fear, agony, horror.

The avalanches were coming down fast, an unstoppable force that would shortly overwhelm the monastery. I myself appeared safe from immediate harm, but few others were. In a couple of minutes, the rest of the monastery would be swallowed by the snow and so I ran down the hill, yelling for everybody to wake up and try to seek safety. More buildings were starting to catch alight, others collapsing, and bells began to toll to warn the monastery of its impending doom. A large number of the

inhabitants were awake now, but it was nearly impossible to tell how many had already died or were hurt in the chaos that was unfolding. I could hear the roar of snow getting closer. I became lost in myself, uncertain of what to do next, if there was even anything I could do. A torrent of emotions - confusion, fear, anger, despair - swept through me. The violent, upheaving, raging of the earth continued. More of the buildings of the monastery were collapsing, particularly the older ones, unable to withstand the pressure of the earthquake. I looked toward the main hall and it had mostly disappeared, crumbling in flames. The building that was such a beautiful example of Tibetan architecture destroyed in an instant. I was soon amongst the monastery grounds, safe from collapsing buildings, but not yet safe from the fast approaching onslaught of snow. The trembling was continuing, seemingly forever. I heard cries for help, but did not know where to go.

I was confused. I felt helpless, useless.

I decided to simply continue yelling. "If you hear me, run to the hill, it should be safe from the avalanche... get out! Get out of the monastery!" I shouted as long as I could before I had to return to the knoll. A number of monks had heard and were now gathering.

The rumbling continued, but its intensity was going down. Within a minute of my return to the hill, the avalanche descended upon the monastery, engulfing almost all that was in its path. At first, I thought the avalanche would overwhelm the hill as well, but the cascading wall of snow went around the knoll and continued into the valley below. I hoped that the nearby villagers would be warned, but the power of the earthquake and the avalanche sobered any thoughts that there would be an intact settlement at the end of it all. I surveyed the hill to see if any of the monks I was familiar with had escaped alive. I spotted Djimon, who seemed quite shaken, standing alone, staring at what once was the monastery complex. The only trace of it was the lingering smoke from burned out buildings and scattered debris. Most was covered in snow. A hollow shell of what once stood.

The earthquake had ceased, and my mind was beginning to process what had just happened. It was playing tricks on me, I was



unsure of whether I was feeling the occasional tremor or not. Not many monks had made it to the hilltop, only a couple of dozen out of at least a hundred. I couldn't see Tenzin anywhere. I wanted to find him. But first I went over to the other monks and asked whether they needed support or medical attention. Most at first glance were physically fine, a little shaken up and distraught, but at least safe. A few senior monks looked utterly content and peaceful, if not happy. Not happy because of what had happened, but due to years of training which allowed them to be in a state of ease regardless of the situation. They were nevertheless assisting the few that were wounded and consoling the less experienced monks. I noticed a few initiates were in tears, screaming in their sorrow. I heard cries for lost friends, for the monastery, for the loss of their livelihoods.

It was tragic to witness, I didn't understand why this happened, and I felt tears well up in my eyes. Tears of mourning for the monks that died. Tears for the destruction of an ancient monastery. I walked a short distance away from the rest of the group and sat on my haunches, trying to calm myself using the training I'd received during my short stay here. I focused on my breathing and reminded myself of the transient nature of thoughts and emotions. It helped, but sorrow remained. I stared blankly into the shadowy abyss of the valley below, a hollow, despairing emptiness ate into my heart. After several deep inhalations, my mind slowly returned to the matter of helping any monks that may have survived, stranded in the wreckage and snow. I stood up, looked briefly into the sky in a vain attempt to find some answers, and walked back to the group with slumped shoulders.

Before I could do anything, an aged monk began to speak. He had an aura of reverence and peace about him. His appearance reminded me of the Dalai Lama, gentle and aged by wisdom and experience. Bald as was customary of the monastic order and had a permanently furrowed brow. He was wearing his crimson chougu that were slightly torn, and he carried a wooden walking stick that he was leaning heavily on. "The karma of our lives and previous lives have led to this tragedy," he began. He was calm, composed yet quiet. I had to strain my ears to hear him, particularly through

the sobbing of some of the initiates. "Please try to accept what happened and treasure the fact that you are still alive... many of us have been lost and our home as well, but distress not. All things are impermanent, everything changes, sometimes subtly, and in this case dramatically and suddenly. And those who have died will be reborn, our souls will continue living in this universe, it is only the body, the vessel, that has been lost." He coughed lightly and grunted to clear his throat, "remember these lessons and use your training and experience to realise these truths when it is most needed." I found the remarks comforting, and I noticed a few of the survivors were beginning to collect themselves again. He finished, "now for those who are able and willing, let us search the snow, through the debris to find any others who may still be alive. Head to the residential areas, many may be trapped in the wreckage of their rooms."

There seemed to be no seriously injured people on the hilltop. A few that were emotionally distressed remained, but the rest began to descend the knoll towards where several residential buildings scattered throughout the monastery once stood. There was little light, the main source coming from the moon and stars above, dawn was still a few hours away, though a few fires throughout the complex did give some additional brightness. I walked over to Djimon who was alone, shoulders slouched, heading towards the living quarters of the senior monks. He looked in my direction briefly when I caught up, but made no indication that he saw me. His gaze returned to the ground in front of him.

"How are you?" I asked, "you seem distant, distraught."

"Aren't we all?" He replied and we proceeded to walk together in silence.

We made our way through the grounds without really saying anything else, climbing over piles of snow, avoiding debris. The whole place looked as though it was just bombed or ransacked by a marauding army, utter devastation. I searched for any sign of life but found none. I turned around briefly to see if any of the others had any success. In the dim light, I saw that one monk had pulled up a body, a half naked man who I didn't recognise, but he was limp. I experienced a moment of shock as he was the first dead

person I had seen in my life. The whole situation felt so unreal, like in a dream or when inebriated. A situation so out of the ordinary that my mind and perception felt twisted and distorted.

As Djimon and I approached the location of the residential block I once lived in, he stopped and looked at me. "I-I have nothing left," he said and I noticed a tear roll down his cheeks, "I have no home, no friends, no money, it's all gone."

I didn't exactly know how to respond, the slightly odd man that I'd briefly talked to at supper was gone. "It's alright, we'll find a way to a town and contact your family," I said, attempting to console him.

"You don't know!" He said loudly, a mixture of despair and anger not really directed at me but rather his fate. "I have no family, they all died years ago. I'm from South Sudan and after the separation, my family and village were massacred by government soldiers during the civil war. They accused us of hiding rebels and supplies. We were a small village who were just trying to survive in the already tough conditions, and the rebels used us as a base. We had no choice... I saw my family murdered, but I managed to escape." He breathed deeply and heavily. "It took me months to reach the safety of London, where at least there was a small Sudanese community who were willing to help me. They gave me some work, and I saved some money. I met people who showed me to Buddhism, which helped me deal with my pain far more than the traditional beliefs of my homeland. I eventually heard of this monastery and decided to come, using almost all the money I had to get here."

"Why don't you contact some of your friends in London?" I asked.

"I can't go back... I entered the country, um... illegally, and only escaped deportation because I was tipped off. I went to Europe, and gradually travelled here, hoping that the life of a monk would give me some peace. This place was my last chance and now it's gone. All gone!"

"I'm sorry," I said, lacking anything more comforting to say, "hopefully, we can find a way."

We continued without a word spoken between us and reached the building. I managed to identify where my room once stood, walked over to it and began to move snow, debris and wooden planks around. I could feel the pain in my hands from the grasping cold, and I was soon stopped in my tracks with dread as I saw the lifeless body of my roommate underneath the wreckage. Standing there aghast for a few moments, a swirl of upsetting emotions swept through me all at once. I hadn't really known him well, but he was still one of the few people I talked to regularly. I had to push my feelings out of the way, there wasn't time, and I searched for a few fundamental things. Luckily after a couple of minutes, I was able to find the small metal container that held my money satchel and passport, and I went outside again to regroup with Djimon. Parts of the building stood out of the snow, still ablaze but beginning to smoulder and I found a small piece of timber that was alight that could be used as a torch. As I reached to pick it up, I noticed movement in my peripheral vision. A hand was sticking out of the snow, moving as though it was attempting to signal a passerby.

"Look over there!" I said to Djimon. We ran over to the hand. Djimon grabbed it and began to pull, but to no avail. I thrust the flaming timber into the snow and began to dig frantically around the hand. Djimon continued to pull and after a bit, we yanked the monk out of the snow. He was blue, bleeding and shivering, gasping for fresh air, but he was alive.

"Are you alright, are you hurt?" I asked.

"I'm h-h-hurt," he said, chattering his teeth and shivering uncontrollably. He pointed to his legs, and we saw one that looked heavily injured. "I th-th-think my leg is b-b-broken."

"Can you carry him back to the hill Djimon?"

"Yeah, help stand him up for me," Djimon replied.

I carefully reached under his arms and pulled him up, asking him to use his strong leg for support. Djimon turned his back to the monk and told him to get on, which he did with some effort and assistance from me. They left me behind and slowly navigated their way to the hill. I picked up the torch again and continued to search for survivors in the snow and wreckage. I saw

a few smouldering corpses, the sight of the mangled, burnt dead terrifying me and the stench of cooked flesh causing me to gag.

I was fairly certain I was roughly where Tenzin's room had once been when I saw him. He was lying on the ground, part of the building had collapsed on him. There was smoke and some flames around him. He was partially covered by snow but his head was free and undamaged. He looked as though he was prepared for his death, lying in what looked like a meditative state. His face was astonishingly unscathed, and strangest of all, he was smiling. He looked utterly at peace and happy in death. Decades of training in the art of dying, learning to accept it when it comes regardless of how sudden, prepared him to embrace death at that very moment. I was saddened to see his passing, but I couldn't help but smile, seeing his contentedness in death, successfully completing the process. According to Tibetan belief, he would now have entered the Bardo state, where his soul searches for its next life. He may even be reborn as another Buddhist master, a *rinpoche*. Or he may have completely left the cycle of rebirth and was now experiencing Nirvana. I said a small farewell prayer to him, leaving him there in his final resting place, and continued the search for other survivors.

It was the better part of an hour before I returned to the hilltop. Signs of dawn were approaching. I found a few more bodies in the snow and in the ruins, but compared to the number of people that were residing in the monastery, many more were lying beneath the snow or under collapsed buildings. I stumbled upon another survivor, a small Nepalese man who was fairly unscathed at the far side of the monastery. When I came across him, he was mourning over the corpse of another, and initially refused to leave him. Tears were gushing down his face as he held the body in his arms. His name was Bashu, and he told me he was holding his younger brother, who had joined the monastery only recently because he was inspired by him to pursue a holy life. In broken English, the monk was insistent that it was his fault for his death. I tried to convince him otherwise but to no avail, and we ended up carrying the body together towards the hilltop.

All of the known surviving monks had regathered, some in mourning over fallen friends, others keeping to themselves. A few

senior and novice monks were discussing the earthquake and what actions to take next. Someone had gathered wood from the ruins and started a fire. The warmth was comforting, and I noticed the injured monks had gathered around. I saw the hurt man that Djimon and I had rescued by the fire, his broken leg supported by an improvised splint. The fire had reduced his shivering and someone had found a blanket for him. He was staring into the fire, seemingly oblivious to everybody around him. Bashu went to the edge of the hilltop and continued to mourn his brother. I left him alone.

I took a seat next to the fire to warm up. It wasn't a large fire, but it was burning well and lit up the area - a moment's respite from the current reality we were all facing. I realised that I hadn't seen Djimon since returning. "Where's Djimon, the guy that helped you?" I asked the wounded monk who we had saved.

He shrugged, "I don't know, he went off again after leaving me here."

I was concerned, he didn't seem particularly stable when I talked to him. I hoped he didn't do anything rash and was simply having some time to himself. I pushed the thoughts aside as I decided to get up and walk over to the group of monks that were planning.

"... the earthquake was huge," I heard when I came into earshot, "it would've affected a large part of the country."

"Villages all over could be destroyed, thousands could be dead or homeless." Another said.

"Kathmandu might be devastated as well," added an initiate.

"We can't stay here long, there's no food, no shelter, the nearby village looks destroyed, we have to find our way to another monastery or someplace that we can stay." The eldest monk who spoke earlier said. I was beginning to think that he was the abbot of the monastery. In my months here, I couldn't recall seeing him before this night.

"But where do we go Rinpoche Dorje?"

"We can go to the nearest town that has a road through which cars and trucks pass," Dorje responded. "It may take us,

hmm, a night or two, depending on our pace. The town is about fifteen miles from here. From there we can hopefully communicate with other monasteries and find out how devastating the earthquake has been. We can offer our services to help those in need in the meantime." He closed his eyes to think, "we should leave today at some point. Once the sun rises, we will search for materials to help the wounded, and see if we can find food for us. Hopefully, we will also find other survivors."

"What of the dead?" Asked a senior monk, "the proper rituals must be observed to help them pass onto another life more successfully."

"Yes, but too many have died, and most lie under the snow or in the wreckage." He furrowed his brow even more heavily than what was naturally displayed. "What we can do, is an ancient funeral tradition for our people. Necessity calls for it. We have only found a few bodies, and sadly, we do not have time to find everybody who perished. So for those we have found, we will perform a sky burial." Dorje finished and looked to the others for their response which was met with sombre agreement.

"What's a sky burial?" I heard a Westerner with a German accent ask.

"A sky burial is not only a practical death rite, but it also allows nature to benefit from the body more than just about any other burial ritual. As the body is now an empty vessel of the soul, it has little significance and should be used as generously as possible. We leave the bodies on a mountaintop, or perhaps in our case on this hilltop, in the open to decompose naturally. The bodies will nourish animals like vultures, and it's minerals may enrich the soil."

"Thank you, Rinpoche."

"Now, tell the others of our plan, be sensitive though, the earthquake has hurt us all, but it's affecting some more than others. Then, take some rest, if you can, gather around the fire, warm yourselves. Remember your practices, your training, and pray for the those we have lost. If you have more questions, don't hesitate to ask." Dorje moved towards the fire, found a rock and sat down. He closed his eyes and entered into a state of meditation. I went to

the fire as well and made myself as comfortable as I could given the current conditions. I found a rock to lean against and managed to doze off.

I woke up to shouts and more tremors from the earth below. Fear shot through me for an instant, but the intensity of the aftershock subsided after a few seconds. Nothing in comparison to a couple of hours ago. It still caused damage, I heard some of the ruins of the monastery collapse, and in the distance I saw another small avalanche occur. But we remained safe. The fire had mostly burned out, leaving smouldering coals and ash. A few monks with arms full of wood were running back towards the hilltop, alerted by the tremor to get out of the ruins. The sky was blue and to the east, the sun was shining bright, indifferent to the destruction that was wrought during the night.

It was still early in the morning, but most of the monks were active now, gathering what they could from the ruins. The injured were resting around the fireplace, I must've been the only able person not doing anything. I jumped to my feet, but reeled, unaware of how exhausted my body was. It took me several moments to regain my balance, muscles throughout my arms and legs ached. I stretched my arms above my head, as well as my legs. I noticed dry blood on my hands and wasn't entirely sure whether it was mine or not.

I spotted where the monks were piling up supplies and surprisingly there was more than what one would think. There were utensils and food that must've come from the kitchens near the refectory, just enough to last a few days. Other supplies included blankets, firewood, a lighter kit with fuel, basic medical equipment and bandages. Someone also managed to find a few tarpaulins and rope. Hopefully, it was enough for us to endure the next couple of days, and to help the injured undertaking the journey as well. Walking down the hill to see what I could find, I noticed Djimon returning. He wasn't carrying anything. We caught each other's gaze and I smiled, but he didn't return it. It was as though he was looking right through me. He could've still been traumatised by the events of the night. Regardless, I asked, "where have you been? Are you alright?"



"I've been thinking, I needed to be alone." He responded.  
"Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"Do you know what we're doing?"

"Yes, one of the monks told me earlier. I haven't been able to find anything, I think we've salvaged just about everything we can. I'm heading back and waiting until we leave."

"I'll join you soon. I think I'll still have a look around, I overslept and haven't helped yet." I said with a lack of conviction.  
"If you haven't been told, we're also having a sky burial for the fallen."

"I know." Djimon broke off and continued to walk up the hill.

I watched him for a few moments before continuing my descent. The destruction of the monastery was far worse in the light of day. It was hardly recognisable. Burnt out shells of buildings poked out of the snow that covered most of the grounds, piled several metres high in some places. Nothing resembled its former self. I saw monks gathering bodies near where the main hall once stood. It had been reduced mostly to rubble. Small parts of the walls remained standing, the avalanche had crashed through the already collapsed structure. I walked towards the bodies, there was about a dozen of them and I saw the corpse of Tenzin lying there, still in a peaceful state. I approached the monks, "shall we begin moving them to the hilltop?" I asked.

"Yes," a younger monk said as he wiped his forehead.  
"Here, you grab the legs." He pointed towards the body closest to him.

The corpse was a small man with an Indian complexion, he looked as though he died in pain. I picked up the legs, the monk grabbed the arms and we lifted together. I struggled at first with the weight because of my weariness, but soon forgot about my own issues. It took several minutes to carry the body up the hill, and when we reached the top, the monk directed me to where the sky burial would take place, and we carefully placed the body down. I saw Djimon looking off into the distance and called for him to give us a hand. He took a moment to respond but soon came to help. For the next half an hour, myself, Djimon and a few pairs of

monks carried the bodies that'd been found, all of us too aware that many more lay beneath the snow and rubble.

By the time we were finished, there were around twenty bodies lying across the hilltop. There were a few more supplies found, and the group was just about ready to depart. A couple of makeshift stretchers were made for the wounded. Rinpoche Dorje and two senior monks were preparing for the sky burial. It was going to be rather informal due to the lack of ceremonial objects for the ritual. The surviving monks had almost all reconvened at the top of the monastery, some looking unfazed and peaceful, others still distraught, upset and scared. There were about twenty or so surviving monks. In total, less than half of the monks were counted for, dead or alive.

The dead bodies had been lain down next to each other in two rows, and four senior monks began to strip them of their garments. I was curious as to whether we would use their clothing for warmth or leave it behind, unsure if anyone would be willing to wear the robes of fallen brethren. I noticed a few vultures in the sky, already circling and awaiting the feast.

The same monks who had removed the garments handed among themselves large flaying knives ornamented with jewels from a bag. They must have managed to retrieve the knives from somewhere within the ruins. After inspecting the tools, each went to a body and started to dismember the arms and legs. As the cutting progressed, other monks chanted a sombre mantra, one that I had never heard before. It was as much a means to block out the sound of knife on flesh, as it was to initiate the deceased ones into death. The senior monks were precise and as clean as possible, but the ritual was still a bloody affair, and several had to turn their heads and vomit. A sickness in my stomach arose, which I forced down. I still retched but held my composure to the best of my ability. The entire process was methodical - arms and legs first, followed by the head. Then the flesh was removed from bone until all that remained were bloody chunks of meat. It was difficult to watch the bodies of my roommate and Tenzin, who I'd talked to less than a day ago, be systematically dismembered as though they were animals at a slaughterhouse. I was surprised by the swiftness

and skill that each monk utilised, and it didn't take long before all of the bodies had been reduced to this state. Despite a growing preference for cremation in mountainous communities, these monks had obviously conducted the ritual before. I looked to the sky again and the surrounding area to see that more vultures had gathered, more than I thought this ecosystem could sustain. I'd always been perplexed by how animals could survive in such harsh and unforgiving terrain, but life always seems to find a way.

My natural reaction to the ritual, conditioned by my culture's approach to death and the soul's relationship with the body, made me mortified by what I had just witnessed. Western culture seems to regard the body as more than just a shell, a temporary home to the soul, and this seemingly disrespectful display went against a deeply rooted belief in the significance and sacredness of the human body. Our attachment to the body may contribute to why we are so averse to death and fear the aging process. I had to remind myself of the Buddhist approach to the body, and the benefit that this method of burial had on countless organisms in the area. When viewed from this perspective, despite the surface level morbidity, the ritual was quite beautiful to witness.

Once all of the bodies had been dismembered, all of the monks distanced themselves to allow the vultures to enjoy their feast. A few dozen of the birds began to fight amongst each other once they had landed, competing for the largest morsels, and hopping around with wings unfolded as though they were dancing a dance of death. We watched only briefly before Dorje concluded the ceremony with a prayer. I was moved and several of the survivors were in tears after witnessing the ritual for their departed friends. After a moment of silence, Dorje asked us to gather the supplies and equipment and prepare to depart. Along with Djimon, I was one of the uninjured survivors, so I volunteered to carry the wounded on one of the improvised stretchers. We were only able to make three of them, but thankfully that was enough. Only a handful had serious leg injuries, the rest were capable of walking, albeit at a slower pace.

The sun was not quite in the middle of the sky, telling us that it was the morning and most of the day was still ahead. As we were leaving, Dorje spoke, "today will be a long walk and we will have to traverse through snow and avalanches. We will be passing through villages, many of which I assume are destroyed. There may be survivors in these villages and we will help them to the best of our ability. We can accommodate a few with the resources we have, but we would have to take the most injured and some of us may have to, ah, sacrifice our own wellbeing to help others. Including myself, I may ask some of you to forgo rations and comfort, if it is necessary. I believe that the training all of you have undertaken has aptly prepared you for this." He paused and looked at all the monks, gazing into the eyes of every one of us. "Our journey today will end at a cave little more than halfway to our destination, unless there is a village along the way that stands strong and is willing to host us. The cave is small, but should be large enough for us all to occupy. It was the cave of my former master, where he lived for more than a decade. Are there any questions?"

"When do you think we'll arrive, Rinpoche?" Asked an initiate with a broken arm.

"Hmm, including several rest stops, and assuming that we do not find any survivors, perhaps, um, an hour before sundown." A sigh of relief came from many of the monks. Though it would be a long day of walking, it shouldn't be too arduous with plenty of rest.

"And if we find too many survivors, but can't support them? Do some of us stay behind? Do some of us sleep outside?" Another asked, it was Djimon.

"If it is necessary, we will make sacrifices, we will find a way. It is in times of struggle when our compassion, love and training is truly tested. But do not dwell on that which has not yet happened, we will make decisions when the time comes. Stay centred in the present and do not worry about your own survival, open yourself to love and be grateful, for you could have easily perished, but your karma has proven otherwise."

Djimon nodded, but I could sense unease coming from him and from other monks.

"Now, let us go, we have little time to spare." As we descended down the hill and into the valley below, I looked back at the feeding frenzy of the vultures and I couldn't help but think that there could be more of us unwillingly offering ourselves as alms to the creatures of the mountains.

## Chapter Four

### *Wandering the Snows*

The rumbling began again. A powerful shock erupted and a few of the injured monks fell over, difficult enough as it was trekking through the heavy snow. I had switched places with another who now held one of the stretchers, allowing me to have some respite. I saw the stretcher bearers were quick to place them on the ground until the aftershock ceased. All of us stopped, a few hushed sounds of terror escaped the mouths of the group. It was as though we froze ourselves in time, as nature unleashed its ferocity all around us. Within ten or fifteen seconds, the earthquake ceased and we looked towards the mountain slopes around us to detect any avalanches or landslides. There were a few, but they were in the distance and much slower compared to the onslaught that had charged through and destroyed the monastery. We were safe and once we had regained our footing, we continued.

Although the distance wasn't too far, it was a more strenuous trek than I'd originally thought. The snow in the valley was deep regardless of the additional avalanches and it became a common sight for one of us to fall a foot or two down into a well-covered hole. We were forced to scramble over several fallen avalanches that had crumbled on top of what remained of the dugout pathways in between the tiny villages that were scattered throughout the mountain range. Recent months had seen snowfall that was the heaviest in years according to the senior monks, making the journey all the more difficult.

We had travelled for a few hours but it seemed much longer. The pace was slower than what was predicted by Dorje. Earlier, we had passed through the village at the bottom of the valley to check for survivors. It was a small community with less than a dozen families, and had structures loosely made of wood

and stone, poorly built and unable to withstand the force of nature's wrath. We found nothing but scraps of wood and stone which marked the location of former homes. Whatever didn't collapse from the rumblings of the earth, was crushed by the unrelenting tide of snow that followed. We didn't find a single person. If there were any survivors, they would've left, otherwise the entire population was buried under the snow. One of the Nepalese monks collapsed to the ground when we had reached the village, he was in tears, wailing, screaming. It was horrible to watch and many attempted to comfort him to no avail. I was later told that his entire family lived in that village and had been living there for generations. After some time, he regained some of his composure and he managed to continue. I heard him cry on several occasions as we walked on, sobbing quietly to himself, but I admired his ability to endure. There are many in his position who would've given up on life entirely after such a calamity.

Despite the horror of what had happened this morning, the devastation and complete upheaval and loss of lives, I attempted to apply what I had learnt in the monastery to the current predicament. I centred my attention to the present, clearing my thoughts to try and relieve some of the anxiety I was feeling about what was to happen next, as well as the sadness that was beginning to consume me over all the unnecessary loss of life by a random act of nature, an act of God. I questioned why such suffering was allowed to exist in the universe, a question for which I still had no real answer. I observed the thoughts and emotions that emerged and dissolved in my consciousness, allowing them to exist in my experience, but finding that they would soon disappear when my attention shifted or when I simply watched them. I noticed for the first time today the stunning beauty of our surrounding landscape. A vast field of snow, mostly flat, but for the path carved by villagers, and the resting places of a dozen avalanches. The brightness of the sun's reflection on the white ground made it sometimes difficult to behold, yet I pushed through regardless, needing some distraction at times from the tragedy that befell us. There were scatterings of pine trees, covered in snow throughout the valley, but overall the density of forest cover was limited due

to the altitude. Many trees had been toppled over by avalanches and were sticking out of the snow as though they had clumsily tripped over headfirst into the snow. The jagged peaks on either side of the valley rose out of the ground, reaching into the skies above, capped in pristine white and watching over the earth in their eternal silence, observing the fate that time brings to lesser beings. In the presence of the mountains, with a clear mind, one feels a close connection with the elements, with nature, and with the soul of the universe. And one cannot help but question their individual significance on this earth whilst amongst these giants. I remembered speaking to a woman a long time ago about mountains, and her explorations of some of the world's largest ranges. It felt like a lifetime had passed since then. She said it always humbled her being amongst the pillars of the earth, helped her realise the sheer immensity of not only the planet but the entire universe. For even the mountains are nothing but ants, or even grains of sand compared to the entire earth, the solar system and the galaxy we inhabit and call home. Contemplating the mountains often makes me recognise that whatever my problems are, they are minor, insignificant and transient. A problem today is often a story tomorrow. It makes one worry less about their situation and simply enjoy being alive in this vast mysterious universe where we have no real idea why we are here or where we are going.

I felt a cool breeze cut through me, across my face and up the sleeves of my robe to send chills throughout my body. I felt alive, and the knowledge that my immediate survival was being challenged heightened this sense of living, yet somehow managed to reduce any concern for my personal wellbeing. Sometimes the reality of death right in front of you brings a total acceptance of it as simply a fundamental part of the cycle of life. The people who died on this day have returned to a state before life, whatever that truly is. Whether it is a return to God, the source of all life, to become a part of the divinity that manifests the universe and all contained within it. Or whether it is the next stage in the karmic cycle of reincarnation. Or maybe it is simply the dark nothingness of non-being. One fundamental truth of the material universe is that everything is transient, everything changes, so perhaps that



means that death in itself is not the end, but a continuation of the processes of existence that we simply don't understand and maybe never will. Despite our enormous leaps in knowledge, we are no closer to finding out what happens after death than the most primitive of our human ancestors.

I listened to the silence of the mountains in the backdrop of our journey. Despite the grandeur of the stone colossi, the loudest phenomena in the valley were the sounds of our wandering band of monks. I focused on the crunching of snow underfoot, the collapse of someone when they fell through a hole, the occasional banter in languages that I couldn't comprehend. At one point in the day's walk, one of the senior monks chanted *om mani padme hum* in an effort to raise spirits. It worked shortly after he began, a few other senior monks soon joined, followed by the Nepalese man who had lost his family. A tragic yet uplifting sight as he sang to the best of his ability, stuttering the words as he continued to weep. Soon the rest of the troupe were chanting along, even those in stretchers were making an effort to join. It was moving to behold and participate in, the melodies of our combined voices had a sombre tone, but they resonated throughout the valley. Our voices slowly lifted from a solemn mood to one of elation as we embraced the circumstances that had befallen us and accepted our fate as simply the workings of karma. Cutting through the delusion that life should always be a journey of seeking the pleasurable, avoiding any form of suffering, and instead accepting life as it is and as it comes. We used this truth to embrace life in all its joys and miseries, discomforts, sufferings, pleasures, just allowing ourselves to recognise the beauty and happiness that can be found in any circumstance or place. A shift of perspective, a gratitude for existence that accepts all experience as experience without positive or negative connotations, is all that was needed. The atmosphere created by our chanting and the stirrings of the heart it brought, reinforced this attitude in all of our minds. A hauntingly joyous and beautiful moment had swept through the valley.

The chanting slowly faded as the monks dropped off one by one and the silence returned. The hymn had done its work stirring the souls of the band, spirits had risen, a tranquillity returned to the

tumultuous moments we were experiencing together. The hours trudged by as our group of monks were noticeably becoming more and more physically fatigued. Hypnotic were the monotonous, off-rhythm footsteps of the men in red robes. Few other sounds pervaded my consciousness except the occasional call of a crow, a cough from a monk, or the faint whistling of the wind. Most remained silent throughout the journey, yet there was still infrequent chatting amongst Nepali speakers. I failed to hear a single conversation in English despite many of the monks being rather articulate in the language. The warmth of the sun's rays was melting a thin layer of the snow, creating a watery sheen over the landscape. My robes were fast becoming damp at the ends, and I could feel the moisture soaking through into my boots. I wasn't sure if every monk had shoes that were suitable for trekking, let alone through thick snow. The stretcher carriers were rotating relatively frequently so as not to exhaust anyone, myself returning to the duty on numerous occasions.

The trail was taking us gradually downhill, but the surrounding environment had hardly changed. The mountains still loomed in the background, but the valley was narrowing. Along the path, there was an occasional stupa, a Buddhist stone structure that has a pointed pillar not unlike an obelisk with a spherical hemisphere base. They are often decorated with the Buddha's eyes and the six Tibetan characters that spell *om mani padme hum*. Blue, white, red, green, yellow prayer flags are often hung from top of the stupa to allow the prayers of locals to be sent off into the sky. Some were in a state of ruin, others were painted white. All apparently contain the relics and remains of monks, nuns and others associated with Buddhism. There were also prayer walls lining the road, dividing it into two lanes. The walls were comprised of large stone slabs with Buddhist prayers, sutras and mantras written on them. In some of the walls, prayer wheels had been placed for pilgrims and travellers to spin for good fortune. I couldn't help but spin a few myself as we walked past, a childish sense of fun yet filled with a connection to a deep ancient tradition welled inside as I did the act. Dotted throughout the landscape, the

stupas and prayer walls created a mystical aura around the valley, lost to time yet eternally present.

In the distance, we saw another small village. A small herd of yaks were grazing for what little food they could find in the snowy, rocky fields surrounding the messy array of stone and wooden structures. Large, hairy, bovine-like creatures with elongated horns that managed to add a certain charm to the Himalayas. The yaks observed us warily as we approached, most ignoring us after recognising we were no threat. One grunted and snorted in an effort to deter us and protect her calf, a successful act from her perspective as we let them be. At first glance the village seemed relatively intact, but as we approached, it was revealed that much of the settlement had been damaged, however, surprisingly the avalanches and landslides seemed to have hardly affected it. I saw one that had ceased near the furthest outlying house. There were a few discernible figures I could just manage to perceive engaging in various activities, rummaging through the wreckage, gathering wood and other materials. A weak billowing of smoke floated into the sky from the far end of the village. As we came closer, one of the survivors waved his hand towards us, welcoming us. Dorje and a few of the other senior monks waved in return. The villager then ran into the settlement and disappeared from sight, probably to inform the other inhabitants of our impending arrival.

Within a couple of minutes, we reached the main part of the village and were warmly greeted. Dorje and a few of the other monks were received with *khatas*, white Tibetan scarves that are offered to people as a sign of honour and respect. Formalities still held despite the dire situation. Looking around, a few of the buildings in the settlement had collapsed. It was smaller than the previous village. There was one main street that was lined with half a dozen houses and behind them were small fields with short stone walls to mark out different properties. I could see a few more larger homes or perhaps little guesthouses that were also dispersed behind the main part of the village, most of which were heavily damaged. All the structures were in varying states of disrepair.

Many of the surviving villagers had stopped what they were doing to watch the arrival of our band of monks. After the

formalities had concluded, Dorje engaged with the man who seemed to be the head of the village, though nothing about his physical appearance indicated this. He appeared to be around the same age as Dorje, but this could be deceptive due to the generally healthy - both physically and mentally - lifestyle of the average monk. He was short with a hunched back, thick and torn layers of clothing, wearing a *dhaka topi*, a colourful traditional hat that has some resemblance in shape to the Turkish fez. The man was clean shaven and had leathery skin from years of exposure to the sun and manual labour. His smile that revealed several missing teeth was warming and we felt welcomed into the village. Dorje and the village elder discussed in a local dialect that sounded rather distinct from the *lingua franca* Nepali. I didn't understand a word, but by the tones of their voices and body language, it seemed as though the earthquake had hit hard, but they were in good spirits. Centuries of subsistence farming in unforgiving terrain and the lack of modern conveniences have given the mountain peoples of the Himalayas the ability to make the best of any situation and to be able to endure hardship with a smile.

Both Dorje and the elder shortly indicated to the group of monks to follow them, and together we walked through the village towards the house where the smoke was emanating from. It was the largest house on the main road, two floors, made of stone with a wooden roof and surprisingly intact but not unscathed. Part of the wall on one side had collapsed, revealing a living quarter and a bedroom. Along the way, the elder directed Dorje to send the injured to a house in which they could rest and receive treatment. Dorje told us that there would be little access to modern medicine in this part of world, but traditional remedies that may temporarily ease suffering were available. We carried the wounded into the house, another building that was only marginally affected, a few shattered windows, a wall partially collapsed. There were women inside treating a few of their own who immediately came to help, indicating with gestures to the rest of us that we could leave and everything was under control.

Reaching the house that the elder and Dorje were in, we were welcomed and told to take rest in the living quarter. The

room was spacious with a few tables around the corners and seating along the walls. An iron-cast fireplace was built in the middle giving out just enough warmth despite the partially collapsed wall. I grabbed a chair, sat by the fire and removed my boots and socks, placing them closely to the heat in a largely futile effort to dry them before we continued. A few of the others followed suit and shortly we had made ourselves as comfortable as possible. We mostly remained silent partly because of the fatigue, partly because most of us were still processing the events of today, and generally because of the introverted nature of many who choose monkhood. The hushed conversation between the village elder and Dorje in another room could easily be heard, albeit in slightly muffled tones.

With a sudden large pang, I remembered how famished I felt. None of us had eaten since the previous night, as we skipped breakfast this morning and hardly stopped walking on our way here. I asked if anyone else was hungry, which received a resounding answer in the affirmative. The two monks carrying our food went to the sacks containing it and carried them to the kitchen. They returned within a few moments with a smile, saying that a few of the villagers will boil some rice and cook the local dal recipe for us all. We all responded with glee and excitement, despite being fed the same basic meal we always ate at the monastery. Interesting I thought, how the value of something varies based on the circumstances in which it is received. It shows that one's reaction towards something depends on the current condition of the mind and body, rather than the thing itself having an inherent objective value.

It was still some time before the food was served. Spirits were higher knowing that we were eating shortly and some of the monks were engaging in conversation. A few had removed themselves to meditate upstairs or to walk around the village. I was rather content sitting by the fireplace, nourishing it with wood and yak dung. A few monks came by to chat, discussing fairly light topics like today's weather, the kindness of the village, but also the earthquake and how far reaching it could be. I was surprised that Djimon kept entirely to himself. He remained in a corner, deep in

thought perhaps, as he was staring blankly into his lap. He'd helped to the best of his ability, but had been distant, cold, and there was a desperation to his voice when I talked to him earlier this morning. Something in his mind may have snapped, or he was simply still processing yet another massive upheaval in his life. I considered going over to him and having a chat, to probe into his mind to try and understand what was bothering him, but I thought against it, deciding it would be best to simply leave him alone.

When the dal bhat was cooked and served, we enthusiastically took our portions, not as large as I had hoped, but it was one of the best meals I'd ever had. The dal was spiced differently to what we had at the monastery, a pleasant surprise. I savoured each mouthful, relishing the different textures and flavours in my mouth. The sounds of eating and the utter void of conversation suggested that everyone else was equally enjoying their meal. I had a brief glimpse of Djimon and even he was heartily indulging himself in this simple pleasure. I felt more reassured that he would be okay.

About midway through eating, Dorje and the elder entered the room. Dorje had a large smile on his face, happy to see fellow monks taking respite from the events of the day. Everybody looked towards him and paused eating. "I see you are all enjoying yourselves," he said. The monks nodded in approval. "I have talked to the elder, Finju, about our current predicament and that of his village. He's told me that his village was rather fortunate considering the fate of its neighbours. Several deaths and a few houses fallen." Dorje paused as a respectful gesture before continuing, "he is allowing for those who wish, to remain here for some time. There is food and supplies for medical treatment. Though there is not enough room for us all to stay. For those of us who decide to continue on, we will spend the night in the cave, still a few hours walk from here. I suggest that those who are most seriously injured remain for at least a night or two, and the strongest to come with me to the cave. A few villagers will be leaving for town in the next few days, and those who stay here can join them if that is what they desire."

"How many of us can stay?" Asked Indra, one of the novice monks who, back at the monastery, used to ask a lot of questions during the teachings.

In the local dialect, Dorje briefly discussed the matter with elder Finju and replied, "he can accommodate about eight of us, ten if we don't mind a tight squeeze. Considering that around half of us have an injury of some sort, they will get priority. I'll soon go over to where the wounded are being treated, and tell them what is happening. I'm sure most of them would like to stay here for a couple of nights."

"It looks like there's plenty of space in the village, why can't we all stay here for the night?" Indra asked.

"Though the village seems rather intact, many rooms have been damaged to the extent that spending the evening inside would be no different to being out in the snow. Do not worry, the cave is sheltered, in fact it hardly resembles what you are all probably thinking of as a cave." He gave a short, reassuring laugh. "Over the years, the cave has been built up and is now more like a small house built into the mountainside. It will be a tight squeeze with a dozen of us, but thankfully our good karma and that of the village means none of us will have to sleep outside!" Dorje gave us all a beaming smile and I admired that he was trying to see the best of the situation. "Now, finish your meals and we will rest for an hour. And then we will decide together who remains and who will continue the journey. We shouldn't stay too long, it would be best to make it before nightfall." Dorje joined his hands in the sign of prayer and bowed slightly before leaving the room with elder Finju.

I had already decided that I would continue on till the cave, something inside was drawing me to keep pushing on. Besides, it would allow someone else to take my place. I wondered how many of the others didn't mind walking for several more hours through the snow. I was guessing that even some of the injured would be happy to continue on. Setting the thoughts aside, I finished eating my dal bhat. A lady soon entered and gathered our plates. I thought that this building must be a guesthouse of some sort, so I got up and found a resident and after some clumsy hand signals, he

directed me towards a place I could rest. She showed me to a small room on the second floor. It was sparsely decorated and furnished with only a bed and a side table. Lying down, I fell asleep almost immediately.

"Excuse me," I heard a faint voice say, "excuse me, sir... excuse me!" In a haze, I opened my eyes to see a monk looking over me, one I had rarely engaged with. "We're getting ready to leave now."

I sat up, momentarily forgetting where I was. My mind was foggy due to teasing myself with a short nap despite the need of my fatigued body to have far more sleep. I nodded to the monk, thanking him and asked, "how long have I been asleep?"

The young monk shrugged, "umm, not long, maybe an hour, a little more or a little less."

I stood up and stretched my body, hearing a few bones crack, feeling unsurprisingly stiff. The monk continued to stand at the doorway, watching and seemingly waiting for me to dismiss him. Together we walked downstairs to enter the main living quarters. All of the others were finishing up their preparations for departure. I went over to the fireplace to put my socks and boots on, still damp. Predictably, the fire did little to dry them. Dorje was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room and shortly after I'd entered the room, he stood up to speak.

"The village has shown us great compassion by allowing some of us to stay here for a few nights. The injured amongst us receive priority over who remains. The four who had serious leg injuries will stay here, I have already discussed this with them. And I believe I counted six more of you who have injuries of varying seriousness. Would all of you like to stay here a few nights to recover?" Dorje swept his gaze around the room, all responded positively by nodding their heads. "Good, I've arranged a guide for those remaining behind so that when ready, you can continue on to the nearest town that should have stable communications and transport. Rest up and remember the teachings. For the rest of us, grab supplies to bring and we will leave."

Shortly, the remaining dozen or so of us left the village. Our departure was like a procession. It seemed as though the entire



village had come out of their homes to watch us leave. I was surprised by the smiles on their faces, from both children and adults, as they waved goodbye. By what I could tell from the position of the sun, it was mid to late afternoon. The great fiery orb was casting a slightly orange hue across the landscape and the shadows were beginning to grow. However, clouds were beginning to creep over the mountain tops as though they were ready to ambush the pleasant afternoon. Soon outside the village, we found ourselves walking through deep snow again, but it was much easier now that the wounded had stayed behind and we'd all eaten and rested a bit. Our pace was faster and spirits amongst us were higher. A few of the elder monks were chatting rather enthusiastically amongst themselves in what I gathered was Nepali or another local dialect. I even noticed Djimon in conversation with the other Westerner monk who I hadn't met before. It made me reflect again on the transient nature of our thoughts and emotions. One moment someone can be utterly depressed and soon thereafter without any significant change, they can be elated with joy. I suppose the lesson of the Buddha is apt: simply do not attach yourself to emotions and thought processes, otherwise you will often end up suffering. Instead, be the witness of your inner workings, embrace them and allow them to come and go. See them for what they are, fleeting.

Despite the growing chill of the waning day, the stiffness of my body and the dampness of my boots, I felt oddly at peace. The majestic beauty of the mountains, emanating a sacred presence, kept my hopes high and left me in continual wonderment. There is something inexpressible about being in the midst of the raw beauty of nature, especially in the most unforgiving of places and regardless of the circumstances, that can bring peace and joy to one's soul. Besides, it is always uplifting when one is aware that the hardships of the day are almost over.

As time passed, clouds overran the entire valley, coming swiftly from the mountains and attacking the clear skies above, characteristic of the unpredictable weather of the Himalayas. They threatened us with snow and it was noticeable that our pace quickened as a result. Shortly, the world darkened around us as the

sunlight completely disappeared behind the clouds. The roar of thunder boomed throughout the valley, an ominous warning heralding a stormy evening. Lightning was occasionally crackling, once striking the top of a nearby mountain, sending a small avalanche cascading down the slope. I overheard a monk asking Dorje how far till we reached the cave, to which he simply replied with "not long". A combination of wet snow and rain began to fall, slowly and sparsely at first, but increased with intensity as we continued onwards.

Within minutes, the conditions worsened and we found ourselves marching through a blizzard. The air became white and I could hardly see a few feet in front of me. The snow whirled and whipped my face and those of the other monks, stinging my eyes and blinding my vision further. The wind picked up making the snowstorm howl and hiss around us as though the gods of the mountains were using the blizzard to haunt us. Normally, I would welcome snowfall as a complete novelty to enjoy in childlike excitement due to where I was from, but the strength of this sudden blizzard made it difficult for me to maintain my composure both mentally and physically.

It wasn't long though until we saw the cave nestled into the mountainside. It looked like a standard house that was resting against a cliff face. A short steep ascent following a barely visible path led us there. Dorje was right, the dwelling was small, but looked just large enough for all of us to comfortably squeeze in. The stone walls and roofing built around the cave appeared intact, managing to successfully weather the violence of the earthquake, and avoiding the following avalanches as well. We were damp, cold and shivering when we entered the cave, and somewhat frustratingly, it appeared that at the very moment we arrived, the blizzard stopped. There were a few small windows that lined one side of the cave which let in enough light to survey the room. Some structural damage was immediately noticeable, but I was unsure whether that was caused by the earthquake or by simple negligence. The manmade section of the cave was directly connected to the natural part at the back. It was simply a single large room. A corner was dedicated to being a kitchen, another

corner had a desk and chair. Towards the back of the cave on one side, there was a small shrine dedicated to the Buddha, and on the opposing end lay something that resembled a mattress. The centre of the room was empty and the floor was a combination of stone and hard pressed earth.

We immediately made preparations to start a fire using the wood that we'd gathered from the monastery. A few monks arranged it whilst others searched around the dwelling for some form of kindling, finding paper and a few sticks scattered about. Some of the wood was dampened by the snow, but the fire was eventually ignited. It was smoky but the warmth that it gave out was welcoming, and as it increased in intensity, the smoke dissipated. One of the younger Nepalese monks gathered the food and the few pots and other items that comprised the entirety of the kitchen. He began preparing rice and handed me a pot, telling me to gather snow to melt. I went outside which was still snowing lightly, and hurried to the nearest patch of pristine snow, bringing it back as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, Indra, the Westerner monk and a couple of others were laying out the bedding and blankets we had managed to acquire. By the end of our efforts, the cave developed a relatively warm and cosy atmosphere.

After I had completed my rather simple duties, I removed my boots and damp robe, found a spot for myself near the fire and simply watched it. Others, except for those who were cooking joined me. Some of us meditated, others chatted quietly amongst themselves, whilst a few, myself included, enjoyed the dance of the flames. Fire was something I had enjoyed since as early as I could remember, and its raw beauty and power never ceased to amaze me. The flame is symbolic of the divine: beautiful, dynamic in its energetic fluidity, a transformer of things, and ungraspable yet absolutely immanent. There is something eternal about it, a single flame can continue on forever given fuel. Similar to water, it merges and separates yet always seems to remain one, just like the divine spark that the great religious traditions say is in all of us. Our physical bodies may be distinct, but we are all unified by that divine flame within us and around us. The fire gives us life, warmth, sustenance, yet come too close and unprepared it can

burn, like the madness that is said to consume one who is not spiritually ready to witness the divine in all its glory. Fire can be the creator, preserver and destroyer of life, similar to the roles of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, each of whom represent different aspects of God and Its workings in the universe.

So absorbed I was in the fire and contemplating its anecdotal similarities to God, that I hardly noticed the serving of dal bhat given to me. My awareness snapped back into my surroundings after being lost in the flames that had made me temporarily forgetful of the plight we were in. I began to mix the curried lentils and rice with my hands, caring little about the dirt and filth that had gathered on my palms and fingers. We didn't have any knives, forks or spoons, so there was no other choice but to eat with the hands. I hadn't done it before myself, but I'd watched others do it and I imitated them to the best of my ability. I was clumsy at first, only able to scoop tiny amounts at a time. It was an odd experience and it felt slightly humbling and seemed to connect me to my food through tasting it, feeling it, and smelling it all the more strongly. Similar to lunch, I was unaware of the extent of my appetite and demolished the dal, and I wasn't the only one, we had all finished eating within minutes of receiving our portions.

Shortly after the meal, Dorje stood up and addressed the monks. All external appearances suggested the man was happy, which I assumed he was despite the burden placed on his shoulders and the tragedy that we had all been caught up in. An aim of the Buddhist is to accept the comings and goings of life as they are, being detached from events, both tragedies and blessings, and to cultivate a positive outlook regardless of circumstances. Though Dorje was being tested, what I saw in the man was that he was living this ideal. We could all feel a warm, glowing presence from him.

"We have gone through a lot on this day," he stated, "but you have all done well, you have all remained strong." I glanced at Djimon, who was listening attentively to the words of the old monk. "Take rest, relax and make the best out of our situation. Yes, we have lost a lot, but do not despair, do not cry, it is simply the work of nature, the work of karma that has led to all of this. It

may seem unfair that this has happened to us, but it is the nature of life in the physical world." He paused and gazed at all of the monks individually with a look that shone only a profound loving-kindness. "Suffering is an inevitable aspect of life, and we as Buddhists learn how to accept this fact and how to manage it. Do not become a victim of your suffering, do not wallow in your misery, in your self-pity. This attitude has no benefit to yourself or to others, it only harms you. Yes, instead of asking the question: 'why has this happened to me?', ask yourself 'how can this experience allow me to grow, what lessons does this teach, and how can I become a more compassionate being as a result?' Though you cannot control all of the external forces that shape your life, in fact you can control very few of them, you can control your reaction to them. Live wisely and do not let your thoughts and emotions consume you."

