

MORNING PRAYER

from the Office of the Dead

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Also by Brother Bernard Seif and a part of this series:

(2001). *Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press / iUniverse.com.

(2002). *VIGILS from the Office of the Dead*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press / iUniverse.com.

This book is a work of fiction, based on seminal ideas drawn from the life of the author. The characters and situations in this monastic murder mystery are the product of the author's creative imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any medical or psychological information provided herein is a part of this fictional work and is not presented as a form of diagnosis or treatment.

To my brother Dan, now with God, and to my dear sister-in-law Rita.

Chapter 1

No murder or mayhem at the moment thought the monk as he settled himself on his wooden prayer bench in the Oratory. I haven't stumbled over a dead body or had to deal with anyone in our community being kidnapped in a long while. Not even a novice having recurring nightmares has disturbed my peace of mind! Underneath Brother Francis' reflection concerning gratitude for a relatively calmer existence was a lower-case question mark. Perhaps he was not so sure he liked things this way.

He spoke to his Master. Thank you, Jesus, for inviting me to found this small monastic community. We usually have about six members, plus or minus one or two. You called me from a more active form of religious life to lead a more monastic expression of the vowed life, but it seems that I am busier than ever. The most important thing is keeping my mind and heart fixed on you, Rabbi Jesus.

It seemed to Brother Francis that Christ was in agreement with his assessment of the vocation to which he had been called. The prayer bench he sat on to meditate hinted of the mysteries of the East. He would start by simply kneeling down and then place the low bench made of pinewood over his ankles. Two pieces of wood formed the sides and a flat top, tilted slightly forward, completed the meditation aid. When Francis would sit back on the bench, he was about eight inches off the floor, but his mind and heart would be soaring to the heavens.

Francis' meditations were more contemplative and non-verbal than they had been many years ago. He would often take a mantra, a simple word or phrase, and repeat it over and over again. Sometimes Francis would repeat the mantra in rhythm with his breath--once on each exhalation. One of his favorite mantras came from Asia and is used there by millions of people everyday.

Loving Kindness Mantra

May I be filled with loving kindness,
May I be well.
May I be peaceful and at ease,
May I be happy.

At times Francis would change the pronoun to "may *he* or *she* or *they* be filled with loving kindness." He did this especially when he found someone difficult to deal with. If he was praying for that person, Francis thought that his heart, if not his feelings, was in the right place. When the Abbot focused on his breathing during meditation he would expand his lower abdomen on an inhalation and relax it on an exhalation over and over again, thus bringing body, mind, and spirit into oneness.

Whatever tool Francis chose from the many he had learned as a novice, or from his spiritual reading, or from Asian hospital rotations and monastic adventures there, his goal was always union with God and honesty with self. This morning, however, his prayer was more conversational than usual. He believed that the Holy Spirit is the one who really leads the prayer and that it is up to us to respond simply and in freedom. Today the Holy Spirit seemed to be leading him toward an informal chat with Jesus.

Recently Francis had celebrated the forty-year anniversary of his entrance into monastic life. During all of those years his constant prayer was the Liturgy of the Hours, more commonly known as the "Divine Office" prior to the liturgical updating of Vatican Council II, which is the public or common prayer of the Church. This set of prayer services is said throughout the world. Originally they were chanted in Latin, but since the Council, they are said in the vernacular language of the local region. The Liturgy of the Hours is a way to celebrate and consecrate the various stages of the day and night to God, and Francis found these periodic services helpful during the course of his busy days, in bringing him back to the reason he became a monk in the first place.

The Abbot was not sure which part, or Hour, of the Office he liked the best. At certain times of his life Francis was deeply drawn to the Office of Vigils, which is a nocturnal prayer service, said sometime the previous evening or during the night, but certainly before dawn. The somewhat lengthy readings of that Hour fed his soul and educated him about scripture and the liturgical feast or season being celebrated.

The rhythm of Francis' prayer and daily life was drawing him these days toward the Office called Morning Prayer. In the old Latin way of referring to this Office, it was called *Lauds*. This word simply means praise.

Like the other Offices, which include Midday Prayer (generically called Daytime Prayer because it can be prayed as Midmorning, Midday, or Midafternoon Prayer), Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer, this liturgical service is made up largely of Psalms.

The Psalms were sung by our Jewish sisters and brothers and reflect their faith in the Creator as someone who led them from slavery to freedom. Many times this slavery and freedom is an inner experience. The monastic doctor had often seen very poor and sick people who had great inner freedom, while the materially wealthy and healthy were sometimes much enslaved. The inner journey was the real one for him.

Francis had been to Israel on two occasions and felt deeply about the need to pray and work for freedom for all peoples. He saw places of imprisonment, destruction, and violence juxtaposed against all of the famous places that make up the sites where Biblical events occurred throughout the whole Judeo-Christian experience.

The Office of the Vigils had been celebrated in the dark and early hours of that day and the time of quiet meditation followed. The founder was preparing his mind and heart to celebrate Morning Prayer, which would begin shortly, with the community. Nature was joining in the preparation, hinting at sunrise by streaking the sky with a bit of red, orange, gold, and pink. In addition to the chanting of the Psalms, with antiphons setting the theme for the various feasts of the liturgical calendar, Morning and Evening Prayer had a reading from scripture as a focal point and then some intercessory prayers to God for the Church in general. These prayers were verbalized and then there was a period of time where the community members and guests of the monastery could voice their own petitions to God.

Petitionary prayer is yet another form of prayer. Francis often thought that people made too much of petitionary prayer. His focus was very much on prayer as a vehicle for relating to someone whom he loved, and not so much a "give me, give me, give me" kind of relationship, yet he knew that we do have the freedom to ask for what we need from friends and loved ones and he did that too with his God.

Following the petitions at Morning Prayer, a canticle from the Bible known as the *Benedictus* in Latin is chanted every day. In English it is often referred to as "Zachary's Canticle." This song is a way of rejoicing in the new day, the new life that one finds in spirituality, and is also a reminder of Jesus' resurrection early on a Sabbath morning.

Even though Francis wondered about his favorite Office and found his opinion changing, moving through the various Offices as he moved through life, the Canticle of Zachary continued to be one of his favorite expressions of prayer from the Scriptures.

The door behind him and to his right opened, and in came one of the nuns from the community. She lit a candle on the altar and rang the bell, which called the other members of the community to prayer. The bell is revered as the voice of God in a monastery--calling the community together to worship.

One of the monks entered next, along with a few men and women who were there on retreat, and before long there was a community of about eight members gathered to support one another in reverencing their God breaking through into the new day.