I found myself smiling and nodding in approval to Dorje's lesson. I felt privileged that I was able to be in the presence of such a wise and loving man. Others appeared to approve of his message as well, and I even saw Djimon looking brighter.

He continued, "we will leave early tomorrow, another long day of walking and it will be a steep descent at times, so be careful. Thankfully, we should be under the snowline, making the trekking easier than today's." A sigh of relief escaped the mouths of several monks. "When we reach the town, you can choose to go your own path, I'm assuming there will be a need for relief work and I will be organising the best way for our monastery to help and where we will go next. Particularly for the foreigners amongst us, you will be wanting to contact your loved ones, some may want to leave the country. Whatever you all choose will be accepted. All I ask is that you do not forget the *dharma*, the teachings, and live your life with compassion and give service to others, okay? Now, return to what you were doing, and rest up for tomorrow." Dorje returned to a sitting posture and engaged himself in conversation with one of the other senior monks.

I suddenly noticed the fatigue from today weighing on my shoulders, making them sag. My eyelids were drooping and I was sporadically yawning. I created a headrest on the floor with the

folds of blankets and my shoes. Uncomfortable, but it gave head support. The fire provided enough warmth so that the robes, which had managed to dry faster than I expected, were enough for me. I fell asleep to the crackle of fire and the chattering of monks.

I was in a house. My house back home. In the kitchen, but it was eerily without any utensils or appliances. I leaned against the bench, and my family suddenly appeared without myself noticing: my mother, my father and my brother. They were staring at me in silence, a deep, penetrating stare. I was confused, why was I here? I felt as though they were interrogating me, as though I didn't belong in this family. I looked outside and saw it was dark. The room was dark as well but something was producing a soft orange glow that made the features of myself, my family and the room discernible. The glow was flickering across the faces of my brother, mother and father and I noticed a small smile creep onto their faces. I was tinged by a slight fear now, the whole situation didn't seem right.

Simultaneously, the three of them said, "you are not who you think you are," spoken in voices that had a metallic echo and were synchronised as though they were one organism. "You are not from here," they continued.

I stood there, taken aback, confused as to what they were telling me.

"You are not who you think you are," they repeated, "you are not from here."

A radiant white light suddenly emanated from my family, consuming their bodies. The walls of my house dissolved into nothingness, darkness. Fear gripped me, all I could do was watch, I was immobilised. The light dissipated and my family was gone. They were replaced by numerous glowing balls of coloured light. My father was replaced by blue orbs, my mother by green orbs and my brother by red orbs. Strangely, they communicated to me in a language that resembled the beeping of a computer or some sort of electronic device. The orbs flashed in synchronisation with the sounds they produced. Though unintelligible, I was understanding the message they were sending me, as though they were transposed into my mind. They were telling me not to be afraid, and to come

with them to see the truth of who I am. The glowing orbs were visibly cold, inhuman and alien, but the telepathic communication gave them an odd familiarity that was comforting. I trusted these beings, if that's what they could be called.

And then I was transported, lifted into the air by a telekinetic ability of the glowing orbs. Hovering, they communicated to me once again, "we are going now." With the orbs, I was propelled into the night sky at an incredible speed, beyond my control. I was shortly beyond the earth, in space surrounded by stars, but the pace did not cease. I craned my neck to see the earth behind me, getting smaller and smaller until it was nothing but another sparkling light amongst millions. My speed slowed down as I passed by Mars, close enough to see its red, barren features. The momentum accelerated again to its original pace, the stars seemed to be passing in blurred lines. My heart was racing from pure excitement and adrenaline. Again I decelerated without any intentional effort as I approached Jupiter. So close I was, the enormous sphere of swirling gas consumed my entire view. The giant red spot, the cyclonic storm that has lasted hundreds of years was peering at me as though it was the eye of the planet, observing my movements.

I was then suspended by the orbs, floating in space above the king of the solar system. The orbs spoke to me again by implanting thoughts into my mind, "you are different, different from every other being on earth or in the universe. You are not from this universe, but you are of it. You are the universe. You have a destiny that you will fulfil. You will change the course of time and history and influence all. Accept and embrace that you are different, follow your purpose and never let anything dissuade you. You are one, you are all, and when you know this, you will consume the world, the universe."

I felt confused again by this cryptic, paradoxical language. Soon the momentum returned, I found myself constantly slowing and quickening as I passed by the rings of Saturn, and the blues spheres that were Uranus and Neptune. Now I was accelerating faster than before, faster than the speed of light. I left the solar system, I left the galaxy, I left time and space until all that was

around me was nothing but dazzling colours, twisting, twirling, frenetic colours, until it all coalesced into a single point, a point that contained all of existence.

My eyes shot open as my consciousness changed from the dream to the waking state, and I returned to the cave dwelling. The fire was dwindling, flames all but disappeared, but the embers were glowing fiercely and the warmth remained. All of the monks were asleep on the floor, many with smiles on their faces, enjoying their own dreams and respite from reality.

What are these dreams I keep having? I thought. The third night in a row. I instinctively knew they were all connected, but I was confused. This dream was the strangest of them all, ungrounded in any semblance of reality. Flying through space with glowing orbs, it was like something out of a science fiction novel or an intense hallucinogenic drug experience. The other two dreams were strange, but at least they were intelligible. Religious symbols pervaded the other two, but this one was just plain weird. I laughed out loud as I recollected its ridiculousness before hastily shutting myself up. The imagery of the dream remained at the forefront of my consciousness as I readjusted my position, suddenly aware of the discomfort I was experiencing on the hard stony floor with an improvised pillow. Closing my eyes, I attempted to return to sleep but my mind was active with questions about this dream, utterly unsure of what had just happened to me.

Did I just dream that I was an alien? Why was I flying through space? Why was my family a glowing bunch of balls that could telepathically communicate with me? What were these paradoxical messages? None of it made sense to me, it was simply strange. Do I even bother to interpret this dream? I wondered, was I over-analysing it and the others too? Doubts began to sweep my mind, there was no point in thinking about it too much, if there's something to them, it'll be revealed in time. These thoughts swirled through my mind, gradually becoming fainter and fainter, as sleep returned to my exhausted yet agitated mind, a deep unconscious sleep.



## Chapter Five

### *To Civilisation*

I was jolted out of my slumber by a loud clanging noise. Sitting up, feeling groggy and sore, I scanned the room to find the source of my disturbance: a monk had dropped some metallic utensils. I didn't care enough to investigate exactly what fell as I flopped back down and rested my head on the rather shoddy makeshift pillow. Resting an arm on my head, the memories of the previous day suddenly flooded back into my mind, reminding me of the situation that had befallen us. A touch of panic swept across me as I recalled the severity of the current state of things. But a calmness shortly returned, yet another reminder of the frequent change of emotions and thoughts the mind and body experiences.

People were packing up, preparing for the long walk ahead. A faint smell of rice and spices permeated the room and I turned towards the improvised kitchen to see a couple of monks making breakfast. Standing up, I walked to the exit of the cave to get some fresh air outside and upon opening the door, the brightness of the day overwhelmed and stung my eyes until they finally adjusted. It was overcast and cold, clouds laying low, shrouding the peaks of the mountains. The dark grey skies menacing our group as they lingered above, appearing to be waiting for us to leave the sheltered cave. The cold mountain air was a refreshing, a welcome contrast to the smoky and stuffy interior of the cave. Feeling slightly stiff, I stretched my legs and arms, noticing the tension and aching coming from my muscles.

A wave of sadness swept over me as a sudden gust of wind struck my face with a bitter chill, as the realisation of the extent of this disaster rushed into my consciousness. The toll it would take on the people of this country was enormous. I knew this, even though I'd only had a glimpse of the destruction. These people will need a lot of help in the coming months and years. A part of me wanted to remain and help, but a much larger part just wanted to

leave and pursue these dreams I've been having, even though doubts were slithering into my mind about their significance. But something... something deep within me, a voice of sorts, was pushing me in that direction. Perhaps it was the *prajna paramita* Tenzin mentioned last night, eons ago.

I noticed a feeling of guilt creep inside me. "Why be so selfish? You have an opportunity to help the people of this country who have been so kind to you," I thought to myself.

"What can I even do to help? I have no skills that are relevant. I can't build a house, I'm not a doctor or a nurse," another part of my mind replied.

"There is always something you can do to help, you could be an assistant, or something. There will probably be charity groups coming into the country to help. You could join one." The altruistic part of my mind countered.

"I want to leave here and continue my journey, to find my purpose, see if I can discover my destiny. There will be time in the future to help people, and I will be far more ready." It was a lame attempt at defending my decision. It's difficult to justify selfishness and I realised that is exactly what I was trying to argue to myself.

"What better way to develop yourself spiritually than to selflessly and compassionately offer your services to those in need? Is there a greater purpose than that?" My mind kept nagging.

"I'll be a waste of resources... the food, water and shelter, as well as the possibility of injuring myself. It would make me a burden on the people, particularly with the limited skills I have. Would the value of myself remaining here outweigh the costs? I'm assuming there'll be food and water shortages." A rather valid reason, I thought, feeling marginally better with this justification. But regardless, the guilt didn't leave and would probably remain for some time to come.

Looking across the valley, I took a deep breath, the crisp air flowed down my throat and into my lungs. The chill hurt slightly as it penetrated my interior, but it was refreshing and my mind became less foggy and crowded. Major events, natural or manmade, often have meaning, or a lesson, for the individual who is caught up in them as well as for society at large, I thought as I

crouched down and played with a handful of snow. The events that were triggered by the disaster would have been interpreted to mean a million things by a million different people. Some may have seen it as some sort of divine punishment for the way they were living, others may have seen it as a violent upheaval that brings a fresh beginning. Some may view it as a lesson in the fragile significance of life, that life is not to be taken for granted. And I'm guessing many have interpreted it as having no meaning at all, just a random act of nature that they were unfortunate enough to have experienced. However it's been viewed, they're probably right according to their own experience. For me personally, I was beginning to think that this signalled an abrupt turning point in my life, something to jolt me into a bigger purpose or adventure, to help me on the path I was meant to follow, whatever that ultimately was.

Noticing that the first breath of air didn't exactly clear my mind, I breathed deeply again, thoughts fading away this time, and I turned and walked back to the shelter, a rumble in my stomach prompting me to check if the food was ready. When I entered, there was already a queue of monks, patiently waiting in general silence for their breakfast to be served. The same meal as lunch and dinner it seemed, but I didn't care. Food is food, particularly in these circumstances, and it tasted fine anyway. I joined the line, standing behind Djimon. His spirits seemed higher than yesterday, not quite as fatalistic, not as despairing. As I approached, he gave me a smile.

"How are you this morning, Djimon?" I inquired, patting him lightly on the shoulder.

"Better, a good night sleep has done the trick," he paused and took a breath, "yesterday, I let my fears and worries get the best of me."

"It happens," I replied, "especially when we're thrown into something like this. Our minds sort of reset themselves to the base survival function, heightening fears and anxieties. I don't think any amount of training could have completely prepared us for this. I reckon no one really knows how they'll react to things until they've actually lived through it." I looked at Djimon to gauge his reaction,

aware that my remarks may have sounded slightly condescending, albeit unintentionally.

"Yeah, that's true, but it's so weird, I have experienced something like this, and I still reacted so badly," said Djimon, referring to his time fleeing war and persecution. He shook his head, "but anyway, I guess the teachings were right in that our thoughts and emotions are constantly changing, never remaining the same from one moment to the next. You know, they aren't exactly real, so why do we grab onto them so strongly?" He asked rhetorically as we shuffled further down the short queue.

About a minute later we were at the front and received our portions of dal bhat. My mouth was watering at the smells of spices permeating from the meal. I followed him to the part of the shelter where he slept and we sat and ate together.

"So have you any idea what you'll be doing once we get out of here?" I asked after a mouthful of food.

"Um, I'm not sure." Djimon thought for a moment. "I'll probably stay here, I haven't really got anywhere else to go. I can't just go back to Sudan or England. For starters I have very little money to even get there, and I don't see the point when I don't know anyone anymore. I think I'll stay and help, continue the life of a monk. Hmm, maybe I'll join a new monastery or help rebuild the old. The people in this country have done so much for me, welcomed me as one of their own. I owe them something... how about you?"

Another surge of guilt came through me. This is a man who has been through so much turmoil in his life, witnessed death and tragedy, who simply wants to help those who have helped him... and I'm just going to up and leave, following dreams and some sense of higher purpose that could very well just be an egotistical delusion. "Ah, I'm going to leave when we reach the town, I'll ride the next bus or truck or whatever is available to the capital, if it's still there, and make my way out of the country." I said whilst making a variety of gestures illustrating travelling. "I feel horrible about just leaving these poor people, but I'm being drawn in another direction."

Djimon regarded me for a moment, I couldn't tell what he was thinking about me, but I felt ashamed nevertheless. Finally he said, "we've all got our own paths to follow, sometimes they may not seem to be the right thing to do, but in the end, it'll work out for the best." He smiled at me and returned to his food.

We continued to eat quietly until we had all finished our meals. Shortly after washing our dishes - if rubbing snow on them could exactly be called that - we readied to leave. It took no time at all for me to collect my few things and within half an hour from eating breakfast, our band of monks had gathered outside, all of us looking towards Dorje for direction. He stood slightly away from the rest of us, surveying the mountains and the valley below. He looked distant and detached from all that was happening, as though he was above all the chaos of the world. He turned to us and smiled, saying in a calm voice, "unless there is any reason for us to stay longer, let us go."

A general sound of consent came from the monks and Dorje began to descend down into the valley. The monks followed the elder in single file, trudging through the snow, carving a path of their own. From a distance, we must've been an odd sight, a long line of stumbling red dots against a backdrop of pure white. I was located around the middle of this line, behind Djimon.

The first few hours of walking were largely uneventful. The temperature didn't rise and a wind started to howl through the valley. The icy chill of the wind slashed across my face repeatedly, forcing me to keep my head down and stare at the seemingly unchanging ground in front of me. The only distinctions I could make were the various contours and caverns created by the footprints of monks in front of me. I played games in my head, pretending that a small man was running along the tiny chasm floor, frantically escaping a giant monster that was myself and my steps. Occasionally, a monk would fall through the snow, parts being far deeper than he expected. This would sometimes generate laughter amongst us, once we knew he was alright, of course. Despite the clouds intimidating us with the ever present possibility of snowfall or rain, spirits were high. There were the frequent sounds of banter in the various languages present at the monastery.

I overheard a few conversations spoken in English, monks discussing typical Buddhist topics such as karma, the nature of suffering, and the impermanence of things, as well as less philosophical topics like the impact of the earthquake on the country and what the members of the monastery would do after we reached the town. I have a tendency to eavesdrop on people's conversations, a bad habit, but I can't help but find it fascinating listening to the discussions of other people.

I spent the time mostly to myself, not only in my own thoughts but also attempting to practice mindfulness. I would focus my attention on the various sensations appearing and disappearing throughout my body, both pleasant and unpleasant. I noticed my shoes gradually becoming damper and colder, my toes feeling the chill penetrate my skin, becoming increasingly numb. I thought to myself that I should pay attention to that, so as not to lose all feeling in my feet and having them succumb to frostbite. I became more accepting of the freezing wind across my face, allowing it to enrapture my nose, my lips and my cheeks. Looking around the valley, there was little sign of life. It was rather desolate, no birds in the sky, no signs of critters on the ground. There was occasionally a tree, but the avalanches after the earthquake must have destroyed most of them in the area after seeing a number of broken branches, limbs and trunks sprouting out of the snow. It almost felt cyclical how unchanging the surrounding terrain was, as though we were continuously passing the same trees, avalanches and mountains, monotonously marching on and on. Even though the reality of life is that every single moment is uniquely different, and I tried to remind myself of this, I couldn't help but be rather bored at times.

Inevitably, I was unable to sustain a continuous mindful presence. Thoughts would creep into my mind, leading to a chain of different patterns, one leading off the other. I thought of home, my family, my triumphs and failures in this life that led me to the current moment. Memories that evoked nostalgic joy and deep sorrow in my being, and also thoughts of the future, bringing feelings of anxiety and hope. I often became lost in the spiral of my musings until something within me would awake me to the

reality of the matter. But this awareness would then lead me onto different cascades of thought sequences, sometimes about the psychological and philosophical nature of thoughts themselves - thoughts within thoughts within thoughts. For me at least, and I'm guessing for many others, thinking seems to be the greatest distraction from perceiving the world, the universe as it is and from being totally present in the moment. Perhaps thinking is sometimes a defence mechanism the body uses to distract us from certain displeasures we are currently going through. It takes you out of your body into your own world, your inner world of previous experience, future concerns and hopes, imaginative adventures in other worlds, fantastic worlds, ideal worlds.

What is a thought? We identify with them so strongly. Our beliefs and ideals are nothing but conceptual thoughts that we cling and hold onto as important for some reason or other. They can cause pain, joy and every emotion that we've experienced. They filter and distort our direct perception of reality, yet without them, we can't even begin to comprehend the world around us. Our mind and thoughts are the single most powerful thing that we as a species have encountered so far. The mind can be used for immense good, but can also be terribly destructive to not only ourselves but the entire world. It was the mind that created nuclear weapons, that led to genocide and war. But it is also the mind that has created the marvellous technologies of the world that have brought us together. The mind has created philosophies and societies that insist we treat others as we would want to be treated ourselves. A double edged sword that one must learn how to wield with care, is one way of thinking about it, I suppose.

A snowflake landed on my nose and brought me out of my own little world. The natural symbol of perfection and beauty in fragility and impermanence. Subtle evidence of the presence and hand of God in the world, I thought, just like all beauty in the natural universe. I looked around to see light snowfall all around. Others were observing the snow and there was a noticeable change of pace almost immediately. A light dusting was building up on the shoulders of the monks, most seemed unperturbed by the change in weather, others were hopelessly brushing the snow off themselves

only for it to build up again on their shoulders and seep into their robes. I wondered about the time of day. Through the thick clouds I could vaguely see where the sun was positioned and guessed it was approaching late morning, perhaps even midday. Several hours must've passed since we began walking.

In the distance, I noticed an outcropping of rocks and a number of trees that had a noticeable absence of snow around them. Dorje promptly stopped walking as though my perception of the place was his cue to begin speaking. "We'll stop to eat and rest over there," I heard him say as he pointed towards the trees and rocks.

I smiled inwardly, relieved to be able to sit down for some time. The energy and pace of the group quickened considerably, motivated by the promise of respite from constant, tiring trekking through the heavy snow. Once we reached the rocky outcropping, the monks carrying the cooking equipment immediately began preparing lunch. It was going to be a small and simple meal, the remnants of the dal from breakfast. I went with a few monks to gather kindling and whatever could be used for fuel in the area since we had nothing left of what we'd brought from the monastery. The outcropping was larger than I initially thought. Boulders of varying shapes and sizes, covered in a sprinkling of snow and strewn randomly amongst numerous pines. It was like a tiny forest, looking slightly magical, I could easily imagine a fawn or some fairies popping out from behind a tree.

We spotted a collapsed, rotting tree and dismantled its branches and trunk, collecting enough to build a fire. Several attempts were made to spark a flame, but the wood was too damp from the snow. As a result, we ate our lunch cold. Not a particularly satisfying meal, but it quelled my hunger.

Whilst eating, Djimon approached and sat beside me. After acknowledging him, we ate quietly until he broke the silence. "So why did you really abandon your normal life to come live in a monastery in the middle of the Himalayas?" He asked.

I was slightly taken aback by his forwardness in asking the question. Not one to hold back his curiosity, I thought. He's been rather open to me with his issues and his story, even though I'd



only really known him a few days. I may as well be reciprocal. "There's a lot of reasons why I came here: spiritual, personal. What do you want to know?"

"All of it," he immediately replied, "I'm sure we've got time for you to tell me before we have to go."

"Well, I guess to begin with, intellectually, I have a deep interest in spirituality and religion, particularly the more mystical side of it all. Buddhism is the only world religion that still has a strong emphasis on mysticism and the inner journey towards self-realisation. I guess it was the most accessible for me," I said, remembering that I was essentially repeating the exact same thing to Tenzin the other day almost word for word. A brief moment of sadness washed over me as I remembered the kind man.

Djimon rubbed his chin, "mystical side of religion? What do you mean by that? I've heard the word thrown around before, but all I think of is magic and secret rituals," he queried.

"It's hard to define, as it encompasses a particular strain within all religions." I scratched my head to think. "I believe that the mystical aspect of all the world religions is the underlying core and truth that unifies them. Though different in a number of ways, the mystical part of every religion shares similar teachings and approaches to spirituality." I paused to gauge whether Djimon wanted me to elaborate further.

"So what's the end goal of mysticism then, enlightenment?" He asked.

"Yes, in a sense, but it's called different things according to the tradition, like in Christianity it's called divine union, becoming one with God. In Hinduism, it's the, ah, realisation that you are God, self-realisation. Each religion approaches this goal of union, enlightenment, self-realisation differently, but there are underlying parts of the journey that are similar. For example, all focus on shedding the ego, the sense of 'I' that keeps us feeling separate from everybody and everything.

"Like we've been taught here," I continued, "it's our strong identification with our thoughts, emotions and body, and then the dominance of these in our experiential reality that prevents us from seeing the world, the universe and God as it truly is: an

interconnected whole that we are not truly separate from." I moved my hands in circular motions to somehow emphasise this unity. "Um I guess, the illusion of separateness we have is the core reason as to why there is so much suffering, physically and psychologically, and why we never feel that our lives are whole. Oh, and there's also the idea of going utterly beyond the physical universe into a state that some call pure and universal consciousness. Either way, stripping away the notion of 'I' is key according to all of the mystical traditions."

"Hmm, keep going," he said as he leaned forward, signalling he was genuinely interested.

I took a breath and continued. "Alright. Each religion, and particularly the mystical part, tries to seek this wholeness by depriving the ego of its potency through a wide variety of ways. Buddhists and many Hindus use meditation to observe the nature of the ego and strip it back until the mind is emptied and capable of truly witnessing reality. But you know that already. And the Abrahamic faiths, umm, they often focus on contemplation, good works, selfless action and compassion to reduce idea of a separate self. I suppose mysticism is a process that completely transforms one's entire being from a selfish animal to godliness." I finished, unsure as to whether anything I had just said made sense.

Djimon nodded, "interesting, I've never really looked too deeply into religions around the world, can't say I completely understand what you mean, but I get the general gist. Maybe we can talk about this more sometime later," he paused for a moment and then said: "so... why else did you come? Being interested in spirituality isn't really a good enough reason for someone to completely drop everything in their life and join a monastery."

I hesitated for a moment, thinking of whether to simply unload some of my emotional and deeply personal reasons for what brought me here. Growing up in a society that seeks to eliminate all negativity in life - emotional, mental and physical - it is difficult to be open about matters that bring personal grievance or suffering. We are generally raised to pretend that nothing is wrong in our lives, that we have no issues and to always have a smile on your face. It makes expressing your deepest feelings very

difficult, even to close friends and family and its definitely taboo to express them to complete strangers. It leads us to put on an invisible mask during our social interactions that hides our true selves in all their aspects. But I wasn't in a normal social setting, not living in a city or town that's constrained by cultural norms dictating our interactions. I was with people who also chose to abandon a normal life for whatever reasons they had. They were all open minded and caring and Djimon was just being curious, so I decided to bring down the walls.

Noticing I hadn't said anything in a while, I realised Djimon was looking at me queerly, waiting for a response. Feeling awkward, I replied, "I guess there's two more major reasons for why I came here. Firstly, I suppose, is a strong dislocation from society I've always felt since I was quite young. I've always felt and behaved differently and the normal path people take in this life, you know, get educated, get a job, get a car, get a family, get a house, then retire and die... it all felt so pointless, so purposeless and simply did not interest me. As crazy as it sounds, I've always felt driven by some strong purpose that my life was meant for more than just that." I scratched the back of my head to itch away a slight feeling of awkwardness. "And throughout my younger years, I imagined myself being a whole range of people that could change the world, from a military general, to a rock star, to leader of the world. My head is wired differently to most, I've found, so the normal life that many people are content and happy with, simply wasn't an option for me, but I also felt I couldn't escape it." I paused to gather my thoughts.

Djimon was nodding, a look of genuine interest was in his eyes, "please, go on," he said as he smiled warmly at me.

I returned the smile, feeling increasingly comfortable with opening myself up to a person, who in all normal circumstances was practically a stranger. "I sunk into a depression and loneliness in my late teenage years and early twenties. I found myself unable to communicate on an emotional level with people, and was hardly able to engage with new people. I became increasingly resentful and hate filled towards society, blaming it for my problems. I became more and more socially anxious, like I couldn't make new

friends and was unable to get a woman." A feeling of embarrassment took hold, but I continued, "I found some solace in studying the world, but also became dependant on drugs to make me feel better and help me escape from reality. Eventually, I stumbled across writings about God and spirituality, which began to bring me out of this dark place. I began to see society, its constructs and the very fabric of everyday experience as, ah, as an illusion veiling a greater reality that many people around the world have called God. It brought me comfort and allowed me to realise that my loneliness was alright, that it should be embraced and taken advantage of. It helped me accept that I was meant for something different. My issues didn't go away, but I was able to cope with them much better."

I was briefly interrupted by a monk saying that we'll be leaving in around fifteen minutes. There was a general affirmation of assent that emanated from the monks, but many continued with their meditation, rest or conversations. Some began to clean up and prepare to leave. I quickened the pace of my own eating, forgetting about it as I opened up my history to Djimon. I made quick work of the rest of my dal, then grabbed a handful of snow and washed the bowl with it. Djimon, on the other hand, was slowly picking away at his last morsels of food in no particular hurry to finish his meal.

"So should I finish my story?" I asked with a hint of enthusiasm. I was rather starting to enjoy discussing my life. There were very few people that I'd met who I felt I could share my experiences with, particularly with things so personal.

Djimon nodded.

"It's nice to talk so openly with someone, particularly in spiritual matters... if you start talking about God and purpose where I'm from, people will lump you into a group of religious crazies, or new age nut jobs. It made me kind of embarrassed to share these aspects of myself."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," he said, "coming from Sudan, where most people talk openly about God doing this and that, and then going to England, where faith is private, is quite a strange change to go through. People look at you funnily if you

want to thank God openly or when you say something was because of God's will... I learned to be quiet about it rather quickly. I guess the answer secular society found to bringing tolerance among religions was to stop talking about it in public. Anyway, go on with your story."

"Finally I decided to travel and see the world. One thing that has always depressed me is repetition and that's probably a reason why I've had so much trouble accepting a normal life. With travel, you do something new every day. I decided to go on a massive safari adventure that traversed across the African continent. Apart from the almost complete detachment from modernity and the chance to be immersed in nature, something... something was simply drawing me there, insisting that I go. Within a few days of arriving, I met someone who I thought would become the love of my life."

Djimon interrupted, "and I'm guessing that she has something to do with the second major reason why you came here?"

I felt myself blush slightly, lowering my eyes, I nodded.

"And it didn't go well did it?"

"No, it didn't," I replied as images of her began to conjure in my mind. Her eyes, her smile, her quirks. Memories started to flood through and I felt a torrent of emotions spontaneously emerge. My heart ached with love and longing, then shifted to a deep sorrow for what happened, then a pang of anger at myself and her, a return to sadness and then back to a yearning love for her. All of this happening in the space of a few seconds. So transient an emotional state can be.

Djimon sensed that it was a difficult subject for me to talk about, "you don't need to tell me about it if it's too hard," he said in a kind and understanding tone.

"It's alright," I took a deep breath to quell my mind and feelings. "Within a few days of knowing her, I developed very strong feelings for her, which only seemed to intensify as I learnt more about her and spent more time with her. We had so much in common, we shared a lot of similar passions, the most significant to me was her love for spirituality. She also had issues with

society, with fitting in, and wanted to do something and be someone that was wholly different to normality. I had never met anyone who had such a similar worldview to me. She made me feel special, made me embrace my difference and follow my dreams, ignoring whatever the world says you should be doing. I spent a month or so travelling with her, and by the end..." I let out a sigh of reminiscence. "By the end, I was insanely in love with her. No one and no one since has made me feel even remotely what I felt for her. We had such a deep connection so quickly after meeting each other... I thought she was the one for me, but there were problems from the beginning..." I let that hang for a moment of tension, feeling quite the storyteller.

"Umm, I found out early on that she was already in a pretty committed relationship, one however, that she wanted to get out of, but never quite managed to follow through. This gave me hope that she might end it with this other man and that we could maybe have a future together. Regardless though, this stopped me from telling her how I truly felt for her early on... which has been one of my life's biggest regrets. Even an evening we had on one of the last days in Africa, somewhere in Tanzania, where we stayed up all night watching the stars and the universe, drunkenly talking and laying next to each other... it was so intense at times, but I still didn't do anything..."

"After I returned home, I couldn't stop thinking about her and we stayed in frequent contact. We lived in different cities, but luckily in the same country and not too far from each other. She stayed with her partner though." I bit down on my lips, suppressing a rather gloomy feeling, before continuing, "this messed with my head a lot and led me through rotating cycles of hope and despair. Eventually, we organised a trip overseas and on the first night we were there, our true feelings for each other came through and I had one of the most incredible nights of my life. By the end of the trip, I thought that I had found the perfect person for me."

Djimon stood up for a moment, having finished his dal, and grabbed a handful of snow to clean his plate, "sorry, please go on," he said, noticing that he'd thrown me off my story slightly.

I snorted a short laugh, "it's okay. Where was I? Ah yes. So, when we got back, I found her slow to breaking things off with her partner. I became irrational, not understanding why it was so difficult for her. I didn't understand how tough it was for her to completely change her life, to jump into the unknown with me. I didn't realise she also loved the other man in a lot of ways and didn't want to hurt him. I pushed and pushed her to hurry things a long, without really caring how she felt. I was so blinded by my own desires, that I didn't realise the damage I was doing. I became deluded that our meeting and eventual union was destined by God and I had to make sure I got to be with her, no matter what it took." I stopped, briefly wincing at the memory. "I became a horrible person, I was abusive to her, attempted to manipulate her... I'm not proud of what I became. And when she finally said she wanted to continue living the way she was and that it wouldn't work between us, it absolutely destroyed me. I wanted to end my life, I lost all sense of purpose and went into the darkest state of despair, hatred and depression I had ever been in. I wanted to kill myself at times."

I paused to take a few breaths, my throat had become rather dry so I had a quick drink. Djimon seemed quite fascinated by my story.

"So obviously, I was very unstable at the time and I thank my spirituality for allowing me not to go completely insane. Ultimately, even though I spent some time trying to win her back, she ended up settling down, marrying and having children with the other man... I was left somewhat aimless, with no real idea of what I was going to do with my life now without her. That's when I decided that I didn't need her to pursue the life of spirituality and exploration that I wanted. So I dropped everything, came here, explored the country and the mountains for a while, and eventually decided to begin my initiation process into the monastic order here..." I let out a sigh and continued, "I guess that about sums up all the reasons why I'm here."

Djimon was silent for a while, obviously processing what he just heard, probably surprised at how much I told him. I suddenly realised that was the first time I've told the story to someone in such depth. "I'm sorry about unloading all of this on

you, Djimon, especially with your background, my problems probably seem like nothing to you. First world problems, huh." I said, wanting to break the silence. I was beginning to feel slightly awkward.

"No no, that's not it at all," he replied with laughter, "I've learnt that suffering affects all of us differently. Like, I know that psychological suffering can be just as horrible as physical suffering. It's something Westerners haven't really figured out yet. You spent all your time escaping from the physical hardships of the world, you know, famine, violence and simple discomfort, but forgot to learn how to cope with your mind and emotions, which can be just as bad for your own wellbeing. Look at the suicides in your countries! My people have learnt how to cope with violence and death, it's part of our daily life and many of us have accepted that." He pointed both hands towards himself. "Even though I've suffered immensely, I don't like to compare people's experiences to my own, because I have no idea how others respond to emotions or any turmoil going on in their head, no matter how silly it seems on the outside. I'm guessing you've come to terms with what's happened and learnt many lessons?"

"Hmm, yes and no, I still think about her a lot, but it doesn't send me on the emotional torrent that it used to. I know there was some purpose behind it all. There's a part of me that hopes that one day, we could be together, but I don't attach myself to such an outcome anymore. I've learnt so much from it all, about myself and how I respond to problems. I have emotional issues I wasn't even aware of before it all happened. I can't even begin to list what I've learnt!"

"It wasn't all for nothing then, huh?"

"Definitely not, even though I didn't see this at the start."

We were interrupted by Dorje, who said that we were leaving in less than ten minutes to make the final trek into town. We stood up and started organising the few things we had on us. "Thanks for sharing your stories with me, I like to learn about people, who they are, where they're from. I know it was a little hard for you, so I appreciate it." In a friendly manner, Djimon slapped me on the back and gave a big grin.



Returning the smile, I said, "thanks for listening, it was good to talk to someone about it and it's rare to find someone who's genuinely interested in another person's story."

We picked up our things, and walked towards the rest of the monks who were gathering and ready to leave. There was an air of excitement amongst us. We were all looking forward to getting into town and hopefully to some of the safety and the comforts of civilisation.

## Chapter Six

### *Chaos and Campsites*

We reached the town faster than I expected. By the standards of other places we'd already passed through, it was like a small city, even though I could see the other side from where we entered. It was perched along the edge of a cliff in a valley that dropped down into a ravine that contained a rapid flowing river. Houses were present on both sides of the valley, many built precariously on the edge, daringly peering below. There was a suspension bridge, built by Ghurkha soldiers and also a flimsy old wooden bridge further along that connected the two halves of the town. The surrounding landscape was rather striking. We had descended what must've been at least half a kilometre in altitude, and we'd sunk below the snowline, creating a stark contrast to the previous few days. The encircling mountainside was covered in pine forest and farm terraces, with snow capped peaks towering above the valley. The aftermath of several landslides and avalanches dotted the area and at first site of the town, it was apparent that it too had been hit hard by the earthquake. The ground beneath numerous homes near the edge of the cliff had given way, sending them into the watery abyss below.

As the band of monks wandered through the streets towards the centre, it became apparent that not a single building in the town was left unscathed. Shattered windows, collapsed walls, debris scattered along the roads, an entire row of houses destroyed by the wrath of nature. There were people busily cleaning to the best of their ability without any heavy machinery, instead using only their hands and crude tools. Children were wandering through the streets, playing games, and in all appearances oblivious to the destruction that had befallen their town. Older inhabitants were sitting on makeshift stools, watching the world pass by, too weary

from years of labour and hardship to rush into rebuilding their homes. Most of the townsfolk stopped what they were doing when they saw our procession of monks. A few ran inside their home only to return shortly after with khata that were enthusiastically given to some of the senior monks.

The street we were following eventually conjoined with the main road in town. It was busier than what first impressions would suggest. Trucks, cars, motorbikes and buses were competing with each other for space on the congested road. I was here briefly when I first arrived in the area, it acted as a kind of crossroads for the region, and at first glance it appeared things were normal, business as usual, despite the destruction. But a closer look revealed frantic behaviour in the town centre, a sense of desperation pervaded the place. A crowd of people, shouting at one another, buying food and supplies from an exhausted looking storekeeper. A few buses were preparing to depart from a small muddy patch of land, where people seemed on the verge of fighting over the last few seats. I noticed a couple of Westerners, looking around appearing confused in the chaos that surrounded them.

We walked through the centre of town, navigating through the hectic traffic and mobs of people. Most stepped aside for us due to the traditional reverence and respect held for those who take monastic vows. I thought to myself how pleasant it was to be in a society that still holds esteem for those who choose to pursue a life dedicated to making oneself a more ideal human being, to seeking enlightenment or God. An attitude towards the spiritual life that died hundreds of years ago in the West, not least due to its material unprofitability.

In due course, we reached a building that was slightly larger than the rest of those in the immediate area. I guessed correctly to myself that it was the residence and office of the leaders of the town. Apart from a few shattered windows, the building was surprisingly intact and we all walked in through double doors at the entrance. The relatively untouched exterior betrayed the internal damage done to the building. Shelves had collapsed and paper was scattered everywhere. One of the internal walls had partially fallen, as though a hole had been blasted

through the middle of it. There was no power in the building, if not the entire town, and I couldn't see anybody using a phone or any type of communicative device. People were hustling and bustling through the room, many too concerned with their own problems to notice a group of monks enter. Voices came from throughout the building, emotions barely disguised by those attempting to remain calm. I couldn't understand what any of them were saying, but the tones of people conveyed sadness, anger, panic among others in a vortex of human activity. A few men, who appeared to work in the building, eventually approached Dorje with reverence, kind smiles and welcoming attitudes, but this did not hide the strain in their faces and look of concern and exhaustion in their eyes. They spoke in the local dialect for several minutes, Dorje remained calm and composed, showing no hint of emotion, yet one could sense his compassion, as one of the men updated him on what exactly had happened in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Whilst he was talking, we attempted to be as inconspicuous and out of the way as possible, pressing ourselves against the walls of the relatively small room in which we had gathered. After a while, Dorje thanked the men and they resumed their frantic and stressful work. He turned to us and with the same indifferent compassion, he spoke to us of the plight of the town and the country.

"The earthquake has caused widespread damage across the entire country and has apparently affected parts of other nearby lands as well," Dorje began with solemnity. "Those killed in the devastation are numbering in the thousands, and the numbers are still growing with each new report. Tens of thousands of homes have been destroyed and hundreds of thousands have been displaced and have been seeking shelter in temporary camps across the country." He sighed and shook his head slightly, possibly a sign of his normally equanimous composure under strain. "There are contradictory reports coming in, communications have been down for the last few days, so it has largely been the word of people who have come into town from the capital and other regions. Some people have said the capital is destroyed, others say it's largely intact. Currently, there is no way for us to absolutely

confirm what has happened. I have asked if there is anything that we can do to assist the town and surrounding villages, but the town leaders just shook their heads, unsure of where even to begin. They want to establish some sense of order before beginning relief work and are waiting on the army to arrive to support them." He swept his hand towards the outside and said, "as you all probably guessed from the situation in this building and outside, it is chaotic. Nobody knows what is happening or how to deal with it. There hasn't been a disaster like this in almost a hundred years. However, for those who want to go to the capital, some power in the city has been re-established and you can contact your loved ones and choose your path from there." Dorje briefly paused and made direct eye contact with myself and the other foreigners in the room. Continuing he said, "for those who want to remain, there is a large *gompa* that has mostly survived relatively nearby. From there we will do our best to help those in surrounding villages. I may be able to organise a few vehicles to transport us there, and we'll leave early in the morning. Tonight, we'll sleep in tents that have been set up for anyone who has lost their homes. For those who will be leaving us, depart as you wish, there are trucks and buses going to the capital rather frequently. You can organise amongst yourselves if you want to leave together, which I advise you do. For now, I'll take you to the tent site and from there you can all decide your own course of action." Dorje smiled reassuringly at us all, clasped his hands together as though in prayer, bowed slightly saying "*namaste*" and walked towards the exit of the building.

The makeshift camping ground wasn't too far from the centre of the town, occupying an open space which must've once been either a paddock for animals to graze in, or an old football pitch. Regardless, its former self was unrecognisable, as it had been turned virtually into a shanty town. Dozens of people were laying about, some with noticeable injuries, others looking afraid, some simply bored. I saw a number of older men sitting around drinking the local 'wine' known as *raksi* (a drink that is far more akin to moonshine than wine), playing cards and gambling away. Many were in good spirits and trying to make the best of the situation, whether by drinking, playing games with their kids or

simply napping on the flimsy collection of blankets and sleeping bags that most families had managed to amass.

We made our way through the camp to find the person or people in charge, following the vague directions of those we asked. I became aware of how tragically surreal the entire situation was. Everybody in the country was collectively experiencing the same event, all thrown out of their normal day to day life into a disaster, unsure of what the next day, or even the next hour will bring. The emotions that were stirring within me varied from a tinge of underlying anxiety, to sympathy for the families that were stuck in this situation with little hope of escaping, to the guilt of knowing that I could escape it all. But there was also a feeling of excitement that this whole ordeal was an adventure unlike anything I had yet experienced, and probably never will again.

I spotted the administrative tent by its distinct logo attached to the tarpaulin, some foreign aid agency connected to the United Nations. I was impressed that they were capable of setting up a camp so quickly given the lack of resources available. We approached them and Dorje started speaking to a few people. I overheard some of their accents, one was obviously British and another was from somewhere in the United States. A third person went into the tent and shortly returned with a large tarpaulin, a couple of poles and some rope, whilst those speaking to Dorje pointed in the direction where there was some free space. Soon they had finished conversing, and Dorje bowed and uttered namaste.

Once we had found our designated site, it wasn't long before we had a comfortable area for ourselves, given the situation. By this point, it was rather late in the afternoon, we were lucky with the weather as the rain and snow had largely held off as we walked to the town and the sky had actually become increasingly clear. When I finally sat down, I realised my tiredness, as did the other monks. But before I rested, I thought it would be best if I gathered the other foreigner monks to discuss who was staying and who was leaving.

We gathered and sat under the tarpaulin which we had set up to function as a kind of roof over a central living area in the

middle of a number of tents. There were only four of us: myself, Djimon, a German and an Indian. I'd noticed the German around the monastery before but never the Indian. I knew that the German had been there for a while, but for how long I wasn't quite sure. I was under the impression that he'd been residing there for several years. The Indian came a month or so after myself, but in all honesty, I thought he was another Nepali monk. We introduced ourselves and I discovered that their names were Michael and Harshvardhan, but for simplicity's sake, he insisted on being called Hash. I liked that nickname, but laughed a little to myself because of its connotations.

"So what are you all thinking of doing tomorrow?" I asked.

Djimon was the first to answer, "I'm staying with the monks, as I told you earlier... I have no family or friends that would be anxious to know if I'm okay. I'd prefer to help where I can and continue with this life."

The three of us nodded in response.

"What about you, Michael?" I said, as we shifted our gaze to him.

"Well, I think I'll go to Kathmandu tomorrow," Michael answered in a thick yet intelligible Bavarian accent. He was a very tall man, slightly burly with a chiselled jaw line, thick stubble and short black hair. "I need to tell my family back home that I'm alive and alright, but I'll return afterwards to help the people out here." He scratched the back of his head, "I've had training in the past in first aid and I was a builder for some time. So, I think I'll be useful here."

The shame of my own decision resurfaced in my being and even a bit of jealousy that he was capable of helping the people effectively, whilst I felt I was more or less useless.

Michael looked at me directly in the eyes. Though his face was roughshod and covered with scratches, his eyes betrayed a kindness that I noticed immediately. "And you?" He asked me.

I let out a small sigh and replied, "I'm going to the capital tomorrow. I was thinking I would leave the country, I'm not sure to where, but I don't think it's appropriate to stay here... I've got no skills to help people and I would just be a waste of resources."

Besides, in recent days, I've come to realise that being a Buddhist monk isn't what I want to be." I felt ashamed and weak that I was just giving up and quitting. More guilt arose when I thought to myself that I have this choice of just packing up and leaving, whereas most people in this country don't have the privilege, yet deserve it far more than I do.

"Ah okay, understandable. It's probably for the best, better feed those who really need it, rather than those who feel like they can help, but really can't offer much," Michael stated bluntly but in a manner that caused no offence. I remembered being told before that Germans don't beat around the bush, generally being rather straightforward people.

We were quiet for a moment before Michael said, "and you Hash, what're you going to do?"

"I'm going to leave the country too." Hash's English was very clear, but still had a hint of an accent. He was thin and shorter than the rest of us, had thick black hair, an oval face, a large nose and slightly chubby cheeks. "To be honest, I don't really want to be here, I want to go home to India. My home is in Uttarakhand, a small state in the Himalayas. I want to know if my family is alright, after Dorje told us the earthquake had also affected nearby countries. Anyway, I never became a fully ordained monk, and was here more for the experience than anything else."

Again we nodded in understanding. I didn't really blame him for simply wanting to leave, I kind of did as well.

"So we'll leave early tomorrow morning?" Michael said, scanning each one of us individually. Hash and myself nodded in affirmation. "We could either go by the public bus, or we could all pay a bit more and get a truck or car, a little more comfortable and faster."

"I don't really mind," I answered.

"Neither do I, the bus probably won't be too bad, but if anyone offers us a ride, let's take that," Hash said.

"I guess we'll just decide when we get there in the morning, how about we aim to leave as early as possible," I said, looking at the other two to gauge their assent. Both agreed. Exhaustion suddenly overcame me and I let out a large yawn, "well, I'm tired



so I'm going to try and get some sleep, even though it's early. Good night!" I stood up to head towards my things when I suddenly felt hunger pangs, "I'll eat first though," I said with a guffaw to the other three.

I could smell the familiar scent of spices, dal was being cooked somewhere nearby. I grabbed my plate and followed my nose. I found a few of the monks reheating the dal by a communal fire not too far away from our area. A few families were sitting around the fire, wrapped in blankets, eating their own dal bhat. It looked far more appetising than our own that was made with the limited ingredients we'd gathered from the monastery. The monks looked at me as I approached and I smiled at them, which they returned. Sitting down with them, I asked for some food. Even though Dorje spoke English very well, these monks didn't and I gestured with my hands the universal symbol for food. One replied by putting up both his hands, revealing ten fingers. Ten minutes. Slightly disappointed that I couldn't be immediately satisfied, I sat down by the warmth of the fire. The day was fading to evening and the majority of light was now coming from the fire. I turned and peered into the growing darkness to see and hear people shuffling around. A low chorus of banter and chatter pervaded throughout the camps. I turned myself back towards the fire and stared into it for a minute or so, mesmerised by the flames licking up into the night sky.

Closing my eyes, I decided to meditate for a little while as I waited for the dal to finish being cooked. I took a few deep breaths to settle in, and then shifted my conscious awareness around my body. I noticed aching throughout my body, in my legs, in my lower back. I felt my heart palpitating, which wasn't in a particularly rhythmic pattern. My mind was cloudier than usual, dulled by a light, enclosing headache that was putting pressure on parts of my brain. The heat of the fire radiated onto my face, growing hotter as time passed. It wasn't the most pleasant experience I've had whilst meditating, but it was a good lesson in equanimity, the equilibrium found when one does not react to the pleasures and pains that are presented to the mind and body. Instead, one merely observes what is happening and simply accepts

what *is*. After what felt like no time at all, there was a light tapping on my knee. Slowly opening my eyes, I looked to the source of the sensation to see a monk smiling at me with arm outstretched and a plate of dal bhat in his hand. I thanked him, took the meal and immediately began to eat.

I was shortly joined by Djimon, who grabbed a serving and squatted next to me. "It was nice to have met you, even though it was only for a short time," he said in between mouthfuls of food.

"You've been good company," I replied, feeling slightly awkward, but nevertheless touched.

"I've been thinking a little bit about what you said to me earlier today, about how you hate repetition and the tedium of the 'normal' life."

"Yes?" I asked curiously.

"Why did you join a monastery, where you do exactly the same thing day in and day out? Just seems like you jumped into the very thing you dislike, doesn't make sense to me." Djimon laughed a little, enjoying the irony of my choices.

"Hmm, yes, does seem a bit weird, huh?" I replied as I scratched my chin. I thought about it briefly. It had crossed my mind before. "I suppose that externally, it appears as though we do the same thing every day, but as you know, the internal journey of the monk is new every single day. We spend our days reading, meditating and generally investigating our mind and emotions. Each day, I read something new, and often figure out something new about myself. So in that way, each day has new experiences, even though it might look like we're doing the same thing day in and day out."

"Yeah, that's true," Djimon thought for a moment, then continued, "couldn't you apply that to daily life then?" He asked rhetorically, "I mean, you can go to work, do the whole nine till five thing, come home, and do the same thing over and over again. But if you have the right mindset, a similar mindset to one that you cultivate in the monastery, wouldn't each day be different then?"