Because it was a Sunday morning, incense was lit on the altar to add to the festivities. The aroma of this particular incense was sandalwood, and its smoke rose from a pewter incense holder.

At this point the meditating monk was doing some belly breathing and the sandalwood aroma wafted toward him, taking him back in his mind and heart to various trips he had made to Asia as a younger monk. He found himself welling up with thoughts and feelings of gratitude that the God of surprises had created the opportunity for him to become a naturopathic doctor specializing in Chinese medicine, as well as a clinical psychologist specializing in behavioral medicine. Some of the patients referred to office visits with the monk / doctor as "one-stop shopping."

Francis rose up off of his prayer bench and slid it under the chair behind his choir stall. The chairs were new. (Only the *best* would do in this monastery.) They were delivered via UPS after having been ordered on the Internet from Staples. The choir stalls--podiums of pinewood used to hold an open book in front of

someone who was chanting the Divine Office and capable of storing a few books underneath on a shelf--were made by Brother Benedict of their monastery. Francis sat in his chair and made his "Direction of Intention."

St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales, founders of this entire world-wide family of monks and nuns, committed lay women and men, and priests and religious brothers, encourage the members of their spiritual family to make such a Direction of Intention. It is really an offering of oneself, and acceptance of all that occurs, upon rising in the morning and frequently throughout the day before their various activities, including times of prayer. Francis offered his prayer to God, embracing whatever experiences of consolation or desolation, clarity of mind or distraction that would occur therein. After that he rapped on the wooden wall to his left with his knuckle as a sign for the assembled community to stand and begin their celebration.

He intoned, "O God, come to my assistance." The community responded with, "O Lord, make haste to help me." The group in the Oratory stood and bowed in unison from their waists chanting, "Glory to you, Source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen. Alleluia." It was Sister Jane's turn to play the keyboard accompanying the chanting, so Brother Francis sat in his chair and sung the Psalms with the group. He listened attentively to the reading of Scripture and poured his heart out in petitionary prayer as the needs of people all over the world were prayed for. He asked God for the strength to do whatever he could do actively to help some of those needs so that his prayer would not be simply words. He knew well, however, the power of God to listen to those words and act on them. When the Canticle of Zachary was intoned, Francis stood with the others and sang in a new and more vibrant way that blessed canticle which Zachary sang in prophecy when his son, John the Baptist, was born.

Something deep in the heart of the Abbot knew that an adventure was brewing. Maybe it was simply wishful thinking, but his intuition was reputed to be rather sharp--and he could feel a rumbling in the atmosphere.

Canticle of Zachary

+Blessed are you, God of Israel
for you have turned your face towards your people and set us free,
and have raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of your servant.
As you spoke through the mouths
of your holy prophets of long ago,
that we should be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who oppress us;
to perform the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and to remember your holy covenant,
the oath you swore to Abraham and Sarah,
to grant us deliverance from evil,
that we might serve you without fear,
in holiness and righteousness
all the days of our lives.
And you, little child,
will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Holy One
to prepare God's ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to God's people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
because the heart of our God is full of mercy towards us,
the day shall dawn upon us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet

into the path of peace.

The service concluded with Brother Francis chanting a prayer to sum up or collect the thoughts and feelings of the group. Then he gave his blessing to the community. It was time for breakfast.

Chapter 2

Silent people drifted out, one or two at a time, and made their way to the main building for a meal prepared by the Abbot. Francis believed that he got off easily just cooking on Sunday mornings. He typically alternated between making Cream of Wheat and Quaker Oats. When he was especially motivated, Francis would make whole-wheat pancakes, rationalizing that perhaps the whole-wheat in the pancakes helped to balance out the syrup that usually bathed his creations.

The community and guests ate in silence, each filling his or her plate and finding a place to sit. Some remained at the table while others wandered out onto the porch, or even a little further down the steps and onto a bench next to a little fountain trickling with water which glistened in the sunlight. When most of the people were finished with their breakfast, hellos were exchanged and animated conversation followed as the dishes were washed and food put away.

The community tried very hard to keep Sunday as a true day of rest. No shopping was done and no laundry was washed. Sometimes one member or another would go off to the woods to spend some quiet time hiking and praying, another person might visit a friend in the area, and perhaps Brother Francis would choose to visit his Tibetan Buddhist friends in New Jersey. Whatever was done was for the refreshment and renewal of the members of the community. Guests living there for retreat would continue their silence, perhaps taking a long walk in nature or sitting outdoors with a spiritual book, luxuriating in the fact that they had a little time and space in their busy lives to do such a things.

As for Francis, he went over to his white mobile home Hermitage on the monastery grounds and changed from his blue scapular and cowl and gray tunic into a red tee shirt complete with a gold dragon painted on the front. A pair of black Asian pants that looked much like sweat pants but were made of light cotton rather than a heavier material completed the change.

The Catholic monk with Eastern training made his way around to the back of the Hermitage which made up his office, waiting room, and cell, and knelt down on the ground, touched his forehead to the earth, then lingered there for a moment. Francis stood up and began shaking his left arm and shoulder all the way down to the fingertips. He then willed his right arm into that same kind of activity. Next he raised his left foot off the ground and began shaking his left leg, loosening it up from the hip joint down to his toes and then, after putting his left foot back on the ground, began shaking the right leg in a similar fashion.

It was a fall day and the sun was warm and refreshing to him, and created a beautiful harmony with the gentle breeze that was blowing. The yang of the sun and the yin of the breeze fashioned a vibrant, life giving balance within the heart, mind, and body of the monk. Brother Francis continued this first part of his practice, called "Shaking the Tree," for a good ten minutes. This was one of the many simple exercises he often did to warm up for his qigong practice.

Loosening up the body in this way is akin to a farmer plowing the field in preparation for planting. The physical body becomes loose and receptive to the simple, choreographed movements that make up any of the thousands of forms of qigong that are done in a more systemized fashion. *If anyone sees me, I hope he or she doesn't call the rescue squad,* he thought.

Francis had made an offering of his practice when he touched his head to the ground, giving it to God to be used for the highest or greatest good of all creation. Having warmed up, he now he extended his arms in front of him, brought his hands together palm to palm in front of his heart, and thought of all of creation surging within him. He was now the "Meditating Buddha."

The series of qigong exercises he was doing is considered by the Chinese to be a means of cleansing the body, mind, and spirit, even to the very core of one's being, even to the very marrow of the bones. Francis stood in a standing meditation pose and then let himself be absorbed by the power of all of creation crackling to

life within him. He let his arms relax at his sides and then extend upwards, floating up until his arms were parallel to his shoulders and next moved his hands so that the palms of his hands faced outward so that his body formed a cross. In this standing meditation posture, Francis became a “Cosmic Being.”