"I suppose you're right," I nodded. "I guess you can take it a step further... experientially, no single day is the same, or even any single moment, no matter how similar to the previous one it

seems. I guess, like we were taught at the monastery, that awareness of the present moment is all that's needed. If you notice each gust of wind, the birds singing, the different people you spot going on about their business, every little thing that happens in the day, each day is totally different. You just need to approach it with more wonder and presence I suppose."

Djimon nodded in agreement, "Yeah, and you aren't even including what you can do with your mind as you go through the day. You can create a world of adventure to pass time, all inside your head. Back in my village in Sudan, we didn't have television or any sort of entertainment that you Westerners have, so we had to use our imaginations all the time to create all sorts of games. It's a shame that so many of us lose that creativity and wonder of the world as we get older."

I let out a little grunt of agreement, "you've given me something to think about, but it still doesn't make me want to go back to normality any time soon. Something deep within me just simply rejects it and I have no desire to live that way. Sometimes I wish I was wired differently, to be content with that nice simple normal lifestyle, but I just can't, I feel constantly driven away from it."

"I think most people feel that way to some extent, but for whatever reason, maybe because they're afraid or don't think it's possible, they can't or won't pursue those feelings. I'd say pretty much all young people, particularly you Westerners, feel that way, but will give up when it gets too hard, or they get too tired. I hope it doesn't happen to you."

"I've thought that before... I hope that too, I don't think it will though," I said emphatically.

We continued to talk as we finished eating. I noticed the day had disappeared and was replaced by the darkness of night. With no electricity in the town, the stars were shining gloriously above us, the clouds having completely cleared by now. I could make out the faint band of the milky way and by simply staring into the heavens, I was filled with a deep sense of calmness. No matter where one is in the world, no matter what is happening, there is still beauty to behold that's easily in reach. To me, that is

another subtle piece of evidence for the existence of God. Djimon noticed me looking up at the stars and joined in, and together we enjoyed the beautiful night by the fire, sharing in the wonder of the universe.

After some time, I said goodnight to Djimon and the other monks, returned to the makeshift tent, prepared a nest and settled in for the night. I fell asleep almost immediately, and didn't dream. Instead I drifted into that experience, or non-experience of deep, dark, timeless unconsciousness.

"Get up... get up, we've got to go soon... wake up!"

Groggily, I opened my eyes, Hash's face was staring right at me, standing above me. I was slightly confused, wondering where I was at first. "Right, alright I'm up," I sat up, rubbing my eyes and stretching my arms. I was stiff in my legs and had a slight headache. "When are we leaving?" I asked.

"Soon, we'll just say our goodbyes, the monks remaining here are also leaving soon. Here," Hash passed me a plate of dal bhat.

I thanked him, and took it, eating with my hands, I forced it down, too soon after waking up for me to eat ravenously, even though I could feel the hunger. I silently cursed my oftentimes sensitive stomach. After a few mouthfuls, I put the plate down and packed up my things. I scanned the tent and soon realised I was the last one to wake up. I stood up, grabbed my things and walked outside the tent to find the monks making final preparations to leave. It was a cool, partly cloudy morning, the sun must've just risen, its warm orange glow was pleasant on the skin. Michael and Hash were standing together, chatting idly, looking as though they were ready to leave. Djimon was with Dorje, who appeared to be explaining something to him, probably further details about their plan for the day. I acknowledged Michael and Hash and pointed towards Dorje and Djimon, saying to them that I was going to make my goodbyes. Approaching the two, Dorje looked at me, smiled and said, "good morning, I hope you're faring well today."

"Good morning, Dorje. Considering what we've been through, I'm doing pretty well," I replied, returning the smile, "it

looks as though we'll be leaving soon, so I thought I'd say goodbye."

"It was pleasant to have spent time with you, though I wish we'd spoken more, you're quite the shy one!" Said Dorje. "In these hard times, you've been very good and persevered without complaining whilst remaining in a rather equanimous mindset, given your novice experience."

I felt myself blushing, "thank you, Dorje, thank you for guiding us to safety, supporting us and understanding with kindness that I'll be leaving the monastery. I'll always cherish my time with you and all of the monks here. I wish you and your people all the best in the future, and a fast recovery from this tragedy." I felt as though my thanks and goodbye seemed slightly forced, a fairly generic goodbye. It was heartfelt, but I often have trouble expressing my emotions in words.

I shifted myself towards Djimon, "even though we've only properly known each other for a few days now, it's been quite an experience."

Djimon gave me a brief smile, "it sure has."

"Thanks for getting me to be more open with people, it was great to be able to talk with you about so much, over such a short time." I said, somewhat averting eye-contact, slightly awkward, and rubbing the back of my head. "I wish I had met you earlier, but I guess that's just the way of things sometimes."

Djimon, touched by my sentiment, walked close to me and embraced me in a hug. Letting go, but holding onto my shoulders, he said, "you're a good guy, I hope you fulfil those dreams of yours, never settle for anything else. Maybe we'll see each other sometime in the future."

"I'd like that," I replied with a hint of sorrow in my voice, as we both took a step back from each other. "Alright, I guess I better go, goodbye Djimon, goodbye Dorje." I made a short wave, which both of them responded in kind, turned around and walked to Michael and Hash.

"We ready to go?" I asked.

"Yep, let's get going," said Michael with some enthusiasm, he seemed rather eager to leave.

The three of us walked past the numerous campsites, weaving our way through people and the accumulated rubbish of the last few days. Most were still asleep, or simply just lying down, enjoying the respite from their harsh realities. There were families huddling together, blankets around their shoulders as they ate whatever food they could muster. It wasn't long before we had reached the exit of the makeshift shanty town and it only took several minutes for us to get to the town centre where buses and other vehicles were departing regularly. Scanning the area, I couldn't spot anybody with a truck or car that would be suitable for the three of us to ride in, so we settled on taking the bus into Kathmandu. We walked over to the bus lot that more closely resembled a patch of dirt that vehicles could park on.

A man approached us, saying in broken, hardly intelligible English, "Namaste! Kathmandu? Come with us, really cheap! We leave now!" The man gave us a large toothless grin, and reached out to take our belongings.

We looked at the bus, a small decrepit thing, rusting in some parts and coloured flamboyantly as many large vehicles in this part of the world were. With horizontal bars fitted over all of the windows, it looked like a colourful bus that escorts prisoners to jail. The vehicle was already packed with locals and I wondered how it could fit any more people. The man indicated again for us to give him our things. I didn't have anything that I couldn't put in my robe, but Michael and Hash had managed to grab their bags before leaving. It seemed like they had no other choice, so they passed him their possessions except for a small satchel that Michael was carrying. He climbed with surprising agility onto the top of the bus, scouted a spot to put their goods, secured them with a thin length of rope and promptly returned. He then ushered us onto the bus, and pointed towards a few remaining vacant seats near the back. We scrambled to our places, weaving our way through sacks of food and all sorts of other products that were casually placed down the aisle. Conveniently for us, the seats we were allocated were all close to each other. I sat down by the window, with Hash sitting next to me. Michael was in the seat in front of us, next to an elderly man wearing a bright dhaka topi, the favoured hat amongst

Nepali men. He was spitting profusely out the side of the bus every minute or so. Though the man was probably a bit ill, I couldn't help but giggle to myself, it was obviously making Michael uncomfortable and a little nauseous, creating a rather comical sight.

Shortly after we had sat down, the bus started to move with a loud roar of its engine and we were on our way to Kathmandu. The ride to this town, I remembered, was rough and bumpy, and took around seven hours. I told myself that going back would probably take much longer, depending on the impact the earthquake had on the roads. It didn't take long for us to leave the town and onto the pothole filled, dirt road that was partially paved, which slithered its way along the cliffs and mountain slopes going up and down, up and down. For some time, I sat in silence, enjoying the spectacular views of the nearby mountain ranges and the lull from walking through snow. If it wasn't for the constant rocking of the vehicle, it would've felt like we were flying through the heights of the world being surrounded by such monolithic pillars of stone. Most of the people on the bus were fairly quiet, but the local pop music, heavily influenced by Indian Bollywood songs yet with a native touch, blared through distorted and crackling speakers, somewhat destroying any potential peace and serenity.

After an hour or so had passed, I decided to get to know Hash a little bit. "So what brought you from India to live in a monastery in Nepal?" I asked.

"Hmm?" He said taking a moment to register the question, "oh, I wanted the experience, I never really intended to become a monk, I'm just interested in the spiritual traditions of my country."

"Huh, yeah that was a reason for me too," I replied.

We fell to quiet for a few minutes before Hash spoke again, "I've always felt like there was so much more to the world than what we can feel, see and smell. That there is some sort of underlying ultimate existence that is hidden by the world that we experience every day without realising." Touching his heart, he said, "we Hindus call it *Brahman*. I believe Buddhism has similar teachings and is nothing but a well developed offshoot of Hinduism. I'm not interested in the superstitious rituals that my

people have developed, and I saw Buddhism as a purer form of teachings that have been largely lost in the mainstream form of my religion."

I thought to myself that there would be a lot of Buddhists around the world who would strongly disagree with him, perhaps even be offended, but I admired the inclusiveness of his worldview. "Surely, that pure form of Hinduism still exists in India? It's why so many Westerners go there for a spirituality that differs from the rigidity of organised Christianity."

"I guess I felt like a change as well, throw myself into something that is so different to what I've previously experienced, but still has some familiarity. I've done plenty of types of yoga in the past, stayed in a few *ashrams*, read the scriptures. I like a lot of it, but yeah, I guess I just wanted change."

"What did you do back home?" I asked.

"Umm, so my father is in politics, representing his region in the Uttarakhand local parliament in Dehradun. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps, but I chose to study physics. As I studied, I learnt about the, ah, the basic fabric of reality, quantum mechanics and the like. It reminded me of some of the cosmology of Hinduism, and I soon found out that many Indian scientists had noted the same similarities. Learning all this made me want to explore the spirituality of my people more. After I finished my studies, I've been on this, how do you say... spiritual journey, travelling around Uttarakhand, to Rishikesh and the holy places in the mountains and by the Ganga." He paused to take a breath. "I went deeper and deeper into it all and eventually came across Buddhism, which also has similarities with the findings of modern physics. I find it quite funny that many of you in the West reject spirituality because of what modern science has found... it's a real shame, you know? Both go hand in hand. Just because you can explain how a house works without needing to talk about the builder or architect, doesn't mean they don't exist. And why did such a well crafted house get built in the first place?"

"I know what you mean," I replied in complete agreement, "I was once a pretty staunch atheist, until I read a few books which argued that science and spirituality are entirely compatible. I think



that there is too much literal reading of the Bible and the other religious books, which misleads a lot of people." With a variety of hand gestures, indicating my passion for an issue, I continued, "and then there's this idea that God is some big person in the sky who sits on a throne and judges all of us. And then there's those who think if God exists, it should be measureable, like any other sort of phenomenon in the universe. It's all a big misconception of how the divine has historically been understood. God was never some sort of explanatory factor for how things happen in the world, like lightning or the movements of the planets. God was more responsible for why things happen the way they do, giving meaning to the events." I paused a moment to take a breath.

"Yes, yes, I know what you mean, it's a shame that there's a big hole in the heart of so many modern people just because they think a belief in something beyond the physical universe is incompatible with science... so unnecessary." Hash said.

I continued my rant without realising, "yeah, and it makes it difficult to appreciate the concept of the divine when all of us have such a dualistic view of reality. God is often seen as separate from the world, good and evil are in constant conflict rather than inseparable parts of a whole. I think there also lies the problem with people not believing. And it's quite understandable. I think it's better to view the divine as both an intimate, immanent part of the world as well as transcending it. God isn't this, uh, this mean kid using a magnifying glass to kill us when he doesn't like us... instead, like Hindus suggest, we are divine, and so is everything else in the universe, so really the evil done to people, animals and nature is really God harming itself. God is sharing in the suffering of humankind, as a mother would share in the suffering of her child. It's due to an ignorance of our deep interconnection, our oneness, that leads to so much self-inflicted suffering, so much hatred in the first place..." I stopped, finally noticing that I'd babbled on for a while, sounding maybe a little bit preachy. "Sorry, I've gone on a bit of a tangent, I just love to be able to talk about this kind of stuff when the opportunity arises. It's so rare, you know, coming from where I come from, to be able to discuss

things like the existence of God, without being called a weirdo and being judged. I'm pretty passionate when it comes to this."

"No, not at all," Hash said laughing, "I didn't understand entirely what you meant, but I think I mostly get it. It's funny, in India, when someone says 'I am God', no one bats an eyelid, because we're all divine. Our soul, the *atman*," he said, again touching his heart, "is identical with the ultimate reality of the universe, *brahman*. I'm guessing they throw you in a mental hospital if you say that in the West."

I let out a small chuckle, "yes, but a lot of the time, those people who declare themselves God, often think they're the only one. Declaring themselves the new messiah or the king of the world, something like that. We live in a pretty weird world, huh?"

"We sure do. So what else made you go from an atheist to someone who is a very deep believer in God? No offence, but surely a few books wouldn't make a difference, otherwise you'd have a pretty impressionable mind."

"Yeah, I guess I just started to look at science from a different angle. I noticed atheism and materialism was just a philosophical interpretation of the evidence brought by science, rather than science itself. Instead of seeing the findings of science as against some spiritual reality, I started to understand the evidence in a way that made the very existence of the universe look unlikely without some sort of divinity. Like it seems odd to me, that with all the beauty in nature, its wonder and complexity, that there isn't some sort of guiding, non-material force in the universe." I paused.

Hash nodded. "I agree, everything in the universe that we see today emerged from the beginning of time and has been reorganising itself constantly over billions of years. We are all literally one, made of the same stuff, interconnected so deeply. For me, that strongly suggests that there is an underlying prescient energy, or God, or whatever you want to call it." He added during my pause.

We were bouncing off each other with a shared mindset and I was quite enjoying it. Biting my lip to gather my next thought, I continued, "the very fact that the majority of people on

the planet have the desire to go beyond themselves, to be part of something bigger - be it in politics, society, religion, whatever - to me suggests that there is something spiritually grander than what we experience in everyday life. We all seem to be driven by some sort of purpose that we feel we must fulfil, whether it is as simple as having children, to wanting to rule the world, something drives us beyond the mere need to survive, to achieve something beyond ourselves."

"You know, you've got an interesting perspective of God and the universe, very holistic, quite like mine. You might enjoy learning about the Hindu approach to purpose, if you want me to tell you."

"You're tolerating my ranting, so please go ahead." I responded jovially.

"I'm personally quite fond of it. Hmm, so there are generally four purposes to life, the lowest of which is the path of desire. This is simply fulfilling one's desires and pleasures like seeking sex, material stuff, good food and all that. A very hedonistic but nevertheless legitimate approach to life, if that's how you want to live. For those who aren't, umm, completely satisfied with worldly pleasure, then they will often follow the path of worldly success: seeking fame, fortune, power - making an impact on the world in some way or other. This can vary from being a successful doctor to, I don't know, being a great conqueror or whatever." He paused and tapped his finger on his cheek to trigger his next point. "Then for those who still feel as though there is more to life, there is the third stage of renunciation, which is pretty much about seeking to be the best possible individual, for oneself, for society and for God. It means acting selflessly, not indulging excessively in the pleasures of life. It also means becoming a productive member of society and being willing to sacrifice oneself for a greater good. Are you following all this?"

I nodded.

"Great. So all three of these paths have their downsides: the first is simply that, ah, worldly pleasures are very limited and temporary in their satisfaction, they don't answer the calls of our deeper nature. I don't even need to begin with the problems of the

path of worldly success, simply put, it isn't for everyone. Many have to hurt others to have their success, and even when a degree of success is achieved, comparisons to others will always make it that your triumphs aren't ever quite enough. The problems of the path of renunciation is that your kindness can be taken advantage of, and it can take so many pleasures away from life, and you simply may not be happy at all." He stopped as though he was attempting to build anticipation for the climax. "Finally though, is the highest purpose of being liberated from karma and the cycle of rebirth and the realisation that the individual and God are one and the same. It is the realisation, not just intellectually, but with your entire being that you are *satcitananda*: infinite being, infinite knowledge and infinite bliss. There are no problems with the highest purpose, it is what the other paths seek without being aware of it. It is total freedom from life's limitations. Liberation is what all religions at their core seek, it's a major reason as to why people seek power, seek wealth, seek pleasures... That freedom from want, that freedom from pain and suffering, we all do it in some form or other."

"Explains a lot about why we do the things we do, doesn't it? Whether or not someone believes in God, it's hard to disagree that we all seek purpose and happiness in some form or other, that we wish to find solutions to the hardships of life through whatever means available to us." As I dwelled on these ideas for a few moments, I looked out the window, to the mountains in the distance, a few small villages sat perched precariously on the slopes, surrounded by farming terraces. From here, they seemed untouched, but the earthquake probably devastated large portions of them.

Hash continued, "I find it incredible that these ideas have been around for thousands of years. Such ancient teachings, we don't even know their real origins, or who even first came up with them, so shrouded in the veil of history. And yet, over all these years, after all the changes in society, technology and our daily lives, they remain as relevant today as they did way back then. Incredible isn't it? It goes to show that our essence, our human nature, has remained largely the same."

"I couldn't agree with you more," I said, "why else would the great religions of the world remain one of the few constants of the human experience despite everything we've been through... they all answer deep fundamental questions about our nature, and carry so many timeless truths about our existence."

Abruptly, Hash changed the topic of conversation, "what will you do when you reach the capital?"

"Um, I'm not really sure, I'll probably go to the embassy, get into contact with my family, tell them I'm not dead. I'm assuming this earthquake has been making the news... they're probably worried sick about me. After that, I'll be leaving the country, though I'm not going home."

"You should come to India!" Hash exclaimed enthusiastically. "You'd love it in Uttarakhand, so spiritual, so holy, such a beautiful landscape, and the source of the Ganga is there. You've heard of Rishikesh?"

I momentarily fetched into my memory of facts, "it's the self-proclaimed world capital of yoga, right? And that's where the Beatles stayed back in the sixties?"

"Yes, that's the place! It's amazing there, lots of Western spiritual seekers go there, it's a little commercial now as a result, but that's not too much of a bother. You know, if you're on any sort of spiritual journey, it's worth spending some time there. There's something special about that town."

The memory of my dream a few nights back came to the forefront of my mind, of the sadhu by the river. Maybe I'm supposed to go there, I thought. I briefly consulted the feelings of my heart... a warm, almost indescribable feeling emanated from my chest, which told me intuitively that it felt like the right direction to go. I made my decision there and then, "Sure, why not?"

For several hours we travelled along the long windy, bumpy road. The bus was going at an incredibly sluggish pace. There were several instances where we had to stop to partially clear landslides caused by the earthquake, helping the local villagers and workers who needed the road clear so that they could be more easily reached by any aid heading their way. People

frequently got on and off the bus. Already, many were resuming their normal lives, selling random things on the bus and transporting packages of who knows what. Their ability to resume their daily lives after such a sudden upheaval impressed me, there was so much resilience in these people. Would people have behaved differently from where I came from? I wondered to myself frequently. Hash and I continued to chat throughout the ride. Michael would occasionally join us, but he spent most of his time sleeping away the hours, waking up to help clear the road when needed. I was glad we left so early in the morning, by the time I could see Kathmandu, popping in and out of sight every time we rounded a hill, a sprawling forest of grey concrete structures. It was late afternoon and the sun was ready to call it a day. Despite the tedium of constantly seeing the final destination but apparently never quite reaching it, I was somewhat relieved that we were almost there. I decided to try to get a little bit of a sleep before we arrived. With no idea how much longer it would take to find a place to spend the night, I thought that I may as well get some rest.

## Chapter Seven

### *Kathmandu*

I awoke from a semiconscious sleep that's typical of travelling in a moving vehicle, a tremor coming from underneath the bus brought me out of my hazy slumber. Cries and whimpers of fear came from many of the passengers and the bus ground to a halt. The earth was moving again.

In panicked confusion, the people on the bus tried to force themselves out, pushing each other, yelling at each other. The bus transformed instantly from any other normal ride to a chaotic frenzy of frightened people, who were all too aware of the dangers an earthquake can bring. I felt fear rise up inside of me, bordering terror, and it took all of my training to return to some semblance of inner calm. There were numerous aftershocks since the first quake, but this one was different, it was bigger, far bigger. The bus was rocking side to side and seemed as though it was threatening to roll over and off the road. I peered out the side of the window and saw that we were in a fairly precarious position. Below us was a cliff, not a sudden drop, but angled in such a way that one would be incredibly lucky to survive rolling down inside a rickety, decrepit old vehicle. Another surge of panic came over me. I felt trapped, as the bus continued to rock, people were stumbling and pushing out the front, much slower than if things were calm and orderly.

I looked to Hash, "what do we do?" I yelled over the shouts of others, the trembling fear in my voice apparent.

Hash seemed calm, it was almost unnerving, "we have no choice, try to relax and trust in God that all will be well."

That actually reassured me. I often said to myself that I trusted God and the universe with taking care of me and also that I wasn't afraid to die. But I suppose one can't really be sure about their attitudes to all that until they are really tested. One can't really

say that they're not afraid of death until they have faced it directly. One can't say that they trust in God and the universe until it's needed most.

The shaking continued, it must've been going on for around twenty or thirty seconds, but it felt like an hour. Hash, Michael and myself were among the last to get off the bus, and just in time, as the tremors forced it to topple over the side and roll down into the chasm below. Staying well away from the cliff, I heard it crash into something, followed by a loud explosion, smoke plumes rose from below us, drifting off into the afternoon sky. It wasn't over though, as rocks and boulders hurtled down toward us from above. I was dizzied as the chaos unfolded and swirled around me. I heard someone get hit, screams of agony. A boulder careened past me, missing me by only a few feet, but slamming into a poor unfortunate soul, taking her off the cliff into the smouldering abyss below. By this point, the earthquake appeared to have mostly stopped, but I wasn't quite certain as I felt my body continue to shake and rumble. About a hundred meters ahead, I saw that a few people had found an indenture in the geography that was shielding them from falling rocks. Grabbing at Hash and waving at Michael, I yelled at them to make their way there. I began to run, but before I knew it, what felt like a punch to the side of my head knocked me and I fell to the ground unconscious.

"Wake up... wake up... wake up." I heard a voice swirl and morph inside my consciousness. Faint, dark, blotchy images were manifesting in my mind's eye, or were they my regular eyes? I couldn't tell. I felt pain.

"Wake up... wake up... you still have so much to learn, so much to find, so much to do... wake up."

Was I already awake, was this a dream? The voice seemed unworldly, but a voice not to be afraid of.

A glorious light shined and penetrated all corners of my mind and soul, it entered my entire being, it filled me with life, but it was different, absolutely different, to any regular expression of feeling alive. I felt total, whole, complete.

"You have a path to keep walking down, you cannot finish here, you are not yet ready to enjoy death..." The voice returned, it



was a soothing voice, comforting, uplifting. It had the gentleness of a mother to her newborn child. "Wake up.... wake up.... wake up. Higher things await you, but you cannot rest now, it is not your time... wake up."

"Get up! Come on, get up!" A different voice.

I managed to pry open my eyes slightly, only to be greeted by another flash of light, an artificial light, a flashlight. Vision slowly returned, I moved my head slightly. A seething headache was pounding my skull, I move slightly. This prompted the flashlight to be turned off, and I started to make out a few figures looming over me.

"Good, he's awake," I heard one say, I think it was Hash. "How are you feeling? Can you move much?"

My awareness was slowly returning, but the headache remained. I touched where the pain was worst, near the left temple, it was damp with blood, but there was some sort of bandaging covering the full extent of the wound. "I'm sore... but I'm okay," I managed to croak.

"Can I help you up?" Another figure said, I recognised the accent, it was Michael.

Slowly, I lifted myself into an upright position, I noticed that there was a third person to my side, an older lady with leathery skin and layers upon layers of wrinkles on her face, who must've been the one to apply the bandage. I reached out my hand to Michael and he helped bring me to my feet. Standing up, my consciousness morphed in and out of darkness and I reeled forward. Hash and Michael were quick enough to catch me before I completely fell and supported me until I was stable again on my own two feet.

"We were worried about you for a while there. You were knocked out for quite a long time," Hash said with relief. Michael nodded in agreement.

"Thanks guys," I managed a smile, feeling very groggy, dazed and confused. "What exactly happened?"

"Basically, as we were heading towards safety, a rock smacked into the side of your head and knocked you to the ground. We made it to cover and waited till rocks stopped falling." Michael

said, pointing to the place of safety. "At first we thought you may have died, we couldn't see if you were breathing. But luckily enough, the rocks stopped falling shortly after you got hit. We waited by your side for you to regain consciousness, and this lady here helped us by wrapping your head in makeshift bandages... and by saying a few prayers."

I looked at her and smiled, she promptly returned it, nodded and said something in Nepali that I couldn't quite make out. She touched my shoulder affectionately and started to walk off. I assumed she was eager to get back to her family.

"You were out for about half an hour," Michael said, "everybody but us has started walking into the city, we shouldn't be far now, only an hour or two is my guess."

I felt and knew that leaving immediately probably wasn't the best idea, but regardless I said gruffly, "I'd prefer to be in the city than stick around here any longer. Either of you have any water?"

Michael reached into his satchel, and retrieved a canteen, passed it to me, which I unwittingly snatched from him. I took a few large mouthfuls, unaware until that moment of how parched I was. The cool water immediately refreshed me and brought some clarity to my mind. I paused to take a breath, and continued to drink. "Thanks a lot," I managed to reply in between gulps.

"Need any more time, before we go?" Hash asked kindly, "that rock was pretty big, I'm surprised you aren't worse than you look."

"No, I should be fine to go, I'll let you know if I need to stop."

The walk into Kathmandu was tiresome. Regardless of my injury, it was a slow trek muddling and stumbling as the day slowly drew to a close. Even though it wasn't particularly dark, I still found myself tripping over rocks and cracks in the ground. I coped fairly well, but still had to stop occasionally to rest, drink some water and wait for the pain in my head to relent enough to continue. We caught up to a few of the people who were on the bus, or at least I thought they were from the bus. In both broken English and Nepali, they would greet us warmly, and wish us well.

Yet again, I found myself admiring the people of this country, who always seemed to remain so positive even in the hardest of times.

My head was foggy throughout the entire journey and my state of consciousness ventured between a light headedness that made me nauseous and a heaviness that felt like I was hundreds of meters under the sea with the pressure slowly crushing my skull. I could hardly recall reaching the outskirts of the city. Only scattered lights were turned on, mostly from personal power generators, humming and buzzing in the shadows of dusk. Hundreds, if not thousands of people were on the streets that night. They were staying as far from the buildings as possible, and had set up camps right down the middle of the roads. Little fires had been made, dotting the streets and giving the impression of some sort of ancient procession in the capital, although without anyone actually moving. People were passing the time doing all sorts of things, drinking, singing, playing card games, cooking food. There were children running up and down the streets, many of whom must have thought this was some sort of fun adventure.

It took me a while to register the scale of the damage the earthquake had done. At first, it seemed as though only the occasional building was affected, walls collapsed here and there, fallen powerlines, some rubble scattered along the street. But as we walked deeper and deeper into the city, the full scale of the destruction was revealed. There were entire rows of houses that had collapsed on each other. Cars that had been crushed, roads completely blocked off. There were sinkholes that had opened up, swallowing everything around them. I saw the occasional body, unclaimed, unrecovered. An arm hanging out of the rubble. A contradiction of feelings swirled within me, an immense sense of gratitude for how lucky I was to get out relatively unscathed, but coupled with a feeling of guilt for why I was so fortunate yet so many others weren't. I pondered on why the universe chooses some people to perish at any given time, while others are spared. An unanswerable question that only God will ever know.

We were heading towards the centre of the city, a neighbourhood called Thamel, where travellers generally find themselves when they first arrive in Nepal. It's more a less hub for

tourists with everything one would need to explore the country. It was filled with restaurants, shops, guesthouses and hotels. It was also relatively close to many embassies. If we were to get into contact with the outside world and figure out what to do next, it was going to be around the area of Thamel.

As we came closer, we weaved through narrow winding streets until it opened up into a large square. Huge piles of rubble covered the entire area, and the outlying buildings were heavily damaged. Spotlights were scattered throughout and a few stationary bulldozers created the impression that we had stumbled onto an active construction site that had recently demolished older buildings to make way for the new. However, we soon realised where we were... it was the historical centre of the city called Durbar Square. I remembered coming here when I first arrived in the country. It was a beautiful place, steeped in history with buildings over five hundred years old. The square was filled with temples and palaces, many of which still had active functions in the local city culture. The buildings had a unique architecture, a hybrid of Chinese, Indian and Tibetan influences, a reminder of the impact that these three great civilisations had on the small country. I have deep love and respect for all things ancient, whether natural or manmade, and I was almost overcome with sadness as I looked at the rubble, trying to discern any significant features that had remained intact. But it was fruitless, the vast majority of this historical place was in complete, ruin. Though I did see one culturally and spiritually important building that remained largely unscathed by the destruction, the *Kumari Ghar*.

One of the more interesting roles the square had was that it was home to the *Kumari*. She was a young pre-pubescent girl who was thought of as a living goddess, the manifestation of feminine divine energy. They spend their childhood almost entirely hidden from public view except on ceremonial occasions, and they have all their needs and wants catered for by priests and other carers. I had the opportunity to see her once, a very strange experience. She emerges generally once per day and appears above her palace's courtyard looking over worshippers and curious observers. When I was there, she looked directly into my eyes from afar. It was a

piercing gaze, as though she saw through all the layers of my personality, penetrating deep into my soul. Aside from this, it was an incredibly peculiar site, a stoic girl, revealing no hint of emotion, covered in elaborate garments, jewellery and makeup. She was only present for a few minutes before being ushered away by the two priests standing by her side. It astounded me that the Kumari's palace was standing, amongst the rubble and destruction, unscathed, as though the divine energy present in the girl was able to protect the building from the earthquake. I wondered if she was still in the palace, following traditional customs and duties regardless of the circumstances, or whether she was relocated somewhere safer.

The three of us remained quiet as we walked through the rubble to the other side of the square that would lead us to Thamel. I could sense that we all had a strong appreciation for history and for me, and I'm sure for the others as well, it triggered a profound sense of grief of the sheer magnitude of this earthquake and the tragedy it had caused. I noticed that I'd stopped reacting to my head injury, realising that it hadn't bothered me in a while. The pain was there, but it had dulled considerably. The blood was starting to crust and the bandage was dry. I thanked again the higher powers that be for my fortune. I could've been killed, I could've had a concussion, and I probably wouldn't have made it as far as I had in a single afternoon.

Thamel was only about a kilometre away from Durbar square and we entered the neighbourhood in little time. In the centre of the city, some power had been restored as there were lights coming from a few buildings along the way. I had little concept of time at this point, the earthquake had happened in the afternoon, and from then it must've been four or five hours. The sun had long disappeared, replaced by the stars and moon shining above, indifferent to the tragedy that had befallen these people. The streets of Thamel were empty and silent, as though the apocalypse had come and gone, taking the world's population with it. It was eerie. Usually the streets and alleys would be filled with people walking and lingering around, buying this or that, going to bars and restaurants. Street vendors, drug dealers and rickshaw

drivers would be heckling foreigners, seeking to earn their daily bread. But instead, there was absolutely no sign of life. What made the experience stranger was that the whole of Thamel, with the exception of a few collapsed walls and large cracks splitting the pavements and roads, appeared completely intact as though the earthquake had simply avoided the area.

We navigated the streets, weaving and winding, searching for a single place that we could spend the night. We spent half an hour looking around, but nowhere was open. Even the largest hotels and guesthouses were closed. Stopping suddenly in the middle of the street as we were walking, Michael said in a clearly frustrated voice, "what do we do? Everything's closed, it's getting late, and I'm so tired."

Hash and I nodded in agreement.

"We might just have to find a sheltered place outside, there's plenty of nooks and crannies around here that we'll probably have to settle with," Hash replied with reservation in his voice. Looking at me he said, "how are you with that idea? Are you feeling alright?"

"Still sore, but pretty good... surprisingly," I answered, "I guess we've got no other choice, another night without a comfortable bed won't kill us."

"As long as we're in a place where we can't be rained on, it'll have to do," Michael added.

I suddenly remembered a tiny alcove where a small ice creamery was located. It was up a flight of stairs and was well sheltered from rain and wind. It was surely big enough to fit the three of us, although we'd be cramped together. "Follow me, I know somewhere we can sleep. Should be good enough for us." I said.

After a few wrong turns and backtracking, I found the place nestled on the side of an alleyway within an alleyway. We climbed the stairs, Michael and Hash surveyed the place and expressed their approval. The alcove's walls were interesting, people over the years had drawn and painted on it, creating a collage of messages of peace, funny cartoons, philosophical quips, and psychedelic imagery. With nothing in the way of comfort, we all just lay down

and attempted to sleep. It was a cool night, but at least our collective body heat brought us some warmth.

I struggled to sleep and it was a while before I finally drifted off, but it was short lived. I awoke frequently throughout the night, shivering at times and sore from the discomfort of sleeping on bare concrete flooring. Other times when I woke, my head and chest were drenched in sweat even despite the cold. The pain returned to my head on several occasions, ripping me from my slumber. My mind dwelled at times on the experience when I was knocked unconscious... was that voice, that vision, real? Was it a message from something supernatural, from God? Or was it my imagination playing up, and the voices were simply those around me, trying to wake me up? It certainly felt real. I wondered if it was a near death experience, but was I really that close to death? Does one need to be on the verge of death to have that sort of experience? With those thoughts swirling and appearing in and out of my mind, I eventually managed to rest till the morning, only a couple of hours in the end.

I was the first to awake, sore and groggy. I tried to return to sleep, not quite ready to face the world, rolling and shifting my position, but to no avail. I gradually sat up, rubbing my eyes, stretching arms and legs, cracking my neck. I was incredibly stiff, as though rigor mortis was setting in on my drained body. Looking outside of the alcove, it was a bright day, the morning sun rays lingering around the entrance, the natural lighting betrayed the time. I realised how hungry I was, having not eaten since yesterday morning apart from a few snacks I bought on the bus. The disturbance of myself moving around, triggered the other two to wake up. None of us really wanted to remain long, so we were shortly out of the alcove and on our way to see if anything was open. Food and something to communicate to the outside world was our next objective.

Walking around the streets of Thamel was stranger than the previous night. By this time of day, the streets would be crowded and loud. Storeowners selling all sorts of things - from Buddhist trinkets, to hippie clothes, to trekking gear - would normally be yelling at passersby, claiming that their store had the cheapest

prices. Cars and rickshaws would be navigating through the narrow streets, avoiding pedestrians, honking horns and ringing bells. None of this was present now. Every single store we saw was closed, and there were only a handful of people, mostly other foreigners, wandering aimlessly around the place, seemingly unsure of what their next course of action would be. We stopped to ask a few people if there was anywhere we could eat that was nearby. Some were looking for the same as us, but one couple told us about a restaurant nearby where they'd just come from that was making cheap dal bhat. Eagerly, I hurried Michael and Hash along and we soon found the place, tucked away off a main street in a guesthouse.

There was no power in the house, just a few candles scattered around. It was run by an elderly lady and two of her daughters, and had a very old and homely feel, with carved wooden walls, tables and chairs, similar to an inn of times long passed. There were a couple of Westerners, engaging in general banter and playing some sort of card game. Upon ordering our food, it was only a short wait before it arrived. The dal bhat was delicious, far more spiced and varied in flavour than what I've been used to in recent memory. I wolfed down my meal at lightning speed and requested a second helping from one of the daughters. I felt much better almost immediately and I was reminded by a common saying amongst Nepalese trekking guides: 'dal bhat power, twenty-four hours', and let out a small laugh to myself. The headache from my injury was dulling as the hours passed and I could only feel the occasional spike of throbbing pain.

Whilst we were eating, we decided amongst the three of us, to head to the embassies of our respective countries. It appeared to be the best option for us to get into contact with our families, and for Hash and I, the simplest way to get out of the disaster stricken land. None of us knew where any of the embassies were, just that they were somewhat nearby, so I asked one of the daughters whether they had a map of the city lying around somewhere. She thought for a moment, nodded, and disappeared upstairs for a while, returning with a map of the city that could be found at any tourist shop. We opened it up on the table and roughly found our



location. Relative to us, they were quite close, many of the embassies were located in a similar area north of Thamel.

"How should we approach this?" I asked the other two.

"We could all go together to each embassy, or all go to our own ones and meet up later," suggested Hash.

"If you two are planning to leave the country as soon as possible, maybe we should go our separate ways," Michael interspersed. "I'll only be at the embassy briefly to talk to my family and then I want to get into contact with a humanitarian organisation, or head to where the other monks have gone to."

"Well if that's what you want to do, sure," I replied.

Hash looked at me. "You and I could go to your embassy first, see if anything is happening for your nationals, and then head to mine. Maybe they're doing evacuations and both of us could get on a flight to Delhi. It seems like the smartest place to send stranded people."

I nodded in agreement, "sure, sounds like a good idea... well if you two are just about ready, shall we go?"

"There might be a taxi nearby that you could take," broke in one of the daughters, "I have seen a few taxi drivers around the area over the past few days. It's good money for them right now, but much more expensive for you."

"Thank you very much," Hash said, "we'll start walking that way and if we see a taxi, maybe we'll get it."

The three of us stood up together, paid for the food with a small tip to the daughter and went outside. In the relatively short time we were inside eating, the day had become overcast and threatened to rain over us, a true testament to the random weather patterns created by the sheer size of the Himalayas. We made our way north through Thamel, the route was relatively easy, simply follow a few long streets. Eventually, our paths diverged with Michael and we said our goodbyes. I felt like I hadn't really gotten to know the man. Even though he was quiet, he obviously had a good heart, wanting to stay in the country to help people to the best of his ability. I admired the man, and again the guilt re-emerged for my own inability and unwillingness to stay behind. I found myself dwelling on these thoughts after we had separated. But perhaps, I

finally realised, this time was simply not the right time or place to completely throw myself into a situation such as this, where I probably would make a small impact, but nothing of significance that could justify my presence and the resources that I'd consume myself. One can act and think compassionately, but it needs to be pragmatic, otherwise one might end up a burden onto themselves and onto others. Like a young child, who tries to do something kind for their parents, such as cooking a meal, but it ends in total disaster. The parents can't be mad at the child, instead they would truly appreciate the gesture. But at the same time, the parents wished that they didn't have to eat the ketchup sandwich or deal with the mess in the kitchen. Good heartedness and acts of compassion, to be successful, have to be done within the boundaries of physical reality.

We reached my embassy within an hour of walking. As we left Thamel, the traffic became noticeably busier, people were walking the streets, a few shops and restaurants were open. There was a feeling of normality returning to this part of the city, though hidden not too far from the surface was the sense of impending danger and the dire reality everybody was facing together. The embassy was larger than I expected and was surrounded by high whitewashed walls with barbed wiring along the top. The entrance had large green sliding gates, with a side door for people to enter through. There were no guards on the outside, but when we stepped through the door, we entered a small security room and were immediately greeted by two friendly Nepalese men. We were then taken through a metal detector, and handed a couple of forms to fill out. Hash was asked whether he was a citizen or not, and when replying negatively, he was politely told that he couldn't go any further. I said to Hash that I'd try not to be too long and he was content to wait outside.

Upon leaving the security room, I was allowed free rein to walk the grounds. It was well manicured, with rather beautiful and elaborate gardens that I wasn't quite accustomed to in this country. The buildings in the embassy complex were architecturally southern European, perhaps Italian, and I was impressed by the facilities available in the grounds, there was even a large

swimming pool. On the lawns at the back there was a virtual tent city, filled with other fellow nationals who had nowhere else to go. A small feeling of pride for my country sparked in me, grateful that they cared for their own people like this. Near the formal entrance of the main embassy building, a plastic table with a sun umbrella was set up with two young travellers sitting on chairs, typing on laptops. It was strange to see a computer, it felt like years since I'd seen such advanced technology. One looked up at me, smiled and waved me over.

"Hi there, what's a monk doing here?" She greeted me, asking the question in a playful manner with a big grin. She was a slender, but healthy looking woman, maybe in her mid twenties. To me she was beautiful: she looked of Asian descent, perhaps Chinese or Korean. She had a heart shaped face with high cheekbones, long, slightly messy black hair that went down to her chest. Her eyes captured and mesmerised me immediately. It wasn't so much the colour, which were a rather normal dark hazel, but it was the shape. When she smiled, they transformed into two dazzling crescent moons tilted onto the side that delved into my soul and warmed my heart. She had a slightly peculiar and unique appearance about her, but I couldn't quite capture what it was. She was wearing clothes that were relatively typical among travellers in this part of the world. Her top was bright and frilly, filled with stripes and swirls of all colours, her dress was knee length and equally as colourful. She wore lots of trinkets and bracelets that were obviously from many parts of the world, suggesting she was well travelled.

It was then I noticed my robes and that I'd been staring at her without saying anything. I hadn't changed at all in days, let alone bathe. I had become so used to these clothes, that I'd forgotten they were a rather distinguishing feature in the outside world. I felt slightly embarrassed and awkward in front of such an attractive woman, who was also the first young woman I'd seen in months. I finally replied, "I guess I'm not really a monk anymore, I just haven't had the chance to change since the earthquake."

"Oh, poor you," she replied with genuine care. She gave me a comforting smile, "what happened? If you don't mind me asking."

"Of course it's okay." I took a breath, "long story, short, the monastery I was living in was destroyed in the earthquake. Sadly, many monks died. The survivors made it to the nearest town and some of us went our separate ways... I kind of decided shortly before the earthquake that I was going to leave the monastery, and I, ah, guess nature forced my hand." Her eyes were suddenly pulled to the bandage on the side of my head, I touched it lightly and winced, "I got hit in the head by a falling rock during that earthquake yesterday." A look of concern swept over her face. Noticing, I said, "I'm fine, don't worry about me, just a little sore, and I guess the bandage should probably be replaced at some point."

"You've been through quite a bit to get here, huh. Come with me, before we sort anything out, I'll take you to the first aid tent and fix you up."

Before I could say anything, she stood up and started walking. I stood there for a moment until she turned and gestured to me to follow. She let me catch up and went to the tent. She grabbed a first aid kit and opened it, systematically picking out bandages, tape, swabs and disinfectant.

"Take off your bandage for me," she asked unhesitatingly as we sat down on tiny plastic stools across from each other.

I quickly obeyed and slowly unwrapped my bandage, I could feel it sticking against the wound and a sharp sting greeted me as I tore it off.

"That's a big cut... are you sure you're alright?" She said as she reached over to me and with a dampened swab, began cleaning the wound. "So what're you planning to do now?"

Slightly distracted by her operation, I momentarily forgot my situation. "Umm, ah, I'm with a friend at the moment, he's actually waiting for me at the entrance of the embassy. We're trying to find a plane that'll take us to India. I came here to let people know I was alive and then we'll be going to the Indian embassy to see if they're doing evacuation flights."

Hearing the word 'India' seemed to have piqued her interest, "India, that's awesome!" She put down the now bloodied swab, opened the bottle of disinfectant and with a fresh swab dabbed it on the open cut. "I love it in that country, completely different world to back home, huh. I'll be going there fairly soon myself. The embassy has organised evacuation flights to Delhi for all citizens wanting to leave, you know." I laughed inwardly at the mention of this, impressed by Hash's foreknowledge. "I'm not sure if they're allowing other nationals, but they may make an exception for Indians, as a goodwill gesture or something. It's definitely an option for you though." She finished disinfecting the wound, discarded the swab and began preparing the bandage. "Any plans for when you get to India?"

"Not really, my friend suggested I go to his home state with him, Uttarakhand. It's a state renowned for its spirituality. The Ganges flows through it and Rishikesh and other sacred towns and places are littered throughout the state."

"Really? That's so weird, I'm thinking of going there too! I've been before, and spent time in an ashram practicing and studying yoga. It's an incredible place, though a little touristy."

I laughed, "that's exactly what my friend said."

"I was also thinking of going to a town called Tiruvannamalai. It's a very sacred place, full of ashrams and temples. Not as well known as Rishikesh, but it's way down south in Tamil Nadu. I'll probably end up going to both, a big north to south journey or something!" She exclaimed whilst wrapping the bandage around my head. She was almost finished and was making the final touches.

"I've never heard of that place before, and I'm not going to even begin trying to pronounce its name." I let out a short giggle, "sounds like an interesting town though."

"And... I'm done. There. Isn't that much better?" She smiled at me and touched my shoulder, "it should be replaced every few days or so. It doesn't look like you've got any more bandages yourself. Here take these." She reached out and grabbed a few from the first aid kit and handed them to me.

"Thank you so much." I was beginning to feel a connection with her, she reminded me a little bit of the last woman I fell for: full of life and spiritual too. The prospects of seeing her beyond this encounter started to excite me. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Kara, it's nice to meet you," she replied fondly, "shall we go back and sort out some things for you?"

I nodded and we walked out of the tent back to the table where I first met her. The other woman there was talking to another traveller, she raised her eyes briefly at us and then returned to her work. She didn't seem quite as friendly. Kara sat back down and turned towards her laptop, "so I'll just get you to fill your details into the computer so we have you registered."

I leaned over and began typing. It was strange using a computer, I felt very rusty and it took me far longer than it should've to enter my information.

Kara looked at me. "That's a nice name."

I blushed slightly. "Thank you."

"Should I sign you on to the evacuation flight?"

I thought about it, I did actually want to go on that flight, it would give me a chance to spend more time with her, but I also didn't want to abandon Hash. "Write me down as a maybe, if that's possible, I'll see what happens at the Indian embassy with my friend. It would be nice to meet up with you though, if we both end up in Rishikesh."

"I'd like that as well. Here, I'll give you my details and how you can contact me, if you don't end up taking the same flight as me." She grabbed a pen and piece of paper, scribbled down a few lines and passed them to me. "Anyway, there are phones and computers inside that building over there. Somehow we've managed to connect to the internet," she pointed to the main embassy building, "maybe I'll see you again sometime, but bye for now!"

"Bye!" I said as I gave a little wave and walked away towards the embassy entrance. I was already attracted to her. I've noticed in my life that that happens rather quickly for me with a lot of women. But she seemed quite special, unique, and being obviously interested in spirituality as well was a big deal for me.

I've found very few people who I can connect with in that regard, and really hoped that I would meet her again.

Shifting my mind to the matter at hand, I soon found a telephone and called my family. It was a rather emotional phone call, my mother burst into tears the moment she heard me speak and I could hear the elation in my father's voice in the background of the call. They had seen the earthquake on the news and had assumed the worst. Thousands of people had died and tens of thousands were now without homes, so why wouldn't they as loving parents be afraid? They asked if I was returning home and I had to inform them that I was continuing my journey, but leaving the country. They weren't too happy, but I knew that they would eventually understand, parental instincts kicking in was all. I told them to let friends back home know that I was alright and to donate to aid agencies if they could. It was the very least I could do.

After talking with my parents, I remembered Hash was still waiting for me, and I hurried out of the embassy. I met eyes with Kara as I left the building, and we both gave each other a smile. When I got to the waiting room where I left Hash, he wasn't there, but the guards soon informed me that he had simply walked across the road to a nearby eatery. Hash was sitting inside and had managed to acquire a local newspaper and was reading various stories all connected to the earthquake. There was a steel plate filled with a random assortment of curried vegetables, rice and a few other unidentifiable things that were deep fried.

I sat down next to him asking, "what're you eating there?"

Looking up from his newspaper, Hash said, "umm, I'm not really sure. I still felt a bit hungry from earlier, and so I just pointed to a bunch of different things when I ordered. I felt like a change from dal bhat so anything would do," he picked up one of the deep fried snacks and took a bite, grunting and nodding to affirm its pleasant taste. "Ah, it's just *pakora*, and it's pretty tasty! Here have some."

"Sure, thanks," I grabbed one and ate it. The pakora was crunchy, savoury and made out of a few vegetables that I couldn't quite figure out, "that is pretty good!"

"How did everything go?" Hash mumbled as he chewed.

"So I called my parents, registered that I was alive and signed up as a 'maybe' for the evacuation flight. I found out that it was to Delhi and there's a possibility that you could get on it as well. It'll probably depend on the number of nationals who have requested evacuation themselves. And, ah, it should be in the next day or two, so I can find out for us."

"That's great! We should look into that. You probably don't need to go through the Indian embassy now. I'm guessing... it would be much more problematic, our government is very bureaucratic and doing anything with them is a nightmare. Though that being said, look here," Hash brought my attention to the newspaper, it was written in *Devanagari*, the script used by many southern Asian languages. There were pictures of large military cargo jets and enormous aid packages. Signs and flags identified them as Indian. Hash continued, "it looks like India has had an incredibly swift response on a massive scale, makes me kind of proud." He then turned his gaze back to me, noticing the fresh bandage, "you've had your bandage changed as well, I see." Hash said, pointing his finger towards my head.

"Ah yes, a nice woman insisted that she change it for me, it's so much better now," I said whilst thinking fondly of the encounter. After a few moments passed, I asked, "anyway, are you almost ready to go?"

Hash took a few more mouthfuls of food, offered me some, which I politely rejected, and he replied, "let's go."

The Indian embassy wasn't a long walk from where we were. Similarly, it was a walled complex and I wasn't allowed inside. I asked if there was a waiting room for me to sit in, but I was told I couldn't but there were a few places in the area where I could wait. I decided to wander around instead. There were several collapsed buildings and I observed efforts by locals, police and construction crews to clear the rubble from the road. It didn't look as though much progress had been made and many were standing around, conversing with each other. With the sheer scale of the tragedy and the work that needed to be done, I couldn't blame them for wanting to take their time. Later, I walked into a group of six



dirty and weary looking Westerners and stopped to talk with them briefly. They said they were part of a larger group who were camping in the hills on the outskirts of the city. They were originally attending a music festival which had more or less become a refugee camp of sorts. The six of them had hitchhiked into town on the back of a truck so that they could gather information and more supplies for their friends. After a brief recollection of our respective experiences, we wished each other the best and went our separate ways. By this point, I decided to walk back towards the embassy, realising that Hash was probably finished with his business. I hurried back the way I came and when I arrived, Hash was waiting for me out the front.

"Sorry Hash, you weren't waiting too long, I hope? I said apologetically.

"No, only a few minutes. It didn't take as long as I thought it would."

"Ah good, so what's the situation with your embassy? What's your plan?" I asked.

"Well there are going to be evacuation flights to Delhi for all Indian citizens scheduled every day for the next several days. I've signed up to the flight tomorrow morning. I didn't think you'd mind," Hash answered. "Oh, I asked them about allowing people from other countries onto the flights, but they are simply unable to until later in the week. Too many Indians to prioritise. So you'll just have to go with your own country."

"Okay, that's no problem. We can meet up in Delhi before going to Uttarakhand. I might need some help navigating my way through the city."

"Yes, that sounds good. Hmm, if you go back to the embassy today and confirm that you want to fly out tomorrow, if they're doing flights then, we'll meet somewhere when you arrive... maybe a hotel or something." Hash paused and thought for a moment, "I know just the place!" He reached into his robe and pulled out a pencil and scrap of paper, and scribbled both in English and in the Devanagari script. "This place is right near the main New Delhi railway station in an area that's pretty popular with foreigners. We'll try and meet there."

"Alright, good. So while I head back to the embassy, what're you going to do?" I asked inquisitively, putting the slip of paper in my pocket.

"Ah, I'll be here, they have just enough room to shelter me for the night. Besides, the flight leaves very early tomorrow morning."

"And what if my flight doesn't end up leaving tomorrow?"

Hash considered the possibility, then replied, "I'll stay a second night if need be, but after that I really should be returning home. It's not too much of an issue, wherever you stay, they can help you with booking a train or a bus, and hopefully our paths will cross again. Actually, hand me back that piece of paper for a moment." I returned the paper and he quickly wrote down some extra details. "There, give that to a rickshaw driver and you should be able to find me... if you make it to Dehradun."

"Thanks, well I guess I'll go back to my embassy, hopefully I'll see you soon in Delhi!"

"I'll see you soon, my friend," Hash outstretched his arm and I took it firmly and shook it.

We parted ways and I hurried back to the embassy. I was rather excited that I'd be leaving soon, and about to continue my journey in a completely different way. I was also happy that I'd get the chance to know Kara more. We'll probably be spending a considerable amount of time together over the next few days, I thought. When I arrived back at the embassy, I was allowed in without filling any forms, as they recognised me immediately. I suppose I was the only Westerner wearing the robes of a monk that they'd seen today.

I navigated my way to the entrance of the main embassy building where the registration desk was, only to find that Kara wasn't there. My heart sunk slightly, only the other woman remained who didn't seem very friendly, but impressions can be deceiving. I approached the desk and asked her to sign me onto the first evacuation flight. Luckily, it was also tomorrow, but much later in the afternoon. I then inquired into staying the night at the embassy, but soon discovered that it was packed to maximum capacity and they were beginning to struggle to accommodate and

feed the people that were already there. I was slightly disappointed but understood that there were people who probably needed to be here much more than myself. A benefit of living a relatively austere life in a monastery for several months and cultivating an equanimous attitude to life is that one takes unfortunate news without allowing it to bother oneself too much. I was then told to return to the embassy early in the morning with all my belongings. Hardly an issue for me.

After learning everything I needed to know, I left the embassy complex to find a place to stay for the evening. I thought that my best chance was to find a taxi driver who could take me somewhere that remained open. I didn't have to wait long, soon finding myself haggling with the driver over the price of the ride. I knew he wouldn't have to drive too far, and he was attempting to charge me an exorbitant price, even by Western standards. After some vigorous negotiating, which turned more into a game, I managed to reduce the cost by half, still expensive, but I soon realised he would need the money much more than I would. Once in the taxi, I felt incredibly guilty for bartering so hard, as he revealed to me the tragedies that had befallen him since the earthquake. I found out that the walls of his apartment had collapsed and that he was still trying to get into contact with his family living outside of the city.

It's times like this that are most difficult when I attempt to reconcile my faith in a benevolent underlying Spirit of the Universe with the devastation, despair and tragedy that a simple act of nature can produce, especially to a people who are so kind, innocent and loving themselves. I simply had to believe that there is some sort of purpose behind the chaos and that a greater good will come to fruition as a result, whatever form that may end up taking. I guess, in my view, because God is the ground of all existence and is inseparable from it, God is doing these acts to itself rather than causing harm to another. But still I must ask, why?

I soon found myself out the front of a hostel called Fireflies. It was located on the outskirts of Thamel tucked away behind a series of alleyways that the taxi could barely navigate

through. It was a humble but welcoming building, whose exterior was heavily painted in all sorts of psychedelic murals and it didn't seem to show any real sign of damage from the earthquake. I decided to pay the taxi driver his original asking price, a minor payback for a country that gave me so much. I was shortly greeted by a young and incredibly friendly Nepalese man, who happily informed me that there was room for me to stay. I thanked him profusely and he showed me to my room. It was small with four tightly packed together bunk beds, each separated by large wooden boards to give some semblance of privacy. The room was messy, typical of a hostel, but it was cosy and I was simply happy that I would get the opportunity to sleep on a proper mattress.

After I was designated a bed, I was shown up the numerous floors to a rooftop communal area. It was an open place with several low-lying tables and cushions instead of chairs. It had a small roofed outdoor area to the right of the entrance and a kitchen to the left. There was a staircase that led to another open room with more cushions, low-lying tables and an interior balcony overlooking the rest of the place. Similar to the outside of the building, the communal room was covered in psychedelic murals and also pictures of events and people who had stayed here before. There were around a dozen people relaxing, talking, reading and I could hear an acoustic guitar being played. I saw a few children working in the kitchen and a young woman sweeping rubbish. It must've been a family run hostel, I thought.

I thanked who I guessed was the hostel owner and decided to go to the outdoor area, where three men, all dressed in vibrantly coloured loose clothing, were smoking. I looked on the table they were sitting at and saw a large bowl full of cannabis. Seeing me, they smiled and signalled for me to come and join them. The three of them welcomed me warmly and asked about my robes and whether I was a monk. I briefly explained to them my situation and before I knew it, they had passed me the joint they were sharing.

A dilemma suddenly emerged in my mind whether to smoke it. I hadn't smoked in a long time. I used to have big problems with marijuana and I developed a strong psychological dependency. But I did always enjoy it nevertheless and with

everything I'd been through in the last few days, it would be nice to take the edge off. I always preferred cannabis to alcohol, it brings much more awareness to the senses, instead of dulling them. It creates a sense of timelessness, bringing one into the present, and can be useful for the investigation of the psyche. I've always found it a very introspective substance and it doesn't surprise me that it has been used across cultures such as sects of Hinduism and Rastafarianism as a mechanism for spiritual development. I'm personally a believer that limited experimentation with mind altering substances is beneficial for the individual's development personally and spiritually, but only to a certain extent. Like a philosopher that I quite enjoy said, 'once you get the message, hang up the phone'. I didn't exactly heed that message when I was younger, which led to much excess and abuse. But nowadays, I didn't need cannabis or any drug to further my spiritual development, but I felt like having some anyway, so I took a few puffs.

A very familiar feeling emerged almost immediately and I felt a great sense of peace and relaxation. The pace of time slowed down and my surroundings became more vibrant and beautiful, not really hallucinating, just greater visual perception. I noticed the music and it sounded incredible. All the intricate licks and riffs of the guitar melding harmoniously into a tantalising melody and rhythm that swirled and danced in my consciousness. I then felt an infinite number of sensations on my body, both pleasant and unpleasant, and I embraced all, enjoying the experience of simply being. I felt a deep love and appreciation for everything and everyone around me and it was in that moment when I realised that I hadn't said anything for a while and the three men were staring at me. Suddenly, we all burst out into laughter, a type of laughter that I had not had in a long time. I laughed so hard that my ribs were hurting and I had tears coming down my eyes. My tolerance was obviously quite low.

Eventually, I gathered my wits and I resumed conversing with the others. We talked of the earthquake, our respective travelling, and random topics far separated from the reality we were experiencing. They were endlessly curious of my robes and

choices to join then leave the monastic way of life. They asked about my motives for becoming a monk, the daily routines of the monastery, the teachings, the spiritual practices. At one point, an incredible hunger emerged and I became far too excited that the kitchen cooked banana pancakes, a comfort that I hadn't had in what felt like an eternity. I ordered several servings for myself and shared them with the other three. All of us gorged on the pancakes in silence, savouring and delighting in the flavours. Given the right circumstances, the simplest pleasures in life can often be the most enjoyable. It didn't take long before I sat back in my seat, completely satisfied by the meal. I found myself exhausted from the day, the joints and the pancakes, and decided to excuse myself from the others and go rest for the night, even though it had only just turned into evening. Reaching my bed and tucking myself into the warm blankets, feeling the soft mattress hug me, I rolled around the bed absolutely loving the comfort it brought. The nicest bed I'd been in for months and as a result, I fell asleep in very little time at all.

## Chapter Eight

### *Departing the Mountain Kingdom*

I saw her in the distance as I walked down a road towards a large ancient Hindu temple. Stone statues of bulls, lions, tigers and elephants lined both sides of the street, perfectly symmetrical with one another, gazing at those walking towards the temple. It was partially ruined and overgrown, vines covering the walls and growing out of cracks. The roots of several trees vied for space and suffocated the stones they had grown on. The last breath of the day, the setting sun casting a vibrant array of purple, orange and red hues across the sky. She peered over her shoulder to look to at me and I could feel and perceive her eyes penetrating into my soul and drawing me towards her. A flight of twenty or thirty long stairs lay before the enormous doorway that marked the entrance to the temple. She slowly ascended the steps, gracefully, the white dress she was wearing brushing along the slabs of stone. My heart was racing as I followed her, wondering why she was leading me here. I was at the base of the stairs when she reached the top and she turned around to look at me again, slowly gesturing for me to come inside with her. I was entranced by her, as though she was a siren that was using a song of silence to draw me near. I climbed without any will or effort of my own, pulled by some other force, the woman or something greater, perhaps both.

I noticed the intricate details of the temple now. It was covered in carvings, sculpted into the sides of the walls, from the base all the way to the very tip of the conical spire. They depicted a multitude of people and events, telling innumerable stories of the human experience and symbolising the values and truths that we hold dearly. There were carvings of violent battles that were effortlessly contrasted by two lovers copulating in all varieties of positions. The entire cycle of life was revealed in these carving,

from the birth of a child, to adulthood, family, and death. There were depictions of the four purposes according to the Hindu way: pleasure seeking, worldly success, renunciation, and liberation. Everything was a vivid symbol of life and death, love and fear, creation and destruction. The architecture truly encapsulated the polarised and contradictory nature of humanity and the underlying sacred oneness that brings it altogether in the form of the temple that symbolised divinity itself.

I reached the top of the stairs, but she had entered inside the temple and I could not see her through the darkness that lay inside the sanctum. I hesitated for a moment as I peered into the shadows, unable to discern any movement. It was a darkness that seemed impenetrable, unfathomable, as though all of existence ended at the large entryway of the temple. An absolute unknown was before me and fear began to warp my senses, the eagerness to catch up to her dissipated. I became immobilised and anxiety ridden, heart pounding, stomach twisting and becoming ill. Terror pierced through my very core, destroying my individual will and capacity to face it. I couldn't escape and for what felt like hours, I was cemented in place, struggling to come to grips against a tidal wave of all the horrors, terrors, and fears from the deepest recesses of my subconscious. I collapsed to the ground, shrivelling into the foetal position, losing any control over my body.

At that very moment, a tiny shred of my remaining sanity resurfaced, just giving me enough clarity to stop the constant bombardment of terror and to see the fears as they were: nothing but projections of the mind that have ingrained themselves thoroughly into my being. Running from them and frequent fighting against them only served to strengthen the fears, allowing them to run wild. I regained my composure, and slowly lifted myself onto my knees and legs until I completely stood up. I walked towards the darkness of the temple, arms open, and embraced the unknown inside. As I walked deeper within, I was enwrapped by the darkness, engulfed by it, but I accepted it in its totality and immediately after doing so, I noticed the fear disappearing. I felt stronger, and the consuming darkness felt as though it was becoming a part of me, completing me.



Light suddenly illuminated tiny parts of the temple and it was growing and spreading quickly. It was not from the sun but from something supernatural. The light was fundamentally different to the normal light of everyday experience, but I didn't understand how or why, I just knew. I noticed the illumination was coming from me and I looked down at my body. I was nothing but pure light and could only distinguish a vague outline of my limbs, devoid of features. I became aware of another source of pure radiance existing in the inner sanctum of the temple. It was also shaped in a way that resembled a human. It was her. I glided towards the other source of light and we became intertwined in union. The blaze of both of our beings then expanded throughout the temple, penetrated inside the ancient stones, and shattered the walls. Continuing to grow, the glorious, illuminating light was swiftly engulfing everything in its path, the animal statues lining the road, the surrounding countryside, and it was rising upwards, consuming the heavens above. The light was revealing the underlying reality of everything in existence - the oneness and the pure essence of it all, the beautiful mystery known as God.

I did not awake immediately. Slowly drifting out of sleep, I felt my blanket, the warmth, and the comfort of a soft pillow beneath my head. I let out a deep breath from my nose, and sank deeper into the bed, gradually moving my toes, feet, legs, arms, fingers, my whole body. I thoroughly enjoyed the moment as I simply lay there, half awake, half asleep. The dream I just experienced lingered around my thoughts, wandering between gaps of nothing and of the coming day. Strange, again filled with lessons and symbolism that would be revealed in due time. I found the presence of the woman interesting, I'm pretty sure it was Kara. Perhaps a strong desire for her was already placed in my unconscious mind. Opening my eyes and lifting myself onto my elbows, I spotted an old analogue clock on the wall opposing my bed. It was still very early, but the sun was close to rising, predawn light was filtering through the windows. Knowing that I was in no rush to do anything, I continued to lay there for a while, embracing the comfort and relaxation that time had offered me, enjoying the memory of my most recent dream.

I slowly found myself more and more restless and left my bed, deciding to wander around the hostel. I climbed the several flights of stairs to reach the common room. Nobody was there, everybody was still sleeping, it was rather nice to have the room to myself. I saw a filled bookshelf and keenly went over to it and browsed through a range of different subjects. From science to spirituality, travel guides and history, to pulp fiction and fantasy, there was a surprising variety of books. The diversity in reading material was likely due to a common custom in guesthouses and hostels around the world, where one visitor would leave a book they had read and replace it with another. A simple system that has allowed me to discover books that I would never imagine coming across. I wasn't sure what I felt like reading, so I grabbed a few to flick through. One was a history that chronicled the story of the Middle East, another was a quantum physics book for a lay audience, and there was also a travel guide on India with a spiritual focus, the latter of which I immediately opened and explored.

The book, aptly and succinctly titled *Religion and Spirituality in India: A Traveller's Guide*, was incredibly helpful in giving me some idea of what I may be seeking in India. Though the book was slightly outdated and focused largely on famous religious sites and sacred natural landmarks, it also explored various ashrams and even went into depth about spiritual teachers around the country, describing schools of thought and practices involved. Thinking about the best direction for me as I was reading, I started to develop a rough idea of what I wanted to do once I reached India. I wanted to find a teacher, a guru, who could personally guide me closer to the divine. Whether this teacher was a wandering holy man or grounded in an ashram, it didn't bother me. I decided that Rishikesh would be a good option to begin this search. Its location along the banks of the Ganges coincided with the river and the sadhu in my dream several nights back. I was beginning to think that the dream was a premonition or a guiding message, telling me to go there. I remembered the words of the sadhu from the dream, "you will die, you will always be dying. It is nature, accept it, embrace it, and you will become like us... infinite. Find me and I will show you how." Perhaps I am

supposed to find the holy man by the river, unless the dream was of deeper significance and all of the images were merely symbolic. Or the dream simply had no significance at all. I had a hunch that I might be on the correct course, though, and even if I wasn't, there was no harm in seeing what happens.

After an hour or so, people were beginning to filter into the commons, many dressed in pyjamas or the equivalent. A young woman sat nearby me and poured all of her attention into writing in what I could only guess was her journal. One of the men that I smoked with last night came in and acknowledged me briefly before going onto the balcony. I watched him for a moment and laughed to myself when I saw him roll and light a joint, reminding me of myself a few years ago. A couple of the hostel workers had also woken and were making coffee, tea and breakfast for whoever wanted food. From the few items available on the menu, I ordered more banana pancakes, a hash brown and a cup of milk tea made in the south Asian style. The cooks were surprisingly quick with my order and I was soon finished eating. I sat around for a little while afterwards, thinking and skimming through books, but soon realised that I should return to the embassy sooner rather than later, as there were likely things to be done in preparation for the evacuation. I put the books away and returned to my room to gather my few possessions. Finally before leaving, I paid the hostel owner, who kindly gave me well wishes for safety and the future.

As I left the hostel, I didn't see any nearby taxis, so I walked in the general direction of the embassy, guessing that I'd find one along the way. It didn't take long and after paying extortionate rates yet again, I found myself back to where I was yesterday. Upon entering the security room, I was quickly allowed through and into the compound, the guards recognising me almost immediately, the robes making myself obvious once again. I didn't know exactly where the evacuees were meeting, so I returned to where I met Kara the previous day near the front of the primary embassy building. People were beginning to gather in the area, standing aloof and talking amongst themselves. All the travellers looked like a wretched bunch: dirt visible on their clothes, messy hair and a general weariness on all of their faces. I was certain that

I was not an exception, probably even worse off, wearing the same robes for almost a week and without any form of bathing. In hindsight I should've had a shower whilst I was at the hostel, I thought to myself as I caught my scent seeping into my nostrils. I noticed two young women, huddled together, leaning on each other for support. One had crutches and bandages wrapped around her entire right leg, a few of her toes were blackened from frostbite. For an instant, I felt overwhelmed by sadness that such a fate had befallen her, followed by a strong sense of gratitude that I was so fortunate. A strange combination of feelings. Why do some suffer whilst others don't, despite no real difference in circumstance?

Was it karma, divine justice, or simply no reason at all? I found myself asking these questions yet again during this time of turmoil.

It seemed apparent that this was the meeting place, but to be safe, I went over to the registration table to see if I had to check my name off the list or anything of the like. But before I began to move, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Turning around I saw Kara standing in front of me, grinning cheekily. "Hey Mr. Monk!" She said playfully, "so you decided to leave with us today, huh?"

"Yeah, I spoke with my friend, and he was able to get a flight himself, but the Indian government doesn't have any space at the moment for non-nationals. So we're going to meet in Delhi, before heading up north," I paused before following with, "I'm guessing you're leaving today as well?"

"Yep, I sure am," she replied.

I immediately felt a jolt of excitement surge through me, "That's great!" I said, perhaps too happily.

She let out a giggle, "I'm glad, my presence on the plane has excited you so much!"

Slightly embarrassed, I changed the subject, "do I need to check my name off saying that I'm here?"

"Um, no, you should be fine, as long as you signed up yesterday for the flight, everything should be sorted out."

"Ah good, so any idea when we're going to be leaving today?" I asked.

"We're supposed to be leaving here by midday, with the flight at around two or three in the afternoon. But that's if everything goes according to plan, which... given the situation, it probably won't. Whatever happens, it'll probably be a long day. Anyway, do you want tea or coffee while we wait?"

"Some tea would be great, thanks," I responded.

"No problem, follow me to the tents, there should be some boiled water over there." She lightly touched me on the arm, prompting me to follow.

It took little time before we were both sitting on a patch of grass within earshot of the meeting area, two plastic cups in hand, sipping lukewarm black tea. We sat in silence for a moment, but it was a comfortable silence like one that can be enjoyed with an old friend.

"So what's your story with the earthquake, what happened to you?" I asked after a few moments had passed. Kara looked at me directly and I detected grief in her eyes.

She let out a small sigh and said, "I was volunteering at an orphanage in Bhaktapur, the city east of here. I've got a little bit of experience with medicine and I was working as a sort of on-site doctor, nurse, something along those lines."

I'd visited the place before, its name was Sanskrit for 'city of devotees' and it had a beautiful and ancient centre filled with temples and palaces with an architecture that wasn't unlike Durbar square - a seamless mix of Hindu, Chinese and Tibetan styles. Wandering the squares and narrow streets felt as though I was transported five hundred years into the past. Few motorised vehicles were allowed in the town centre and the inhabitants seemed to live a life that had never changed.

"I was asleep in the room that I shared with a few other volunteers when the earthquake came," Kara continued, "I woke up straight away when I felt the tremors and shakes. I heard cries and screams coming from the dorm room of the orphans and I got up and ran towards them. I was confused, unsure of what was happening at first, unaware that it was even an earthquake, but my instincts pushed me to help the kids..." Her voice began to trail off, recounting her experience was obviously difficult for her. She took

a deep breath, mouth trembling slightly, "when I reached the room and opened the door, the building started to fall apart... I panicked and yelled at the kids to run out, a few ran past me and made it out safely, but before my eyes... the walls and the roof caved in on top of... the children," she stopped again and her eyes watered, a few tears ran down her face.

I touched her lightly on the shoulder to comfort her, "you don't need to continue if you don't want to," I said.

She started to snivel, and then leaned over and hugged me, crying softly onto my shoulder. I returned the embrace, feeling empathetic yet slightly awkward towards her. She soon let go and regained her composure, "it's okay... I saw so many innocent, beautiful children crushed to death. I knew them all so well... I could hear some of their cries for help underneath the rubble, knowing exactly who they were. I couldn't do anything, so I ran, fearing for my own life. I wasn't hurt at all... I feel so... responsible for what happened."

"That's so sad, I don't really know what to say... But don't beat yourself up over it, everything was beyond your control and you reacted naturally. The fact that your first thought was to help the kids says enough." I said, attempting to reassure her.

"Thank you... really. I know I couldn't really do anything, but it's hard not to feel the guilt." I noticed she had perked up slightly. "Anyway, I came here because there was nowhere to stay in Bhaktapur, the city centre was utterly destroyed, all those ancient buildings gone. I caught a taxi to the embassy and volunteered to help travellers. As people started to stream through the embassy to register their names, I learnt of their stories, gained a new perspective on things. Others, you included, saw people die and couldn't do anything about it... do you see those two girls over there?" She pointed towards the two young women I saw earlier, the one with frostbite. I nodded. "They were asleep in a guesthouse on one of the trekking routes when the earthquake struck. Their guide and a friend died in the following avalanche. The one with the broken leg was carried for kilometres through the snow. Just those two alone out in the wilderness. I can't even begin to imagine

the struggle they went through. We've both been pretty fortunate that both of us came out of all of this pretty unscathed, huh?"

"It makes you wonder a lot of things, doesn't it? Why some suffer, struggle, even die, whilst others don't for no obvious reason. Lots of existential questions." I said.

"It really does... the whole experience has shaken some of my beliefs, given me some doubts. Why would a loving God allow such a thing? I mean it's easy to reconcile my faith when I simply read about tragedies or see them on the news, but it's a totally different matter when you're directly witnessing the pains of the world yourself. The reality of it smacks you in the face."

"I've had to deal with those issues myself over the past few days," I replied, "can I ask what religion you're a part of?"

"Of course!" Kara exclaimed. "I was raised a Christian, and the basic teachings of the church have been the underpinning of my spirituality. I thank my parents for focusing on Jesus' teachings of compassion, forgiveness and non-judgement, rather than the more rigid 'don't do this and that' morality that is too often a part of Christianity. My parents travelled a lot, so they also exposed me to other religions. This encouraged me to discover and practice some of them and bring some of their aspects into my own faith, which has only strengthened it further. I have a belief that God is the love that binds the universe... you could almost say that I believe the entire universe is love in some form or other... but seeing innocent children die before my eyes has made it incredibly hard to reconcile with this belief. I just see it as so senseless, no purpose whatsoever."

"It's tough, and there's no easy answers, and it's something you'll probably have to figure out yourself, I think. I've got some ideas about my understanding of God and how everything seems to have a reason... it's helped me a bit, but..."

A booming voice interrupted our conversation. "Can everyone gather around please!" We both turned to see a heavysset figure standing in front of the main embassy building, who I assumed to be the ambassador. He was flanked by several staff wearing fluoro yellow, high-visibility vests. "For those evacuating the country today, I need you all to listen. We'll be leaving in a few

hours and there are several items that I need to brief you all on, so things can hopefully run smoothly."

Kara and I stood up together and walked closer to hear better. The ambassador delivered a general plan for the day. There were few responsibilities for the evacuees apart from being patient and following orders. We were to leave by bus to the international airport, where a military cargo jet delivering humanitarian aid would be collecting us and then taking us to Delhi. I couldn't help but feel some boyish excitement when I heard that we would be flying with the military. He finally delivered us information about accommodation when we arrived, telling us that the government had organised all of us to stay in a luxury hotel for a few nights before we were left to our own devices, calling it a treat courtesy of the taxpayers. The whole crowd, including myself and Kara, were quite elated after hearing this news. After his speech, the ambassador returned inside and his staff directed us to a building where we would confirm details about ourselves and fill out some documents. The embassy workers were very efficient, kind and patient to us, and I couldn't help but feel some pride for my country's government and its ability to help its citizens. Surely other countries wouldn't be doing the same.

After filling out a few forms we were asked to wait in a shaded outdoor area, a large patio filled with chairs. It essentially became a waiting game and I spent the next few hours sitting, walking around the compound, and chatting with Kara and others. At one point, an enormous lunch was served, a simple meal of macaroni and cheese with either a vegetarian or chicken option. I don't think ever in my life, I'd become so happy from something so simple. The pleasure of having basic Western comfort food was incredible. It wasn't a particularly flavoursome meal, but it was completely different to anything I had had for months. At one point, there was a pretty young woman who was playing guitar and singing. Her voice was melodic and soothing, as she played folksy songs as well as a rendition of *House of the Rising Sun* which I found rather moving. When she finished, I asked if I could use the guitar for a while, having learnt to play a little bit years ago. I was rusty, but I managed to pluck a few old favourites of mine like



*Greensleeves* and some old rock songs. I noticed in the corner of my eye that Kara started paying attention to me whilst I was playing, and I smiled inwardly to myself.

Eventually, the ambassador emerged and informed us that the buses had arrived and it was time to leave. We were a few hours behind schedule but that was only to be expected. In a somewhat orderly fashion, all of the evacuees managed to pile onto two buses that were to directly take us to the airport. Though it would only be a short distance to travel, it was pleasant to see that the buses weren't the normal ones used by locals across the country, but were coaches that one could find touring around any Western country. The drive to the airport felt like the smoothest ride I had ever been on. It was an uneventful trip, and because of the alphabetical ordering of passengers, I unfortunately wasn't seated with Kara, so I largely kept to myself. It gave me a brief moment to reflect, as often happens when I'm sitting quietly in a moving vehicle, be it a bus, plane or car. There must be something about the movement of the world around the vehicle as it moves, which triggers an hypnotic effect when watching the trees, buildings and people fly past. Somehow this situation generates a space to think about the way things are, or should be, or of the past (depending on the state of mind at the time). My head was full of memories that brought a variety of emotions to the surface. Memories of my time in this country, this beautiful country that had befallen such a terrible fate. I had met so many people of such diverse backgrounds: peasants, monks, businessmen, tour-guides, shopkeepers, painters, musicians, Buddhists, Hindus, animists - at their core, not much different from anyone else in the world. I had lived, breathed, struggled, shared bread with these people, this land, and now I was leaving it. For how long? Forever? Who knows where life takes one, just accept that it'll be a continuous ride until the last moment. I felt a sorrowful pang in my heart at the recollection of my time here and its imminent end. But I suppose the end of something is simply the beginning of something else, whether it is positive or negative, boring or exciting in comparison to that previous stage... regardless, whatever one is doing, no

matter what someone else might think, it is another expression of the infinite possibilities of life, of experience.

Lost in thought almost the entire journey, it took a few moments to realise we had arrived at the airport. A chaotic scene. There were a number of people and vehicles owned by aid agencies from the likes of the United Nations and the Red Cross along with many others. It was an odd sight to see the cars and uniformed men and women, a sight one would only expect to see on television, in a far distant place, traumatised by war and famine. Assuredly, the media wasn't far behind and as I got off the bus, the others and I were surrounded by cameras and journalists who were eagerly shoving microphones in our face, asking a whole range of questions.

I've had rather mixed feelings towards the media in the past, particularly the mass media of the twenty-four hour news cycle. On the one hand, it has given us the capability to be informed about whatever is going on in the world at any one time. It has a role in connecting us closer to one another. A few hundred years ago, it would've been unthinkable that one would be able to almost witness a conflict, a natural disaster, a political election or whatever from the other side of the world, let alone being able to witness it exactly when the event was happening. But on the other hand, mass media can exploit people, does exploit people, both the witnesses and the participants of any given event. There are exceptions to the rule, but when a media agency is driven by profit, rather than delivering quality information to the viewer or reader, major problems emerge. Reporting becomes more about catchy headlines and stories that will entertain rather than inform people. Worse is when that desire for profit mixes with an agenda of some form or other. The media will then use their position to manipulate the audience, sometimes through an appeal to emotion, or through distorting reality, or by simply ignoring stories that may actually have some relevance to their viewers' lives.

Ultimately, the biggest negative effect of the mass media is that it doesn't teach people to think for themselves, they forget to question what is being reported. The individual becomes too outraged at what is happening, or too sad, or even too entertained

to really stop and think and ask the questions: how much of this is actually true? What are they leaving out? Where are the biases present? The effect can be a mindlessness that allows potentially nefarious forces to come to power. But then again, there is no use in utterly rejecting all forms of information coming from the media, rarely is a news story completely debased from reality. And an utter rejection may lead to just as warped a picture of reality, where everything is a conspiracy and all corporations and governments are evil. One needs to be discerning instead. Be critical of all that one sees and hears, rejecting this, whilst accepting that until a more complete picture of an issue or story arises.

Drifting in thought, I hardly noticed one of the reporters saying, "ah, excuse me sir. May I ask you a few questions?"

I snapped out of my state and after a moment's hesitation, I agreed with a curt nod.

"You're dressed in monk robes I see, were you at a monastery when the earthquake occurred?" She said with an accent that indicated she was from the same country as myself.

"Yes. Most of the monks at the monastery died due to collapsed buildings, fire and avalanches," I said with a tinge of grief in my voice, "I was only one among about twenty or so to have survived."

"That's horrible," she replied with no hint of emotion or sympathy in her voice, simply a statement. "Are you looking forward to going home after living through this tragedy?"

"I'm not going home, I'll be staying in India for a while." I replied, I wasn't particularly interested in continuing the interview.

"Okay, then. Has it been a tough experience for you?" She asked.

"Of course it has!" I snapped, "over a hundred monks where I was staying died, there's chaos and destruction everywhere, and there's very little I can do to help." Pointing at her accusingly, I raised my voice, angrily saying, "and now I've got people like you cramming cameras in my face, asking the most obvious questions imaginable!" I quickly realised my little outburst wasn't very monk-like behaviour, "sorry, that was a little harsh."

As though she didn't register my outburst, all she said was, "thank you for your time."

I wasn't too far behind the rest of the evacuees, and I noticed Kara was waiting for me beyond the mob of reporters. She smiled at me and we walked together as we entered the airport, following the embassy officials from afar. We soon found ourselves inside a large waiting room that was designed for journalists to interview important figures when they first arrived or were leaving the country. We were told to wait and be patient, delays had arisen with the arrival of our military. Kara and I decided to sit towards the back of the room in one of the corners.

"You got flustered pretty quickly there," Kara said, "not a fan of the media?"

Embarrassed, I looked at her, "you saw that? Well I suppose I'm not. Um, I'm a bit cynical when it comes to them, and her reporting just seemed so superficial to me, as though she didn't really care about any of this. It annoyed me a little as well that she was focusing on us, her country people, instead of any other aspect of the disaster."

"People back home want to know how their fellow people are doing: their friends, their work colleagues, their relatives. It's not a bad thing, really. Their viewers want to hear and see about the people they care about, and these news organisations are just delivering on that. Like, you can say people should care equally about others, regardless of race, nationality or religion, but that simply isn't how normal people are." Kara retorted in a friendly manner.

"You're right," I admitted, "I guess the media can't be wholly to blame for the state of the news... people do want action, entertainment, they want to feel emotions, they want their stories to be straightforward. Basic supply and demand with the media and its audience, huh. Not necessarily just the big corporations telling you what you should be watching."

"There's a danger in placing the blame on any given issue on only a single person or thing, isn't there?" She asked rhetorically, "the story is always far more complex than what is assumed and it often ends up that everyone is responsible in some

way or other. Some people complain about media bias. True it exists and there are those with an agenda to push that bias. But, you know, part of the reason it exists is that its intended audience have already accepted that perspective, and there are so many people out there that simply aren't interested, or even aware of other points of view. It's not like, umm, someone watched a particular news station without any pre-conceived beliefs or values, and all of a sudden they're indoctrinated by watching a few programs! It's more likely that they are drawn to that channel because it shares similar views to them."

"That's a pretty interesting way to look at it," I responded, becoming all the more attracted to her because of her show of intellect. "Hmm, I suppose that means that we should be paying more attention to our own biases, understand where they come from and why we hold them." Scratching my chin, saying, "and, ah, become aware that our perspective is one among billions, all being mere constructions of the mind based on the things we've learnt over the years and the experiences we've had. A way of viewing and understanding reality, rather than reality itself, which seems to be a mistake that all of us commit."

Kara let out a giggle, "you really like to add an extra layer of depth to the conversation, don't you?"

I laughed a little, "I suppose I do. Well I guess whenever I talk about people, society or whatever, I often like to think of human nature, spirituality and, ah, how it is woven somehow into pretty much everything we do."

"I quite like that about you," she said warmly.

We continued to chat in the waiting room for a long time. We were completely absorbed in conversation with each other in such a way that when we were finally told the plane had arrived, it felt like no time had passed at all. There were many I'd met before who I could have such fascinating, constant flowing and timeless conversation with. It felt as though all else in the universe dissolved and all that was left were words being exchanged between two people, two minds in seamless communication.

We were escorted through the airport, a very small, old-fashioned place, but it was nevertheless clean and orderly. Though

I did remember the utter chaos of baggage collection when I first arrived in the country: bags and people everywhere, all condensed into a tiny room with three or four luggage carousels. I remembered panicking when it took ages to come across my bag, only to find it randomly thrown onto the ground, amongst dozens of other suitcases and backpacks. So much had happened since that first day landing in Nepal.

Our evacuation group was shortly through the check-in area, not particularly time consuming, as we seemed to have VIP treatment in the airport, and were ushered through different checkpoints until we reached the baggage clearance. Interestingly, the queue was divided into male and female lines. I wondered if it was because of incidents of sexual harassment, or simply because of the conservative nature of the society, which may have favoured some degree of gender segregation. I wasn't sure, it didn't exactly matter at this moment. Before I knew it, we were in the departure waiting area. Unlike major international airports with endless shops, food and entertainment, the terminal was incredibly modest with only a few kiosks scattered around. I could quite easily see all of the lounges and departure gates from where I was standing with the rest of the evacuees.

It wasn't long before a few air force personnel introduced themselves to our group and gave us a briefing over what was to happen in the next hour or so. The highest ranking of the soldiers was a commanding figure, not dissimilar to the stereotypical image of the boot-camp training officer, albeit much more friendly. In a booming voice, he instructed us to open our bags and remove any flammable items. Not particularly troublesome for myself, seeing as though I had nothing but robes, a wallet and a passport on me. He then told us that we were to be leaving shortly, that we were to follow the soldiers to the plane, and go straight onboard to find a seat. Very straightforward instructions. Finally, he advised us to keep calm and be patient.

We still waited another twenty or so minutes before the final departure. In that time, we all remained fairly silent. It was an interesting silence that pervaded the terminal lounge, a silence of collective anticipation, and also one of exhaustion. I was unsure of

the time, but when we left the first waiting room, the sun had set quite a while earlier. The quietude was broken by the promptings of the senior officer in charge and we assembled to leave. We were hastily directed outside onto the tarmac. It was completely dark by this point and all to be seen were the lights of the runway, the giant cargo planes and the tonnes of aid that had been delivered from various nations around the world. I saw aircraft and aid from most noticeably India, but also from the United States, China, Britain, Australia among others. It was an incredible sight to see. Not just the fact that there were enormous planes everywhere, which did wonders for the little boy inside of me, but also what it all meant symbolically. Despite all the animosities and self-interested power politics that appear to run the planet, this was the world's nations coming together, selflessly, to help a tiny, poor, mountainous nation struck by an affliction of nature, who had little strategic or economic value to many of these countries. It was simply the right thing for them to do.

After several minutes of walking across the tarmac and down a runway, we reached our aircraft. It was an enormous piece of human engineering, the size of a jumbo jet. The massive cargo hold doors were open with a ramp sprawling down onto the ground. There was more media awaiting us as we approached the aircraft including more cameras this time. I felt slightly giddy about the whole situation, it felt so unreal, like it was taken from an old war movie, with troops yelling "go, go, go! Get into the plane". As I stepped onto the ramp, I briefly turned around to survey the area, and the country, one last time, as though it was the end of this chapter of my life. I took a deep breath and went inside. An officer directed me to sit wherever I wanted, which allowed Kara and I to be next to each other. The seating was arranged in four long rows, with two sets of two rows that faced each other looking to either flank of the aircraft. I couldn't stop feeling that I was in a movie, like I was in a drop ship, about to parachute into enemy territory, but instead the exact opposite was happening.

On all of the seats were some earplugs, a small bottle of water and a chocolate bar, which I swiftly ate, only just becoming aware of a sickly hunger, the excitement originally suppressing any

other feeling. I sat quietly for some time and awaited further briefings from the officers in charge. Cameras were shoved into the faces of weary travellers, who responded either with enthusiasm or utter contempt. It was interesting to watch the cameramen and reporters interact with each other and those around them, the reporters telling the cameramen to film it from this angle or that, asking the interviewee to answer the question again but differently this time. Even though it was rather impromptu journalism, they still managed to make the whole thing feel staged and choreographed. I let out a small laugh to myself about the absurdity of the semi-theatrical show in what really wasn't the most appropriate context to do so.

Kara noticed my giggle and asked, "what's so funny?"

"Oh nothing really," I replied, "I'm just watching the media do what they do best. I find it funny how detached they seem to be from the situation and how they're reporting this story the way they would with anything else, no matter how trivial."

She nodded and said "this is all so weird, isn't it? This is really a once in a lifetime experience, it's hard to imagine myself being evacuated by the military ever again!"

"I can," I said in a serious tone. Kara looked at me strangely until she realised I was joking, and then she began to laugh, with myself joining in shortly after. When we stopped, I asked, "so what're you going to do when we land in Delhi?" I hesitated slightly before continuing, "still thinking of going to Rishikesh?"

She thought for a moment before replying, "I think I'll go to Rishikesh as well, I'll join you and your friend, if you don't mind."

"Of course, that'd be great!" I said happily, "it'll be nice to have you along with us, especially once my friend goes his own way." I hadn't really thought about Hash since we parted ways, I hoped that everything was going as smoothly for him as it was for us.

"Attention everyone!" A loud familiar booming voice filled the cargo hold and brought everybody to silence immediately. "We will be departing within the next ten minutes, I want to direct your attention to myself and my fellow two officers here. We are going



to brief you on the taking off and landing procedures including safety guidelines. So please listen carefully!" The chief officer essentially gave a slightly altered version of standard commercial airline safety instructions. The main difference was that he warned us that the G-force will be quite strange as the seating arrangement faced towards the side of the plane, rather than towards the front.

It wasn't long after the officer finished, when the plane prepared for take-off. The sound of the planes enormous engines drowned out any prospect of conversation once they had begun. I became intensely aware of why we had been issued earplugs, but it didn't take too long to become accustomed to the noise. I heard the lifting of the cargo hold ramp and turned my head to watch it close completely. By this stage, many of the evacuees' baggage was under large mesh nets to stop them from rolling and sliding around in the loose open space. And then I felt the movement of the plane, taxiing backwards, turning right, left, right, moving forwards, faster, faster, faster and then we were off the ground. A shot of excitement pulsed through me as the force of the flying craft pushed my body to the side, compelling me into an uncomfortable position that twisted my back. I looked around and everybody was in a similar posture to myself, like rows of dominos that were in the process of falling but had stopped halfway. Some people appeared as though they were having the time of their lives, others were not quite as enthusiastic, and a few were sleeping through it all.

The aircraft gradually levelled out and I could return to a comfortable position, with nothing but the loud droning of the engines to indicate that we were flying. I looked to Kara and noticed she was already dozing and I laughed to myself, wondering how she could possibly sleep through that. She looked gone to the world and incredibly peaceful. I admired her beauty briefly in that state, and felt so lucky that I'd found someone so amazing, who also seemed to have taken an interest in me. I had left my home country and joined a monastery because I thought I would never find someone else to love so deeply, but here I was, finding someone in the most unusual of circumstances, who had given me a ray of shining hope for love. With that thought in mind, I

slouched into my seat, stretched my legs over the suitcases of random passengers and drifted into a sleep that hung somewhere between the waking and dream world.

## **Chapter Nine**

### *Under the Night Skies of India*

I awoke to the sensation of a strong descent, not a frightening one, but startling enough for my internal balance to register that something was different. I had slept, I think, or more closely it was that kind of sleep where there is a degree of awareness and conscious thought patterns that melds with something which resembles the dream state. A kind of sleep that tends to occur when one is sleeping upright, uncomfortably and in something that's moving. On a loudspeaker, the voice of one of the pilots asked the officers and crew to prepare for landing. It seemed as though no time had passed at all, but I soon realised the flight from Kathmandu to Delhi could be essentially measured in minutes rather than hours. I looked at the other passengers around me, seeing almost the entire spectrum of human emotion on their faces. Some looked upset, some excited, some a little bit frightened. Two children were giggling to each other and playing with a couple of plastic toys. There was one woman further down who was obviously angry at something or someone. Everybody was weary, many with large bags under their eyes, hardly managing to keep their eyes open. I felt a moment of solidarity with the people on the flight. Though the only other person I knew was Kara, we had all been through this experience together in some form or other. We all had stories to tell of tragedy and hope, and all of us, by fate of being born in the same patch of land, were in this together at this very moment in time. I felt a oneness with these people that generated a great deal of compassion and love for them. It takes those moments, when a bunch of random people are thrown into a situation that is the complete opposite of their normal existence, where the unity of humanity - the sense of everyone being in it together - really shines through. Unfortunately, this

sense of unity always tends to come during dire times: a war, a disaster either manmade or natural. But to me it shows the hidden goodness of the universe that subtly pervades everything even when times are at their darkest. A great loving warmth in my heart spontaneously emerged and slowly expanded throughout my body and I felt a moment of joy for everybody and everything.

I sat with the feeling during the final descent until we landed on the runway, where I was snapped out of the experience by the rush of everything around me the moment the plane came to a halt. Though slightly more orderly than a normal commercial aircraft, there was an immediate hustle and bustle of activity. People rushed to grab their things and get off the plane. The process didn't have the military precision and structure that one would expect. We were basically allowed straight off the plane once the cargo hold doors were open, and we collectively made our way into the airport from the tarmac, only to be greeted once again by a throng of reporters. They appeared to merely want to capture our arrival on film, seeming less interested in us as individuals this time, with the exception of the two girls who had developed frostbite. The reporters were particularly interested in them and their story of survival. I couldn't really blame the media, it was a fascinating story, but I nevertheless felt sorry for those girls who probably just wanted to go to bed.

The affair of getting through airport customs was similar to any commercial arrival, but exceptions were made so that the visa process was fast-tracked and smoothed out. It was very convenient that we'd arrived in the middle of the night and had staff from our consulate in Delhi to guide us. I was presented with the opportunity to have either a month or a six month visa, taking the latter on a gut feeling that I would want to remain in the country for some time. After everyone was processed, we were taken to the exit and guided onto buses that would take us to the first taste of luxury I'd had in quite some time.

The short walk from the entrance of the airport to our transport struck me hard. It was hot, very hot, even this late in the evening. Taxi drivers were blasting their horns, men were approaching us, asking to drive us to wherever, despite the fact that

we obviously had arrangements already. I attracted stares from many of those around us, largely accountable to my red robes, I gathered, but they did seem to be amazed by the sudden horde of foreigners that poured out of the airport. The attention made me feel uncomfortable and the whole experience was a bit of a sensory overload, but we were shortly on the bus and driving to our destination.

The glimpse I had through the windows into the city of Delhi revealed a stark contrast to the world I had just come from. Lights filled the streets. Cars, trucks, rickshaws and even a few ox driven carts littered the highway - surprisingly busy traffic despite being the middle of the night. The highways were smooth and wide, lines were clearly painted although the drivers paid little heed to lanes. An overground metro line followed the length of the highway, and I saw trains on a few occasions zoom above us. There were billboards littering the sides of the road, images of figures from India's political parties and covered in slogans written in the Devanagari script. I recognised the face of one man as the current president of the country, though his name eluded me. Even though Delhi remains a rather poor city, it displayed a wealth and bared the hallmarks of a modern metropolis that I had not experienced in a long time.

Kara must've noticed the perplexed look on my face mixed with a dash of wonder, saying, "cool place, isn't it? So different to Kathmandu, especially after the earthquake. Odd seeing cows alongside all this modernity, huh."

I nodded without taking my eyes off the window.

"Just wait till the morning, if you think it's busy now, just wait till you see Delhi awake!"

"Going to be a bit of shock, is it?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Probably will be, Delhi is really crazy. There's going to be a lot of sights and smells that you may not have experienced before. I noticed you looked uncomfortable when all those men were staring at you earlier..."

"Yeah, I was a little bit, why?"

"Get used to it, even though it looks a bit like they're staring at you intently, almost with a bit of hostility, I've been told that they're really just fascinated by foreigners. They don't get to see us often, especially ones that look like you." She pointed to my robes and face, letting out a short laugh.

I laughed, "I guess I'll have to get used to it.... I think I'll buy some new clothes in the morning so I don't stand out too much."

"But you look so good in those robes!" She retorted playfully.

"You mean these robes that I haven't changed out of for God knows how long? I keep smelling them and it's not good!"

"I thought spiritual people weren't meant to care about their physical appearances and the like?" She lightly jeered.

"Oh, but it's my compassion for others that makes me want to change clothes. They shouldn't have to suffer this!" I joked.