He next used his mind’s eye to go “beyond the beyond.” Francis experienced infinity reaching into his spirit beyond horizons, beyond all that is. The monk experienced the endlessness of creation flowing through him, all around him, entering one hand and exiting the other, entering up through one leg and exiting out the next, coming down through the top of his head, and moving out to his tailbone. Every aspect of his being was caught up in this vortex of creation that God had manifested by uttering the Hebrew scriptural word *ruwach* when God created everything in the Genesis story--and saw that it was good.

Francis now cleansed his bone marrow, as the Chinese see it, by placing the back of his left hand at his kidneys and letting his right arm float up his side and eventually letting the palm face down over the top of his head, the *bai hui* in Chinese. Then his hand floated down in front of him in a cleansing motion, as if he were pushing all the negative or contaminated qi within him into the earth to be recycled.

He reversed his arm movements and did the same movements again, completing one set. Francis did three sets of “Cleansing the Bone Marrow with one Hand” before he completed the whole process by placing both hands in front of him, palms facing upward and moving up the trunk of his body, flipping the palms around to the heavens when they got up around his chest he continued up above his head, connecting his palms with the sky, turning them down and letting them both slide down in front of him for one last movement known as “Cleansing the Bone Marrow with both Hands.”

Francis was now ready to do a full form of qigong. He knew a number of forms and often rotated them, partially to keep himself fresh and alive, and partially to remember the forms for teaching. Today he chose one of the forms he learned long ago when he first started practicing qigong. This form has a movement for each of the five elements or energies that make up the blueprint of Chinese medicine.

He moved his body and mind in a way meant to invite *fire* into his being. He then moved in a dance-like fashion, creating a circle of the *earth*. Next he moved in a manner that obviously indicated that his arms were inviting *air* into his being. This was followed by a movement designed to draw *water* from the heavens, not so much physical water, but the very energy or quality that water shares as it brings life to others. He stood as if he were hugging a tree or holding a large pot in front of him, to evoke the qualities of *wood* in his being.

Having done this once, Francis turned his feet a quarter turn to the right and did the same set again. That completed, Francis turned another quarter turn and did the same set again. Francis turned another quarter turn and did the same set for a fourth time, and with one more quarter turn was back where he started and did a final set of Five Element moves.

Francis felt invigorated and cleansed. He also experienced a renewed sense of balance and harmony in his life. All of the five elements he had just thought about and tried to evoke with his qigong movements surrounded him, moved with him, and lifted him to an altered state. Francis knew well that the marriage of science and spirituality was doing far better these days than in the past. He had been invited to give a one week graduate course on science and spirituality at a graduate school of theology in Oklahoma and had concepts related to these topics churning in the back of his mind. He was trying to prepare a good experience for his future students and had been gathering notes and materials for some time now.

The monk sat down in a white vinyl lawn chair--this item from K-Mart--not Staples. He joined the thumb and first finger on each hand together, thus creating a circle or circuit of energy in each hand. He then lightly touched the tip of his tongue to the back of his upper front palate to make another inner circuit or connection, and let the bulk of the qi or life force within settle into his lower abdomen, the *dan tian* in Chinese and the center of the human person in Chinese medicine.

After meditating in this fashion for about twenty minutes, Francis returned to the front of the Hermitage and went inside. In medieval times monastics used quill pens to illuminate manuscripts, but today they use computers. He was about to check his e-mail, but before he could the telephone rang. This was somewhat providential because he had only one telephone line, which was shared by e-mail, phone, and fax. If he were on the Internet, the caller would get a busy signal.

On a personal level, Francis had little desire to use modern technology, but as a doctor he knew its value. Each of the members of the community did what he or she could to support the monastery and his

contribution was through his clinical practice. Thus, most of his income was derived from the health insurance carriers of his patients. When patients were without health insurance, he lowered his fee to accommodate them. The computer helped with this also, handling electronic claims and printing paper claim forms for those companies still in the dark ages. Managed care insurance plans were his biggest burden. The paperwork was overwhelming and many times the payment was far from equitable.

The Abbot picked up the ringing telephone that sat on the left side of his desk--very convenient for a lefty. He gazed out of the window above his desk and look beyond the driveway to a little grove of trees across from the Hermitage, and to the barn-like Oratory just to the right of his field of vision.

As he lifted the phone, Francis was hoping that it would not be one of his patients. He gave to them everything he could but didn't have an answering service to screen patient calls, so there were times when they would catch him, even on the day of rest. Certainly if it were an emergency it would not be a problem for the doctor; if it were *not* an emergency such a call triggered mild irritation. Francis tried to work mostly with chronic conditions. He was not in a situation to make regular rounds at the hospital or to be able to drop everything at a moment's notice to deal with an illness.

The monk was too good at multi-tasking. As he was saying "Hello, this is Brother Francis," he was also scanning his desk, piled with work that needed to be done, while his mind assessed ways to do that at the same time.

On the other end of the line he heard a voice bursting with energy exclaiming, "It's Krishna. I'm so glad I got through to you this morning. I was on call last night and had to go out two times to the clinic where people who were very sick awaited me. Anyway, both are stable and I am ready to go back to bed. We don't have a temple nearby so I did a pujah here in my house. I did the prayer service to Ganesh. You know, he's the elephant-headed representation of God who is prayed to in order to remove obstacles. Without sounding disrespectful, I think he's a little like your St. Anthony and finding things."

"Krishna, it's wonderful to hear from you! Maybe St. Anthony found *you* for me. You've been on my mind. How are you doing, my friend?"

Krishna responded, "I'm doing beautifully. My life is like yours--too busy, but happy. But on to more important things. I'm calling because I had an exciting idea. A few of us got together and decided it was time for a great adventure and I am creating one for us--which includes you."

"Interesting you should say that, Krishna. I was just thinking that life has been rather calm for me of late--and thanking God for that with mixed emotions. Underneath I must admit to a little restlessness. As long as this great adventure does not involve dead bodies, kidnapping, being called to the Bishop's office, or anything like that, I may consider it."

Krishna stated very simply in response, "It's time for us to go to Tibet."

"Tibet?" responded the Abbot. "Why in the world would I want to go to Tibet?"

"Why would you want to go to Tibet? Come on Brother Francis. You know very well why *you* would want to go to Tibet. You are an Asian medicine specialist. You are also a bridge between Eastern spirituality and Western spirituality."