"Sure, sure..." she said, laughing, as I returned my attention to the outside world. Delhi is an enormous city, bigger than I thought was possible. I had read somewhere that the city had over twenty million people living within. An incomprehensible number considering that the entire population of countries like the Czech Republic and Israel combined would still amount to less. I wondered how it was even possible for so many people to live in such a small area, but it seemed to work.

The highway slithered on for what felt like an eternity, and once we finally turned off onto some narrow winding streets that could hardly fit the bus, it still took half an hour until we arrived at the hotel. It was an unimposing building and connected to several others along a street that was probably two widths of the bus wide. One wouldn't expect that there was a fancy hotel inside, in fact, it lacked any features that would suggest it was a hotel at all with the exception of a neon lit sign baring its name. Initial appearances can be deceiving though and we were pleasantly surprised when we entered to find a well furnished, clean and air-conditioned lobby with a staff eager to greet us and take our belongings (if I had any). We were politely asked to wait whilst rooms were being issued to us.

The smell of incense pervaded the air and I noticed by the counter that there was a small shrine dedicated to the Hindu god Ganesha, the statue within depicting the elephant headed god of fortune, removing obstacles and other attributes. Devotees had lit candles, incense and placed flowers around his neck in tribute. Hinduism is interesting in that it is not necessarily as polytheistic as it appears on the surface with its thousands and thousands of gods. For many, these gods represent emanations or attributes of one ultimate reality, one divine energy that manifests in the universe in countless forms. Worshipping gods like Ganesha is worshipping for the particular attribute the divine energy can provide. It is simpler to pray to God when there is an image that one can easily conceive and relate to, instead of the infinite, ineffable reality that can feel too distant for most people.

I meandered around the lobby whilst waiting for my room-key, admiring the oil paintings on the wall. One depicted a battle comprised of Indian nobility, vicious warriors and elephants who were engaging in frantic, bloody fighting. Another portrayed a couple in love, the man had blue skin and played some sort of windpipe instrument to his lover as they sat in a forest by a river with animals watching in admiration. I wondered if some of these paintings were taken from actual events in history or were simply ancient Indian myths. There was also a small bookshelf in the corner of the room which I couldn't help but browse through, but nothing in particular stood out to me.

I shortly heard my name being called out in a thick Indian English accent and turned impulsively, raising my hand. "That's me!"

"Here is your room-key, sir. It is on the third floor, would you like someone to show you the way or take your bags?"

"No, thank you, I don't have any bags, and I should be fine to find my own way," I replied with a polite tone. I took the key, as well as a padlock. Even in a hotel like this, they use an old-fashioned key and lock system. I quite liked it, having a lock and key gave the place more character, took me back to an older time before everything was electronic and easy but also a bit dull.

"Okay, sir, have a nice stay." He gave me a large grin before he shifted his attention to the next person.

"Hey!" I heard Kara exclaim as I began to walk towards the stairwell. I turned to see her standing behind me. "How're you feeling? Are you tired?" She asked.

I quickly scanned my mind and body for fatigue, and surprisingly, it wasn't as present as it should have been. "Come to think of it, only a little bit... why do you ask?" I queried, anticipating the answer.

"I'm not really that tired either, arriving in Delhi and taking in all the sights woke me again, gave me some energy. Do you want to do something?" She said, turning her gaze towards the ground, cheeks becoming slightly red, shortly returning a slightly bashful eye contact.

"That sounds good, I'd like that, but what's there to do at this time of night?"

"Probably not much, but I noticed that this place does have a rooftop garden and bar, we could meet there shortly?"

"Alright, I'll go have a look at my room and meet you there soon."

"I shouldn't be too long, they're handing out rooms in alphabetical order, and I'm not too far behind you... I'll see you shortly!"

I gave her a short, quaint wave and turned to head upstairs. After several flights and a small maze, I reached my room. As I was the holder of the lock and key, the room was already open for me. It was spacious, much bigger than I needed. In one large room, there was a king-size bed, couch and coffee table, a large flat-screen television, wardrobe and still plenty of space to walk around. It was decorated with wooden carved ornaments and paintings similar to those in the lobby. I let out a sigh of relief as I threw myself onto the bed. It had finally set in that a new chapter of my life had begun now that these short but impactful events had ended. I briefly reflected on the previous week or so since the earthquake. It felt like so much time had passed since I was living in the monastery, reluctantly accepting that this was my best option in life. A lifetime ago, but here I was wearing the same clothes.



After a few minutes lying on the bed, eyes closed, I got up and left the room to make my way upstairs. The floor I was on was almost at the top of the building and it was a brief walk to the roof top. The garden presented a spectacular view of the city, just high enough to prevent other buildings from interfering. Not so much a garden, besides a few pot plants, but rather a series of low lying tables with cushions instead of chairs as seating. Even this late into the night, candles were lit along the tables. I could hear the honking of horns below and a chorus of dogs barking, a testament to a city that truly never rests. Kara wasn't there yet when I arrived, but a staff-member was present. He stood behind what resembled a bar and offered me a beer. I hesitated for a moment, as I hadn't had a drop of alcohol in well over a year, before I even went to the monastery. I didn't mind it, but it generally didn't agree with my body, and I always became sick earlier than anyone I would drink with. I never really enjoyed the culture surrounding drinking as well. All night parties, going to nightclubs and bars and the like, which I did find enjoyable from time to time, but it was never really my thing. Being more interested in other drugs and my social anxiety in my younger days probably contributed to this attitude.

"Ah, yes, please." I eventually answered.

The bartender turned around and opened a small refrigerator, selected a large beer and opened it for me. "Two hundred rupees, sir." He said as he handed the beer to me.

"Oh, um, I don't have any money on me at the moment... you see, I just arrived with that large group from the airport. I haven't had time yet." Awkwardly, I searched my pockets in vain.

"It's okay, I can pay," Kara walked to the counter and handed the man a few tattered notes, "Could I please have a beer as well?" She asked politely.

The bartender bobbed his head, turned and retrieved a beer. He then reached into his pocket, pulled out a small wad of rupees and gave them to Kara.

"Thanks, Kara." I said, slightly embarrassed.

"No problem, but you can probably just charge it to your room next time," she replied with a hint of humour.

"Of course! I didn't even think of that. I'm probably a bit more tired than I originally thought." I said as I stifled a yawn.

We walked towards the balcony and together we enjoyed the view. Thousands of lights and outlines of buildings, some were brightly illuminated whilst others were shrouded in darkness, suggesting to me a strong disparity of wealth in the city.

"It's quite beautiful... not conventionally, but in its own kind of way, isn't it?" Kara said after a few moments.

"It is, I don't really know how to describe it, it's a rather strange, almost contradictory, combination of old and new. And it's so huge as well."

"You'll find that across India... the land of contradictions and paradoxes. A place where you'll see the full scope of human experience!"

I laughed, "that sounds like a tourism advertisement, perhaps a little more honest though... How did you have money, by the way?"

"I still had some from the last time I was here. I knew I'd be coming back, so I didn't exchange it."

"Ah okay," I took a sip of my beer, crisp and refreshing. A fairly famous beer that I'd had before back in my country. I heard voices behind us and saw a few more evacuees enter the rooftop. "Looks like we aren't the only ones to think of this."

Kara nodded and we continued to watch the view for a while. We had another comfortable silence, words weren't needed to be exchanged, we had talked so much throughout the last few days, and for me, it was nice simply to be in her company.

After some time, Kara asked, "do you know what that Indian head bobble means?"

"No, I didn't even realise they actually did it, I thought it was just a stereotype!"

"It means a lot of things, depending on the context. It can mean yes, okay, good, maybe. It's pretty odd to get used to, sometimes it looks like they're just being rude and ignoring you, but they simply don't need to say anything." I tiny smile creased on her lips. "I find it interesting how such a small gesture can express so many things."

I answered with an overly exaggerated head bobble and Kara joined in, shortly breaking into laughter. After we stopped, I said, "shall we sit down?"

Kara bobbed her head and let out a giggle. We sat down on some cushions, sitting opposite across the table from one another. We talked for a while and discussed what to do in the morning. Kara reminded me that we were to meet Hash at some point. I felt guilty as I had almost completely forgotten about him, caught up in the events of the last day. It also didn't help that I was becoming more and more infatuated with Kara. We finished our beers rather quickly and I went to buy a few more, this time charging the fees to my room number. Kara told me about India, we talked about our past, and before we realised, we were both feeling tipsy, perhaps even drunk, talking nonsense to each other, starting to softly touch one another's arms, slowly getting closer.

"Would you like one more beer? It must be starting to get really late, or early, however you want to look at it." Kara said, slurring her words.

I felt much better than I normally did when I drank, so I agreed. She got up and shortly returned, but sat down on a cushion next to me instead, directly facing me. We looked into each other's eyes for moment without exchanging words, piercing through the cloudy haze of our drunken stupors. My heart began to beat faster and faster in excitement, and I felt something was about to happen. Kara smiled at me and lightly touched me on the knee. Too often in my life I had let these moments pass without doing anything about them, too shy, too scared. But this time I leaned forward slightly and she did too and before I knew it we had locked lips. We kissed only for a moment before we withdrew and both let out a slight laugh, and then almost immediately we returned to kissing, we wrapped our arms around one another, holding each another ever more tightly. My heart burst open with love towards her and I could feel it emanating from her body. I was encapsulated by a blissful joy as I felt the warmth of Kara engulf me and for a moment, all was right in the world.

We stopped abruptly as Kara let go of me and whispered, "come with me," as she stood up and took my hand. I rose with

her, feeling nervous, but I simply followed without saying a word, and we went down to her room, leaving the beers behind. We paused to kiss frequently as we descended the staircase and as soon as we entered the room, we removed one another's clothes and threw ourselves onto the bed. We entwined together in a passion that I had not experienced since my previous love, and we were taken into a timeless realm where our bodies, minds and souls came together to form a whole. My nerves disappeared completely, my heartbeat fluctuated and for a moment, it felt as though the pace of both of our hearts were in alignment together. Kissing, caressing and loving each other, we climaxed at the same time in a unitive ecstasy that briefly transcended the mundane world and together we experienced a boundless, selfless love. In those early hours of the morning, our souls were united into one and everything else in the universe disappeared. Emerging from this state, we collapsed into one another and fell into a deep exhausted sleep.

I awoke the next morning feeling slightly groggy and ill in the stomach, the product of a complete intolerance to alcohol. This didn't matter though, as Kara's head was resting on my chest, and she was sleeping peacefully with an arm wrapped around me. A slight smile stretched across her beautiful elegant face and she looked completely untroubled by any of the problems of the world. I lightly brushed her hair, playing with it slightly, and felt a strong loving connection with her. For a moment, I lay in disbelief that events between us had happened so quickly, but it felt so real and deep. I had never really rushed into something like this before, was never interested in one night stands or brief flings, though I didn't think this would be one.

I thought about sex as I lay there staring at the ceiling, the attitudes towards it across time and cultures. There are so many understandings of this act of love and procreation, so complex yet at the same time, such a simple thing. It brings more pleasure than just about any other experience, and this pleasure has led to vastly different ways of thinking about it. Many see only the pleasure side of the act and simply pursue the sensual dimension as frequently as possible. Perhaps this why it has been understood as sinful,

historically, by Christianity and other religions. The pursuit of sex can lead to excessive lust, selfishness, even violence at its most extreme. It can be seen as a distraction from the reality beyond our senses, a distraction from God, which is why monastic orders tend to prohibit it. But these same traditions that condemn the lustful pursuit of sex also see a sacred, cosmic dimension to it. Sex is the ultimate physical symbol of the divine union between two souls, the ultimate expression of love that can create none other than life itself. One could ask, what else is a more godly act? Rather than the mindless lust for pleasure or the absolute condemnation of sex apart from reasons of procreation, in my eyes, sex is the quintessential symbol of love for another being.

As the ancient Chinese philosophies would say, it brings the unity of *yin* and *yang* - the two opposing yet complementary forces of the world - into harmony. The ecstasy brought from climax represents the earthly equivalent of *satchitananda* - absolute being, infinite consciousness and unlimited bliss - in other words, something unworldly happens that represents the epitome of human experience. Perhaps this is a reason why the ancient Hindus placed such a high and sacred value on the sexual experience.

I was brought out of my ponderings by Kara's stirring. She lightly stroked my chest, inhaled deeply, and said with a warm smile, "good morning" before lifting her naked body up, apparently without reason. I playfully grabbed her, pulling her back down, and embraced her in a strong hug which shortly turned into kissing. My loins stirred and not before long, we were making love again, slower and more wearisome than the previous night, but there was still a strong sensuality about it.

After we had finished, we lay with each other, arms wrapped around one another, utterly content in the moment. No problems in the world, nothing else really existed apart from the two of us. But at the back of my mind, something nagged me, saying that I still had a duty today to fulfil and so I asked, "what time is it? It's not too late, right?"

"That's what I was going to check, before you pulled me back down!" Kara replied before sitting up and checking her watch

on the bedside table, "it's midday.... when did you need to meet your friend?"

I fished my mind, nothing else in the world seemed important except being with Kara. After a moment of thinking, the memory appeared, "he mentioned a place near the main railway station in New Delhi, said it was quite popular with foreigners... do you know the name of the place by any chance?"

Kara thought for a moment, "Um, I think I do. It's a dusty, crowded market area with hotels and restaurants. The area has plenty of character if it's the place I'm thinking of. Do you want to go find him soon?"

"Honestly, I'd prefer just to stay right here with you all day... you know, he did say that if I couldn't find him, I could just meet him in Dehra Dun where he lives."

"Oh that's a bit mean! We should try and find him!" Kara told me off.

"He wouldn't have to know, I haven't even known him that long, surely he wouldn't mind!" I replied.

"You haven't known me that long, and look what's happened! The length of time doesn't always matter, it's the depth of time that counts, if you know what I mean."

"Hmm, that's true," I conceded, "I have been through quite a lot with him... you're right, let's get ready and try and find him."

We got out of bed at an encumbered rate. As I stood up, I reeled slightly, a tinge of nausea struck my stomach. I really did have a low tolerance for alcohol, I thought. I also managed to catch a smell of myself and thought it would be best to finally clean my body properly.

"I'm going to have a quick shower first, I need it... how did you cope with it last night?" I joked.

"I only noticed a bit, you're not smelling too bad, it's kind of just your natural scent I suppose." Kara replied.

"Oh, that's what you call it. Good to know that you're attracted to body odour," I teased as I walked into the bathroom.

The revealing waters of the shower showed the full extent of my dirtiness as grime washed off my body and into the basin. It was odd to think that everything that had attached itself to my body

over the course of the last week had followed me this far. It was as if all this dirt and blood had its own story to tell. I spent several long minutes scrubbing every nook and cranny in my body and I eventually emerged from the shower feeling purified, cleansed and refreshed. But upon returning from the bathroom, I remembered that I had to wear the same unwashed robe at least until I bought some new clothes. I hung my shoulders in resignation and accepted that I was going to be getting dirty again much sooner than I anticipated. Kara took my place in the bathroom and showered herself whilst I waited lying naked on the bed, reluctant to put on the robes until it was absolutely necessary.

When she was finished and we were both dressed and ready to leave, Kara said, "wait, can we talk for a moment about what happened last night?"

I stopped mid pace as I was heading towards the door and turned, replying, "of course, what's on your mind?"

"It all happened really fast, didn't it? We've only known one another for a few days. Was last night something special for you as well?"

I walked up to her and touched her on the shoulder reassuringly, "last night was incredibly special for me. Let me tell you something. I was taken aback by you the very first time I saw you. I saw so much beauty in you that I was mesmerised. But it wasn't just a physical attraction, something in my heart stirred. What I saw was much deeper and I simply knew that there was a hidden connection between us, as if I was meant to meet you. I developed feelings for you, almost immediately and they blew up over the past few days, leading to what happened last night. I was just so happy that you felt a similar way. Like you said earlier, it doesn't necessarily matter how much time has passed, it's the depth of time spent that counts..." I trailed off to look at Kara directly in the eyes.

"I did feel something as soon as I met you, an instant connection and it became deeper the more time we spent with each other. I hadn't experienced anything like I did last night, there was so much love and passion between us that it felt transcendent."

"I felt the same way," I said as I leaned forward to kiss her, and after a brief sweet moment, I pulled back and said, "you know, I had a dream of you the night before we were evacuated."

"Really? What happened?" Kara asked, looking genuinely curious.

The dream had faded in my memory slightly, but I recalled it to the best of my ability. "Um, so I appeared on the outside of a beautiful ancient Hindu temple. I walked inside, which was incredibly dark and I, ah, began to feel intense fear and anxiety which only disappeared when you appeared in a sort of glowing angelic form and you dispersed all the darkness in the temple. We then came together and united in a blissful, divine love. From there, it felt like, uh, it felt like my being expanded into the universe and I became one with you and everything in the cosmos... It was a bit like how I felt with you last night."

"I wonder what it all means? Seems like it's pretty rich in symbolism: temples, angels, sex. And that transformative emotional experience from fear to love." Kara paused talking to think for a moment, tapping a finger on her chin and her other hand on her hips. "There's a bit of parallel with your recent experiences as well, you went from the uncertain darkness of your time immediately after the earthquake, and then the light came through once you had a means to leave, around the time you met me."

"It's strange, I've had quite a few dreams over the past week. All of them have been oddly spiritual, some even religious."

"Oh really? What happened in those ones?" She asked.

"I'll tell you about them a bit later... Now, shall we go find my friend?"

Kara nodded, "what's his name, by the way?"

"Harshvardhan, but he'll probably tell you just to call him Hash... kind of a cool nickname, right? I'm not sure if he's realised what the word *hash* means to us."

"I'm sure he has, hash is everywhere in this country," she laughed, "he probably just doesn't care."



## Chapter Ten

### *A Day in Delhi*

It took a bit of travelling to get to the place where Hash was going to meet us. I thought Delhi was busy in the middle of the night, and I was wrong. It was nothing compared to the chaos that is India's capital in the middle of the day. Stepping out of the hotel and onto the street, I was immediately struck by an assault to the senses. What Kara said earlier immediately came to my mind: that India was a land of contradictions and paradoxes. Within one inhalation, I smelt aromatic incenses burning from a nearby street-side temple; rotten vegetables, meat and possibly excrement; the fine *masalas* used in cooking, coming from street food vendors littered throughout the street; and a number of other smells that I simply couldn't identify. I exhaled, and inhaled once again to take in the plethora of scents, stinks and smells that covered this average street in Delhi. Walking down the thoroughfare, I was also visually assaulted by the strangeness and franticness of the city. Bright, exuberant colours of all sorts were on full display on people's clothing, on painted houses, on decorations of shopfronts, and on murals clumsily splattered on auto-rickshaws and cars. The street was incredibly crowded and it showcased the contrast between modern and traditional India. There were business-looking types in suits wearing nice watches, expensive sunglasses and with smartphones attached to their ears. Women dressed in typical Western clothing: shorts, jeans and t-shirts. But there were also Muslims and Hindus in their traditional garbs: some women wearing the black, all-covering *burqa*, and other women adorning elaborate jewellery on their arms and face and dressed in brightly coloured saris. Both men and women modestly covered their bodies, despite the heat from the sun. There were people riding motorbikes alongside men using carts drawn by oxen. Modern

retailers selling gadgets and useless plastic things stood alongside old decrepit looking shops that traded handcrafted goods of all varieties. I wondered what strange world I had entered, I thought Kathmandu was a change in setting to what I was used to, but it was nothing compared to this.

Almost immediately after stepping out of the hotel hand in hand with Kara, a little girl wearing no shoes and a tattered, dirt covered dress began to follow us, and repeatedly tugged my robe and touched my shoes, placing her hands together in a gesture of prayer. I stopped to see what she wanted from me and looking into my eyes, she made the universal sign for food or money. I felt a surge of shame and guilt that I had nothing to give her and so I asked Kara to offer her a few rupees. Kara shook her head and prompted me to ignore her and keep walking. The little girl followed us for a short time, but soon gave up. I later asked why we were so mean to the girl, she was obviously destitute, probably a street orphan, what harm could a little bit of money have done? She explained that even though it feels wrong, we don't want to perpetuate the problem of street children. Many of them are basically owned like slaves and the money that they can gather often doesn't end up in their own hands, but some sort of boss. Many run from their families due to conflict and poverty, and as a result, haven't had the chance to go to school. The life of a street child does offer opportunities for money, not much, but more than they could perhaps get otherwise. They're frequently hired illegally and often subjected to abuse from their employers. So even though giving a bit of money seemed like the right thing to do, it would have had an accumulative effect that just feeds into this cycle of child poverty and exploitation.

Further along the street, a cow meandered directly towards me, seemingly oblivious of not only myself but also of all the happenings of the world around her. Cyclists and rickshaws were narrowly avoiding her and just before the cow was about to reach me, she sat down in the middle of the street without a care in the world. After staring somewhat dumbfounded at this cow for a few moments, I noticed in the corner of my eye several more cows grazing through discarded fruits and vegetables next to a small

shop stand. The owner was vainly attempting to shoo away the animals, and I couldn't help but burst into laughter at the oddness of this situation and this place. Kara looked at me quizzically, "what's so funny?"

"The cows. They're hilarious." I managed to spurt out before I came to grips and composed myself.

She laughed as well, "they are pretty funny, huh? They're great characters. But I hope you don't act like this every time you see a cow, you should probably get used to this... hey look!" Kara pointed towards the jumbled assortment of telephones poles and electric cables that drooped above the street, and appeared to be ready to collapse and electrocute a passerby. At first, I could only stare at this beautiful woman and paid no attention to what she actually said. I was becoming intoxicated by her, a strange concoction of intense attraction, a slight nervousness and excitement seemed to constantly flutter through my body as I continued to hold her hand, an odd feeling in itself for me. Prodding me again and giggling a little, she managed to shift my focus to where she had indicated. Three monkeys were climbing along the cables one after the other, jumping onto rooftops and balconies. They were frequently peering down to the street below them, looking out for food and potential danger. I made eye-contact with one for a split moment, and I shuddered slightly, as the monkey and its eyes appeared far too human. A bizarre sensation.

"Whoa, I didn't know that monkeys lived in the city!" I said excitedly.

"Yep, there're monkey colonies in a lot of cities across India, just another thing that makes this country special!" Kara said.

At the end of the street that intersected with a larger, more traffic-filled road, there was a group of auto-rickshaw drivers eager to drive their customers anywhere they wanted. When we approached them, there appeared to be some structure to decide which driver got to take us around, probably an informal queue or something of the like. When ours was chosen, we told him our

destination and he showed us to his *tuk-tuk*. But before I got in, Kara grabbed my arm. "Wait, how much?"

"Three hundred rupees." replied the driver, a tall, middle-aged skinny man with a thin moustache.

"Too much, too much. One hundred." Kara counter-offered.

"No, no, no, no. Fine, two hundred and fifty."

"We both know it's not that far. One hundred and fifty."

It didn't look like the driver completely understood what she just said, but he proposed less anyway, "two hundred."

Kara thought for a moment. "Fine, deal."

The driver bobbed his head, not looking particularly happy, and said "get in."

The two of us squeezed into the back of the little three wheeled vehicle. In all appearances an auto-rickshaw, or tuk-tuk, looks like a potential death sentence: hardly any safety features, tiny wheels and compact, and not to mention it was up against chaotic traffic. Regardless, they're quite fun, nimble and rather cute contraptions. The driver often personalises the interior and sometimes the exterior. Our particular driver was a Muslim, as indicated by a crescent moon symbol at the top left corner of the large windshield. He had a small nuclear family: two teenage sons and a wife wearing a *hijab*. I later heard somewhere that a large percentage of auto-rickshaw drivers in the northern parts of India were Muslim, for whatever reason. He also began playing Indian pop music that could only be faintly heard over the sound of the engine.

Once we were settled in, I inquired to Kara, "your haggling was pretty ruthless, was he ripping us off that bad?"

"Not as bad as I've had, but yeah, he was ripping us off. When I first came to India, I was conned and scammed so much that I got fed up and so I got tougher on people trying to sell me stuff. Sometimes it seems that just because I'm a foreign woman, means I'm going to be rich, naive and easy to cheat. Besides that, it can also be pretty fun, you know. We don't really get the chance to practice the art of haggling from where we're from."

The traffic was dense but the distance wasn't too far. Hundreds of cars, motorbikes, buses and auto-rickshaws competed for ground as collectively the traffic inched forward. Layered upon this jumbled mesh of machinery was a cacophony of horns, constantly blaring to one another, saying "watch out, I'm here". Our driver was quite adept with the horn and at spotting opportunities to move forward, and I noticed this was an advantage that most other vehicles didn't have. As a result of their size, tuk-tuks were able to weave in and around traffic, sometimes hopping onto the sidewalk, narrowly avoiding a pedestrian or two. Every time traffic came to a stop, be it at traffic lights or simply a jam, a small horde of street children would come and bombard as many people as possible in an attempt to sell whatever goods they were pushing - books, flowers, plastic toys, cheap clothes. But in all of this chaos, there was an underlying order, perhaps even harmony beneath the surface. I didn't see collisions, any road rage, and all seemed to be getting where they wanted. Once I became accustomed to the horns, they developed an odd symphonic sound to them, almost musical. There was also an air of freedom in something as simple as riding a rickshaw. No seatbelts, no regards for safety, you can lean out the side and flail your arms if you wanted. It was something that the West lacked, with its excessive regulations of anything that may qualify as a 'safety risk'. My attention switched frequently between the distractions of my external surroundings and the amazing woman I was falling in love with. We spent half the time of the ride staring into each other's eyes and simply watching and admiring one another. Yet again I couldn't help but become entranced by her crescent moon eyes, and she apparently saw something in me too. We laughed on a number of occasions when nothing was said and we came to the realisation that all we were doing was gawking.

When we arrived at our destination, the heat of the day struck me immediately as I stepped out of the rickshaw. We stood at the entrance of an open bazaar that had little shade except for the stalls where shopkeepers were lounging around apathetically, the summer day taking too great a toll on their energy and everyone else's. It was also dry and dust was frequently kicked into the sky

by gusts of wind. The bazaar was selling all sorts of fruits and vegetables, clothing, spices and souvenirs. There was a row of shoe shiners who toiled hard, cleaning the footwear of a few modern looking Indian men. Monkeys were lingering above, looking for opportunities to steal some food. Stray dogs were sniffing around the stalls, keeping a wary distance from the people around them. In the distance facing back towards the road that we were dropped off, I could see the New Delhi railway station - a massive complex that dominated the area with a vast network of interweaving railway tracks feeding out of it, virtually connecting the rest of the country to this marketplace. The bazaar funnelled into a wide street that was covered in shops, hotels, and travel agencies. There were a number of alleyway restaurants, delicious aromas emanating from them and setting off hunger pangs in my stomach. The street was chaotic, a combination of a normal road and a pedestrian area. Both man-powered and motorised rickshaws competed with people, animals, mobile stalls, motorbikes and the occasional car in this crowded thoroughfare.

"What's this place called?" I asked Kara.

"Paharganj, it's a neighbourhood that pretty much caters to travellers, both foreign and local. The place has nice and well-priced accommodation, good food, cheap stuff... and it's pretty crazy as well, a nice taste of India!" She answered. "So where're you meeting Hash?"

"He wrote down the name on a piece of paper," I reached into my pocket and retrieved the note, scanned it briefly and then handed it to Kara, "any idea where this is?"

"Hmmm, nope. Let's just keep walking and keep an eye out for it. We should get you some new clothes though, you must be boiling in those robes."

Sweat was drenching my back and beginning to soak through my garments, it must have been around forty degrees. I agreed, "sounds good, it would be nice to wear clean and dry clothes, and also not to be stared at by every second person that I walk past."

"Okay! Follow me, I'll find you something nice." She grabbed my hand and pulled me along an energetic pace.

I blindly wandered the street, following Kara like a loyal dog. We went from store to store, firstly buying a large backpack, which was shortly filled with bare clothing essentials: underwear, socks and some cheap t-shirts. There was a store selling loose, earthy coloured clothing, essentially a store catering to those with hippy sensibilities. Kara directed me towards it and selected me a few pairs of pants and a couple of shirts. The clothes were incredibly light and thin and when I asked for a price, it was hard to believe that clothing like this could be so cheap. Kara also picked up a nice dress with *aum* symbols and elephants elaborately interwoven in a spectrum of colour. Afterwards, we went to a few more shops and I bought some practical items: sandals, a raincoat, a towel, toiletries, and some warmer clothes. I was slightly confused when Kara insisted I buy a jacket and thick pants, even the thought of wearing them rose the temperature in my body. But she eventually convinced me, saying Rishikesh was in the foothills of the Himalayas and the journey wasn't too far until one was in the midst of the mountains. I was surprised that buying so many things would cost so little compared to buying the same quality stuff in most other countries around the world.

With a new set of gear, we were ready to find Hash. We had spotted the meeting place whilst shopping, and promptly returned there when we finished. It was a hotel that had a series of large square neon lights above the entrance, vertically arranged, each with a different letter and collectively spelling "Krishna Hotel", named after the divine avatar from the *Bhagavad Gita* and countless other Indian stories, myths and legends. We entered the hotel and I asked a receptionist if Hash had checked-in to stay the previous night. After thoroughly searching through the guestbook, he shook his head negatively and apologised that he couldn't be of more help. I explained to him that we were to meet him here, and he invited us to wait in the cool, air-conditioned lobby of the hotel, a fine relief from the outside.

Kara went to sit on one of the leather couches and I decided to go to the bathroom and finally change into different clothes. Despite having a shower earlier, changing into clean clothes made me feel new, purified and lighter. The robes were rather heavy and

I was beginning to chaff significantly in them. In comparison, the new clothes felt like I was wearing nothing at all. When I returned to the lobby, Kara immediately looked up. "Wow, you're looking sharp! A whole new man!"

"Really?" I replied.

"No... not at all. But they still kind of suit you."

I laughed, saying, "whatever, I like them, and you suggested them anyway!"

I went and sat next to her on the couch, wrapping my arm around her shoulder, feeling slightly awkward at first, but it all disappeared when she embraced it and nestled her head on my chest. I was beginning to feel wholly comfortable with Kara and I gave her a quick peck on the head. She reacted by looking up at me and kissing me briefly on the lips, afterwards giving me a beaming grin radiating love. We waited around for an hour or so. There were books in the lobby so I occupied my time by flicking through several of them. Most were cheap pulp novels that tourists had left behind, but there were a few interesting ones on India, its history, nature and culture. Kara left a couple of times to wander, returning on each occasion with something different: a small cup of chai and a samosa the first time, the second time with oranges and bananas.

Despite the hot day, a warm milk masala tea with a samosa was a delicious snack to pass the time and abate the emptiness within my stomach. I was more hesitant to try the fruit, after hearing so many warnings in the past of dodgy fruit that can make one sick for days. I had heard from someone whose friend had developed a permanent condition that permanently affected her digestion or damaged her sense of taste, I couldn't quite remember.

"Are you sure that the fruit is okay to eat?" I asked.

"Should be," Kara said without a second thought, "umm, I've never had a problem. Fruits that are unpeeled are generally pretty good and only rarely is there a scandal with sellers tampering with them. Some inject dirty water to keep the fruit moist, but I wouldn't worry about that."

"Alright... I trust you on that." I replied half-earnestly.

"Besides, you've spent a lot of time in Nepal already, your stomach must've hardened from some of the food there."



She had a point and I was hungry. I took the orange first, eager for its succulence. Best not to worry too much on things that probably won't happen, I thought. From simple things like trying food to the big experiences of life like travelling, love and pursuing one's passions. A little bit of caution is always appropriate, of course, the world isn't all rainbows and laughter, but one can't deny themselves the experiences of life, simply because of over-thinking every little problem that could pop up.

After a while Kara asked, "so, what time did you say you'd meet?"

"We didn't exactly agree to a particular time... just said this afternoon. I expected he would've stayed here."

Kara sighed with a hint of irritation, "I wonder why he would want to meet at a hotel he wasn't even staying at."

"Yeah, it does seem a bit odd."

"Well I'm still hungry, want to get some food?" She asked.

"Okay," realising I was slightly famished myself, "I'll just leave a note with the receptionist... actually, do you want to just explore Delhi for a while and come back tonight?"

"Sounds good, but let's eat first."

I wrote a short letter to Hash, saying that we'd be back here at around seven in the evening and told the receptionist who to look out for. We left the hotel and re-entered the heat of the day. It was probably just passing its hottest point, just before three in the afternoon. I noticed people were trying their best to stay in the shade as much as possible. We only walked a few meters up the street to the closest restaurant sign, which led us down an alley towards an eatery that was little more than a hole in the wall. It had a few tables, a counter and a door leading to a kitchen. The lighting was dull and slightly tinged blue, perhaps attributable to the colour of the walls. It appeared to be family run and we were greeted in a friendly manner. We were sat down and a little girl in a green and yellow dress, who couldn't have been much older than ten, gave us a couple of handwritten laminated menus. It was written using the Latin alphabet but the words were in Hindi. There was *lassi*, *naan*, *biryani*, several things with *aloo* and *paneer* and *kofta* in them, among many other items on the menu. I was very impressed by the

range of food for such a small place, but I had little idea of what anything was, though I did notice that the vast majority of stuff on the menu lacked any meat.

"Okay so..." Kara began, "a *lassi* is a yoghurt based drink, often sweetened and flavoured to your choosing. *Biryani* is like an Indian fried rice; dishes with *aloo* in them have potatoes; *paneer* is generally goat's cheese; *kofta* are floury fried vegetable ball things, they're pretty tasty." She continued to point out a few of the curry sauces and other main ingredients, but I stopped paying attention, becoming distracted by the movements of her lips and the flickering twinkle in her eyes as she enthusiastically explained the wide variety of dishes on the menu.

She apparently picked up on this and playfully questioned me, "so what were the last few things I just said?"

"Hmm, what? Oh, I don't know." I said, somewhat taken of guard, slightly dumbfounded.

She laughed, "Am I really just that pretty, huh? My face alone can dull your mind like that!"

"No, no, no... well, yes. I was just so enraptured in admiration for you that I didn't care anymore about food."

"Shut up," she joked, blushing slightly, as the little girl returned to take our order.

Without putting much thought to it, I selected the *aloo matar* - potatoes and peas - with no indicator of what the curry sauce would be like. I also added some garlic *naan* and saffron rice on the side. Kara ordered a few *roti* and the *palak paneer*.

"Spinach and goat's cheese?" I said when the girl had walked off.

"Sounds a lot nicer in Hindi doesn't it? But it's delicious, You can try some when it arrives."

"Huh, seems interesting, a curry made from spinach and goat's cheese... never thought something like that would exist."

"If something's edible, chances are someone's probably tried to combine it with something else that you can eat," Kara stated, "and apparently goat's cheese and spinach go well together!"

I nodded and changed topic, "so what should we do today? We've got plenty of time."

"Maybe we should first look into train tickets to Haridwar, the nearest town to Rishikesh with a station... unless it's changed, there's no direct line. We could check the railway station after lunch to see if there's any tickets."

"Sure, let's get that out of the way... shall we try and leave tonight, or spend another night here in Delhi?"

"Ah, chances are we may not be able to get a ticket for tonight, they usually sell out months in advance and only leave a few for emergencies and foreigners."

"Makes sense, I guess the country does have a reputation for being crowded and busy." I paused, before remembering, "wait, but what about Hash? Shouldn't we wait to see if he wants to come with us?"

"Honestly, I'm not so sure if we're going to end up meeting with him. Surely he would've stayed at the hotel he told you to meet him at." Kara answered. "I'm not saying anything bad has happened to him, but maybe his family or friends picked him up at the airport. I'm sure they'd be eager to see him after the earthquake."

"You're probably right," I said, "but we should still stop past the hotel again later this evening... Anyway, what else should we do while we're here."

Kara thought for a moment. "We could do some sightseeing, go somewhere historical maybe? We could go to the old city, it's quite an experience just to simply wander around the area: its alleyways and bazaars are a bit like a trip back in time. There's a beautiful, enormous mosque that would be worth seeing... Hmm, there's also the Red Fort and plenty of other historical places to visit. Actually, if you want, we could go to a temple or something, there're plenty of major spiritual places here for a lot of religions. There's a massive Sikh temple complex, a major Krishna temple, you know, the 'Hare Krishna' people?" She scrunched her face slightly, thinking. "The Baha'i temple is also something quite amazing to see, it's massive and looks like the Sydney Opera House, but in the shape of a lotus flower."

I weighed her options, "do you reckon we'll have time to go to a few places? The Baha'i temple sounds pretty good, but I'd also like to check out the Old City."

"Sure, if we leave straight after lunch, we should be able to squeeze a few places in."

As Kara finished speaking, the little girl returned with our food. All was served in metallic oval shaped bowls. I was fascinated by Kara's dish, little cube chunks of goat's cheese in a green sludgy sauce that must've been the spinach. It didn't look particularly appetising, but it smelt delicious. Mine, on the other hand, looked like a fairly standard curry that you could find at any Indian restaurant across the world.

Kara noticed I was staring at her food, "you want to try some of mine?"

"Yes please, looks... interesting, to say the least," I said.

Kara spooned a few chunks of paneer onto my plate and draped it with the sauce, suggesting to wrap it in some of the naan bread. I took a large mouthful and the taste was bliss in my mouth. "Wow, that's great!"

"Yep, now let me try some of yours!" She said as she reached over to grab my aloo matar and some of the rice, mixed them together and tasted it. "Yours isn't too bad either. This place may be a bit of a diamond in the rough, huh." I nodded in agreement with a mouthful of food. We ate our meals rather quickly and paid the family. Together our food cost around five or six American dollars.

Hands held, we left the restaurant and went towards the train station to see if any tickets were available for tonight or tomorrow. It didn't take long to reach the station, just a few busy roads and marketplaces, and not to mention a few heckling rickshaw drivers and other would-be salesmen. The New Delhi railway station was huge and crowded. At least from the entrance we came through, the building itself wasn't particularly attractive, just a simple gateway leading into a large 'pick-up and drop-off area' teeming with taxis, tuk-tuks and buses as well as numerous food stalls and other vendors selling random trinkets and cheap gimmicks. There were queues of people everywhere, some

seemingly going nowhere. Queues without a purpose. Once we reached the building proper, I saw yet again the contradictory diversity of life in India. In the wide arched hallways of the train station, there were dozens of families who had set up for a long wait till their train arrived and the almost inevitable delays that I'd heard plagued the Indian railway system. Women, children and men were lying together on thin blankets, sleeping the day away. There were people who were obviously from deeply traditional rural areas of the country, elaborately dressed in colourful saris and the equivalent male garb (though not quite as beautiful and ornately decorated). There were numerous beggars around in tattered clothes going from family to family trying to scrounge some food or money. A cacophony of loud conversation, shouting, and monotonous voices coming from crackling loudspeakers permeated the station. Kara and I received numerous stares as we walked around the place in an attempt to find the end of the queue. I noticed that the security of the station was rather lax, despite some of the issues the country has had with terrorism. All that separated the outside from the actual railway lines were a few metal detectors that were ignored by many passengers and didn't even seem to be turned on. In essence, the railway station was a chaotic microcosm of what I had seen throughout the day wandering the streets of Delhi.

"Do you reckon it's even worth trying to get a ticket?" I had to shout to make my voice heard.

Kara looked at the queues, analysing our chances, and yelled "probably not, come to think of it. I think that's the queue over there for the emergency tickets." She pointed vaguely at a mass of people who were struggling amongst each other for precedence in the line. "Maybe we should just take a bus, at least we'll definitely get a seat and won't have to wait for half the day."

"Okay, let's get out of here." I shouted in reply.

Once we were out of the station and could talk normally again, Kara said, "I really just wanted you to have the experience of riding a train in India. Another time though, the station's pretty crazy, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure is," I said as I momentarily reflected on the experience. "So, let's go get some bus tickets before we explore."

"Alright we'll have to go back. The easiest way is to just visit one of the travel agents or hotels in Paharganj. Many try and rip you off, but I've got a rough idea of how much a ticket should cost."

It was several attempts before we were able to get tickets that weren't too overpriced. I understood that these agents needed some commission, otherwise they wouldn't be able to run a business, but many were asking for huge sums compared to the value Kara thought was appropriate. Eventually we settled, paying eight hundred rupees each for our tickets. An overnight bus leaving from around this area would be taking us directly to Rishikesh late in the evening.

After getting our tickets, we walked to the nearest metro station, close to where the railway station was, which presented yet another strange side of India. Below the chaotic surface of the city, the fairly recently built underground subway lines showed a different face. No less busy than the world above, but it was clean, somewhat orderly and very high-tech. I've used the metro systems in far more developed cities such as London and Berlin, and this was much nicer, and despite the sheer size of the city, the network was rather easy to navigate. Perhaps it was a showcase of India's new wealth and status in the world as a rising nation. A statement that India was on its way to rubbing shoulders with the other great powers of the world: the United States, the European Union and China. The security was also stricter here than in other cities and far more so than the nearby railway station. Our bags were checked and we went through individual lines, separated by gender, an attempt by the Indian government to mitigate sexual harassment.

After a brief look at the metro line map, Kara seemed to know exactly where we were going and so I mindlessly followed. Once we had made our way to the platform, we didn't have to wait long before the subway train arrived. It was something like a survival of the fittest to get onto it. Before exiting passengers were completely off the train, boarding ones piled in, and I'm certain not everyone got off where they wanted. We pushed our way on, with

slightly more courtesy than was averagely displayed and made our way to the middle of the carriage where a tiny bit of space was granted. We were packed like sardines, shoulder to shoulder with other people, but surprisingly the air was cooler and less stuffy than the station itself, and even the world above. It was actually a relief from the heat that had managed to seep in from the surface to the underground. We were only on the train for a few stops before we got off to transfer to another line. The second line took quite a bit longer, but soon enough we were out onto the open streets once again.

It was only a short walk from the station before I glimpsed the Lotus Temple. Enormous, well maintained and cultivated gardens and fountains surrounded it. Straight pathways throughout the grounds, all leading to the temple, were lined by shrubs and small trees, trimmed in a variety of shapes and sizes. Peacocks wandered the gardens freely, whereas people, apart from workers and guards, were confined to the paths. It appeared as though the landscape architects of the gardens were attempting to create an Eden of sorts surrounding the temple itself. It was exactly how Kara described it: the Sydney Opera House in the shape of a lotus flower. The temple was magnificent and dominated the surrounding area. It had nine white marble petal shaped sides, arranged in a circle, and nine more larger petals within this first encirclement. From what I could see, there were a number of entrances into the house of worship which were formed by more marble petals for a total of twenty-seven. It genuinely looked like a giant white flower in bloom.

As we approached closer and closer to the temple, the lines of people became larger but they moved at a quick and orderly pace. We were stopped by workers at the temple and instructed to remove our footwear and leave them behind in a security room that was situated underneath the path. We continued along, following the queue, and upon getting closer, I noticed that the temple was surrounded by numerous large petal shaped pools with aquamarine tiling. The whole complex was perfectly symmetrical and radiated a beauty that is all too rare in modern architecture. It was a nice relief to witness a relatively new building that could capture beauty

so well. I find that too many examples of modern architecture focus on being different and abstract to the point of absurdity. Still interesting to behold, but lacking the soul and beauty that the hand-made structures of old so seamlessly embody.

In due time we reached one of the entrances, the nearest to the main walkway, and were told by temple workers to wait in silence. I had a brief glimpse inside and could make out a wide and hollow single-roomed interior. It was filled with long benches not unlike a Christian church, all positioned towards an open space, not quite an altar, where people could speak to gathered crowds. After standing for a few minutes, allowing the visitor group to build up, the worker briefly informed us about the temple and told us to remain in total silence whilst we were inside.

When she finished, we were allowed to enter and I immediately felt a soothing, peaceful presence. Silence permeated everything inside the building. The sounds that did arise were a few loud footsteps or the odd cough. But these were simply engulfed again by the silence as quickly as they arose. The interior of the temple was relatively simple yet emanated beauty. It was mostly bare, but quotes from the founder of the Baha'i faith, Baha'u'llah, as well as other significant figures adorned some of the walls in golden writing. At the centre of the roof was the nine-sided star, the symbol of the faith, representing the holiest name for God according to the religion. I wandered around the temple for a few minutes, the tranquillity of the place stilling my mind. It was hard to believe such a place could exist in the middle of one of the biggest and busiest cities in the world. Eventually sitting down on a bench, I closed my eyes, calmed my mind, focused my attention to the sacred peaceful presence in the temple and gave a short prayer of thanksgiving for the experiences and guidance I'd been given recently.

A few minutes passed before I stood up again. I noticed many of the group who I'd entered with had departed, and I thought it was probably time to leave as well. Looking around, I met eyes with Kara, who was casually walking around the rim of the temple, the tiny connection with her making my heart stir briefly. I indicated to her for us to leave with a slight movement of



my head. The whole time inside the temple felt like a very subtle spiritual experience, like the feeling when someone recognises the simple beauty and joy in the normal and mundane: a kind gesture from a stranger, the warm colours of afternoon light, or the growing love between two people.

The Baha'i faith is quite a beautiful religion, new by the standards of many others, but remains largely untainted by the exclusiveness that is pervasive in too many of them. It is relatively small in numbers compared to the ancient giants: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. A Persian religion founded in the nineteenth century, its three central principles espouse the unity of God, the unity of religions and the unity of humanity. God is understood as infinite, eternal, both transcending the universe and being immanent within it. Although religions and people have differing conceptions of God, it is believed that all are pointing towards the same ultimate reality, the same fundamental truths, and this leads to the Baha'is understanding that religions have an underlying unity. Founders and central figures of the world's religions, according to the Baha'is, are manifestations of God in the world, each proclaiming truths and revelations that are relevant for the society they appeared in. With a tolerant and understanding way, the Baha'is talk of the equality and fundamental unity of humanity beneath the beautiful diversity on the surface. From these three central principles, flows a social and individual moral code that is similar to the core teachings of other religions that emphasise compassion and love as paramount. Though it is not a perfect religion, there's no such thing, it's teachings on unity are a model for which others, religious and nonbelievers alike, may apply to help bring more peace and reduce suffering in the world.

Outside of the temple where we were free to talk again, I leant over, grabbed Kara softly around the waist and kissed her briefly. Aware of the slightly condemning attitude towards public displays of affection that the country has, I was still unable to resist. Letting out a giggle and jokingly telling me off, Kara then asked how I found the place.

Still holding her, I answered, "beautiful temple, very tranquil."

"It is, isn't it? There's a serene calmness to the place that's present in other spiritual places around the world." Kara said, pausing for a moment. "Means that it's special, I think, and probably says something about the authenticity of the religion. I feel the same way when I enter a big beautiful cathedral. You can really feel the sacred in these places."

"Yeah, I think I know what you mean, I've had the same feelings before," I replied as I let go of her body, taking her hand instead and we started to walk away. "Anyway, so where to next? The old city?"

"Yep, if you still want to go. How do you want to get there? Rickshaw or metro? Hopefully it shouldn't take too long either way."

"I think rickshaw, I prefer getting a bit of a look around, even if its slower."

We walked quietly in the gardens for a while, stopping to gather our shoes, and gradually meandered towards the exit. At this very moment with Kara, all was perfect in my life and nothing else seemed to matter. A hazy sun was beginning to set over the city, a red glowing orb lacking the rays that burst forth and permeate the landscape at the end of the day in many other places around the world. The sunset had its own beauty, suiting the Delhi skyline well, but its reddishness appeared unnatural, whether it was the pollution, the cooking fires, or it was simply that the atmosphere was different in this part of the world. It was odd to look directly into the sun without any straining of the eyes. Gazing at it was almost hypnotic, staring directly into one of God's tools to create, sustain and destroy life.

Leaving the grounds of the temple, there were a couple of young men standing around a large pile of green coconuts that I'd failed to notice when we first arrived. I told Kara that I wanted one and we watched the rather entertaining display of coconuts getting hacked by machetes, and transformed into a beverage complete with a straw. Though they must've been sitting in the sun all day, the thick shell allowed the water inside to stay cool and refreshing. We walked with our coconuts towards an auto-rickshaw stand, where a number of drivers approached us offering a ride. After a

brief negotiation with prices, we were on the road to the centre of the old city, despite the slowly fading light.