"Some might call me more of a 'missing link,' but you're right, Krishna. I do stay deeply rooted in my own Christianity and monastic life, but also find that Eastern approaches deeply enrich me and my relationship with Christ. This is consistent with the teachings of the Church. Also, the Dalai Lama says 'don't put a yak's head on a sheep's body.'"

"You don't need to convince me of your orthodoxy or authenticity, Francis. I don't think you have to convince anyone who *really* knows you about that either."

"Right again, Krishna. I guess it's just an old habit that once in a while creeps back up on me. Most people understand very well what I'm about. You understand the Asian medicine side of my life because of your background as an allopathic physician. You are a traditionally trained Western MD and I am a traditionally trained naturopathic medical doctor specializing in Chinese medicine. You're the one born in India with the dark skin and I'm the one born in the States who sometimes has to act like a vampire so that he doesn't get sunburned. What an interesting combination of East and West in both of us. You're East and West and so am I."

“So, we have an allopath, a naturopath, and we are both psychopaths! I love it when you tell people we are twins, Francis. It always gets a surprised look at first and then a laugh.”

“Speaking of surprises, how in the world would I ever be able to go to Tibet? You’re a little different from me, Krishna. They could drop you anywhere in the world and, one, you’d enjoy it, and two, you would eventually find your way home. You work in clinics, Krishna, for a fraction of what you would get paid in private practice and the good side of that is that you do get some time off. I am in private practice and have to kind of carve out time away from my case load.”

“Francis, you need to do *exactly* that, it’s good for you and good for others. Just because you’re in private practice doesn’t mean you’re earning the big bucks. You give away so much of your services every year. You could be a very comfortable person at this point in your life, but you’re not, especially when considering finances.”

“I’m comfortable enough, Krishna. We all are in this monastery. So many people have so little. My comfort is largely within as you know. You know that very well, my friend, because you’re the same way. One difference between us is that people don’t presume that ‘the Church’ supports you. Sometimes I need to clarify that monks and nuns live buy the work of their hands like everyone else. There is no collection plate. One man from another country actually thought that the government subsidized us!”

“Frustrating I am sure, but don’t let me get off track, Francis. I haven’t had much sleep. The point is, I’ve been talking with our old friends Dave and Chantal. It sounds like their marriage is going very well and that they’re very happy living in north Jersey, commuting to the Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania area. They have some interest in Tibet, mostly because they want to get to understand you, our deceptively simple and complex friend, even better. They say they would consider going to Tibet if you would go.”

“Wow, that involves a lot of time and money, Krishna.”

“I know someone in the travel business; we can book our own flight with the help of the Internet and I think we can do it at a very reasonable price. Besides, you know that you are required by law to attend continuing education courses periodically. Now is your time to do it. Instead of driving to Lancaster, or flying to Chicago, you’ll simply be going to Tibet. What’s the difference?”

“Oh, just thousands of miles and lots of jet lag—little things like that.”

“Come on, Francis, admit it. You know you would love it. Jet lag has never stopped you before. Besides, you have that gadget you wear around your neck. What do you call it--a ‘Chionizer?’ It creates negative ions or something, isn’t that it?”

“That’s right, Krishna, and it cuts my jet lag down by at least half. The owner of the company that sells them says that it helps to clear away stagnant qi.”

“Anyway, Chantal has been plotting and scheming with Flo and Mani about the trip too. They are into it, Francis. What a team we would have--David a detective, Chantal a forensic psychologist, Flo a Cracker Jack nurse, and Mani, who has her own healing energy business. I’m not sure about all of that but I’m sure it’s fascinating. Finally there is me, a Board Certified Family Practice Doc, and you a clinical psychologist, Board Certified in Behavioral Medicine, naturopathic Doc specializing in Chinese medicine, and above all a Christian monk!”

“Just saying all that, Krishna, is probably enough to get us arrested. I mean who would believe that conglomeration of people, backgrounds, interests—not to mention the ‘colorful personalities.’ They’d think we were making it up.”

“Francis, we have been in some horrendous scrapes together and no one ever thought that we were making them up--but a few did wish that they were fairy tales.”

“Well, everything worked out pretty well in our other adventures. You weren’t geographically close by for some of them, but Dave and Chantal and I have gotten a bit of a reputation for sleuthing and healing.”

“Dear Brother Francis, I know what you will say next. You have to take this to Jesus in prayer and see what insight you might get into making such a decision. You have to do Discernment of Spirits to see where this is coming from. Whatever you call it, I reverence it and ask you to do that. Will you at least do that much?”

“You know me like a brother, Krishna. I will do that. I believe that God’s will is manifested not only through the duties of our state in life but also through friends, family, opportunities that arise, and more. I will

definitely consider it. Tibet is a land of mystique and intrigue and you're beginning to whet my appetite a little bit. Why don't you get some sleep now, Krishna?"

"I sure will. Thanks for chatting with me and for being my most unusual friend."

"I am the one who is gifted by our relationship, Krishna. Goodnight and good morning. Bye."

Francis hung up the phone with a smile on his face and turned around in his swivel chair away from his desk. He was now facing the back wall of the Hermitage and in front of him was the computer. With a few keystrokes the computer was dialing the Internet. He had some incoming mail to look at. Actually he receives dozens of e-mails every day, lots of it junk mail, but some of it very interesting and important information.

Oh-oh. Red alert. There's a message from Chantal here. I think they're ganging up on me. He clicked on her electronic message and opened up a post from his old friend from graduate school. She was someone with whom he joined forces on occasion and together helped life situations to resolve themselves, or come to a better conclusion than they might have by individually working on them. In other words, they were a good sleuthing pair.

Some say that he and his friends don't always *solve* mysteries but rather guide them through a process so that they're forced to open up, much the way a flower opens up in a hot house. With a last name like "Fleur," flower in French, what more would one expect of Chantal? Whatever their supposed skill level is, his relationship with Chantal was extremely life giving and balancing for him. He sometimes compared it to the loving friendship of his founders, St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. They loved God first and one another within that context. Although Chantal considered herself a hopeful agnostic, she was raised in a French Canadian family with strong Catholic roots. Her faith, Francis mused, was deeper than she realized.

There she was, yakking on about Tibet in the e-mail. Not only Tibet, Francis read, but there will also be some time in Nepal and Bangkok. *This is getting more and more involved. Maybe I better just pull back right now.* Another part of him, however, said that maybe I do need some time away. Besides, anything I can learn there might be helpful to my patients. I'm also deeply interested in bridging gaps between the great world religions. Perhaps if we revered more of what we hold in common and respect what is different between religions there would not be any more terrorist attacks.

After Francis surfed the net for a while, going into the time warp often associated with that type of concentration, he found that his mind was overflowing with thoughts of Tibet, Nepal, and Bangkok. What lands of mystery and intrigue! What places of ancient spirituality and healing--along with a tremendous amount of suffering.

He remembered that some historians teach that *the* two major experiences with contemporary spirituality are Vatican Council II, which changed the Church more in a few years than it had changed in five hundred years, and the occupation of Tibet by the Communist government. The invasion of Tibet forced millions of Tibetans out of their homes, but along with that exodus came teachings about Tibetan spirituality, culture, and medicine that were disseminated throughout the world. These age-old secrets would never have been dispersed so broadly had not the invasion occurred. Maybe there was some wisdom to this idea of going to the source of that ancient wisdom. Perhaps he might even be able to help one or two people along the way on such a journey.

Francis would certainly be praying over the matter. Perhaps one way to gather more information and see if the idea is any way affirmed by others would be to drive over to the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center near Washington, New Jersey this afternoon.

Francis often took a hike or went to the Learning Center on a Sunday afternoon as a way to refresh himself. He sometimes felt like staying home and taking a nap, or getting caught up on a little reading, but when he did so he'd wind up at his desk, puttering around with what amounted to work. If he pushed himself to go out, he always came back refreshed and ready to move into another week.

His surfing on the computer was interrupted by the sound of the Oratory bell calling him to Midday Prayer. He logged off and walked over to the Oratory. He sat quietly in his choir stall as the others gathered in silence to consecrate yet another phase of the day to God. As he had done hundreds of thousands of times before, Francis rapped on the wooden wall next to him and everyone stood for the opening verses of this part of the Office.

The first Psalm to be chanted was Psalm 23: "The Lord is my Shepherd, how can I lack anything?" Francis' mind thought about the ways he had been shepherded by so many other people throughout his life and

how God had always remained faithful to him and was not about to desert him now. He wondered if his shepherd would encourage such a major trip at this point in his life.

Midday Prayer is by design the briefest part of the Liturgy of the Hours, taking only about eight to ten minutes to pray. In larger monasteries, the monks or nuns would stop in the fields, the bakery, or the kitchen, and celebrate this brief prayer service and then continue on with their work. In the Salesian Monastery, after this part of the Office is completed, the community members help themselves to a noontime collation, a snack.

Francis bowed to the altar and left the Oratory to eat some peanuts, have a piece of fruit, and get on the road to Washington, New Jersey. He mentioned to the others that they all might want to gather in the evening for a mystery video, a favorite recreation for the community. Having organized things in that way, Francis set out for the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center.

The trip was the usual forty-five minute journey; the monk listened to audiotapes from a two-year course of studies in Chinese medicinal herbs that he had completed some years prior. This was his third time listening to those tapes and he continued to learn each time he listened. As he passed through the magnificent cleft known as the Delaware Water Gap, Francis began thanking God for the beauty of nature and for his wonderful family, friends, and community.

His mind having been fed with ancient medical information, and his senses having been nourished with the beauty around him, he arrived at the Learning Center in what seemed to be a matter of minutes. A little Tibetan dog, a breed known as Lhasa Apso, greeted him with barking and a wagging of his bushy tail. Francis called the little animal a dust mop and then deigned to give him a little pat on the head before he moved on up to the temple to reverence the beliefs that his friends here held at this place of learning.

The temple had only a very slight scent of dampness but Francis had begun to associate that scent with quiet and prayerfulness. As soon as he entered into that atmosphere he rejoiced in the teachings of Jesus and also the Medicine Buddha--an Asian tradition that celebrates the healing of all people through prayer, meditation, and a balanced diet.

Francis had come here without eating lunch on a few occasions and coveted some of the fruit and peanuts that graced the altar in front of the Buddha placed there as offerings. He certainly would never touch them but it was comical to think of sharing lunch with the Buddha in that way.

Having completed a little period of silence, Francis left the temple, retracing his steps through the outer courtyard, past a splashing fountain, down some steps, and over to a building that the people there referred to as the schoolhouse. He took off his shoes in the foyer of the schoolhouse and ascended a staircase, entering a room with an eight foot by twelve-foot tonka on the far wall in front of him.

This tonka was a large painting on cloth in which was depicted the Tibetan Buddhist lineage through thousands upon thousands of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, moving back in time to prior teachers and enlightened masters. It evoked in Francis' mind times when he had been to Bar / Bat Mitzvahs of children of his friends. The rabbi would take the scriptural Torah scrolls out of the Ark containing the Torah and hand it to a grandparent who would then pass it on to a parent who would then pass it on to the young person. That type of lineage in the Judeo-Christian tradition was also celebrated in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in its own unique way.

The married couple who runs the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center are very wise and learned people. They are also very simple and humble. This couple has spent most of their lives at the Center, meeting there in their twenties and now being in their fifties. The Dalai Lama has stayed at the Learning Center on several occasions. The neighbors are very aware of his presence because what is normally a quiet, peaceful road on a mountain becomes flooded with travelers for a few days.

Chapter 3

The co-director of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center is a woman named Eve. She told us that she would be giving the class that day because her husband Judd was "chained to his computer" in order to complete a book manuscript. Judd had been working on a translation of a classic Tibetan text for several years and his publisher was putting the pressure on him to complete this project. Judd and Eve, a happily married

couple who worked well together in running the Center, often traded off teaching assignments, sharing their wisdom with the small group of students who would appear on a Sunday afternoon for some Dharma instruction. The class began with the traditional Tibetan prayer prior to study.

Refuge and The Wish

I go for refuge
To the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha
Until I achieve enlightenment.

By the power
Of the goodness that I do
In giving and the rest,

May I reach Buddhahood
For the sake
Of every living being.

Today Eve announced, “It’s always good to review some of the basic tenets of Tibetan Buddhism. This afternoon I would like to go over the Four Noble Truths. Actually, the Four Noble Truths are something that all Buddhists adhere to, not just we *Tibetan* Buddhists.

Eve stood up and went over to the green chalkboard and began writing, her hand banging the chalk forcefully against the board as she wrote out the ancient teaching. Then she pointed to the old wobbly board.