We arrived around half an hour later out the front of the enormous *Jama Masjid*, one of the largest mosques in India. In the heart of the old city, the mosque loomed over it all, perched above the streets, and accessed by climbing broad, ancient sets of stairs. The walls were carved from red sandstone in a style that was quintessentially Islamic and similar to other architectural gems of the Mughals, the Muslim rulers who conquered northern India almost five hundred years ago. We walked up the stairs to the entrance gatehouse and asked one of the guards if the mosque was still open. Looking at his watch, he reluctantly let us in, saying in broken English that it will close at dusk, which was just a few minutes away. Before we could pass though, he instructed us to remove our shoes, and tapped Kara on the shoulder, pointing towards a pile of headscarves and telling her to wear one. She had obviously worn one before and was adept at wrapping it around her head. I thought for a brief moment of the reputation that Islam has regarding its often unequal treatment of women. Sometimes it seems exaggerated by many in the West and the latest incarnation of our misunderstanding of Islamic culture. People often forget that men's clothing is heavily regulated in Muslim societies and they are also supposed to present an appearance of modesty. Looking around, there were many Muslim men conveying this sense, donning a *shalwar kameez* (a pants and long tunic outfit) and a skullcap known as a *kufi*. Although by today's standards in Western civilisation, the treatment of women is often unacceptable and an inequality exists according to some interpretations, it is important to recognise that the role and rights of women in society was enormously progressive during the times Islam emerged, and it continued to be a champion for the next thousand years in many ways. Islam brought an egalitarianism to Arabia and the Middle East that hadn't really existed before. But like any other ancient religion, it has to be reinterpreted for the times that it's in now, abandon practices and laws that only had relevance in a particular cultural context, and apply the beautiful timeless truths that are contained within its teachings, so that Islam can continue to

flourish, maintain its unique perspective on life and contribute to the journey of humanity.

These thoughts subsided when we walked out of the gatehouse and into the enormous courtyard that could fit thousands of worshippers comfortably. The gateway we entered from, I soon noticed, was only one of three large entrances to the complex. The sounds of the streets below had been largely muffled and similar to the Lotus temple, it felt like an island of calm in the midst of chaos. The building of the mosque itself was an example of symmetrical beauty, created from red sandstone and white marble, it had three large domes that were somewhat similar in appearance to the Taj Mahal. There was a huge, ornately carved arched entryway in the centre with Arabic calligraphy taken from the *Qur'an* scrawled decoratively along the sides. This primary entrance was flanked on its left and right by ten smaller archways, and on each end of the building was a giant minaret, where the call to prayer would be echoed across the city. Walking inside the mosque, I noticed it was incredibly simple and sparsely furnished. All that was in the arched hallways were prayer mats lining the ground and a few bookshelves containing beautifully decorated copies of the *Qur'an*. I felt a moment of sadness about the misunderstandings across the world of these people and their ways. How could a religion and its followers, so often vilified, create such beautiful works as these? Surely they had been directly inspired by that divine beauty which brings forth a sense of awe beyond words and a burning desire to create something in its name. I wandered the halls of the mosque for a few minutes, enjoying and admiring the architecture.

Reaching a random point in the hallway, I felt a spontaneous urge to delve into this ancient religion, and so I bent down onto my knees, and prostrated myself in as much of an imitation of the Islamic way as possible. I said a few times to myself, *allahu akbar*, God is greater, the common saying of praise to God that recognises the idea that God is greater than anything in the universe and anything mentally conceivable. I uttered the saying, the *Takbir*, to help my mind rest in the divine, feeling it

appropriate to do so in a mosque, and I had a moment of silent prayer and contemplation.

Upon standing up again, I turned to see Kara watching me, leaning against one of the archways. I felt slightly awkward in front of her, having spent a lifetime in a society where public expressions of faith are largely frowned upon. But she simply smiled and motioned for us to leave with no sense of judgement present. Returning outside into the courtyard, tourists and worshippers were funnelling out of one of the three gates and we joined the line out, Kara putting the headscarf back and grabbing our shoes.

Walking down the stairs, Kara asked, "so how did you learn to pray in the Islamic way?"

I laughed, "I kind of made it up as I was doing it. I've never formally prayed in that way before, thought I'd give it a shot... felt right, considering where we were."

"Fair enough, but don't you worry that you're being a little bit disrespectful?" Kara probed.

"Hmm, I suppose some might because I'm not technically doing it correctly, but I hope they understand that I'm just making an attempt at adopting their ways. There's still the same intention for them as there is for me, and it's not like I'm mocking them in any real sense." I shrugged. "I don't think the way someone prays or conducts a ritual really matters if it's aimed at attempting to establish a closer connection to God or whatever you're directing your attention towards."

"Ah, yeah, I get that. Do you pray often?" Kara said as we reached the bottom of the stairs. We started wandering down a nearby street, the sounds of vehicles' horns and people in the area forced us to raise our voices slightly, the early evening having little effect on the busy streets below the mosque.

I thought for a moment, then said, "yes and no. I guess... for a long time, I thought it was pointless, praying simply didn't seem to ever do anything, there isn't much evidence supporting it, is there?"

"Depends what you think actually counts as evidence, I reckon." She retorted

"Yeah, I guess you're right, people generally do have different views of what's evidence and what's not. Anyway, I met someone a while ago who gave me a little bit of insight into the purpose of praying. He told me that the way he prays is by praying as selflessly as possible. Praying as a form of gratitude for experiences he has in life. Praying for others, friends, family, community, the world. And then once he has prayed in gratitude and selflessly, he would then pray for a little something himself, but not stuff like money or other material things."

"That's a bit like how I was taught by my parents. Being raised a Christian, you can pray to ask things for yourself, for others, pray for thanksgiving and pray to praise God."

"Oh really? That's pretty interesting. Maybe he was raised a Christian, he was from Italy. He explained to me that there's a few reasons why prayers don't get answered, which made me more open to the idea. He said what we pray for isn't necessarily what is best for us, or others around us. We sometimes pray for harm on people we don't like, or for something we desire, all of which may bring no actual good to the world or ourselves. He also said that if all our prayers were answered, we would be hollow, incomplete people... we wouldn't have experienced the challenges and hardships of life that often make us better human beings. If we got everything we asked for, we would become spoilt, lazy and lack any real drive or purpose, and is that really a world we want to live in?"

"That's all pretty much the same as I was taught when I was younger." She smiled at me warmly, and I could see she was feeling something similar towards me as I was towards her. "It's nice to find someone that doesn't think prayer is silly and useless."

I suddenly realised that I had no clue where we were. We had been walking down random alleyways and streets as we were talking, and the one we were currently in was particularly narrow. There were a few people working on the street: simple grocers, chai vendors, a woman who had laid out random junk on the ground to sell. A few people, metal smiths and textile makers were working out of their homes, little more than hovels. The alleyway was dimly lit, a few flickering lampposts and a fire were all that

illuminated the area. I sensed the hairs on my neck prickling up and turned to see three men staring straight at us and appearing to follow us. I tried to think nothing of it, though I felt a tinge of fear emerge. We continued walking for a while and turned down a couple more alleyways, all looking more or less the same. I noticed that they continued behind us, keeping some distance, so I subtly alerted Kara.

She nonchalantly glimpsed over her shoulder to gauge the men, turned back and leaned closer to me, whispering, "don't worry, this has happened to me before... sort of. I think I know roughly where we are, not too far from a main street, we'll go somewhere more open. Besides, you look bigger than those guys anyway." She touched my shoulder reassuringly.

I was still a bit scared, but attempted to conceal it by saying, "I'm worried about what could happen to you."

Seeing straight through what I said, she laughed, "I think I can handle myself."

Walking down a few more lanes at a slightly hurried pace, we reached the end of one alleyway as it opened up to a larger street with many more people, motorbikes and auto-rickshaws. Kara stopped and turned around, myself doing the same. We saw the three men a few dozen paces away from us, who had stopped as well. A jolt of fear surged through me, but I was comforted by the nearby busy street. Even though nothing serious would happen now, I decided to display some courage and walked a few paces towards them. I noticed in the body language of the men that they were hesitating and uncertain. Loudly, I asked, "why are you following us?"

No response, just blank staring.

"Well, what do you want?"

Finally, one stood forward, replying nervously, "N-n-nothing, we go to markets, we won't hurt you..."

All of my fear dissipated and I felt like an idiot for worrying so much. "Why were you following and watching us?"

The speaker rolled his eyes upwards and bit his lip, interpreting what I had said in his mind before he spoke, "uh, I

don't know, you're foreigners, you look interesting, we were going the same way... We can go other way if you like?"

Relieved but feeling foolish, I said, "no, don't worry about that... I'm sorry."

Unsure of how to finish this interaction, I apologised again and said goodbye. Turning around with Kara, we continued onto the larger street, covering enough distance so as not to have another encounter with the men. We stopped by a food stall, which was selling an elaborate yet small meal. Kara bought two and gave one to me.

"I can't remember what these are called," she said as she handed me one, "but they're pretty tasty." She took a mouthful and continued, "so what was that back there?"

Whilst chewing, I said, "I don't know, I feel a bit stupid. Paranoia got the best of me. I guess at the time, I just wanted to confront them... too often in my life, I've been too scared to do anything but get away when situations like this come about."

Teasing, Kara said, "and were you trying to impress me?"

"Only a little bit," I admitted.

"That tough guy kind of stuff doesn't really do anything for me, but it was sweet that you wanted to protect me," she said, smiling and kissing me on the cheek.

I felt myself blush, changing topic, I said, "I'm guessing we're just about out of time?"

She looked at her watch and nodded, fumbling slightly with her food in the process. We walked over to the nearest auto-rickshaw, hopped in and were soon weaving our way through traffic towards Paharganj. In the rickshaw, I thought about the episode that had just happened. I'd allowed fear to grip me, and became paranoid of a danger that didn't exist. Was my fear warranted? I wondered. There are frequent reports in the media of the issue of rape and assault in India, but do these stories really reflect the reality of the country? Was my fear deeper than that, something more primordial? Perhaps my wariness was simply instinctive, but my mind seeped into this natural precaution, conjuring scenarios of bad things that could happen, dwelling on the potential for danger, and turning a healthy cautious awareness,



into a paranoid distortion of reality. Anxiety for the future, whether immediate or long-term, can be one of the most crippling things the mind can do to itself and one's wellbeing. Constant worrying about one's future safety too often inhibits our thought processes, obscures our judgement, prevents us from opening ourselves to new experiences.

We were shortly back out the front of the 'Krishna Hotel'. Going inside, there was still no sign of Hash. I asked the receptionist if he had arrived at some point, to which I received a negative answer. After discussing with Kara for a moment over what to do, we decided to leave, concluding that Hash must've encountered his family or friends when he arrived back in India. Leaving the hotel, we searched for the location where we were told by the travel agents to catch the bus. With some difficulty and needing to ask directions several times, we finally found a street that somewhat resembled a bus depot, or a pick-up point at least. Seeing buses lined behind one another in a straight row was a good sign. A few were sitting inactive, a couple were preparing to depart. We asked a few people and managed to find roughly where we'd be leaving from. There was a Western looking woman leaning against a wall, very short blonde hair and covered with a number of tattoos including a large one on each arm written in Sanskrit. I asked her if she was going to Rishikesh as well and replying in a French accent, she confirmed that we were in the right place.

An hour of waiting followed, and we talked with the woman. She was aiming to become a Yoga teacher and had been to India every year for the past decade or so. I enquired about her Sanskrit tattoos, and she said they meant love and freedom. She talked endlessly about her Indian lover, but never really told us where he was. An interesting person and she certainly passed the time with her abilities to chat. Eventually, the bus arrived and the three of us settled in at the very back. I relaxed and tried to make myself as comfortable as I could on a worn down bus. A long day, but I was guessing an even longer night was still to come.



## **Chapter Eleven**

### *By the Banks of Mother Ganga*

My suspicions about the length of the night were confirmed. We arrived early in the morning after a fairly rough journey. The bus felt as though it had absolutely no suspension and every bump no matter how slight reverberated throughout the entire vehicle. We stopped frequently throughout the night, and we had two long meal breaks, one at around eleven and the other at three or so. God knows why it was necessary to have two dinners, or a very early breakfast. Apart from eating a samosa and drinking some milk tea, during these breaks, I drifted around aimlessly, zombielike, making little effort to converse with Kara or any curious Indian who took an interest in foreigners hanging around a roadside eatery in the middle of the night. The tattooed woman, after getting on the bus, had a shift in attitude and kept largely to herself. Kara managed to sleep fine it appeared, oftentimes resting her head on my shoulder, but I simply couldn't. I was left to my fate of either endlessly staring into the dark dimly lit night, or being on the cusp of sleep with my head awkwardly resting on the seat in front of me. I made several attempts to meditate, it felt like a while since I properly committed to doing so. I found, however, that I was being repeatedly hypnotised by the somewhat rhythmic bumps on the road and by my own dreamlike thought patterns - spontaneous images of whatever appeared in my mind with no conscious effort on my own part. I would partially lose some awareness of my surroundings, but each time I would come back with a headache and a sickly feeling in my stomach.

So on arrival in Rishikesh, I was relieved to be off the bus. The bus depot was located at the beginning of the valley that had the mighty Ganges coursing through it. A few kilometres further up the valley was the town proper. The river flowed into hazy

plains below where I could see cooking fires and farmers beginning the day's work. Far off into the distance, I could hear faint singing and chanting over megaphones coming from local temples. The morning was still dark, and slightly cloudy. The sun hadn't quite reached the crest of the surrounding hills leaving pinkish skies. It was a world away from Delhi, even though it was only a few hundred kilometres down the road. It all appeared to flow together and swirled into a mystical atmosphere that pervaded the surroundings.

We grabbed our baggage and Kara, the tattooed woman and I walked over to a nearby auto-rickshaw stand. After a brief negotiation where Kara was unable to persuade the driver to reduce the fare, the three of us jumped into the back of the vehicle. The rickshaws here were much larger than the ones in Delhi. They were almost the size of a small car and looked like they could fit up to six people comfortably on the seats, not including the driver's compartment. I understood why the driver didn't want to budge too much on the price, he probably could've gotten a bigger load of customers.

In comparison to the bus ride, the drive felt like no time at all had passed. As it progressed, the scenery changed rather quickly, the surrounding hills became steeper and I had a proper glimpse of Rishikesh. The town is located on both shores of the Ganges, nestled in a valley. For a large stretch of Rishikesh on both banks are *ghats*, or stairs, that emerge from the waters and lead up a dozen or two steps to temples and ashrams that saturate the town. Most of the buildings in the town lacked modernity yet were brightly coloured. One of the more prominent ashrams was covered in pinks and yellows, others were covered in dark and light blues, some were green, some orange, all creating an incoherent yet vibrant mosaic. Joining both sides of the town are two long extension bridges that can only manage foot traffic, three or four people abreast. The Ganges at this point was wide and fast flowing, clean and clear, there were parts that even resembled rapids. At a closer look, I could see men, women and children bathing in the river and cleaning their clothes, their everyday lives still dependent on the flow of the Ganges.

We were dropped off in the centre of town, in a small square that was just beginning to wake up. Fruit and vegetable stalls were being set up, but apart from that there appeared to be no activity in the other businesses that encircled the square. The tattooed woman said her goodbyes to us, telling us that she was heading straight to the ashram she'd joined. Kara and I turned the other way to find a room to rest in and leave our luggage. Knowing exactly where she was going, Kara took me through several narrow alleyways, down multiple, winding flights of stairs, and we eventually appeared out in the open near one of the suspension bridges. Crossing the bridge, there was light traffic by Indian standards. A cow had sat down part way through without a care in the world, and as a result, a human traffic jam slowed our progress. The situation was too funny to become impatient, despite my weariness, and it gave me the chance to admire the view of Rishikesh and the Ganges flowing through the middle and below me. Morning light was beginning to spread across the town and the warmth of the day was starting to be felt. It was a beautiful place, I'd never really seen a town like it before.

The other side of Rishikesh was quite different, mainly due to the lack of cars and auto-rickshaws. It looked easier to navigate with one main road following the length of the river and ghats, but hidden by a variety of different buildings on both sides of the street. Even though the town was still relatively quiet at this time of day, I could immediately see why Kara said it was a little touristy. Down the entirety of the road were souvenir stalls, advertisements for yoga and *ayurvedic* classes. Numerous restaurants dotted the street, simple-looking but promising worldly cuisines ranging from Israeli to Italian to Chinese. Accommodation was everywhere, most with names relating to Hindu culture and gods. Kara chose a guesthouse just off the main street, seemingly at random. The door was closed, but after knocking a few times, a short stocky man, presumably the guesthouse keeper, sleepily answered the door, half-heartedly welcoming us for understandable reasons. After processing passports we were taken up a few flights of stairs and shown to our rooms. Small, dimly lit and without a single window. The wall was painted in a light blue but had brown

and yellow stains scattered throughout. Dampness and stuffiness was in the air and a mouldy smell permeated the room. A ceiling fan hung above the double-bed, which I switched on immediately to mix up the air. Not too bad overall considering we were paying the equivalent of a few dollars each. As soon as the keeper finished showing us the room and left, I took off my shirt, already sweating from the warmth of the day, and collapsed into the bed. Kara climbed in as well and embraced me as I drifted off to sleep, cuddling together despite the heat.

I woke up several hours later, sweating profusely, it must've been the middle of the day. I couldn't see or hear Kara and assumed that she had gone out to look around. I had a quick shower, mainly just to refresh myself. Slipping on the same clothes, I noticed a small note on a little wooden desk in the corner of the room. It simply said to meet her this afternoon at the evening *aarti* ceremony on the ghats of the *Parmath Niketan* ashram. I had no clue what an *aarti* ceremony was, but finding the ashram probably wouldn't be too difficult. Didn't matter anyway, hours away. I wasn't sure exactly what to do, I already missed Kara and was feeling a small hole in heart, so I decided to simply wander the streets, alleyways and ghats of the town.

Leaving the guesthouse, I was immediately smacked by intense sunlight and warmth, though it was cooler than Delhi at least. The number of people wandering the streets had increased a hundredfold, a river of human life, each drop of water a little bit different but essentially the same. I joined the throng of people, going the opposite way from which we arrived. The street remained primarily pedestrian except for the occasional motorcyclist attempting to navigate his way through hundreds of people. Numerous cows, far more than in Delhi, were meandering along the street, some bothering shopkeepers, others sitting and watching the world pass by. Walking around, I was frequently heckled by merchants to buy this or that, frustrating me initially, but I soon got used to rejecting them. The number of restaurants along the street gave me hunger pangs, and I shortly found a place tucked away and close to the Ganges which largely escaped the hustle and bustle of the main street. It was a humble place run by a

few young men. Little more than a couple of wooden shacks with a small outdoor area offering a view of the town and the Ganges. Sitting down, my thoughts were initially dominated by a longing for Kara, on how amazing she was, and wondering what she was doing right now. But this was interrupted when I noticed a couple of other foreigners here, who were discussing loudly between themselves whilst eating a bowl of chips. I overheard a few snippets of their conversation: something about how 'awake' they were, stuff about revolution against the system and the one-percent, the idealistic world that was going to be implemented on the ashes of the old order. There was arrogance to their voices, as though they were better than other people who didn't share their perspective. They sounded very confident in their worldview, seeming to imply that the way they saw the world was exactly the way it is and you're wrong for disagreeing. It made me wonder exactly how 'awake' they really were, when they were actively creating an unfounded sense of superiority towards themselves over others. But I suppose we're all a little bit guilty of believing that the way we see the world is the right way to see it, some may just be more vocal about it than others. They were dressed as absolutely stereotypical hippies, but their mannerisms suggested that they didn't exactly live the hippy ethos. I caught myself judging, making assumptions and opinions on these guys, two people I had never met before, and only heard less than a single conversation between them. I wasn't any different to them really.

I turned my attention to the menu, a diverse range was on display and I ordered a *thali* and a sweetened *lassi* when the waiter came. I didn't have much of an idea of where to go now that I was in Rishikesh. Somewhere deep inside drew me here, but that spark of guidance had since left. Perhaps I was lately becoming too enamoured by Kara to pay attention. I wondered if following a literal dream was really such a good idea, I've only been assuming that this dream was a sort of vision, without having any real proof. What am I even doing here? Am I supposed to learn something, become something here? Am I meant to find a teacher, a *guru*? Following this spark of guidance has turned out pretty well anyway. I've met an incredible woman and am pursuing a spiritual

path in a beautiful part of the world. I guess, it didn't really matter if I didn't exactly know where I was going in life, things often tend to come when they need to come, so there's little use in worrying or over-thinking.

I emerged from my thoughts when the waiter returned with food. Mixing together the various sides of the thali into the rice, I ravenously ate the meal, washing it down with lassi. I didn't linger for long after finishing, and got up within minutes to continue my exploration of Rishikesh. I wandered down the length of the town and it changed considerably walking through it. At times it became less dense in buildings and people, almost rural, before shortly returning to a bustling laneway. I was slightly shocked by the commercialisation of spirituality in the town, I had the image in my head of a pure, holy settlement that had mostly escaped the trappings of capitalism, but every second building was advertising yoga, meditation, chakra healing, spiritual paraphernalia and anything else that could be marketed. I wondered how genuine the teachers who offered these classes were. Many probably were, many others probably just trying to make some easy money.

I noticed numerous sadhus scattered throughout the town. It reminded me that Rishikesh was still a lively centre of pilgrimage and deeply sacred to the faith. Most of the sadhus were old frail looking men with long dreadlocks and scruffy beards, donned in saffron robes and wearing turbans and long necklaces made of *rudraksh* seeds. A few *sadhvi*, Hindu nuns, were in the town as well, instead having a shaved head and wearing pink robes. All carried a small metallic tin for water and a food bowl, true signs of an ascetic. I'd heard before, however, that there are fraudsters amongst the genuine spiritual seekers, an issue that's existed for centuries. Holy people in India are almost universally respected in the country, many people abandon their regular lives to travel India as an ascetic on a journey towards God, and regular folk are generally more than willing to offer food and money for their cause. As is apparent, this can be readily exploited by criminals on the run, or those who just want an easy, free life. A few sadhus I passed were crouched by the side of the road, smoking cannabis through a *chillum*, a clay tubular device partially wrapped in a rag.



Some sadhus smoke as part of a sacrament for the god Shiva, to bring greater awareness and to expand their consciousness. A religious ritual in many senses. I remember being told this when I first arrived in Nepal around the time of an annual festival dedicated to Shiva, the one day a year that cannabis can be legally smoked in public.

Walking past one of the sadhus, he attempted to sell me a significant amount of marijuana for a very cheap price. He insisted that I sit with him as he showed me his product in the middle of the street, albeit a quiet one. I noticed in his eye movements that he was frequently scanning the area, very wary of being caught. Though tempted, I politely declined, fairly certain that this sadhu may not have been genuine. I'd never heard of a holy man who was an active pot dealer. Most of the other sadhus I walked past appeared to be real, however, one could never be too certain, as there wasn't any way to separate the frauds by physical appearance alone. Almost all asked for money or food as they shook their metallic tins at me. I spared a few rupees for some, but thought that I would buy several pieces of fruit and offer it to them instead. I found that the genuine sadhus would be happy and grateful to accept the fruit, seeing as though that's the only reason they would need to beg, whereas the others would insist on being given money and would scowl at me if I didn't.

Following the main road through the town, I stumbled across *Parmath Niketan* ashram after wandering through a marketplace with restaurants, convenience stores, bookstores selling spiritual material of all kinds, and several music stores each playing similar peaceful new age music infused with Sanskrit lyrics. The ashram was enormous, situated along a considerable length of the town and riverside. It was coloured in a variety of reds, yellows, pinks, and oranges, with Devanagari letters painted on walls and other surfaces. Some of the writing was in the Latin alphabet, spelling the ashram's name. The ashram had its own long length of ghats and it would be here that I'd be meeting Kara later tonight for the aarti ceremony. The thought of this once again made me realise how much I missed her, even though she was only gone for a few hours. From what I could see of the ashram

complex, there were large residential quarters, numerous temples and statues of Hindu gods. One statue particularly stood out, a large depiction of the monkey god, Hanuman, sitting in a half-lotus position, wearing nothing but a gold embroidered loincloth and a golden crown with a spiked halo connected. Hanuman was graphically opening the centre of his chest, specifically the area of the heart, to reveal two blue figures standing within. I couldn't discern who they were, guessing that they were Shiva and his wife Parvati, but I didn't know enough about Hindu symbolism or gods to really be sure.

I navigated my way down to the ashram's ghats, the heat of the day tempting me to touch and feel the cool waters of the Ganges. There were only a few older women in the area who were doing a number of things. One was washing clothes, another mumbling prayers with hands brought together, standing in the water up to her waist. A third lady was simply sitting on the steps watching her friends, talking with the one doing laundry. They didn't appear to notice me as I approached the water. Removing my sandals, I dipped my feet in and felt a cool yet refreshing sensation. Due to the location of Rishikesh, the waters of the Ganges are relatively clean, largely untainted from the waste further downstream as the river makes its way across India towards the Bay of Bengal. Though I had nothing to dry off with, I removed most of my clothes and slowly walked further into the water until it was around the level of my stomach. The stairs continued surprisingly deeply into the water, and I wondered briefly how they were made and how old some of the ghats in the town were. I took a deep breath and completely submerged myself, returning to the surface several seconds later. I felt cooled off, cleansed from sweat that'd been building up, and also reinvigorated as though the energy of thousands of years of prayer and worship by the river flowed into my system, vitalising my extremities and my core. I swam slightly further out and allowed myself to be caught by the streaming of the river, casually drifting a dozen or so meters on my back before pulling myself out of the swift current. I continued to paddle around for some time before coming out of the water and drying myself by basking in the sun in my underwear. I

had drawn the attention of the nearby women who were occasionally glancing at me curiously. I was unsure whether I was actually allowed in the area, as it did appear to be owned by the ashram. Shrugging, I thought it wouldn't really matter and continued to lie down along the ghats near the edge of the water.

The day's warmth ensured that it didn't take long before I was almost completely dry. I put my clothes back on and left the ghats, returning to the main street. I followed the road past the ashram, the town thinning considerably afterwards, less buildings, less developed. There were several construction sites and a few more ashrams, private housing and a couple of scattered cafes that didn't look as though they received nearly as much business as more central locations. A couple of groups of foreigners were walking ahead of me, appearing to have a set destination in mind. Deciding to follow them as they could be going somewhere interesting, I casually meandered behind them, keeping to myself. The two groups, I was unsure if they were actually connected, walked to the outskirts of town until the path forked. The small groups turned left, away from the river towards a partly forested area. When I took the turn, I immediately saw overgrown walls and small stone ruins. A gateway guarded by two slouching, uniformed men was further down the path. The foreigners approached the guards and after an exchange of money, the rusted iron gates were opened for them. Once they went in, I followed and asked the two men what this place was.

"Fifty rupees," one replied without answering, holding out his hand to receive money. The other guard remained silent, mostly ignoring my presence.

"Okay... where are we?" I asked slowly.

He simply gave me a large grin in reply, probably due to a lack of understanding. Too curious, I paid him the money, he bobbed his head and uttered a few words in Hindi to the quiet guard, who in turn opened the gates. Walking in, the gate was closed immediately afterwards, and I thought to myself that I may have just bribed the guards to get in. They appeared as though they worked for the government, but there was absolutely nothing formal about exchanging payments with them or about the gateway

they guarded. Turning my attention to the walled complex, I was presented with the ruined shell of a former community. There were buildings of numerous shapes and sizes, some were simple and modern, others were more elaborately built. Not a single building was completely intact, holes in rooves, walls collapsed, rubble everywhere. Bushes, vines, trees and other plants were growing in the walls, through windows and cracks. There was an eerie energy in the air, yet it was peaceful, tranquil. An underlying silence pervaded, I couldn't hear the other visitors who had now disappeared from vision. The only sound, apart from my own footsteps, were birds singing to each other in a melody that emerged as quickly as it returned to the silence of the ruins.

Among the first ruins I walked through were the strangest. They were set amongst numerous trees, almost hidden at first, made of small stones and shaped roughly like eggs. I explored inside one of them and found that there were two levels inside with multiple entrances. The upper level was small and I had to arch my back to enter. A little hole where a ladder may have once been led to the lower, slightly higher roofed level. The small structure had nothing in the way of furnishing left, and I couldn't figure out whether people actually used to live in these things. Exiting through another way, I spotted more of these egg buildings, all built closely together, separated by an occasional tree. Ascending nearby stairs, I was given a view of the place I had just crossed, dozens of these structures filled the area, reminding me of a hidden ancient town of a civilisation, lost in the ages. Standing there, I felt a shudder and the oddest sensation that I was being watched intently by someone. Spinning around to look at my surroundings, I saw nothing and shrugged it off, continuing to wander around without really worrying.

For the next hour or two, I explored the grounds of the complex. Several huge structures, four or five stories high, looked like they once functioned as residential and administrative quarters. Numerous houses were built into the complex, many were extensively damaged and almost inaccessible through the overgrowth. I was starting to think that this place was once an ashram, an enormous one, and wondered why it was abandoned. I

scoured through as many buildings as I could, exploring the rooms and corridors of the larger and smaller structures. For such an interesting place, it was surprising that there were very few people, I hardly saw anyone around. A few cows had managed to enter the grounds, a paradise on earth for them, undisturbed by flocks of people and with all the grass they could eat. Monkeys were also there, jumping along the rooftops of the higher buildings, climbing trees and being as explorative as I was. The whole complex constantly reminded me of post-apocalyptic videogames and movies that I used to play and watch. I was half expecting a zombie to appear around the corner at any moment.

Below one of the larger buildings was an underground area, almost completely shrouded in darkness apart from a few dully brightened areas streaming from cracks of light in the ceiling. Just enough visibility to have a look around. The area consisted of numerous tiny cells lined along a long twisting corridor each of which could only fit a couple of people comfortably together, but ideally looked only for single occupants. In the darkness, the passage and adjoining rooms seemed like a prison complex or something more sinister, but being part of an ashram, I guessed they were meditation cells. Perhaps they were underground to reduce sensory perception: no light, no sound means one can explore and understand their mind, and practice meditation techniques without the infinite distractions of the outside world. Regardless of the benign reasons for the construction of these cells, it all felt rather creepy, not least because I didn't know exactly why this place had closed.

Another building I explored, closer to the houses, led into an old sports or collective yoga and meditation hall, I guessed. Its roof had partly collapsed, shattered windows were everywhere, vines dangled down from above, weeds were growing through the cracks in the ground. A few people lingered about playing music from portable speakers and throwing a ball around. I immediately noticed large murals and graffiti painted on the walls, one of them depicting the four Beatles and I instantly realised that this was the ashram the band famously attended, or at least the hollow shell of what it once was. I should've recognised it for what it was earlier,

given all the signs, but I thought that the ashram would still be active. I only spent enough time in the hall to observe a few of the murals, most were psychedelic, alluding to the 1960s, and the writing on the walls had messages of peace, love, unity and a few lines from Beatles songs.

Leaving the hall, I decided to go to the very outskirts, as far away from the entrance as possible. A forest marked the end of the ashram, only a small wall separating the grounds. I scaled the wall with relative ease and stood upon it to look beyond the boundary and the ashram. Apart from a dirt road that led into the forest, I couldn't penetrate it deeply with my eyes and guessed this was the very edge of Rishikesh.

Suddenly, the hairs of my neck stood up and I felt myself being watched again. I turned around and caught a glimpse of a saffron robed man, a sadhu, staring at me. I wanted to approach him, wondering if he had been following me all along, but after I jumped off the wall, briefly shifting my gaze away, I looked up again. He was gone.

Who was that? I wondered as I began to walk towards the exit, satisfied with my time spent here. He looked familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Probably just one of the sadhus I'd seen in town. My thoughts didn't last too long on the matter as I turned my attention back to the ruins and my surroundings, to experience the last moments of my time in the ashram. Such a surreal place, so tranquil, a small taste of what a world without people may be like, the passage of time and the power of nature slowly overcoming anything created by the hands of man. The ruined ashram had an underlying historical presence to it, I could feel the weight of thousands of people once living here, including one of the biggest musical groups of all time - a similar feeling to when one walks among other places filled with history: places of revelation, the battlefields of old wars, the city squares that witnessed social and political revolution. A concentrated human presence often tends to leave a mark on a place, well after it has been abandoned.

The afternoon daylight was beginning to pass into dusk, the sky was turning orange, the sun becoming a reddish hue. I returned

to the banks of the Ganges, on the ghats where the *aarti* ceremony was to be shortly held. Crowds were gathering, steadily trickling through the gateway that led to this section of ghats, and sitting wherever they pleased around the area where the ritual would be conducted. Locals, families, travellers, tourists, hippies were all present, talking amongst themselves, eating dinner, taking photos, some performing their own personal rituals and chants. The sun cast a beautiful reflection skimming along the top of the river, creating a mystical undercurrent. I scanned the place for Kara but couldn't spot her anywhere, so I sat down where the waters met the stairs, removed my sandals and dipped my feet in, the pleasant sensations healing my feet, slightly sore from a day of walking. I watched the sun set and the crowds gather more and more. I didn't think much during this time, I simply experienced my surroundings: the people, the town, the river. I realised I hadn't felt this peaceful in some time and took a long drawn out breath that ushered a wave of relaxation throughout my body. I felt simply at ease exactly where I was.

After some time passed, I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to find Kara standing behind me. She took off a small backpack and sat down and gave me a short hug and kiss. "What did you get up to today?" I asked excitedly as I wrapped an arm around her, feeling the joy of being reunited with a loved one.

"Not too much," Kara replied, looking equally happy. "I visited the ashram I used to stay at. Talked to some of my teachers, practiced yoga, walked around... how about you?"

After giving her a quick summary of the day, I inquired, "so what's this *aarti* ceremony about?"

"Okay, so an *aarti* ceremony is a Hindu ritual that uses fire as an offering to a god or several gods and they're done all over India. The one we're about to watch is called the, umm, *Ganga aarti*, an offering to Mother Ganga, the goddess of the river. It's quite beautiful and incredible isn't it? Right now, there are other ceremonies down the entire length of the river, all offering their thanks and praises to the Ganga, the giver and preserver of tens of millions of lives." She looked towards the river and let out a small breath of wonderment. "Amazing how a single river can be so

central to a culture and religion. You know, many believe that a single dip can cleanse you of your sins and lead to *moksha*, freedom from the cycle of rebirth. That's why so many Hindus want to die by the banks of the river... Have you heard of the burning ghats at Varanasi?"

I shook my head, "I vaguely remember reading something about it."

"It's one of the most incredible places I've ever been!" She exclaimed. "It's where people's bodies are cremated in the open air on large pyres right next to the river. All day, every day bodies are burned in an ancient ritual, departed being brought from all over the Hindu world as a final dying wish. When I was there, I couldn't help but think of death constantly, staring at it directly in the face. I'd experienced nothing like it before." Kara paused and looked back towards the river, obviously evoking a powerful memory. "Like, a family even invited me to join them as they commemorated the passing of their loved one. The grandmother, I think, of the large family had died and one of her sons was sobbing heavily. A few sons and daughters were solemn, but others were joyous, celebrating death as an inevitable but really just another temporary stage of the endless process of life, rather than, you know, the end of everything... The woman who invited me explained the different parts of the ritual and its significance. She was so calm and collected about it all. There was so much beauty in the whole thing, how they dealt with death in such a profoundly spiritual way..." Kara drifted off, looking out towards the river, lost again in recollection. I couldn't help myself but simply stare at her beauty both internal and external. Her passion for life and people was making me fall harder and harder for her. I was pretty sure that I was in love.

Chanting and the playing of traditional Indian instruments suddenly emerged, throwing us out of the moment and signalling the beginning of the *Ganga Aarti*. We both stood up and moved closer to get a better glimpse of the ritual. Over static speakers the hypnotic chanting in Sanskrit pervaded the space around the ghats and river. Five *Brahmins*, Hindu priests, elaborately dressed in red and saffron ceremonial garments, approached five pedestals



aligned parallel to one another each holding a large golden lamp shaped somewhat akin to a candelabrum. The priests proceeded to light the numerous candles on the lamp, I couldn't see how many there were, but I was guessing it was a symbolic number. Another man emerged from the crowds who had the appearance of a sadhu, however an air of authority was about him. He approached a microphone set up near the five pedestals and directed the chant in a new direction with the other musicians following suit. In accordance, the priests lifted the lamps off the pedestals and began to whirl and spin them around in a synchronised pattern that reflected the hymn-like chanting. Moving slightly closer, I noticed a number of priests, nuns and initiates of all ages sitting down around the area of the ritual, forming a perimeter, many appeared like they were in a trancelike state, unconsciously rolling their heads back and forth, rotating their bodies in a circular pattern. The Brahmins whirling the lamps also looked to be in a trance, as though they were directly experiencing the primordial sound of the universe, *om*, joining it in harmony through the surrounding music, chanting, and their own movements, dancing and twirling with the fires that symbolise the divine.

The energy created by the ritual spread to the crowd, some joined in the chanting, most observed. I was caught up in it all, hypnotised, mesmerised by the rhythmic and cyclical chanting and droning of the music, by the patterns created by the swirling of the lamps. For a moment that felt like hours, I went into a trance brought on by the experience and the energy of my surroundings. All distinctions, all notions of separateness, of the notion of "I" and other, disappeared into oneness, into unity with all that were present, the Ganga and the entire cosmos. It felt like I touched the divine, experiencing it in a brief instant of ecstasy. Though this possible glimpse of universal consciousness, of God, didn't last long. It faded as soon as it appeared, but when I returned to a normal state of mind the ritual was coming to a close, the music and chanting slowing down. The priests had begun to move through the crowds, holding the lamps, so that worshippers and whoever wanted could receive the *aarti* blessing by using their hands to wash the warmth of the flames over their head. I wasn't

sure how to exactly perform the ritual, and I simply imitated other people when the priest came to me. I was still emerging from the trancelike state, somewhat indescribable due to the multitude of sensations I was experiencing all at once. Only a feeling of oneness - with the people, with the ritual - was comprehensible which remained strongly within my being for some time.

The ceremony had effectively finished, and the crowds began to disperse. Staying back to linger for a moment, I noticed in the corner of my eye the sadhu who I'd seen in the ruined ashram standing by the gateway entrance to the ghats. He made a gesture of prayer towards me, bowing slightly. I started to walk towards the sadhu, but before I could get anywhere, Kara tugged at my arm and said, "where are you going?"

I pivoted towards her, "I'll be back in a moment, I'll tell you later." Turning again, the sadhu had disappeared, nowhere to be seen. I said to Kara, "actually, don't worry."

"What's going on?" She asked.

"There was a sadhu I saw at the ashram, it felt like he might of been following me... and I think I saw him again just then. He's disappeared though."

"Huh, that's weird." Kara said, shrugging, "I wonder if he's out to get you."

"Seriously, you're kidding right?"

"Yeah probably," she laughed a little at her joke, continuing, "well if he's following you, he'll probably make himself known at some point."

"Or I'm just seeing things... it's odd though, he looks similar to someone I've met recently..."

"Whatever happens, happens, no one but God knows why," changing the topic, she said, "how about for now, we go eat?"

We went to a restaurant on the other side of town, crossing the suspension bridge in the darkness. Kara took me to a small rooftop restaurant tucked in an alleyway. It gave a sprawling view of the town, though at this time of night, all that could be seen were dim outlines of buildings and the lights of the town. The moonlight shimmered along the Ganga, revealing its rushing waters. The lighting of the restaurant was dim, only candles were

lit, and we were seated on cushions on a low lying table. All very romantic. We ordered our meals and talked more about our day. Kara spoke about her ashram, suggesting that it was a good option. I was more interested in going somewhere further away, secluded from the frantic business of the town, somewhere that I was really drawn to. Wanting to experience the different approaches of other ashrams, she thought that it was a good idea. We also discussed what we were going to do tomorrow. I felt like exploring further down the river, a little adventure to look around the forests and hillside away from the town. Perhaps I'd bump into an ashram further away or could ask some locals who I may come across. Kara was interested in looking for a new ashram as well, but she didn't particularly want to go hiking around the hills, and said she'd wait till morning to make up her mind. Even though I would miss her sorely if she didn't come explore the outskirts, my intuition was telling me that this was something I had to do.

We left shortly after our meals, the restaurant specialised in Western dishes, Kara had chosen a vegetarian burger, and I had a carbonara pasta. She told me that eating meat was forbidden in the town along with alcohol, which was a common custom across deeply sacred towns and cities in India such as Varanasi and Pushkar. Coming from a secular country, it was slightly strange having laws directly taken from religious principles. We went directly back to the guesthouse, stopping only to pat lonely cows wandering the evening streets. As we entered, the guesthouse owner greeted us friendly and bid us good night, appearing to harbour no ill will for waking him up so early in the morning. Once in our rooms, we practically jumped on each other and made beautiful, albeit sweaty love, desperate to have one another following a long day mostly apart. Afterwards, we lay on the bed and simply enjoyed each other's presence, talking for hours about our past, former relationships and goals in life as we slowly became more and more tired, drifting gradually into sleep.

## Chapter Twelve

### *A Stroll in the Forest*

The sun hadn't quite crept over the hillsides around Rishikesh when I awoke. A dark reddish hue, the hints of dawn, was washed across the sky. I had gotten up, left the room and was standing on a small railed balcony that overlook the street below and I could glimpse over the top of the nearby buildings, giving a view of large parts of the currently sleepy town. There were signs of movement below, shopkeepers sweeping and setting up their stalls, the echoing growls of a few motorbikes, a few barking and yapping dogs. I took a deep breath and watched, thinking of nothing in particular, still emerging from sleep, the two consciousnesses overlapping in a hazy concoction of the peaceful oblivion mixed with the awareness of the waking state uninhibited by thought. I felt as though I dreamt last night, but all I could remember were swirling images, a strange landscape filled with strange faces. Wondering about the vivid dreams I had had in recent weeks - of the Passion of Christ, of the guru by the river, of the interplanetary, inter-dimensional journey, of the Hindu temple - all appear to have meant something significant, a message, a vision. They were too vivid, too real, too full of spiritual symbolism to dismiss out of hand as meaningless. All were dreamt so closely to one another. And then there was the waking dream whilst meditating, returning to the Passion as though something forced me to go back and finish witnessing the event. That experience along with being driven by the earthquake had led to all this: the massive upheaval in my life, quitting the path of the monk, leaving the mountains, meeting Kara, the search for a new path. The dream and experience, in the desert witnessing the crucifixion, seemed so disconnected from what it helped trigger, but then again, stranger, unexplainable and apparently separate

things have triggered big changes in peoples' lives and throughout history. My attention was drawn to the minor injury on my head where the rock had landed. I was fortunate that it barely amounted to needing a light bandage, merely a cut, a bruise and the occasional headache. It should've been much worse. I softly touched the area where I was hurt and felt a small sting. The voices that compelled me to get up, to follow my destiny... simply the product of my mind, or something deeper? Something resembling the near death experience, contact with something beyond and bigger than myself.

I felt the warm embrace of arms wrapping around my stomach, Kara whispering 'good morning' playfully into my ear. I returned the hug, kissing her, and we watched the early morning pass together, chatting about nothing in particular. Suddenly out of the corner of my mind, the connection was made, and I exclaimed out loud, "the sadhu I saw in my dream was the same one that I kept seeing yesterday!"

"What are you talking about?" Kara asked, giving me a quizzical look, slightly confused by the outburst.

I laughed. "You might find this a little weird or unbelievable, but like I said earlier, I've had a lot of strange dreams filled with symbols recently. One I had a little while ago had a sadhu and a rushing river. The sadhu told me in Sanskrit, I think, that I had to go into the river and allow it to take me away. The sadhu in my dream looked exactly the same as the one I saw a few times yesterday."

"Is that so? Are you sure that he's the same one? I mean, what did he look like in the dream?"

"He had long dreadlocks, a bushy beard, wearing saffron robes and a large *rudraksh* necklace..." I drifted off, realising how hopeless my description was.

"So he's basically what every sadhu looks like? You've described the stereotype," she laughed.

Slightly embarrassed, I couldn't help but laugh, "so he may or may not be connected to the dream, but there was something so familiar about him, and I saw plenty of typical looking sadhus yesterday. It was pretty odd that he seemed to have directly

acknowledged me as well... maybe I'm being a little delusional, a little superstitious."

Kara shrugged, "I guess... like I said yesterday, you'll just have to wait and see!"

A moment passed and she let go of me and meandered back to the room. I watched her walk away and returned my gaze towards the town, thinking about the day ahead, feeling as though I was in a purposeless void. A feeling that had remained with me since I first arrived in Rishikesh, looming above the minutiae of my time here. Why am I even in this place? What's joining an ashram really going to do? I'll learn a bit of yoga, work on meditation, explore an aspect of Hinduism, a few teachings here and there. It'd be good here, beneficial to my development as a person, I'm sure. But my impression of this place... it didn't feel like what I was after... not that I even knew what that was. Wandering the town yesterday, past ashrams and learning centres, I didn't feel as though this was the right place to continue my inward journey. I leaned against the rails and sighed, pushing the thoughts aside. I'll find something here, maybe that sadhu has got something to do with it.

Returning to the room, Kara and I prepared for the coming day. Showering, dressing and packing a small bag, we shortly left the guesthouse and found a quiet place for breakfast, where I enjoyed a few fried eggs on toast and some muesli, a Western meal that I hadn't had in a very long time. The restaurant was tucked away and run by Nepalese immigrants. Prayer flags and images of the country were adorned throughout the place that was largely outdoors. As we were paying at the counter, I noticed a small donation box for the earthquake and felt a pang of guilt rush through me, reminding myself of the selfish decision I had made to abandon the country. Impulsively, I reached into my wallet, withdrew a handful of rupee banknotes and stuffed them into the box. Being in view of the kitchen, the chef noticed and thanked me, bowing his head slightly.

I nodded in return, "did anything happen to your family in the earthquake?" I asked, pointing at the donation box.

An older man, he took a few moments to understand what I was saying, eventually replied, "my son... his family... lost their home... but, no one died, it could be worse."

I admired his resilient and positive attitude, something I'd found constantly in Nepal. A country of mostly subsistence level farmers, so many losing their homes, their possessions, having to start everything from scratch again. Yet so often they were happy, they knew how to enjoy the simple beauty of life, to be content with so little, to take the negatives that happen with the positives. To find happiness within and among loved ones, not dependent on a checklist of material things or achieving particular goals as a precondition. It's a lesson many of us more fortunate need to take in, especially when tragedy and difficulties arise.

I wished the man and his family all the best and we left the restaurant. By this point, the day had truly arrived and the heat was beginning to be felt. Kara and I went separate ways, deciding to simply meet back at the guesthouse late in the afternoon before sunset. It was slightly hard to part ways and we hugged and kissed for a while, but like I resolved yesterday, it was something I felt needed to be done. She told me to just keep walking, to follow the main road that we were already on. Jeeps were available to take me out of the town, a very informal public transport system, but I decided to simply walk, wanting to get off the beaten trail as soon as possible and follow the course of the river and surrounding hillside in my own way. As long as I didn't go too far from the Ganges, there shouldn't be any issue getting back.

Along the way out of Rishikesh, I bought fruit, water and other snacks. The town thinned out surprisingly quickly after I passed by the second bridge. The bustling, commercial centre of the town gave way to small rural properties, homes with a goat, a cow and a small patch of land for vegetables. A few ashrams were amongst this quiet area of town, many of which didn't appear to cater to the numerous foreigners that would come, no English or even the Latin script was present on the signs, gates and walls that marked the ashrams' boundaries. Few people were walking along the old dusty road, and those that I did come across gave me a curt

smile, appearing interested in seeing a foreigner wandering by himself outside of the town centre.

In due course, the outskirts of the town was abruptly met by dense sal forest, a common tree across the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. I continued to walk for an hour or so. All around, I could see nothing but the path I walked on and the greens and browns of the trees and thickets. I wasn't too far from the Ganga, hearing the rushing of the waters crashing onto rocks. Occasionally I heard rustling in the trees above, and caught a glimpse or two of langur monkeys swinging, hopping and jumping. Their long tails providing balance and an extra limb to navigate and traverse the world of the treetops. A plethora of different types of birds were singing a chaotic yet almost harmonic symphony everywhere I walked, my footsteps crunching on the dirt and broken asphalt providing the only underlying beat. An orchestra of nature playing to an audience of one that always returned to the deep penetrating silence that is easily found when civilisation isn't too closely nearby.

The sounds and silence of nature were periodically disturbed, however, by jeeps and other vehicles driving past, some slowly, some quickly, many blaring their horns around corners, an unfortunate necessity to warn other possible drivers and pedestrians on the road. Each time one would come, it would ruin the tranquillity around me, roaring through the relative quiet, distorting the sounds of the river, the melody of the wind blowing through the leaves, the chattering of birds. It became increasingly apparent that it was difficult, if not impossible, to escape the presence of people in this land and to find genuine solitude amongst nature. A loss for much of the modern world and an underappreciated aspect of existence before the rise of megacities and highways and the destruction of pristine natural landscapes. All in the name of progress and to feed our insatiable desire for the 'good life'. What was it that separated us so strongly from our natural roots? Why did we begin to see the natural world as something to conquer, to subdue, to exploit, rather than to simply live with and to learn from? Why do we see ourselves and our problems as superior to nature's needs and issues? Was it



civilisation and the rise of agriculture that brought this attitude, almost universally, to cultures and peoples that decided to settle? Thankfully, the world seems to be remembering the fundamental importance of the natural world to our survival, but the separation remains, the superiority complex between us and animals remains. This predominant perspective on the world, whether consciously or unconsciously held, will continue to plague us and the environment. And we can't just rely on governments to legislate and others to do it for us, we can't just blame big corporations and big polluters. The changes the world needs has to be holistic, and we must recognise the role of both the individual and the collective in ensuring the harmony of humankind and nature. We need to realise that we as individuals are also at fault for the state of the world.

I emerged from my trail of thoughts when I spotted a low lying stone wall built along the side of the road. It wasn't particularly long and looked disused, moss grew all over the cobbles, and it was partly ruined, a collapsed pile of rocks marking the end. I didn't exactly care why it was there as I spotted at the end of the wall a narrow path leading off the main road, heading towards the river. I jumped at the opportunity and followed the trail that wound around trees and scrubs. It was partially covered by leaves, reducing its visibility, and it didn't appear to have been used recently by humans. The path descended at a steady rate, I was higher in the hills than I thought, and after ten minutes or so, the forest opened up onto a small sandy beach covered in large rocks, the trail disappearing quietly into the sands. I was presented with a breathtaking view of the river and the surrounding environment. Further up, I could see a bend in the river, sheer cliff faces flanking one side. It was in a steep valley where I found myself and apart from the rocky precipices, it was covered in forest. I couldn't see any signs of human influence, no markings, no rubbish, just the wide, flowing waters of the river nestled in a valley, the product of millions of years of erosion, carving a route from the glaciers of the Himalayas to the Gangetic plains below, and today a source of nourishment for countless life forms. This must be the mighty Ganga at its most primal and beautiful, I

thought, perhaps even how the old sages of ancient India discovered it, who later wrote the Vedic philosophies on the river's banks.

I sat down on a large rock on the shore, the river's waters lapped against its smooth surface. A large banyan tree hung nearby where the beach met the forest, tilting slightly towards the river and providing a measure of shade over my head. A calmness slowly crept over me as I watched the hypnotic stirrings of the river as it flowed past, listened to the ferocious rushing in the distance intermingled with softly crashing waves on the shoreline nearby and the murmuring swirls and ripples of water navigating carelessly through rocks protruding from the banks. A potent symbol of nature's force, the river's calls blocked out the sounds of wind, the singing of birds, and my gaze frequently shifted back towards its eternal flow. I wasn't raised near any major river so every time I've seen one, I've been filled with a sense of novelty and amazement, a similar feeling to when I've seen grand mountains or vast deserts. I wondered if natives of mountainous parts of the world had similar senses of awe when they saw vast plains or the ocean for the first time.

The heat of the sun was penetrating through the branches and leaves of the banyan tree, warming me up, getting me hot and sweaty, so I stripped my clothes off, bundled them up and took a swim. The waters were cooler than further downstream in the town, even chilly, and were bluer and clearer. The current by the shore wasn't too strong but the waters deepened sharply, waist deep before I'd realised. I bathed and immersed myself for ten minutes or so before returning to the rock, sprawling myself on its flat surface, my eyes gradually closing as I lay there waiting to dry.

I fell into a doze, semiconscious of my surroundings, thoughts and reality mixing together in my mind. The refreshment of the river slowly wore off as I dried in the partly shaded sun. I was stirred by the feeling of a nearby presence watching me, I opened my eyes and tilted my head to see a little boy standing at the beginning of the pathway staring at me curiously. Becoming aware of myself in my nakedness, I immediately reached for my clothes and hurriedly put them on. Returning my attention to the

boy, he started waving at me and then walked quickly towards me with an excited grin on his face as I hopped down off the rock.

He stopped a few paces in front of me and said in a loud, rather high-pitched voice, "hallo!"

"Hello!" I replied with a short wave, "what're you doing here?" I asked.

The boy didn't appear to understand English, he dropped eye contact, looked around and noticed my bag, pointing at it and then making a gesture with his finger and mouth indicating food. I reached into my bag and pulled out a banana I'd bought earlier, holding it out towards him. He eagerly snatched the fruit, thanking me with a strong accent, before peeling and eating it.

"Understand English?" I asked whilst he ate. He looked up at me, swallowed a mouthful and shook his head. I stood there watching him, looking around, not very sure of what to do. I continued to wonder what this kid was doing this far out of town by himself, something wasn't quite right it seemed, but he looked like he was in good spirits. He finished the banana alarmingly quickly, almost as though he was famished. He pointed to my bag again and moved his hands in a way that looked like he was telling me to open it. I let him have a look and he reached in and grabbed a pen. Removing the cap, he started to draw squiggles on himself. Looking up at me, he stretched out and grabbed my arm, and drew on me, whilst laughing and giggling. When he was satisfied, he put the pen in his pocket and tugged on my shirt, but this time in a way that appeared to indicate for me to follow him. I didn't really have a choice but to go along, he could be lost, I thought. He let go of me when he knew I was following and he took me down the path we had both come from, but diverted at about midway to go along an animal trail that I hadn't previously seen.

Winding and weaving through trees, hearing the roars of the Ganga slowly fade as we went deeper, we walked at a brisk pace for what felt like half an hour. We didn't stop and I began questioning why I was following the boy. I periodically forgot he couldn't speak English, asking him several times where we were going, and almost as quickly retracting my question. The dense forest eventually started to thin out and opened up to a wide open

space in a valley with a small subsidiary river flowing through it. A tiny village was nestled within, mud brick houses scattered between small farms with crops only beginning to grow. Villagers, mostly women, were weaving, supervising children, working the farms, feeding cows, goats and chickens. A few people saw us approaching the village and looked at me with curious eyes, before noticing the child who had led me here. Two women, one young, the other middle aged, both wearing contrasting saris, screamed in what appeared like delighted relief and they rushed to embrace him in their arms. I didn't know the language, but it was obvious that they were muttering incoherently, tears streaming down their faces, so happy to see this boy again. After a loving moment between the three, the older woman signalled for me to come over to them and she gave me a warm hug saying a few words of thanks in her language. I didn't know how to convey to her that I'd just tagged along but it didn't matter as I was then ushered into the village.

It was step back in time, the only signs of modernity were a couple of motorbikes and a few plastic jugs and tubs. In the middle of the village was a small square formed by the layout of the houses with a tree in the centre providing a place for shade. A low lying wall around the tree provided some seating where a few men were lazing about, one snoozing in the heat, and I was kindly directed to sit down. The older woman woke the dozing man, shouting at him and then at the others, sending him running. I laughed at the quick scolding that was just given, even without understanding what was said. It's interesting that we don't always need worded language to make our thoughts, feelings and desires communicated. A more primitive communication, closer to the animal world. The simple tone of a voice and its volume can convey anything from a display of authority to consoling a loved one. The way we position our arms and bodies, and the way we look at someone can sometimes say more than words ever can, and oftentimes speak more truth.

For a few minutes I sat, wondering what was going to happen. An elderly man emerged from one of the distant huts with one of the men who was scared off earlier. As they approached nearer, I noticed the elderly man was wearing large spectacles and

the saffron robes of a sadhu. He had a long shaggy beard and dreadlocks organised in a topknot. Appearing frail, there was nevertheless a vitality in him, a grace in the way he walked, even as he held onto a wooden staff. Though he looked like any other holy man in these parts, there was a familiarity about him. As he came closer and closer and I could make out his features more distinctly, it clicked... it was the man I saw yesterday.

"Hello, namaste, I'm glad you made it here," he said meeting my eyes, "you did well by bringing the boy home, his mother and grandmother were worried to death. He ran off into the forest yesterday morning, furious at someone for some reason or other."

I lowered my eyes, confessing, "I didn't really do anything, I was sitting by the river and he came to me. I gave him some food and then he got me to follow him back here."

"I see..." he stroked his beard, "maybe finding you, it changed his spirits, making him want to come home."

Shrugging my shoulders, changing the topic nonchalantly, I said, "you look familiar, did I see you yesterday in town a few times?"

The elderly man let out a short eccentric laugh, "yes, yes, that was me. I was observing you yesterday, making sure it was you. I've known of you for a while now."

I looked at him curiously for a moment, "why were you following me?" I asked.

"Do you remember the dream you had recently?" He responded.

"What?" I said startled, shocked. A million thoughts rushed into my mind, confusing my perception, but I eventually managed to answer. "Yes... I was by a river and I came across a man that looked like you. He told me to immerse myself in the river and let its currents take me away."

"Yes, that's right. It's why you've come here, isn't it? Well I can tell you, your faith has been rewarded." He paused, looking at me, building anticipation, a large toothy grin slowly grew on his face. "That was me in your dream, and I had a similar one of you! It was so, uh, vivid and real, it didn't feel like a normal dream, a

very rare thing indeed for that to happen... I took the matter to my Master, who lives away from this village, and he instructed me to seek you. He said if the dream was more than just a dream, you would appear shortly, and that you did!"

A strange burst of joy surged through me as I comprehended this surreal situation and the validation of my dream. Even though I followed them, there were many doubts lingering in my mind as to the reality of the dreams. I became slightly light-headed to the sheer fantasy of the situation, but managed to gather my wits and utter a response. "This is all so strange... so what now? Why were we brought together?"

"I do not know... all I do is serve my Master and serve this village and whoever else I can. I run temple and religious duties here, conducting ceremonies, rituals, and giving advice." The sadhu rolled his eyes upwards and twirled his moustache, thinking a moment, "I believe that I was simply the one to find you and take you to my Master, my Guru. He will know why you are here... would you like to visit him now?"

"How far away is he?" I asked, wary of the passing day, still slightly stunned by the situation.

"A few hours away, deep in the forest and high up in the hills," he said, whirling around and pointing off into the distance. "He lives plainly and simply with a few devotees and students. We should go now if you want to get back to your woman before the sun sets."

"How did you... never mind." I thought for moment, calculating my time, "okay, let's go."

"But we'll eat first!" He turned to the younger woman and said a few words to her in the village's dialect. She bobbed her head and scurried off. The man turned his attention back to me, "it should only be a few minutes... Oh, and my name is Vriddha. Pleased to meet you," he said, smiling.

After a short wait, we were fed a small meal of rice, curried vegetables and chapati, simple but energising. Whilst we ate, the villagers were fascinated by me, and used Vriddha as a translator to ask me questions about where I was from and what I've been doing. I asked my own in return about what life in the village was

like. We didn't linger long though, and were shortly on our way, heading down a dirt path that was soon enclosed by forest, the village disappearing gradually into the thickets.

"So who is this Master of yours?" I asked after some time had passed and the path had begun to ascend uphill, sweat collecting on my back, the surrounding shade of the trees doing little to reduce the heat from the sun.

"Oh he is a very special man, yes..." He paused to organise his thoughts, "he is a local saint. Many believe, myself included, that he sees beyond the illusion that we call reality, beyond thoughts, emotions and all conceptions, to the stillness, the peace, the joy that many call God. Umm, he has truly realised in the core of his being that the *atman*, the spark of the divine that resides within all of us," he touched his heart, "is identical with *brahman*, the soul of the universe, the changeless Ultimate Reality behind everything that exists before our eyes." Vriddha then expanded his arms outwards, regarding the world around us. "He has become one with the universe, one with God."

"And why do you call him your Master?" I enquired.

Scratching his head, he replied, "hmm, maybe master isn't so good a word to use. It often means something to do with control and slavery where your people are from, isn't it?"

I nodded in agreement.

"Yes, yes. Ah, *guru* then might be a better word, or just teacher, but he doesn't teach in any normal sense, no real classes or anything like that. He gives knowledge through dialogue, through questioning the student, and simply through his presence. He sometimes communicates truth in silence to students through what is called *darshan*. Yes, he is a very great man, the energy of God flows within him and touches anyone who goes near," Vriddha spoke with reverence in his voice for this man.

Darshan, I played around with the word in my mind, I'd never heard of it before, how can someone transfer knowledge without language? A degree of scepticism swept through me, I was too familiar with the cults and scams that can arise from students placing all their faith and loyalty in a guru. "So how do you know he is what he says to be?" I probed, my wariness obvious.

Vridhha looked at me, narrowing his eyes, but then let out a bellowing laugh, "oh you're a doubting one, aren't you? Your Western... fear, I'd like to say, of anyone who has authority over others, especially anything that claims to be religious or spiritual."

I grinned. "You're very perceptive."

"I owe that to my guru, teacher, whatever we're going with. He's taught me to be inquisitive and question everything, especially himself. I'll let you see for yourself how he is. You can make up your own mind about him, but he's the real thing. You won't see him wearing gold or driving fancy cars like the fraudsters do. You'll probably be quite disappointed by his appearances, if anything."

We walked further and further uphill, the path narrowed and steepened dramatically. We were deep in the thick forest, though it occasionally opened up to a sweeping view of the valley and the adjacent foothills. At times I could make out the village far below, and the Ganga off in the distance. I kept forgetting that I was in the Himalayas, but only the beginning of them, the same set of mountain chains as the monastery where I started this adventure. For all I knew, I was on the other side of the world, so different in so many ways. Different people, different customs, different landscape, different weather, different wildlife. The geographical distance between here and there was negligible, but the variety of nature in between truly revealed the beautiful and infinite diversity of the planet.

The trail eventually followed along the top of a cliff face, presenting us with a stretch of barren hillside without trees, having been replaced with rocky outcrops on one side of the path, a sheer drop on the other, and lasting for several hundred meters. Traversing along the edge of the cliff, around a bend in the hill, our destination was revealed to us. The path widened again, and led to a small, flat area nestled between two slopes of the hill. An open place with a small scattering of trees. There were five little huts, linked together by dirt paths and centred around a large banyan tree. Each was made of mud brick or concrete, painted in pink and light blue, all looked as though they had only one room inside. The furthest away hut was slightly larger and built into the earth,



possibly as part of a cave tucked into the hillside. No one was visible but as we neared, I could smell spices and other aromatic flavourings. Vriddha told me to sit and wait under the shade of the banyan tree, whilst he knocked on the hut door that emanated the strongest aroma. A young woman opened the door, modestly dressed in a plain linen garment that covered her body. She was holding a bowl and stirring something in it. The two exchanged a few words that I couldn't quite hear or understand, Vriddha pointed to me and the woman looked at me with a smile and gave a short wave before closing the door and returning to her duties.

Vriddha returned to me and sat down, saying, "he's in *satsang* at the moment, we shouldn't interrupt, we'll wait for him to finish."

"Okay, what's *satsang*?" I asked.

"Ah, it's a special, spiritual gathering of a few people with an enlightened person. Normally, a little talk is given and then questions are raised. Sometimes there's scriptures, sometimes there's meditation, the main purpose is to be in good and truthful company, not just with an enlightened one, but with other people as well."

"Huh, is that so?" I replied, "so what exactly goes on here? It's a tiny place."

"It's great, isn't it? It's so humble, lacking any of the luxuries that the rich ashrams show. But it still runs like any other ashram, just much much smaller," he said enthusiastically.

"It does look and feel so real, so authentic, and so far away from the hustle and bustle of India," I said, genuinely impressed.

"Only a few people know of this ashram and only rarely does a foreigner visit or stay. If you so choose, you'll be the first in quite a while."

I thought about Kara, would she want any of this or was she expecting something more modern? My first instinct was that this place was real, authentic, that this could be the next step in my journey through life. I hoped that Kara shared the same feeling and for the first time, I worried that she may not want to join me.

"You're thinking about your woman, are you not?" Asked Vriddha.

He must've noticed a look of concern or a hint of anxiety on my face, "yes, I'm wondering what to do if she doesn't want to be with me here. The life here looks austere, basic, and we're in a pretty remote place."

"I wouldn't worry about it now," Vriddha consoled, "no use in worrying when you can't do anything about it! Wait till you meet and experience my Mast-, ah, my teacher. There's no rush for you to decide what to do. Talk with her later, you can worry more then, but for now, don't bother!"

Vriddha was right, and as I was about to reply, the doors of the furthest hut swung open, four young Indians, two men and two women, came outside, silent for a few moments before beginning to chat amongst themselves. Vriddha beckoned me to follow him towards the hut. He acknowledged the others, exchanged a few pleasantries with them in Hindi or the local dialect, and then switching to English, they welcomed me to the ashram, clasping their hands together in a gesture of prayer and bowing slightly towards me. Walking past them, we went inside the hut. I was immediately struck by a strong smell of incense. It was sparsely decorated, a few straw mats on the ground, cushions, a bookshelf to the left of the doorway lining the wall. The far end was slightly raised like a dais, candles along the edges, the wax dripping slowly onto the floor. The Master was sitting in absolute stillness, legs crossed in the lotus position. What surprised me most was his appearance. He wasn't the archetypical guru that I expected. He didn't have a long flowing beard, wrapped in robes, wearing a turban of sorts. Instead he looked very frail, skinny, his ribs were easily visible. He wasn't wearing anything but a large loincloth that wrapped around his waist, cutting off just above his knees. He was clean shaven and had thin wiry white hair, showing some signs of balding. Though there was an aura about him, a calm serenity pervaded the room.

Vriddha prostrated himself in front of him whilst I stood in silence, watching the old man. It wasn't long before he slowly opened his eyes and gave us both a warm welcoming smile, saying in a soft, soothing voice, "namaste, namaste, you must be the one Vriddha has dreamt of. Welcome to our ashram."

"Ah thank you, sir," I said, uncertain of how to address him, "I had a dream too, but of coming here, Vriddha was in mine as well."

"Yes, it's all very odd, isn't it? A bit of a mystery how it happened, but here we are nevertheless. I suppose you're wondering why, not so much as how, am I right?"

"That's true..." I replied. I didn't expect the man to be so articulate in English, I could hardly even detect an accent.

"The divine has a plan for you, I know this. Something special perhaps, something unique? Yes, but everyone has a destiny laid out for them, all are special and important to the whole, though it may not look that way on the surface. At least part of your purpose appears to be with me. I am to help you realise what has always been there, hidden deep within you. I am to help you realise that you are God, that you are the universe and beyond. In the words of your Christ, I am to help you know thyself so you can see that the Kingdom of God has been within you all along."

I couldn't help but feel excitement rise through my body, I couldn't think of anything to say, a thousand thoughts streamed through my mind. Finally, I asked awkwardly, "what can I call you?"

He laughed, "yes, it must all be quite strange and surreal, an old man telling you that you're God. You've only really read about this in books, haven't you? You never truly thought that you could actually realise the Eternal Self residing within you."

I thought about this for a moment, I'd entertained the idea when reading about religions and spiritualities of the world, but he was right, I never truly thought that I could actually achieve that state of being. There were experiences I'd had before that felt beyond the normal, like my first night with Kara or yesterday during the aarti ceremony, but were they truly the same experiences of the mystics? I nodded in agreement, uncertain how to really answer him.

"There's an old Hindu belief when it comes to the guru and student relationship. When the time is right for a genuine seeker, a teacher will appear in his life and guide him in their journey. It appears that this has happened with you, and through rather

exceptional circumstances as well... Oh how rude of me, you can call me Swamiji."

"Pleased to meet you, Swamiji." I smiled, "but I'm still unsure of what I'm to do."

"You worry about your lover?"

"Yes, how did you know?" I asked, "Vridha couldn't possibly have told you about her."

"I know these things, and besides, it's written all over you. Do not worry, things will work out fine. Trust me." Swamiji said reassuringly.

"Okay, but I'll still need to talk to her about all this," I said, but I remained somewhat unconvinced, "is she able to stay here? What can she do?"

"I'm sure we can make arrangements here, there's plenty of room for both of you to stay. And there's nothing stopping her from joining you and the other students. We at the ashram also help the nearby village with its problems, she's welcome to do what she pleases as long as it's towards cultivating her divine qualities."

"She would like that, I'm sure, she loves hands on work to help wherever she can," I replied. Changing the subject, I asked, "how are you going to teach me?"

"I won't be teaching you anything, there's no method to learn, doctrines to follow. What I'll be doing is help you realise the Truth for yourself. Every person is different, and I'll guide you in a way that works with the bundle of thoughts, emotions and, um, mannerisms that you call your personality. There's no prescribed medicine, no step by step manual. Self-realisation can only come from within, all I can do is give you a little nudge in the right direction. So that's how I'm going to teach you, if you can even call it that."

"If you're not a teacher or anything like that, why are you called Master?" I probed, the question lingering on my mind from earlier.

"Oh, I don't know," he responded, rubbing his chin, "I guess it's just a title that locals and students have come to call me. Indians have different attitudes to authority figures, particularly

ones they see as gurus, you know? I guess they call me Master simply out of respect, even though I don't demand this title or any veneration whatsoever. Call me what you wish, I don't care, names are obstacles to experiencing Reality as it is anyway... But enough of all this, it is getting late in the day, I believe you should be making your way back to town before it gets dark. Come back in the morning with your woman and we will begin."

"Yes, good idea. Thank you, Swamiji, I'll see you in the morning." Nodding, I turned and left the hut and sat by the banyan tree. Vriddha lingered behind for a few minutes before emerging shortly after.

"He sees a lot of promise in you, you know?" Vriddha stated.

"It seemed like that, didn't it? I hope that he's right."

"Of course he is right, he is enlightened," the faith Vriddha had in Swamiji was obvious, and I prayed it wasn't misplaced. "Come," he continued, "we'll go back to the village together. From there, one of the men can give you a ride back to town on his motorcycle."

"Alright, let's go then." I said half-heartedly, hanging my head in resignation, tired from the day's walking. A strong part of me wanted to simply remain here for the night, but I did also miss Kara a lot.

The journey back to the village was uneventful. The descent allowed the return to be much quicker and far less tiring. When we arrived in the little settlement, I didn't linger long, bidding a curt farewell to Vriddha before jumping on the back of a motorbike that was driven by a young man wearing a striped collared shirt and blue jeans, one of the only reminders of the century in which I was actually living. He called himself Govinda and throughout the course of the ride he attempted to make small talk with me: asking me where I was from, whether I was married, what religion I was a part of. Completely normal questions for an Indian to ask, unafraid of offending Western sensibilities by asking personal questions. I felt a little uncomfortable at first but I soon realised that the only issue I had with these questions was the product of social conditioning, of the paramount importance that

our culture places on the right to privacy which our modern society has possibly taken to such an extreme, that it is borderline taboo to ask strangers about personal details and matters. His English was limited and broken, but comprehensible. He was an adept yet dangerous rider, weaving along the road, narrowly avoiding potholes and refusing to slow down over bumps. I had little choice but to trust my life and helmetless head to this man whom I had just met. No use being scared in situations where one has little control over their fate - if something happens, it happens.

I was back at the guest house before I knew it, the ride taking a fraction of the time it took to walk. I was just in time to meet Kara, it was late in the afternoon and the skies of dusk were falling over the town. She was lying in bed, relaxing with a book in her hands, a thick novel that I hadn't seen or heard of before. When I entered, she raised her eyes away from the pages and greeted me warmly, saying, "you're back! How was your day? Did you make any progress?"

"You wouldn't believe it!" I said excitedly as I started to recap on what I'd done today: the random child, the village and the meeting of Vriddha and Swamiji. "What did you do?"

She bit her lips slightly, arranging her thoughts, "I went to several ashrams around the town and on the outskirts. There's a few that look pretty good for us. All of them offer different yoga programs, a few teach deeply into different meditation techniques. One of them is centred around the Vedas and offers lots of philosophy. The only downside was that they're all in the middle of town, except one which is a few kilometres away, right on the banks of the Ganga."

"Oh really," I said curiously as I sat down on the bed beside her, "what was that one like?"

"I really liked it, it was small, quiet and homely. It was literally on the banks of the river. They offered a few programs that have a holistic approach to yoga and meditation in a traditional Hindu way. So there's plenty of rituals and chanting and what not. I really like the look of it to be honest."

"How long are these programs? Is there any way to become a resident of sorts at the ashram?" I asked.

"It only goes for a week, but you can stay longer on afterwards at a small cost."

I thought for a moment, it sounded good, but my heart was already set on the place I'd found myself, "I'm not really after just a short program... I want something longer term, not a yoga retreat." I said, perhaps too bluntly.

"Oh... okay," she said, disappointment present in the tone of her voice, "well tell me more about the place you found then."

"Sorry if that sounded a little bit mean," I apologised, "this place looks special. It's remote, away from everything. A tiny ashram tucked high up in the hills. There aren't any programs or packages designed for foreigners, but rather there's a guru, a really nice and intelligent man, who instils his wisdom into those that come." I said, counting on my fingers the pros of the ashram. "I told him about you and he said you can practice yoga and do whatever helps you cultivate your inner Self. He even said you can help in the villages nearby."

"What's it like there? The accommodation and utilities?" Kara inquired.

"Pretty basic, but it looks like we'd get a room to ourselves. I couldn't tell if there was electricity or running water though."

"And that Vriddha man you met... was he the one from your dream?"

"It's hard to believe, but it really appears like that. He even confirmed it to me that he had a similar dream. He was meant to guide me to Swamiji, apparently... It still seems so weird. But I feel like it's part of my destiny or something to learn whatever is to be learnt from this teacher."

"Is that so? I'm guessing you've already made up your mind then haven't you?"

"Yeah, I have. But I wanted to talk with you about it... I want you to come with me. I know we've only known each other for a very short time, but there's something special between us. So please think about it." I said, feeling as though I was almost pleading to her.

Kara thought for a moment, a long moment, and then a smile grew on the corner of her lips. "Yes, we have only known

each other for a very short time..." she said, "but I feel a connection, a special one, between us as well. And like I said, it's the depth of time that matters." Taking a breath, she let out, "it's going to be quite different, quite tough by the sounds of things. But I would like to be part of something more authentic than anything offered here, something more real. And these dreams of yours seem to have some reality to them, as crazy as that sounds. I believe in you and if you think this is the real deal, I want to come along for the ride!"

A burst of joy surged through me and I rolled over to her on the bed, throwing her book to the side, hugging, kissing and laughing. I felt as though after so much searching I had stumbled across the right path. I was out of the wilderness and standing on the front door of the next chapter of my destiny.



## Chapter Thirteen

### *The Ashram*

We rose early the next morning, I was eager to leave and go straight to the ashram after breakfast. We showered, packed our bags, paid for the room and went to eat. Kara had suggested somewhere new, wanting a Western breakfast in full knowledge that we may not have the opportunity for quite some time. Crossing one of the suspension bridges to the other side of town, we found a small restaurant hidden in a steep narrow alleyway. I had a simple but plentiful meal of muesli, eggs on toast, a lassi and milk chai tea, whereas Kara had a huge vegetable filled omelette. We wandered around for a short while afterwards, as I had spent very little time on this side of Rishikesh, and so we visited a bookshop and a few other stores and stalls. Mostly souvenir stuff, but there were some interesting religious objects and items to cleanse the body such as a funnel used to unblock one's nasal cavities.

Returning across the bridge, we walked over to an open dirt space where jeeps gathered to drive people out of town. Several drivers approached us, yet none of them knew the place I was talking about, it didn't help that I had forgotten to get the name of the ashram. We eventually managed to get someone to drive us to the closest village and drop us off there. Walking yesterday was quite a different experience to the drive, instead of the peaceful timelessness of casually walking in nature, the jeep rocked, bumped and screamed through the forest with a complete lack of suspension... it was fun nonetheless. The driver dropped us off on the edge of the village and we immediately set off towards the ashram, only stopping briefly to say hello to Vriddha, but he was happily dozing in his hut. It was still rather early so we decided not to disturb him.

Holding hands and chatting throughout the walk, we scaled the hill and were at the ashram in what felt like very little time at all. The day was beginning to heat up, but we were largely shaded from the direct sunlight by overcast skies, so it wasn't particularly arduous. We were greeted as soon as we stepped on the grounds and were shown by the young lady from yesterday to one of the huts. It was sparsely furnished: two single beds with thin mattresses and a small wooden table with two plastic chairs. There was a shelf on both sides of the room that were empty of books or anything. Despite being rather austere, almost primitive, the room was well insulated and kept out much of the heat of the day. After dropping our bags, the kind lady showed us around the small ashram, which was rather unnecessary yet she insisted anyway. Her English was very limited but she knew how to get a point across with gestures to accompany her small vocabulary, and within a few minutes we received a complete tour of the grounds. At the end, I asked if Swamiji was busy and if I could see him, but she replied negatively, saying that he was in meditation. For the time being, we were told to relax and do as we pleased. I returned to my accommodation, feeling slightly lethargic, and decided to take a short nap, whereas Kara asked if she could help with the cooking or with anything around the ashram. The helper ladies were more than enthused to accept her offer. I was relieved that she was happy with the place, she appeared more enthusiastic than myself to get started.

Dozing in my room, I was woken up after a few hours by a series of taps on the door. The swirling mixture of the sudden awakening and the warm stuffy air of the room made me groggy, giving me a dull headache and a slightly sick feeling in my stomach. I opened the door to find a helper lady, who informed me that lunch was ready. I nodded and stumbled out of the hut, the smell of spices permeated the air, creating an invisible trail towards the kitchen. The helper opened the door for me and I walked into the dimly lit room to find Kara, Swamiji, two helpers and the four students sitting on the floor in a semi-circle around a stove fireplace. A large pot with something stewing within was sitting on top of the stove and a tandoori oven was in the corner

cooking chipati. The floor was made of compacted dirt, but there was a large straw mat covering the area where people would sit. I was greeted by everyone with smiles and I sat down next to Kara after briefly acknowledging them.

I looked at Kara and began to say, "how've you..."

"Shhh!" I was interrupted by one of the students.

"Now, now, do not forget he is new here," Swamiji softly rebuked the student and then facing me, said, "it is custom for us to eat in silence, so that we can fully enjoy the meal at hand, and give thanks to the divine for providing it to us."

Slightly embarrassed by my ignorance, I nodded without saying a word. Lunch was served almost immediately afterwards: a simple mixture of curried vegetables, rice and chipatis served on a round shiny metal tray. Once everyone had received their food, Swamiji led a brief prayer in Sanskrit, all but myself joining in. Unsure of what to do, I simply closed my eyes and listened, assuming that it was a blessing or a thanksgiving. Once it was finished, I waited a moment for cutlery, and looked to the others to see that they were already eating by using their hands to mix the food together and to scoop it into their mouths.

Swamiji noticed my slight hesitance and explained, "eating with our hands is a humble gesture, as is eating whilst sitting on the floor. It keeps us grounded and connected to time immemorial and to the food itself. Using knives and forks, though subtle, can make us feel above our natural state." He smiled at me as he ate a mouthful, "besides, you get to truly feel and experience what you eat... and it's a little bit of fun as well!"

My hands were a slightly grimy which made me reluctant for a moment before I delved into the meal. At first it was a strange feeling and I could sense my cultural conditioning coming through. I'd only done it a few times with the monks, and that was only because of necessity, too hungry to care. A voice nagged at me saying that this was something children do, not adults, but I soon dismissed the thought and embraced the practice, what Swamiji had said made sense. I wasn't particularly adept at eating with my hands, I could hardly gather a mouthful, so I observed for a moment the technique the others were using and applied it myself.

By the end of lunch, I felt pretty satisfied that I was on the way to mastering the technique. Though my slow and clumsy manner of eating meant that by the time I was finished, the students had already left. Swamiji and Kara stayed behind and waited for me and once I ate the last morsel, Swamiji spoke, "both of you come with me and we will discuss what you are to do here."

Leaving the kitchen, the three of us went to the tiny meditation hall that I had met the guru in yesterday. He indicated for us to take a seat on the cushions as he stepped onto the dais and sat down into the lotus position. I felt a slight bit of envy that a man of his age could sit in that way with such ease, whilst I had always struggled with it. He watched us as we adjusted ourselves into comfort and then asked bluntly, "why are you both here?"

The question struck as rather odd as we had discussed this yesterday and he'd seemed rather happy to take us both in as students. Before I could respond, however, Kara said, "I want to grow more, spiritually speaking, and I've found that many of the ashrams nearby in Rishikesh tend to be commercial and only really offer different packages in physical yoga, without offering much more of substance... it's becoming too much about the money and I wanted something more real."

Swamiji nodded and added, "that is only half the truth, isn't it? You're also here because of him," he pointed at me, "you've taken quite a liking to him, haven't you? And you want to be with him more, even though where we are right now is an admittedly austere place and isn't quite what you're used to. Am I not right?"

Kara blushed, nodded saying, "yes, I suppose you're right. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. And I wouldn't even have searched for this place myself."

"Out of love then, I suppose, that you followed him here... or is it too soon to use that word?" Swamiji prodded further.

Kara and I looked at each other briefly, but we said nothing.

A laugh bellowed from Swamiji, "how easy it is to play with your emotions! Both of you obviously have very strong feelings for each other. I've hardly seen you together, yet it is so apparent. There is no need to hide such feelings for the sake of

preventing an awkward moment or because it is considered a socially odd thing to do. Embrace your feelings, accept them, there is no need to hide them." Looking directly at me, he abruptly changed the subject, "Now why are you here?"

I remained silent in thought, scrutinising in my mind over what my answer was. I'd already given it to him yesterday, hadn't I?

"You're over-thinking, strategising on how to answer the question," Swamiji interrupted. "It must come from the heart, from the soul. The first, impulsive feeling and thought is often the correct one. Now what was that?"

"To see the face of God," I answered poetically.

"What does that even mean? God is not a man, or any being for that matter."

I hesitated, thrown off by Swamiji's bluntness, "ah, to become one with God, to be enlightened... you should know what I mean!" I said stiffly and with a hint of irritation in my voice, knowing that I would be rebuked.

Instead, his tone changed again and he said softly, "and why do you want to be enlightened? Why is there appeal to it? Haven't you read your history books? This journey isn't particularly fun, it's austere and full of sorrow at times." Throwing his hands into the air, this way and that, he said, "you're young, why aren't you off gallivanting around the world, enjoying the pleasures of this life, instead of spending time with a half-naked old man who lives in a mud hut?"

"Umm, well there's more to life than just having fun and doing whatever's enjoyable, none of that has ever taken my interest. That path lacks depth, it lacks purpose. Yeah, sure it's great for a while, but it soon gets boring, monotonous. I want to know and experience why we are here, the meaning behind it all."

"And why is that?"

"I don't know. But the feeling has always been there, nagging at me throughout my whole life. I just want to know, simple as that."

Swamiji scratched his chin, "why here then? Surely, your homeland can help you satisfy your needs?"

"Hmm, people have mostly stopped pursuing anything more in this life than chasing after their own happiness. Most don't recognise a spiritual life as a valid pursuit anymore. India is different though, the country seems to be geared towards it."

"Aren't you simply pursuing your own happiness though, just in a more unusual way of going about it? You just seem to have a different criteria for what happiness means."

He struck a chord with that remark, in a resigned tone, I said, "you're right, that's true. But I suppose mine is a higher calling to something bigger than myself."

"So you think you're better than other people because you may not be as blind and don't accept their way of life as wholeheartedly?" He sneered, albeit in as friendly a manner as one would think possible. "The pitfalls of the spiritual path are many, and the feeling of superiority over those who may not have progressed as far is one of the most subtle, yet the most deadly."

I felt slightly offended, but I knew he was right, deep down there was a sense of superiority.

Before I could respond, he continued, "the trappings of the ego are many and it is by both tempering and working with the ego through which it will eventually be overcome. Your ego, that sensation of 'I,'" he said as he made an outline around his body with his hands, "must be unravelled if you want to experience God. For simple reasons. If God is the All, the Infinite, then to experience that which *is*, one must disentangle oneself from the separation that is caused by the feeling of 'I'. Yes, only then can one truly become whole, and be one with God and the universe. The ego is only a... only a tool to help us navigate and stay alive in the world. It allows God to have an infinite number of individual experiences. In a sense, it is also what drives one to search for God in the first place. So in many ways, the ego is necessary." Wagging his finger, he said, "now the problem is that we attach ourselves to it and separate ourselves from everything else. Nowhere else in the world is this more apparent than in the modern way of life with its excessive individualism and capitalism. And it is often least found in the people's around the world who have maintained their close connection to nature, to the cosmos. The traditional ways of the,

ah, indigenous folks of America and Australia are good examples of this... I am guessing you've read a lot of this before? All this talk of ego and connecting to God and the universe, nothing new, am I right?"

I nodded. I'd read most of what he had said before in books, but he spoke in a way that really penetrated deep into my heart and consciousness that words on a page simply cannot do.

"Good. Now I'll ask again, why are you really here?"

His comments stirred a whirlwind of thoughts in my mind, was it emotional, mental, or something deeper that brought me here? Was it my ego talking, was it God pushing me along? I couldn't exactly answer, and in resignation, I sighed and said, "I don't know."

"That's what I wanted to hear! Admitting that one does not know is the first step towards true knowledge. A paradox isn't it? But wasn't it Socrates, the father of philosophy in your part of the world who said it so? We must be willing to let go of our preconceptions, our, uh, suppositions, our facts and opinions that lead us to think that we know the truth of the matter. Unencumbered, you will be able to allow the light of truth to seep through and dispel the darkness of ignorance." He paused for a moment as though to let all that had been said to seep into both of our minds, his words weren't solely directed at me, but for Kara as well. Speaking again, he said, "now, enough philosophising and interrogation, I'll tell you the rough schedule of what happens here at the ashram."

For several minutes, Swamiji informed us of the daily happenings of the ashram. There was considerable autonomy, the structure wasn't particularly rigid and everything was voluntary. A few scattered Hindu rituals marked different periods of the day along with *satsang* and designated times for physical yoga, meditation and meals. A few times a week, time was set aside for karma yoga, selfless action, which usually involved cleaning duties and going to nearby villages to help with whatever or whoever needed it. After Swamiji had finished summarising the comings and goings of the ashram, he invited us to close our eyes and sit with him in silence for some time. It was incredibly peaceful just

simply being there, doing nothing at all but being present to the moment, despite all the things that could've annoyed or upset like flies or the heat. The man emanated a strong aura that soothed the soul of whoever was near him, clearing all concerns and worries about the world. Once he had finally dismissed us, after how long I wasn't quite certain, I wondered to myself why he wasn't more popular, why more people hadn't sought him to teach them in life. I shrugged the thought aside, too content to care, too eager to continue under the guidance of this holy man.

This first proper meeting with Swamiji, informally initiating us into the ashram, prompted the beginning of numerous talks between myself, Swamiji and the others who were living at the spiritual community. The first few weeks were less of an adjustment than Kara and I had initially thought, and we adapted to the lifestyle rather quickly. Kara was happy at the ashram, fitting in better than myself. She became more and more attracted to the idea of karma yoga, doing good works not for any worldly self-interest, but simply to help others. She combined her service with *bhakti* yoga, the devotional and love-filled approach to union with the divine, recognised in Hindu philosophy as one of the most respected paths to God. I found it rather interesting that she had found the Hindu equivalent of the paths Christianity often espouses.

I spent long hours in discourse with Swamiji, sometimes lasting from sunrise to sunset, despite the schedule of the day, and it soon became apparent that I was the most eager of all at the ashram to learn whatever I could from him. Although, I may have been less involved in the other duties, rituals and aspects of daily life that living in an ashram brings. I was heavily drawn towards *jnana* yoga, the path of knowledge, yet it was constantly insisted that a number paths must be followed and not just one whilst ignoring all the others. A part of me remained that was also there to challenge Swamiji intellectually, as a healthy scepticism endured on whether he truly held the answers to all questions regarding life. Though, he tended to outwit me on every occasion. The man appreciated that I simply didn't accept everything he said on the grounds of authority and he happily invited the challenge.



On the second day after our arrival, a lengthy discussion took place that I remembered well for being more solemn than the vast majority of other talks, or at least it felt that way for me. No matter the topic, Swamiji never seemed to be affected by whatever it was being discussed. Perhaps it was because he was a true practitioner of detachment or perhaps he'd simply given talks on the matter so many times.

Upon all of us gathering in front of him, sitting on the small cushions on the floor, he opened his talk with a simple question directed at Kara, "do you suffer?"

Kara detected a trick question, but resigned herself to answering, "of course I do, everybody and every living thing does at certain parts of their lives."

"Is this true?" He asked the rest of us, which was received by a series of agreeable nodding. "Do you want to rid yourselves from suffering? From the mental and physical hardships that this life brings? That is what the Buddha promises should be the end goal of life, isn't it? And it's the goal that all the systems of thought and worship in Hinduism aim for - liberation from the cycle of rebirth."

The Indian students agreed, one responded, "why else would we be here? We seek liberation from all of these hardships, to experience the eternal bliss and peace that follows."

Kara then spoke, "isn't suffering necessary to the human experience? Necessary for us to reach heights that we never thought we could achieve?"

Swamiji smiled, "interesting answer, please continue."

"Well, I was raised a Christian, and my parents taught me that suffering was simply a part of life. Umm, but instead of viewing it as something that was to be passively endured or to escape from, suffering should be seen as a test or a challenge to overcome. An opportunity to grow, to become a better person and to become closer to God. One sees who they truly are when they suffer, I think. It's easy to be a good person and act spiritual when nothing goes wrong. The true depth of someone's spiritual progress is glimpsed in those moments of suffering." She paused, but shortly decided to continue, "besides, think of all the beauty in our

art, our music, our writing that has emerged through the suffering of a lonely artist or heartbroken musician."

Watching Kara speak, I felt enamoured by her answer, spoken with passion and from someone who had experienced their fair share of suffering in this world. A beautiful response that summed up my feelings towards the topic as well. Again, I felt so blessed or lucky to have met her when I did.

Swamiji nodded, "the doctrine of reincarnation has a similar though perhaps a more... brutal way of looking at it. Suffering has a purpose, it's self-inflicted and inevitable, but work through it and be good and you will be closer to freedom." Swamiji adjusted his position, stretching his back, and turned his gaze towards me, "and you, what do you think or feel of suffering?"

"Hmm, I once read somewhere that suffering is necessary for ethics to exist. It gives you the choice to better yourself or do harm to yourself or others. Like, you see someone suffering, physically, emotionally, whatever, and you have the choice to do something good about it, or you can completely ignore it. Good doesn't seem to be able to exist unless suffering in some form does too. If there was no suffering and we were just automated to be virtuous, would we really be good?" I asked rhetorically as I scratched the back of my head in thought. "And I guess I feel quite similar to Kara about suffering as well. Though I'd like to add a little bit. It always seems, or at least for me, that whilst we're actually suffering through something, be it emotional, mental, physical, we want nothing more but for it to end. Even though there's those moments where I would be aware that I should utilise this time to better myself, it's not until it's all over that I reflect and become almost glad that I went through it, especially if I come out even stronger." I chewed my lip, thinking if I'd said everything I wanted, then continued, "that being said, I've only really experienced emotional and mental turmoil, little physically, so I don't know what it's like to suffer during war or famine or from a horrible illness."

"Ah yes, it's always assumed that physical suffering is worse than anything psychological... but this is misleading. All the types of suffering are interconnected, just think of a broken heart,

or the process of losing a limb and facing a life unable to move the way you once could. It's really a modern phenomena, particularly in your part of the world, that most physical suffering has disappeared and that as a result you should simply be happy. But instead, umm, physical suffering has been mostly replaced with severe mental and emotional anguish. Just look at all the people suffering depression, extreme anxiety and all those other issues, it seems like it's on a scale never before seen. And we still seek to escape it through all the same old methods." Counting with his fingers, saying, "through fun, entertainment, food, sex, family, doing whatever we can to take our mind off it. Yet we never do, no matter how hard we try to hide from it." His words reminded me of what Djimon had said, two people from impoverished nations saying essentially the same thing.

Swamiji changed track slightly, "so I don't offer a remedy to suffering, I offer ways to manage it, make it tolerable, and learn from it. It doesn't really matter whether it's us working out our karma, or if it is God challenging us to be better people and to come closer to the divine, or if it's just utterly meaningless. Suffering is there and in millions of different forms, and learning how to use it to your advantage is what will help rather than offering solutions and promises of one day escaping it."

"How do you learn to use your suffering to make yourself better?" One of the Indian students asked eagerly.

"Everyone has a different journey to make, there is no single approach to follow. But I can offer you all some vague advice on how to approach suffering, based on my own experience that has helped me immensely." A large grin emerged on his face as he looked warmly upon each of us before continuing. "It is common to hear across spiritual traditions, but a total present centred awareness is critical. Being aware that you are suffering will often reduce it; being aware that it can make you stronger will help; being aware that you are not just a body and mind, but God and the universe, that you are the witness, will help you manage your suffering. An all-encompassing awareness is necessary and it takes practice." He coughed to clear his throat. "We often think and feel too little, we think of ourselves and only our own

problems... the, uh, 'why me?' attitude simply makes the suffering worse. Instead, become aware that the universe is suffering with you, all the time, and many people are suffering far worse things than you probably are at that time. Expanding your awareness to include others in it, to feel compassion, will help reduce your own suffering and help you grow to become a more loving, compassionate and godly human."

More questions were raised over the next hour or so by all of us and at the end Swamiji encouraged us to sit in silence and meditate over the nature of suffering with him in an attempt to internalise what we were not necessarily taught, but guided towards with our own reason and intuition. As occurred at the end of each discussion, a few moments were set aside to utter an ancient and sacred Sanskrit mantra. The most common of which was the *Pavamana* mantra: *om asato ma sat gamaya, tamaso ma jyotir gamaya, mrityor ma amritam gamaya, om shanti shanti shanti*. Roughly translated, it meant: from the unreal lead me to the real, from the darkness lead me to the light, from the dead lead me to the immortal.

On another day, a couple of weeks after we first arrived, Swamiji and I were discussing metaphysics and conceptions of God. Initially, he spoke in depth of different ways Hindus understand God, before turning to the Abrahamic faiths of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and later to the natural spiritualities of Native Americans, tribal Africans and Indigenous Australians. He talked of how all religions and spiritual paths of life have found and understood some underlying supernatural Source of the universe, but the mind had attached different concepts to try and explain what this Source was. All had shortcomings, but all contained kernels of truth in some regard. I was amazed by his depth of knowledge of other faiths, having wrongly assumed that he would really only be familiar with his own. Eventually, he turned to me and asked how I understood the divine.

"Umm, I've been thinking about it for years," I began, "I've read a lot about how different religions see God, and I guess I've chosen aspects from each tradition that I see as having an underlying similarity and truth to it. My understanding is of, ah, a

trinity of infinite Being, Consciousness and Energy that is deeply interconnected, and is both within and beyond the universe. Energy is that underlying life principle, the Tao, that flowing force of the universe which manifests into all the spectacular things that inhabit it. Hmm, then there's Consciousness, meaning universal consciousness, the Mind of the cosmos that experiences and creates the universe. And finally Being itself is... uh, how do you even describe what being is? Is-ness maybe? In other words, my conception of God is somewhat like how mystics across religions have described the divine in their poems and stories. I also believe the key characteristic of this ultimate reality is love. Though sometimes a bit difficult to perceive, love is present in some way in everything. All of the religions of the world share the ideal of compassion, the selfless desire to help another out of love. If all the religions share compassion as a core ideal, why wouldn't love be a core aspect of God? Honestly, I could keep speaking for hours about this, I think too much about it," I let out a stunted laugh, "and I'm still to work out the kinks of my personal theology and metaphysics."