The Four Noble Truths

The fact of suffering /difficulty
The origin of suffering (craving / desire)
The cessation of suffering (detachment)
The eightfold path leading to the cessation of suffering

“To me,” the teacher continued, “these four radical statements sum up a whole philosophy of life. They teach us that suffering is an integral part of living--as if we didn’t know that one! They also suggest that our suffering comes about largely by desire, that is, we cling to what we have or what we want and in that way we cause ourselves pain. The Four Noble Truths provide a way to free us from suffering by suggesting detachment or a letting go and to enter into this more deeply by means of the Eightfold Path. We will discuss the Eightfold Path in detail later. I will write it here for your own reflection in the meanwhile.”

More clicking on the board with chalk was followed by another point of Eve’s hand.

The Noble Eightfold Path

Right speech
Right action
Right livelihood
Right effort
Right awareness
Right concentration
Right thought
Right understanding

“There are those who believe that the Judeo-Christian tradition emphasizes suffering. There are even those who believe that suffering is holy, or somehow something that is to be sought out so that we might earn credits to get us into heaven. For the Buddhist there is plenty of suffering without seeking it out; it is intrinsic to life.

“One may wonder why there is this grappling with the concept of suffering in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Some of this was spawned by the Buddha’s own upbringing. Does anyone know the story of the person we are talking about? There were certainly other Buddhas before him, more ancient ones.”

A petite woman in her late thirties with long blond hair raised her hand, and after a nod from Eve began to explain her view of the Buddha’s background. The woman was a pediatrician and saw a great deal of suffering, both in children and their loved ones.

The student answered, “About 2,500 years ago there was a man named Siddhartha who was born as a prince in an Indian region of Asia. His father was a king and when the prince was born, a sage prophesied that Siddhartha would be either a great world ruler or a great spiritual leader. The father, who wanted his son to inherit his kingdom, kept Siddhartha from being exposed to any form of suffering, sickness, poverty, or difficulty, so that he would not be attracted to helping those conditions improve through spirituality, and thus be drawn away from inheriting his kingdom.”

The doctor continued in a more animated state now that she had begun telling her story: “One day Siddhartha was taken out of the palace compound in a kind of parade to see things beyond the palace walls because he was very curious and his father thought this might allay his curiosity. Young and healthy people lined the streets; the old and infirm were not allowed to be anywhere in sight, but somewhere along the route Siddhartha did catch a glimpse of an old man in the distance. He was so captivated by this sight that he got out of his coach and chased after the man. The man led him to other sick and elderly people, thus Siddhartha’s illusionary world was dashed.”

A biker with tattoos all over his hairy forearms adjusted his position on a rickety couch and mumbled something about how cool and fascinating this story was.

The pediatrician explained that this glimpse of what the young prince thought of as most challenging, so transformed Siddhartha that he left the palace and took up with a group of ascetics living in the woods and began fasting to an extreme. This lifestyle did not help him find enlightenment, or the meaning of life, or the reason for suffering.

“Siddhartha continued to wander, to meditate, and to struggle to bring some meaning into life,” the doctor said. “Eventually, sitting under a *Bodhi* tree, he experienced enlightenment, a deeper sense of what life is all truly about. “*Bodhi*” actually means enlightenment. He began his teaching career at that point and his followers grew in numbers quite rapidly.”

Eve applauded her student, telling her that the gist of everything she said was accurate and that the deeper challenge of all this was to internalize and understand some of Siddhartha’s teachings. Siddhartha, now the Buddha, the enlightened one, was leading them off to struggle within themselves to understand and grapple with the deeper meaning of life. The Four Noble Truths were simply a way to embrace a kind of courage so that one could move past the illusions we create in life and live peacefully with what is real.

A middle-aged man with an English accent who worked with computers for a living turned his head toward Francis and asked, “Don’t Christians talk about detachment and surrender in some fashion as they try to deal with life and come to terms with the deeper reality of what life means?”

“Yes they do, Colin, but detachment is not the same as apathy, and I don’t think the Buddhist teaching on not clinging is apathy either. The Christian tradition teaches us not to cling to what is fading or what is passing or what is basically only illusion anyway. Christ teaches us to look for what is good and valuable in life, and to move forward with that. So, for example, it means that looks, health, money, what kind of car we drive, are not the substance of life for us. St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal, the patrons of our monastery, teach us that we can *enjoy* good things in life but it is not helpful to get addicted or *attached* to them.

“There was some twisted theology going about in the Middle Ages that suggested the more something hurts, the holier we were for enduring it. I don’t subscribe to that, and certainly my spiritual teachers don’t subscribe to that philosophy either. There is enough hurt in the world to go around--we do not need to look for more.”

A teenaged boy with multicolored spiked hair and pierced tongue chimed in, "Yeah, I started to get that message. I used to think that Catholics were so into rules and regulations that there was no room left for *real* spirituality. I used to think that they really didn't care much about relating to another person--the Jesus they followed."

Those in the room who had not been in the presence of Tommy before looked a little startled at the revelation that this young punker had such depth. He continued without noticing, or perhaps not caring about, the shift in the energy of the room. "My oldest sister had a baby recently and I was asked to be the Godfather. I'm not Catholic but the other Godparent had to be Catholic and then it would be kosher, so to speak. Anyway, I went to some classes prior to the baby's Baptism and learned some interesting things.

"Firstly, priests are human. The guy who taught us couldn't have been more down to earth and pleasant.

"Secondly, he said that even though Baptism does wash away sin, a large part of the ceremony has to do with welcoming the child, sometimes an adult, into the Church community. So Baptism is really a welcoming ceremony that is supposed to be fun, not something negative or medieval."

Eve reoriented the conversation to the Buddhist path. "Tommy, that was very insightful and I was happy to hear your comments. I'm wondering about a parallel to that Baptism ceremony in the Buddhist tradition. Can anyone think of something that might be even remotely like a welcoming ceremony or way of incorporating it into Buddhism?"

"I can," said the pediatrician. "I think 'taking refuge' would have some parallels to Christian Baptism or perhaps a Jewish Bar / Bat Mitzvah."

Eve seemed pleased that her students were thinking things through on this level. "Exactly, why don't you continue on Deb, and tell us a little bit about what taking refuge is about."

Deb continued. "Well I have been studying here but I, and some others, have not actually taken refuge in a formal way. I'll give it a try though. When we realize that life is about suffering one way or another, the need for help, support, or for refuge increases within us. That realization motivates us to turn to the 'Three Jewels' of the Buddhist tradition and seek refuge and support there."

"Deb, you're just outstanding in what you're telling us but I want to draw some other people into this so I'll stop you there for a moment and ask if somebody can tell me what the Three Jewels are."

Someone in the back of the room hollered out "the Buddha." Another voice that had not been heard from yet timidly voiced "the Dharma," and a third new voice said "the Sangha."

Eve was now elated. She said, "That's it exactly. The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. All we need do now is to define each one of those jewels within which we take refuge."

Judd, Eve's husband and co-teacher, walked into the classroom at that point. "I've been listening to you out in the hall folks, and enjoying this class very much." Eve gave Judd a quizzical look. He put his hand up as if to stop any verbal assault and said, "It's done, it's done, I just finished the last page of my translation from the Tibetan."

Everyone broke into applause and Judd, tall and lean, longish brown hair, crashed down into an old chair and breathed a sigh of relief. Eve offered, "Congratulations, I knew you could do it if I pushed you into it." Everyone laughed. Eve continued, "I'm not going to let you hijack my class, darling, but because you're the newest student here today, you've got to tell us the meaning of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

He responded humbly, "I'll give it a try."

"The Buddha is the enlightened one, the one who struggles to lead us to a deeper understanding of life, and who has compassion for all sentient beings. The Dharma is the teaching of the Buddha and also our destiny, our fate; Christians might call this the Will of God. The Sangha is the spiritual community; this is the group of people with whom we unite to strengthen us on our journey towards enlightenment. For example, in this room we are a Sangha, a spiritual community."

Eve smiled and said devilishly, "Very good, Judd. You may stay because you knew the answer."

Hearty laughter broke out within the group and the biker had a strange look in his eye and a slight smile on his face. "I don't know if I'd take that from a biker chick."

Tommy spoke up next. As he spoke, the ring of silver metal through his red tongue clicked against his teeth every now and then. "Eve, you mentioned the Eightfold Path, and wrote it on the board. Can you explain it to us at least a little bit, please?"

“Thanks Tommy, I would like to because I think it is such a practical way of life. Eve stood up and in doing so, was barely as tall as her seated husband. She went over to the green board and underlined the title of the Eightfold Path. As Eve was transitioning to the board, Francis was reflecting.

The Eightfold Path is a little bit like the Beatitudes or the Ten Commandments. It looks like a code of life that helps people to live in a healthy and positive fashion. I have seen so many people leave “organized religion.” Perhaps I prefer disorganized religion. They say that there are too many rules and regulations. Many of the Eastern traditions have far many more rules and regulations but somehow we Westerners don’t see that. Okay, Jesus, I remember you teaching us--judge not and you will not be judged.

The class was rapidly winding down and before he knew it, the group was reciting the prayer that was said at the end of every class. This prayer offers up what has just been done for the good of all sentient beings.

Dedication of the Goodness of a Deed

By the goodness
Of what I have just done
May all beings

Complete the collection
Of merit and wisdom,

And thus gain the two
Ultimate bodies
That merit and wisdom make.

The group began to disperse, saying good-byes and drifting off in various directions. Francis lingered, and asked Judd and Eve if he might take a walk with them because he wanted to run an idea by them. It was a beautiful day, the sky was a luminous blue, and they graciously accepted his invitation.

The trio made their way down the stairs and outside into the welcoming sun and green grassiness that seemed to go on endlessly. They wandered past a *stupa* containing the bones of their founder, *Geshe Wangyal*, affectionately know as “Bakshi.” The *stupa* was about twelve feet tall and six feet square at the base, whitewashed, coming to a point at the top. It had various colorful markings on it, including the painting of the all-seeing eye of the Buddha.

Just beyond the *stupa* was a lake, around which the trio moseyed reflectively. Francis shared with his Buddhist mentors that he had been invited on a trip to the Far East, namely to Tibet, along with having some time in Nepal and Bangkok. He wondered if it was his Dharma for him to go on such a trip. His friends left him with one question in return. “Why in the world not go?”

Chapter 4

The phone beeped softly into the Abbot’s ear as he keyed in the number to the conference calling service. The automated voice, in a pretty female tone announced: “Welcome to the conference calling center. Please tell us your name.” The Abbot answered, “Brother Francis.” In a split second he heard the same mechanical voice announce: “Brother Francis has joined the conference.”

Detective David Gold was the only one on line at that moment. He responded with a cheery, “Hello and welcome my favorite monk! How are you doing today?”

“Very well, David, and getting excited about the possibility of a journey to the Far East. Will Chantal and the others be joining us soon?”

Before the Abbot had quite finished his question the automated voice announced: “Chantal has joined the conference.” David said hello to his wife, who was calling from her office, and Francis seconded the welcome from his office. The electronic assistant next announced that Flo had joined the conference, which

was immediately followed by an announcement about Mani, who had also phoned in. These people were welcomed with the same warmth, as was Krishna, last to join the conference call. (Some say Krishna still goes by IST—Indian Standard Time.)

When all six friends were on their electronic connection, Chantal began to organize the meeting in her soft but decisive voice. “Okay guys, we could go on forever just chatting and enjoying one another’s company but we’ve got some big decisions to make.

“First, are we all into going to the Far East? Secondly, those of us who go need to organize an itinerary. Third, what is the focus of our journey? Fourth and finally, will we have enough time to get this all together so that we can leave in a little over a month from now?”

The group went “round robin” from one person to the next, stating their desires to go on such a journey, especially with such wonderful friends. Everyone was open to the possibility. Some had more reservations than others due to things such as finance and time, but all agreed that if they were able to manage it, they would like to go on this journey.

Chantal next asked the group about the focus of the journey, as well as about possible places that their adventure might take them. Flo, a Registered Nurse of many years and a real veteran in healthcare, responded with her typical energetic enthusiasm.

“All of you folks know that I lost my husband after a long illness just about a year ago and I am wide open for a new adventure. I’ve worked in a hospital setting for over twenty-five years and I am ready to learn some very new and different things about healing and medicine. I have great respect for Western medicine but believe that Eastern healing approaches and ancient wisdom might well be the medicine of the future. I definitely want to meet up with some indigenous healers, and visit whatever type of healthcare institutions exist in the Far East.”

Flo’s energy communicated itself to the quieter person in the group, Krishna, who spoke next. “Having been born and raised until my teens in India, I have been exposed to various Eastern healing practices. As a Western family practice doctor I would like to integrate Eastern and Western medicine, and thus fully support Flo’s enthusiasm about looking into Eastern healthcare.”

“That certainly appeals to me,” said David Gold. He continued, “I have been in law enforcement for almost as long as Flo has been a nurse. Krishna, you are almost young enough to be our son but we certainly see you as a peer and a dear friend. I would like to exercise this mind of mine, which loves to puzzle out mysteries and solve crimes by being in a land filled with intrigue and ancient mystery. I’m particularly captivated by the way the Tibetans manage to live in the midst of an occupied land. They have to be very careful about what they do and say because of the Communist government, yet they have maintained their culture and positive attitude, and that’s a mystery to me. I’m sure they have their struggles as well--as a detective I am immersed in that reality everyday. My Jewish background propels me toward any of the great religions of the world, and Tibetan Buddhism is certainly one of those. So, all of that gets my vote.”