Swamiji sat in consideration for a few moments, "you have put thought into this, I can see. It is good that your thoughts are towards *Brahman* a lot," he said using the Sanskrit term for the ultimate reality or Godhead. "In all big ideas about the world... a German student of mine told me years ago that in his language the word *Weltanschauung* is a good word to use. I like the word, it means something like worldview but I was told it expresses so much more in German... sorry, I drift. All *Weltanschauungs*, about God or who we are, or why we are here, whatever, contain some tiny kernel of truth within them, no matter how small. But none of them tell the whole truth about the world. Ideas are good pointers, but that is all they are, they should not be mistaken for reality itself." He appeared as though he was physically fishing his mind - rolling his eyes upwards and tapping a finger on his chin - before returning to the conversation. "The Jains have a story of five blind men and the elephant. Each was touching a different part of the elephant and making descriptions based on what they felt. One felt the leg, another the left side and so on. Each has a somewhat

accurate description of what they've perceived, but because they are blind, they fail to see the elephant as a whole. Ideas are similar, they are good, they are a step in the right direction towards *moksha*, towards liberation, but they can only take you a part of the way."

"So how do I go further?" I enquired, eagerly awaiting his response.

"You must abandon the concepts you hold, abandon your deepest beliefs. Even if some may be true and others false, as long as you hold onto your beliefs and concepts in your mind, the veil will remain and you will never perceive reality as it is. You need to stop worrying about whether things are nice and logically sound, all it does will satisfy your base rationality, but ultimately they will just clutter your mind. To experience God and see the universe as it is, beyond *maya*, the illusion of the reality of the physical universe," he took a slow, drawn-out breath, "you must go beyond the mind and simply be totally aware in the present moment and aware that you and everything else is *Brahman*. It is as simple as that. Too much time is spent over-thinking these things."

Similar things were spoken in the monastery, but I never fully understood them and my mind often challenged this idea, so I asked Swamiji, "okay, so, if I'm not thinking, what makes abandoning my beliefs and concepts different from those who don't think about these things at all? Say, from someone who just mindlessly watches TV all day?"

As though he had his response loaded in a gun and ready to be triggered, he said, "there are many differences between one who is, what you can call, of no-mind and someone who is mindless. The mindless may actually think a lot, but usually about things that satisfy his or her base pleasures, his biological and material desires: food, entertainment, sex anything that brings instant gratification. There is nothing inherently wrong in these pursuits, but all can lead to suffering in so many different forms, for not just the person, but also those his life affects." Lifting a finger in the air, he waved it around for emphasis. "Ah, but thinking too much can be just as harmful as mindless impulses and sense gratification. And this is another reason why it can prevent liberation and seeing

reality as it is. Think of all the suffering caused by too much thinking: anxieties, fears, delusions, obsessions, attachment, anger - just to name a few. And the countless deaths and suffering caused by ideas, not just from religious fanaticism, fascism, racism and the like, but also seemingly innocent and benign ideas like freedom and democracy... there are even atrocities in the name of human rights, as paradoxical as that sounds. Insane what any idea can have the potential to cause, isn't it? Ideas often divide the mind, create separation and a dualistic *Weltanschauung*, preventing us from seeing reality as the interconnected oneness that it truly is." Clapping his hands together in a gesture of conclusion, he finished, "that is why we need to go beyond the base desires of the body. And go beyond the concepts, beliefs and the like created by the mind. You need to surpass those to see the light, to see the face of God, reality as it is.

I was vaguely reminded of what Hash told me about a Hindu understanding of purpose on the bus back in Nepal. "Uh, I think I understand what you mean... I'm not sure if I entirely grasp it though."

"You continue to intellectualise it. Let go of trying to understand these things with your mind, simply experience and drop all your thoughts and desires." He let out a laugh. "Amazing, isn't it? This simple advice is paradoxically the easiest and most difficult thing to do."

"I still don't see why pure ideas can be a hindrance, like holding ideas of boundless compassion towards all life, or staying hopeful that someone's suffering was all for a good reason. Say, what if I am able to create a concept of God that is logically sound and can satisfy the world's religions, I might be able to help bring more understanding to the world, to help bring unity among the religions."

"Ah, you over intellectualise too much, most people won't bother with complex explanations of God. They have far too many concerns to worry about, they have duties in their daily lives that cannot wait. Ideas are powerful, yes, but for an idea to be powerful it needs to both resonate in the hearts of people and have practical value. This is where the, umm, scholars and academics of the

world have gone too far. They have over analysed, over compartmentalised, and over conceptualised everything to the point where they have lost all meaning. And now all that's left is a small circle of people arguing about minor, insignificant differences that have no bearing to reality. The philosophers, sociologists and psychologists and the other 'social scientists' are the worst culprits. But for our purpose, we need to rid ourselves of all theological conceptions that add baggage to the journey. All interpretations of God and gods are simply that: interpretations, mental abstractions." He said with a forced bluntness. "Many point toward a glimpse of the truth of things, but never more. It's the same with any phenomena in this world as well: we can analyse, dissect, separate and theorise all we want about something, let's say, ah, an old banyan tree. Sure, we can learn a great deal from it." Slowly expanding his hands further and further outwards, he explained, "but to truly understand any single tree completely, one would have to learn not just about its physical properties, but its immediate ecosystem, and then the larger environment around the tree which allows it to flourish. And that's just for the present state of the tree! To understand its history, its evolution, one has to know the entire universe to truly understand how this one tree formed and exists." His arms were completely stretched out by the end of the statement, looking slightly comical but it emphasised his point. "The best we can do is to create generalisations and abstract concepts about the tree, and unfortunately, this simplified approach is mistaken for reality. Nothing inherently wrong or bad about this, we just replace the reality of the tree with the abstract..." He paused to let me digest this, but soon completely abandoned the topic saying, "anyway, enough of this for now. Let us go eat!"

Days passed and I began to notice trends in his discourses, key ideas that were the thread of his way. "What is necessary is the dismantlement of the gripping hold that our thoughts and emotions have on preventing us from experiencing God, the life force of the universe, and from truly knowing who we are," he began one discourse. Kara was sitting beside me and a few others had gathered around including some from the nearby village. Visitors were more common than I originally had thought. Several times a



week, a couple of new faces would show up, listen to a talk, have a small meal and then be on their way. Even the odd traveller, who has gone a little off the beaten track, would come across the ashram and enjoy the day here.

"Ideas, values, beliefs need to be pushed to the side if one wants to go beyond their ordinary state of consciousness into something far more expansive, grand," he continued with the increasingly familiar topic. "We experience this purer form of consciousness in our daily lives, we just don't often notice when it occurs. It happens in those sparks of creativity, where out of nowhere a brilliant spot of insight, or a fresh idea seemingly appears out of nowhere. That state of consciousness, free of thoughts and emotions, allows these things to appear from the deeper parts of your Being.

He paused to see if anyone had questions, so I asked, "isn't what you're saying right now just a bunch of ideas?"

"Yes they are. But I haven't mistaken them and attached myself to them in a way that prevents me from seeing things as they really are. I am simply communicating my experience to you in a rather limited but necessary way, that shouldn't be mistaken for the real thing, but more an indicator towards it."

"So what kind of relationship are we to have with our thoughts and emotions? Do we try and get rid of them? What if I like my thoughts and a lot of my emotions, what if I want to have those experiences?" Indira, a middle aged Indian woman at the ashram, questioned.

"Good question, there is nothing wrong with ideas in themselves. Many ideas have done wonders for humanity, but many others have brought about great suffering. The power of emotion has had a very similar impact. You wouldn't be here listening to me if it wasn't at least part due to your thoughts and emotions, pushing and driving you throughout your lives. Yes, all the technology you use, the society we live in is largely the collective product of our ideas, beliefs, feelings and emotions. They are fundamental to us as human beings." With the increasingly common waving of his finger in the air, he said, "the goal, therefore, isn't to get rid of them, that would make us nothing

more than robots. Instead, our goal is to rise above all of this, to stop being controlled by these processes and be on a more balanced level with them. Each one of us has a different mixture of all these processes, we all think a little differently, we all feel a little differently, so each one of our journeys is unique in its own way. That is why the dogmas of religions and ideologies, and to a lesser extent, even our education systems, can be so limiting. One solution for all is a poor solution to a problem.

But thankfully, there are ways that can be followed by anyone: the cultivation of awareness of your thoughts and emotions and of the world around you. Awareness is something we all have and it doesn't involve a long list of dogmas or criteria to work. Simply notice a thought arise and see how quickly it dissipates into nothing, notice when you feel an emotion and watch it develop, change, arise and disappear again. Listen to the sounds of the wind, of the birds, of all the noises in the world, watch the dance of sunlight on the myriad of things that it gives colour to. The cultivation of awareness will bring you closer to the present moment, closer to reality as it is." He paused to close his eyes and take a deep breath. It was obvious he was practicing exactly what he was preaching as joy crept onto his mouth as he simply embraced experience itself. "We are something much more than human," he continued, "deep within us is that divine spark, *atman*, and it is through that where we can have a glimpse of the totality of the universe, realising that all is one and that we are *Brahman*. An awareness of the unity of all things does wonders to our active being, it compels us to try our best and to do only what benefits others and what is ultimately good for oneself."

Swamiji stopped again to see if any questions were raised, seeing none, he changed track slightly, "even the idea of death is merely that: an idea. Death is often our greatest fear and the greatest fear of many living things. The death of our loved ones, our own death, terrifies us. And yes, there is the process of bodily and psychological death, but our souls go on forever, perhaps taking on a different body at some stage, or returning to the unified state with God, who is really to say? The mysteries of that which lie beyond remain as such. The infinitude that is God can allow all

of these things to be a possibility. Regardless of what happens after death, it is simply another process in the cycle of life, fundamental for it, indeed. All things must perish, yet all things are reborn in some way or other. Take what you eat, for example, all that was eaten was once alive, but has now been transformed to nourish another, and even the remaining waste is reused and renewed in some form or other. Death sustains life, simply put, so why do we fear such a natural process?" He left the question to linger in the air for a moment to see if anyone would answer.

"Umm, a fear of the unknown, the uncertainty of not knowing what will happen, and the suffering that can often be brought on by the process of dying. I think that's why we're afraid of death," answered Kara.

"Yes, a fear of the unknown has always robbed people of truly experiencing their lives to their full potential and experiencing the beautiful journey of life and the wonders of the universe. Many are always too afraid and restrained by the 'what ifs'. I believe that fear stems from a fear of death and suffering. Most people simply don't want pain. But we shouldn't hide from it, but embrace it, as it will likely turn out that the process of death is generally not as bad as it is perceived. That is why we can't let our mind with its anxieties rule us, because death will happen, it may be pleasant, it may be nasty, but it will happen regardless of what you want. So we can't let it rule us, as it is only our bodies and mind that will die anyway, all things of the physical will pass, yet we will still live on, we are all God aren't we?" Though soft spoken, these last words reverberated around the room, penetrating my mind, absorbing into it. Strange to hear these words uttered by a man and not read out of an old book. Swamiji let the discussion end at that moment, and we sat in silence to contemplate what he had said.

Months passed, and I could sense a subtle change growing throughout me. It was an incremental change, unnoticeable on a daily basis, but I could feel a growing consciousness about me, my mind expanding, my soul expanding, my love expanding for everyone and everything. In my hours of meditation and other yogic practices, I became more peaceful, sometimes even

experiencing moments of bliss. The simple food we were given tasted as good to me as anything created by the world's greatest chefs. The sounds and sights of the surrounding forests - the multitude of greens and browns colouring the environment, the birds, the wind rustling leaves, the faint rushing of the Ganga, and even the occasional loud, honking jeep - became like an Eden to me, and was more pleasurable than any movie, concert or any form of entertainment that I'd enjoyed before. Making love with Kara became an even greater experience than our first time together, a cosmic transcendent passion sweeping through us each time. Sex wasn't a distraction from the sacred like most monastic orders across the world claim it to be, it was the sacred incarnated. Almost ironically, practicing detachment and awareness made those very experiences all the more blissful. Detachment, too often being associated with asceticism and avoiding indulgence in the pleasures of life, yet this was the opposite, practising detachment allowed the simplicities of life to bring me more joy than one would think possible.

At the end of one particularly long day, I was sitting outside alone, looking over the valley below and enjoying the cooling warmth of the late afternoon as the hazy red sun of India was setting behind the forested mountains. Swamiji approached where I was and sat down beside me, and together we sat in silence for a few minutes before he asked, "how would you like to go on a pilgrimage? Stretch your legs and apply some of what you have learnt here."

This thought excited me, my adventurous side pushing through, screaming at me to say yes. "Where to?" I inquired.

"We would go to Gangotri, a town lying close to the source of the Mother Ganga, but from there we would walk further to its very source, Gaumukh. I apologise, but it will just be you and I that will go, Kara must stay. You have progressed far for such a short amount of time, you must truly be in the grace of the divine. You and I must go alone on this journey, it will not be long so do not worry."

"I'll talk to Kara about it, but I'm sure she'll be alright with it," I said, slightly sad that I wouldn't be able to see her for a few days, yet nevertheless thrilled to go on an adventure.

"I've already told her, and she's happy for you to go."

"Okay, let's go then!" I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, tired from a busy day.

Swamiji rose, using my shoulder to stand, and said, "I've been guided to take you there, and you will find out why when you arrive." He began to walk away, but as he was leaving, he turned and said, "we leave in the morning," before returning to his hut and leaving me in a state of perplexed excitement as I watched dusk sweep over the land, thinking and playing around in my mind of the coming journey.

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Pilgrimage*

The following morning, I rose earlier than usual, an hour before dawn, and packed a small bag of items I would need for the journey. Swamiji instructed that I was only to bring a few essential things and not to bother with anything that wasn't necessary, not much of an issue seeing as though I'd lost my niceties in the earthquake. I was quiet enough so as not to wake Kara from her sleep, tiptoeing around the room and ever so slowly putting things in the bag. As I was leaving the hut, I gave her a short kiss on the forehead which she must've registered in her dream as a slight smile shone across her face. Though we wouldn't be gone for long, there still remained a feeling of finality to my departure, as though something was going to change whilst I was gone.

Swamiji met me outside and I looked above into the heavens to see the reds and purples of the predawn sky, a few scattering stars still remained clinging onto the last vestiges of the night. One of the helper ladies had kindly woken early and cooked a simple breakfast for us that we hastily ate before we departed. I was surprised at first when I saw Swamiji carrying only a long wooden stick and a small metal container to hold water. He was wearing the saffron robes that demarked a sadhu and it was then I realised that he would be relying on alms for his food. Here standing in front of me was a true ascetic, relying on nothing but the grace of other humans and the universe for his survival.

The journey down to the tiny village was slightly more precarious with such little daylight to guide us, I slipped several times on loose rocks and had to assist Swamiji on numerous occasions. Though for a man of his age, he was remarkably adept at navigating the path without much help. Along the way down, I asked exactly how we were getting to Gangotri, aware that the

distance was probably too far to walk. He informed me that we were going to ride a ten hour long bus from Rishikesh to the holy town. Given my last experience with such a vehicle in the mountains, I was slightly dreading the ride, knowing well that the route would likely be similar in makeup.

Arriving at the village, the inhabitants were already waking up and beginning their day. The sun had risen, but was still to make its appearance over the surrounding hilltops. In the local dialect, Swamiji asked the same man who had driven me months ago for a ride into Rishikesh. I felt guilty as Swamiji banged on the door of his house, seemingly without a care, and woke the man up. Yet to my surprise, the moment he saw Swamiji he was almost joyous to take us. Both of us managed to squeeze onto the back of the motorbike more comfortably than I thought was possible, but then again, I had seen entire families of five jump onto a bike and manage to drive along without any issues. It was a strange freedom that is given in this country and many others of the developing world - a freedom to take risks that may put one in harm's way, the product of a lack of government control, or perhaps simply the mindset of being able to make one's own decisions on safety. I've noticed it is a freedom that is slowly eroding in the rich, highly developed nations of the world.

We were driven to the far side of Rishikesh, a further away bus terminal - or more accurately an open dirt space - than the one Kara and I had first arrived in months ago. Swamiji had timed our journey well, and after saying our farewells to the chauffeur, we only needed to wait a few minutes before we could jump onto the bus. We were too late to be able to sit down although this didn't last long, at least for Swamiji, as he was shortly offered a seat by a young man. With a loud sputtering of the engine, the bus, filled to maximum capacity, shortly took off, and was completely out of Rishikesh within minutes. I spotted a few other sadhus also catching a ride, sitting next to one another, both with large, grizzly, unkempt beards who gave me big toothless smiles when our eyes made contact with one another. Large packages of God only knows were taking up space down the aisle of the vehicle, a small, strange

blessing in disguise since they created more seats for people to rest on.

The road we travelled on must've been recently sealed as it was initially smooth and the bus was able to drive rather quickly, feeling like we were sailing across open flat waters with hardly a crest in the waves. However, as it ascended further up into the foothills of the mountains, the road gave way to more and more potholes and breaks in the asphalt, creating an increasingly uncomfortable journey as we were thrown from side to side as if a giant had grabbed onto the vehicle and was rattling us around. A few of the older people were obviously queasy and several times I heard the sounds of retching over the loud Indian pop music that was blasting through static speakers. Several months away hidden in the tranquillity of the ashram made the ride a bit of a test for me, though I was able to adjust relatively quickly to reengaging with civilisation, managing to find respite through a cultivated inner calm in the sweaty, hot and crammed bus.

We stopped several times along the road, once for an early lunch at a small hilltop town that offered panoramic views of the surrounding hills, many of which had other little villages sitting on them. A family of four who was also on the bus was fascinated by Swamiji and I, curious as to where I was going and why I was travelling with a holy man. They themselves were from Delhi and were also going to Gangotri to pay respects to the temple that was central to the town. I ate sparingly at the hilltop settlement, slightly nauseous from the bus ride, but still managed to have a few samosas and a cup of chai. It wasn't long after we left the town when the foothills began to disappear, becoming steeper and steeper. In the far distance, I began to see snow capped jagged mountains as we were weaving on narrow roads high in the valley in which the Ganga flowed mercilessly through. Forests of pine trees emerged that gripped desperately onto the mountainside, fearful of collapsing into the ravine below, a fate that had befallen a number of their brethren. Though I had spent months in a monastery nestled in mountains similar to these, I was still awestruck by their beauty and power, and it was exhilarating to be so high up and amongst them once again.



Over the next few hours we stopped on the side of the road, the bus barely able to make enough room for other traffic passing by. The stops were purely for people to relieve themselves, twenty or so men lining up next to each other to urinate off the side of the cliff, and unfortunately the women had to find a spot where they could go comfortably. I was happy to be able to breathe in the fresh crisp air of the Himalayas and enjoy a view uninterrupted by the movement of the bus and people within it. Each time the bus stopped, I saw the two sadhus walk off a few dozen paces away, but still plainly in sight, and they would squat down and pack a chillum, smoking it ritualistically, dedicating it to Shiva. On the first occasion, they noticed I was watching them and invited me over to smoke, but I declined as politely as possible with hand gestures. The rest of the bus journey was a repetitive, dull bumping and winding, as the vehicle arduously made its way deeper and deeper into the mountains. Nothing of significance happened, though at one point, the contents of one of the mysterious packages was revealed. It was filled with cucumbers, which the owner opened up, and began to peel and sell them to the other passengers. I burst out laughing at the oddness of such a business venture and opportunity, and unintentionally drew other laughs from those sitting around me.

The general monotony of the ride did allow me to think and wonder what was special about this pilgrimage that I was undertaking. I found it odd, that with all of Swamiji's talk about the unreality of the world and of ideas, what exactly was the point of even going on a pilgrimage. Yet when I asked he simply replied, "you will find out soon enough, be patient". I thought about the sense of finality I felt when I was leaving the ashram and wondered if I had a moment of precognition that something bad was coming my way. Yet the thoughts were soon swept aside when the bus finally stopped at its destination. After more than ten hours, we had arrived in Gangotri.

As soon as I hopped off the bus, I was swamped by a dozen people offering me rooms at cheaper and cheaper prices, each trying to outbid one another so that I would stay with them. I pushed through them, largely ignoring and rejecting their deals for

the time being and waited on the other side of the mob for Swamiji who shortly appeared behind me.

"I will go to the temple, and stay there for the evening. They will allow me to sleep there, but I'm afraid you'll have to get your own room from one of these gentlemen," Swamiji said as he made a sweeping gesture to the mob of guesthouse owners and workers.

"That's fine, will I meet you tomorrow morning then?" I asked.

"Yes, that would be best, I will be conducting rituals and will be in prayer for much of the rest of the day and evening. I'll find you in the morning and we will leave early. Rest well!" He said, patting me on the shoulder, turning and then walking straight into town, leaning slightly on his walking stick.

Almost immediately after he left, a man approached me, "room for you?" he asked.

"How much?" I asked unconcerned about the price, it would be cheap regardless of where I stayed.

"Three hundred rupees."

I bobbed my head in the Indian fashion, having picked up the habit from my few months staying here. I was happy that the room cost less than two cups of coffee back in my home country, and he directed me to the guesthouse which turned out to be the closest to the bus station and the entrance to the walking trail leading to the glacier. He walked me past several rooms, looking inside to see whether anyone was staying in them, and eventually found an unoccupied one for me. It was a larger room than what I had at the ashram and also came with an attached bathroom. The man told me that we'd sort out payments later and left me to my own devices. I noticed my hunger and after dropping my bag on the floor I left the guesthouse and headed into town to find some food.

The town of Gangotri lies near the bottom of a valley, situated on both sides of the river Bhagirathi, the major headstream of the Ganga. Similar to Rishikesh in that respect, but on a much smaller scale. Pine covered hills surround both sides of the town which are abruptly ended by jagged rocky cliff faces. A beautiful

location, hidden away from what one would typically conceive when thinking of India. It reminded me more of Switzerland or any other alpine landscape in Europe or Northern America. Whilst I walked down the narrow lane that served as the main road of the town, I looked up to see the late afternoon golden sunlight dance along the forest edges slowly giving way to the shadows of evening. The street could only handle foot traffic yet it was still bustling with pilgrims and trekkers from India and abroad. Dozens of shops were set up along the laneway, all selling similar things: bronze and plastic containers of varying sizes to collect water from the river to take back home, images of Shiva and other gods, snacks and other basic goods for the journey. In general, the stores catered perfectly for both pilgrims and travellers of all types. Dotted amongst the stalls were restaurants and cafes selling a variety of different cuisines and after several minutes of walking I spotted a few European-looking travellers in one of the restaurants and went in there to eat. On the menu were several Western meals like vegetarian burgers, pizza and pasta, and seeing as though I hadn't eaten anything like that in months, I thought I would treat myself to it. When I entered, the two Europeans, who appeared to be a couple, waved me over and invited me to join them, strongly recommending the burger with chips. With a laugh, I was all too happy to accept their advice.

"So you're doing the trek?" The woman, who had a strong Scandinavian accent, asked once I'd sat down and ordered my dinner.

"Ah yes, sort of... I'm actually doing a pilgrimage here." I answered somewhat awkwardly, a self-conscious side of me arose in slight fear of being labelled a nut job hippy type.

"Huh, that's interesting," was the man's response, who had a thick, obviously French accent, "are you one of those Hare Krishna people or something?"

I laughed, "no, not really, I've been staying at an ashram for the last few months and my... guru, for lack of a better word, asked me to come with him here."

"Where's he now?" Inquired the woman.

"At the temple, praying or something like that. He went off on his own way almost as soon as we got here. Long bus ride to get here, huh?" I said, changing the subject.

"We have a motorbike," the man said in a friendly yet slightly smug way, "we travel across India on the motorbike all around the mountains, all the way south, everywhere over the past couple of years. It is fantastic!"

I was impressed, I wasn't aware that a foreigner could just simply get a motorbike and drive. An empty feeling arose and a sudden desire to do something like that at some point in my life emerged.

"Are you walking tomorrow to the glacier?" Asked the woman, "we'll be leaving in the morning and will reach a tiny settlement of ashrams near the glacier."

"I suppose I'll be doing the same thing with Swamiji," I answered, "What're your names, by the way?"

"I'm Henri, and this is my girlfriend, Britt, nice to meet you. We'll probably see you along the way!"

My food arrived shortly after we introduced ourselves and I rather ravenously ate the burger and the chips. It tasted delicious to me even though it was definitely lacking in quality compared to what I'd had in the past. After finishing the meal, I bid farewell to the couple, certain that I would probably bump into them at some point tomorrow. I continued to wander throughout the town, soaking in the atmosphere, observing the daily happenings of a pilgrimage community.

Following the laneway, it opened up to a square that was dominated by the main temple of the town and a small series of ghats leading down to the river. The square was packed with Hindus lining up to enter the temple and many were conducting a wide variety of rituals all around the grounds. Bells were being rung, incense lit, groups of people droning chants, some pilgrims were cleansing themselves by the river. For being considered one of the most holy temples in India, it was a rather humble and small building, slightly underwhelming if anything. It was almost completely painted white with one main dome in the centre and four smaller ones in each corner. To me it looked more like an

Eastern Orthodox Christian church than a Hindu temple. I couldn't see Swamiji in the thick of the crowd, and I assumed he was probably inside already. It didn't feel quite appropriate for me to join the rituals, so after a few minutes of wandering the area I turned back towards my guesthouse to rest up and have an early night. I was all too aware that Swamiji would likely wake me at a very early hour.

But it wasn't Swamiji that woke me at an ungodly hour, it was my bowels. I woke to an intense nausea, a horrible sickly feeling worse than I'd had in recent memory, and as soon as I became more aware of my senses, I rushed headlong to the bathroom, and vomited on the floor and the walls, missing the toilet with the first gushes of sick that violently erupted from my body. My stomach contracted as I emptied out half digested food and pains twisted my innards as I retched on all floors over the grimy, stained bathroom. When I thought it was almost over, I started to feel it rush towards my other end and I quickly managed to sit on the toilet as it sprayed out in a fiery burst. The rancid stench of what came out of me, caused me to vomit again, and I soon felt faint from the amount of liquid that had escaped me all at once. I managed to stay upright, and the intensity of the nausea began to reduce to a far more mild and manageable state, leaving almost as quickly as it came. I didn't know what to do about the mess, but I still made an effort, using what was available to clean it up. I did an alright job as I wiped the sick off the floors and walls, occasionally dry heaving, but I still felt guilty for the poor person that would have to come in the morning and clean up whatever I'd missed.

Slowly returning to my bed, I managed to sleep feverishly for a few more hours until Swamiji woke me, banging loudly on the door. I stirred from sleep and jumped straight out of bed, but the moment I was upright, the nausea returned and I had to quell my stomach's urge to start vomiting again with all my concentration. Opening the door, I was greeted by Swamiji's beaming smile that faded as soon as he caught a glimpse of my face.

"You are not well," he stated matter-of-factly.

"No, not really, I think it was something I ate last night." I replied groggily.

"Can you walk?"

I shrugged, "I suppose I'll be fine."

"Good, drink lots and lots of water and you'll be alright.

Pack your bags and lets go. Think of it as a challenge, people have been through worse. We'll get you some medicine to help." Swamiji always had a way of being blunt yet somehow managed to sound kind at the same time.

I nodded and grabbed my bag, I hadn't unpacked the previous night, so I was out of the door within seconds, leaving money on one of the beds. Outside it was still dark with only a few signs of the coming day, but one store was half-open, the owner sleeping upright slouched against his chair. Swamiji woke him with a slight prod and he sold me some pills that Swamiji ensured would ease the nausea. We then walked towards the entrance of the hiking trail where we were stopped by park rangers to get permits, a means of the government to reduce the human footprint in the national park. My mind was a sickly haze and I could hardly focus my attention, Swamiji guided me through the process and we were shortly out into the forest surrounding the town. The sky was partially overcast but night was now fading. The pines surrounding the trail kept us in the darkness though, and I stumbled my way through the first few kilometres of pristine forest that was gradually rising higher and higher into the mountains. In the faint light, I could make out its beauty. It was a magical forest, covered in beds of pine needles, mossy stones, various types of fungi and a few collapsed trees here and there. I half expected a fairy or an elf to appear from behind a tree. The cool alpine air kept the forest crisp and fresh, and the aroma of the pines swept through and enwrapped my nostrils. I could hear the early morning calls of different birds, the creaking of trees being swayed by the light wind, and the rushing of the river in the distance.

Despite the distracting beauty, waves of nausea struck me frequently and each time it arose I had to suppress the urge to let it all out, if there was even anything left inside. I couldn't stomach the simplest or smallest morsels of food and consequently my

energy and pace was limited, needing to stop every twenty or thirty minutes for a break and a long drink of water. The tablets I took had hardly seemed to have changed anything and I slightly regretted even ingesting them. Swamiji encouraged me to keep pushing on, and attempted to distract me by engaging in conversation that was largely one sided as I could only really nod and muster a few slurred words. I felt weak and tired even though we hadn't come far, but I kept pushing regardless.

The tree line eventually began to thin out as our altitude rose and we were presented with glorious views of the valley we were in - covered forest, cliffs capped by jagged mountain peaks covered in snow. The remnants of avalanches dotted the landscape, breaking through the forest, some reaching all the way to the bottom of the valley. The river that had carved this valley over the eons roared below violently, dirty from the sediment of the river rather than from human waste. Looking ahead, I could see the mountains rise higher and higher and the beauty of my surroundings helped take my mind from my sickness and exhaustion.

"Ah, the beauty of creation," Swamiji said whilst we were resting on a large rock shortly after we had risen mostly above the tree line, and were now looking over the desert-like landscape that was before us. Rock formations, eroded by time, latched on to the mountain side, and enormous piles of gravel made the scenery appear as though we had transported to a different geographical region. The alpine world had disappeared to give way to something more barren, yet eerily beautiful. "This is why we do not live in a world that is completely illusory, but instead it is a reflection that contains the essence of the divine. Our civilisations used to be so close to this primal creation, yet we have almost lost it completely," he said with a hint of melancholy, lowering his head. "We build concrete jungles and destroy so much in the name of development, purely to serve our own interests. But why? Does it make us happy, has it really made us better people? No, it just makes us comfier, but even that is arguable. As much as we want to escape it, we are still subject to nature's laws."

I nodded, only partly paying attention to what he was saying, each time he opened his mouth during the journey, Swamiji would make a few statements and that was all. We were hardly speaking as we walked, but he started to chat away every time we took a break. He was remarkably fit given his age and stature. The frail man was drawing on an unseen energy that appeared to continuously nourish him. I would even hazard a guess that he doesn't sleep at night, but rather enters a trancelike state, resting in the divine.

"There is no evil in the natural world, all is simply part of a cycle," he began at another short rest. "Life begets death and death begets life. There is beauty to the most horrible looking creatures and the way they feed off one another. Even though at first glimpse it appears to do awful things, almost evil things, it has a purpose that is invaluable to the world it lives in and is an inseparable part of the interconnected chain of the universe. In knowing that, there lies the recognition of a deeply hidden beauty to even the most repulsive life forms. People though, hmm, they are a different matter. We have a moral conscience, we are all aware that there is something inside us that makes us want to do and be good. Yet we are also capable of great acts of harm, evil acts you could say in crude language." Pointing at me, which managed to somewhat focus my attention for a tiny amount of time, he said, "nobody is pure evil, there is good in all, some just need to dig incredibly deeply to find it. And if we didn't have that choice to do right or wrong, would any of our good acts be truly good, if we were simply programmed to always do so? Can something positive really exist, if there wasn't a negative to go with it? The Chinese figured out that the two go hand in hand and both exist as compliments to one another in the world, I believe they call it the *yin-yang* principle. Seeing the whole is what is important, rather than focusing on the division that is too often caused by seeing opposites in perpetual conflict."

Again, I was hardly registering what he was saying, as I took large gulps of water and eased my legs. His questions were purely rhetorical and I think he was aware of my hazy, groggy state of mind. For a man that tried to detach us from ideas and



concepts, he sure loved talking about them in between long silences. We continued walking for several hours, the trail twisted and turned and narrowed. At times it had completely disappeared under gravel and we had to precariously navigate our way through, slipping and sliding and barely avoiding falls. There were a few crossings of large, swiftly flowing streams that fed into the river with treacherous and improvised bridges made out of rusty corrugated iron sheets which loudly creaked as we walked over them. A few large avalanches of snow or gravel also blocked the path that we had to climb and walk over. Yet slowly and surely, we were getting closer to the enormous mountains that were initially far off into the distance, but were now looming large and growing over us. The temperature started to cool down, but the sun that snuck in between clouds gave us extra warmth. I started to feel better, the frequent water breaks kept me hydrated, and the pills must've started to have some limited effect. My mind was still slightly befuddled and groggy, though moments were becoming clearer and I was able to appreciate my surroundings and comprehend the words of Swamiji more and more. The surreal desert landscape became increasingly prominent as the pine trees completely disappeared and instead the barren terrain with only scatterings of shrubs came to dominate the area. We were no longer hugging the side of the mountain, but rather it flattened out substantially and turned into a world that was alien. If it wasn't for the snow-capped mountains surrounding us, I would've easily believed we were off-world on an inhospitable planet.

Finally, after about seven or eight hours of walking, we topped over the crest of an elevated rocky outcrop and in front of us the small settlement that the European couple mentioned was revealed. It was mid-afternoon and the clouds were slowly drifting away, the sun had passed its peak and had begun its slow decline. I was utterly relieved when I witnessed this sight and Swamiji announced, "we will rest here for the night and finish your pilgrimage tomorrow morning."

The settlement was as tiny as it sounded. It held within it several little gray, drab concrete ashrams with large and sloppily painted writing in the Devanagari script along the walls. There was

also a camping ground where a number of tents were set up and I could make out a group of a dozen or so people huddled in a circle around a small fire. On the outskirts, there was a sizeable guesthouse appearing slightly out of place, like a ski lodge without any nearby slopes. We followed the trail down the outcrop and into the town, going straight to the largest and most central ashram. We were greeted in an open courtyard that overlooked the wide valley we were in, offering an enchanting view of the dramatic peaks surrounding us which gave life to an otherwise lifeless landscape, the stark contrast between the ugly man-made structures and God's handicraft ever so pertinent. The man looked more like someone who ran the affairs of the ashram, rather than someone who was deeply religious, but appearances can be deceiving and he greeted us in a manner that was almost ritualistic. He showed us to rooms that were located in a dark and narrow hallway, too low lying for me to stand completely upright. We were given separate rooms which were nothing more than a large, hard mattress with several blankets that covered the entire flooring. Wooden shutters concealing a small window let in a limited amount of light, but managed to keep out the wind fairly well. The only electric source of illumination was perched next to the doorway but didn't work, as the only power in the settlement would've come from an inactive portable generator somewhere nearby. The man told us that dinner was at seven o'clock and breakfast from six in the morning and then left us to our own devices.

"Get some rest, you deserve it," Swamiji said warmly, "if you're not up, I'll wake you at dinner time. You have to be better by tomorrow, you'll need to be in good condition."

"Okay, Swamiji," I yawned.

"I pushed you fairly hard today, but I bet you feel good about yourself, true?"

"Physically, no, not really, but mentally, yes, it's good to be challenged." I answered rather proud of myself and what I'd achieved, even though a doctor would've probably recommended me not to have walked so far.

Swamiji laughed, "good, I will see you later." He closed the door behind him, and I collapsed onto the bed and wrapped myself

in blankets the moment he left, falling asleep faster than my eyes closed.

A light tapping on the door stirred me from my sleep after what felt like only a few minutes, but when I opened my eyes, there wasn't any light shining through the cracks of the shutters. In the darkness, I fumbled around until I grabbed my coat and reached the door, opening it and vaguely seeing the outline of Swamiji who greeted me, saying that it was almost dinner time. I nodded and left with him. It was far colder than earlier and I shivered as mist seeped out of my nostrils when I breathed. We went to the courtyard which was illuminated by fluorescent lighting and was now teeming with dozens of people. It had been set up for the evening meal, three rows of straw mats around ten metres long were arranged on the concrete flooring with twenty or so steel plates placed along each of them. Pilgrims and other travellers were gradually sitting down and awaiting their meal, yet it was still relatively quiet with only whispered conversations happening around the place. I spotted Henri and Britt on the edge of the courtyard, sipping tea and chatting between themselves and a rather heavyset middle-aged Indian man. Joining them and introducing Swamiji, I talked about the hike with them and how they found it. The Indian man was curious about our reasons for being here and I engaged with him briefly on general Hindu beliefs. He was a very pleasant and kind man who was part of the burgeoning religious middle class of the cities, here on a short break from work, doing what he believed was a sacred duty. There was a powerful feeling of community to the grungy ashram, strangers from all walks of life gathering for similar albeit still different purposes, reminding me of the unity within diversity of humanity.

A shout interrupted our discussions signalling that dinner was being served and we all sat down near each other on the concrete floor in front of our plates, as numerous servers came past providing us with bulk produced rice, dal, curried vegetables and chipati. Before everybody began to eat, a collective prayer rose up amongst us all and was chanted with passion by most of those present: *Brahmarpanam Brahma havir, Brahmagnau*

*Brahmanaahutam, Brahmaiva tena ghantavyam, Brahmakarma samadhina.* It roughly meant that God offers us food and we offer it to God, and by doing godly acts we can attain Him. It wasn't dissimilar to other prayers of thanking for food present in other religions, and it was different in words but not substance to the one that was often recited before meals back at the ashram. After the prayer was finished, everybody started filling their mouths, using only their hands, maintaining total silence throughout the meal. I was still queasy, but managed to scoff down most of it, the hunger due to my lack of eating outweighed the reluctance my stomach felt. Though the fluorescent lighting and dull, grey concrete walls and ground created a somewhat dingy atmosphere visually, there was a peace and pleasantness to eating a meal on the ground with at least forty strangers hidden away from civilisation, who were all here for the same purpose. I wished Kara was with me to experience this moment and wondered what was so important that she wasn't allowed to come, but the thought didn't linger long, being in full knowledge that I would be seeing her again in a matter of days.

When the servers came past again, I declined a second helping of any of the food except for another chipati, and once I was finished eating, I stood up and went to a washing basin to clean my plate. Afterwards, I accepted an offer of tea and lingered around talking with Henri and Britt about their travels and the simple things of life. The night sky was clear and full of stars, thousands glittering and casting their glow over the beautiful, barren landscape. At the back of my mind was a slightly nagging worry about the coming day and what was going to happen when we reached the destination. Henri and Britt asked if we wanted to join them tomorrow for the final part of the trek, but Swamiji interrupted them and declined in his strangely kind but blunt manner. I went to bed within an hour or two, still feeling exhausted from the days walk, yet my nausea had almost completely disappeared and I now thought I would be ready for the final stage of the journey.

The following morning, I received my usual knocking on the door by Swamiji and again the thought arose as to whether the

man actually ever slept. I had slumbered dreamlessly, sinking completely into the dark, peaceful void of the unconscious mind. The sun had risen already but it was overcast and threatening with rain or snow, whatever happened at this altitude. A simple breakfast of porridge and tea was served but without the formality of the previous evening as only a handful of people were awake. We didn't wait around long, however, and I rushed my meal, and before I had managed to finish my tea, Swamiji was urging us to go before too many people had left. He must've wanted to beat the crowds or something like that and I only caught a brief glimpse of Henri and Britt before I departed, wishing them farewell and good luck.

It was only a walk of a few hours to the glacier and the trail was mostly flat and relatively straight. The path disappeared at times, replaced by rocks that had to be hopped across, the trail coming closer and closer to the river itself, the murky waters gushing and pounding against the boulder strewn shoreline. Around us stood several prominent peaks that towered above, the most notable of which was named the Shivling, called as such because of its shape representing the Shivalinga, a physical symbol of the god Shiva that is found across the subcontinent in both natural and manmade forms. It was a striking mountain to behold and I found it difficult at times to draw my gaze away from it and return my attention to the path before me. A few other pilgrims had left as early as we had, a group of Sadhus sat by the stream, collecting water in jugs and waving to us as we passed by. A few stupas were made along the path as well as a number of miniature temples, little more than tiny shrines dedicated to Shiva. Red arrows painted on rocks showed the direction of the trail to help pilgrims and trekkers. The area had a feeling of holiness to it, the concentration of thousands of years and possibly millions of pilgrims worshipping here left an energetic imprint in the valley, the presence of the divine was strong. Apart from the crashing of the river, all was silent, calm and still.

After some time had passed, I caught sight of the glacier, Gaumukh, which roughly translates to cow's mouth though I didn't see the resemblance. It didn't look quite as I expected, thinking that

it would be shining white and pristine, but it was actually covered in dirt, the ice stained brown, and now I understood why the river was of a similar colour. It was an enormous wall of ice that came to a sudden halt, water flowing from underneath it. I'd never seen a glacier before and I was awestruck by the idea that this was a giant river of ice that had helped carve out the mountains and valley around me. We walked ever closer to the wall of ice, the path didn't exist anymore and we had to climb and jump our way to the absolute source of the mightiest river in the country and arguably the most sacred in the world. It was a moment of great significance for me, a journey that had begun in the mountains of the Himalayas months ago which had almost come full circle to the very same mountain range. A feeling of exhilaration leapt through my heart and body, and I felt a tear of joy flow down my cheek. Stopping at the foot of the glacier, I heard the light trickling and dripping of water, some of it spraying softly on my face as it landed on the outcrops of rocks and ice below. More water came, but from the skies as rain began to drizzle down, pattering lightly on the ground around us.

Swamiji allowed me to enjoy the sight of this natural wonder for several minutes, before he said, "now your trial will begin."

"My trial?" I asked puzzled.

"We are going to induce a glimpse of the Beyond for you, it is willed, but first you must prove yourself." His tone was solemn, I hadn't heard him speak like this before. His normally kind and joyous voice was replaced by graveness.

I hesitated, a tinge of fear hit me in the chest and shot up out of my mouth, "w-w-what do you want me to do?"

"You must completely immerse yourself in the waters and carry yourself to that rock," he pointed to a large stone that struck out from the middle of the river directly below the wall of ice.

"There, you will circle it until you can bear it no longer. Then you will climb upon the rock and sit and cleanse your mind and body, purifying it. There you shall witness the divine and realise the truth of things."

"What? But I could die? Is it really necessary?" I panicked, it sounded ridiculous, archaic.

"Yes, that is the whole point. You must be willing to face death, and be close to it, if you want to truly surrender your ego and realise the nonexistence of death."

"No! That's a stupid ritual!" I burst out, "I don't need to risk my life like that!" I was frustrated and scared at the same time. I started to question all that I'd been through and why I more or less blindly followed this old man.

"Calm down, use what you've learned. It is your mind and your base instincts that are wired to fear death which are talking. You are still being controlled. This is an important step in your destiny, sometimes you must face danger, even throw yourself into it." His voice lost its solemnity, becoming soothing. It relaxed me slightly. "What I am saying is nothing new to you, is it? Death isn't real, it's just the pain that you fear, isn't it? But try and transcend it by doing what I ask. I am not forcing you, you can walk away right now, you can even remain at the ashram for as long you desire. But your future lies in this moment and it will shape who you are forever."

"Is there another way?" I sighed.

"Yes, but it may take years, decades even, this path is offered to you instead... it is willed."

I hung my head in resignation, "alright," I took a deep breath, "I trust you." I didn't fully know why, but a spark glimmered within me, an inner voice speaking to go... to let go and plunge into the waters. The same voice had guided me all this way and it had always been right. I removed my clothes, already shivering in the cold, raindrops fell on me along with the splash of the glacier's water trickling down the icy wall. There was no shoreline, and I couldn't see anything in the murky waters, nothing to show how deep it was. I sat down by the nearest rock by the river, and dipped my left leg in, the rushing waters tugging at it, and I hesitated for a moment before sliding my right leg in. The waters were freezing, and I wanted to pull out, but I slowly went further and further into the channel, unable to grasp the bottom with my feet until I was almost completely below the water except

for my head. I struggled to keep a hold of the rock I was on. I felt my entire body chill and pain surged. I already desperately wanted to come out, but I was driven to keep going. My mind nagged at me, saying how ludicrous this was, how I would die of hypothermia if I stayed much longer. One slight respite was that there was a series of rocks I could hang on to that would lead me to the one Swamiji instructed me to go towards. Slowly, slowly, I stretched my arms to reach out to the nearest one thrusting out of the waters, grasped it and pulled myself over towards it. I felt a sharp pain streak across my legs as I moved, cutting myself on something unseen below. I felt the gash of a wound in my leg, the skin flapping against the surging current. Waves were crashing over my head, making it difficult to breathe. I thought I would be swept away, to be thrown and tumbled down the river to my death. But I held on. I pulled myself to the next rock, then the following one, and before I realised I was at the large stone where I was meant to be, the icy wall of the glacier looming over it. I felt myself able to remain in the water for longer, the frozen waters were numbing the pain. I circled it once, twice, a third time but then could take no longer, and struggled to pull myself onto the rock. I sprawled myself on top of it, breathing heavily, and shaking violently from the chills, my skin had turned a pale blue, yet I regained my composure and sat up and closed my eyes...

Nothing. Oblivion.

A void, a black terrible void. Though I wasn't there, or anywhere. The world had disappeared and nothing but emptiness remained. I wasn't afraid, I wasn't feeling or thinking anything. I wasn't experiencing anything, I myself was aware of nothing. Yet there was an awareness, one that had no centre of focus, as there was nothing to be the subject or object of that focus.

An explosion of light, a brilliant transcendent, illuminating light, of such beauty and peace and bliss that nothing in the physical universe could equal it. This light contained all things within it, and yet remained beyond - galaxies, nebula, suns, planets, plants, animals, people, the universe. All conscious, all being, and I was a witness to it, and I was it. I was consciousness, I was love, I was experience. I was all. I was the creator, sustainer



and destroyer. I was time, I was space. I was the trees, I was the mountains, I was the oceans. I was the antelope, the prey, I was the lion, the predator. I was a newborn baby in the arms of her mother, and I was the mother. I was the man on his deathbed, and I was his family witnessing his dying throes. I was the plastic wrapper dancing in the wind, and I was the wind carrying the litter. I was the concrete pathway in a bustling metropolis, and I was the tiny weed that sprouted from the cracks. I was the starving child, unable to move, and I was the rich warlord exploiting the poor and destitute. I was the murderer, the rapist, sentenced to death, and I was the victim and the executioner. I was all. I was life and death. I was God.

My eyes opened. I emerged from the state, returning to normal consciousness, reeling, and I fell onto my back. I was shaking profusely and uncontrollably, my entire body felt as though it was on the verge of collapse. I knew I had just had a powerful glimpse of that which lies beyond the veil of this world. My head was pounding, my heart felt as though it was about to fly out of my chest. A moment of sheer terror bordering madness swept over me and I looked at Swamiji as he watched calmly from the side, whilst I was writhing and spluttering. This horror that consumed me soon dissipated and was replaced by a stillness of the soul, a tranquillity that soothed my being. and I regained control over my mind and body. I attempted to think back to what I experienced but couldn't recreate it in my head or the feelings of what just happened, it lay beyond the reach of my mental faculties and any worldly sensation or emotion that I had experienced before. I had witnessed God for a brief instant, beheld the divine, became the divine and returned.

Had only seconds passed? Minutes? Hours? It felt like an eternity that I was in that state, but paradoxically a brief flash. Energy and strength had miraculously returned to me, I remembered I had to get back. I entered the water, but found little issue in crossing, yet when I dragged myself back onto land, at the feet of Swamiji, I was drained again, utterly exhausted. He helped me upright, and wrapped me in clothes, both mine and his, and hugged me tightly for warmth. Kneeling with him by the source of

the Mother Ganga, I began to sob profusely onto his shoulder, a mixture of joy, relief and a hint of madness. "Well done," I heard him whisper in my ear as I continued to weep in his arms.

Once I had regained my composure, he stood me up, and lightly grabbing me with both arms on my shoulders, he said in his calm voice, "so you have had a glimpse of the face of God, into the mind of God. Is that really the end of things? You have come a long way, but far more still lies ahead. Life doesn't have an ending, things don't come to a conclusion nice and tidily like in a fairy tale. It keeps moving on and on into eternity and not even death stops it. Death itself brings a renewal of life and the eternal machinations of the universe churn on forever in an endless process of creation and destruction." He embraced me tightly once again. "You have come to know thyself, now you must venture onwards and continue your journey, the same journey that many before you have walked and many will still walk after you. You must now guide others, and help those who are suffering in this world. This part of your journey marks neither the beginning nor the end, both are meaningless to that which lies beyond ordinary conception. Remember all of this well, and you yourself will truly become an infinite reflection of the ultimate reality that we call God."