Mani began to read from a long list of places she wanted to go to and things she wanted to see. She had facts and figures from a reputable travel company that specializes in the Far East journeys. Mani’s heart of gold sometimes needed to be tempered by allowing time and space for input from others. Her quick mind and articulate speech could unwittingly run roughshod over the good intentions and ideas of other less assertive people. This group was aware of that and had little problem with relating to her in that context. In her early forties, Mani had founded her own successful company, an organization that promotes energetic healthcare. Every conceivable type of esoteric healing was being practiced by someone in her company, i.e., Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, qigong, various forms of bodywork, and only the God of the world’s great religions knew what else. She loved the southwestern part of the United States and in recent years had relocated there with her family.

“I’m not trying to run the show, gang, but here are some possibilities. We could fly to Nepal for a few days to start. We need to enter Tibet through Nepal anyway. One cannot enter directly through India because of the political situation of—the multitude of Tibetan exiles living in India. That would give us a wonderful opportunity to experience the beauty, culture, and healing traditions of Nepal. Our visas would be processed during those days in Nepal for our later entrance into Tibet. It’s just an hour or so from Kathmandu to Lhasa by plane. The bulk of our travel time could be spent in Tibet, and on our way back it’s very easy to stop in

Bangkok, Thailand, for a few days to visit that kingdom as well. From there we could fly back to LA and then on to our various States.”

Krishna got back into the conversation. “Abbot Francis, you have been quiet. Why don’t you tell us about your dreams for such a journey? Even if the journey never materializes we can still enjoy this process. What we *think* profoundly affects not only our bodies, but our behavior, as well as the outcome of many things in life.”

“I’ve been listening with great interest,” said the Abbot, with a touch of awe in his voice. “I’m really getting excited about this journey. Everything that each of you has contributed to a potential itinerary, along with reasons for going, are seconded by me. As a naturopathic doctor and Chinese medicine specialist, the medical arena is very important to me. As a Christian and a monk, I’m deeply interested in Tibetan Buddhism and in spending time in some of their monasteries and temples. I have been studying Tibetan Buddhism for several years now through the Asian Classics Academy. They offer a rather extensive distance-learning curriculum of study and have a branch in New York City. A famous Western Geshe runs it, which is quite unusual. A *Westerner* who has trained in Tibetan Buddhism to what is our equivalent of a Doctorate is very rare indeed. Perhaps it was a part of God’s providence that I have been doing this kind of study because I might be able to contribute a little bit to our understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist culture that we will be encountering.”

“Krishna,” the Abbot said, “Your devout Hindu background would be of great help to us also, will it not?”

“I hope that it will be! Nepal is Hindu as well as Buddhist so we will be able to visit some sites from both traditions I believe. I think that my Hindi language ability will be enough to communicate, to some extent, with the people in Nepal also.”

The group was quiet for a moment. A profound silence enveloped all of them and seemed to spread out over various parts of the country: New Mexico for Krishna, Arizona for Mani, Kentucky for Flo, New Jersey for David and Chantal, and Pennsylvania for Abbot Francis.

“Maybe it’s a bit of emotionalism,” volunteered David, “but I get the feeling that a Being greater than any one of us is at work here. This project is beginning to take on a life of its own. I’m starting to get the sense of a call from Yahweh to make this journey.”

Flo spoke: “What is it that you always say, Francis? When someone has thoughts like that, we need to ‘test the spirits’ to see if it is from God, the evil one, or ourselves.”

“The Gospel invites us to pray over various ideas or promptings that we may have,” stated the Abbot, “in order to see if they are of the Lord, of our making, or perhaps of some evil force. This is consistent with Hebrew tradition as well, although David is much more of an expert in that area than am I.

“Anyway, Jesus says very clearly in the Gospel that a good tree bears good fruit. Conversely, a bad tree bears rotten fruit. May I suggest that we pray a little bit and ‘test the waters’ of this idea, so to speak, by seeing what the other people in our lives think about it? That may give us some indication as to where these ideas are coming from.”

Chantal broke in, “You all know that I am a hopeful agnostic. I do think that there is a lot of wisdom in the life and teachings of Jesus, and I think that this may be a good way to proceed. Why don’t we talk again in about forty-eight hours and see what we’ve come up with.”

Mani offered, “In the meanwhile, if you folks are okay with it, I will continue doing research and try to get some potential dates and financial figures together.”

Everybody agreed readily and the electronic voice began announcing who had left the call as the six members of the electronic conference call hung up their phones.

With that completed, another type of electronic beep sounded. It indicated that someone had entered the waiting room of the white mobile home that made up Abbot Francis’ office and waiting room. He was scheduled to meet with a man who was dealing with an advanced stage of cancer. Francis was working with the staff of a big teaching hospital in Philadelphia where this individual was undergoing Western treatment for his cancer while Abbot Francis provided Eastern treatment.

A liquid extract of Maitake mushroom, along with some other medicinal herbs from the East, were being used to treat this man’s condition. The professional literature was becoming increasingly clear that if a person

opted for Western cancer treatment, he or she would do much better with the addition of Eastern treatments as well. Some patients opted for Eastern treatment alone, others for Western treatment alone, but all of this was done with meticulous attention to ethics, legalities, and to presenting informed choices to each patient.

Francis had been seeing a change in the type of patients coming to him in recent years. Not too many years prior, when people came for what some would call ‘complimentary’ and ‘alternative’ treatment (which the United States government now refers to as CAM, short for complimentary and alternative medicine), they would have been through every other conventional type of treatment possible. Many would have had powerful drugs dripped into them through an IV or taken them orally; others might have had multiple surgeries. Some may have experienced radiation as well.

Today more and more people were coming for treatment that did not report being “at the end of my rope and it’s frayed.” The philosophy of Chinese and naturopathic healthcare strongly supports the concept of helping people *stay* well, not only helping them when they are ill. The United States government has set up an entire CAM Department and is taking a closer look at a variety of treatments that were either ignored or denounced not that long ago.

The doctor began reflecting upon the seven principles of naturopathic medicine that he had studied in naturopathic medical school. They meant even more to him today than they did earlier in his life.

Naturopathic Medicine Principles of Healing

- 1) First do no harm
- 2) Recognize the healing power of nature
- 3) Identify the cause
- 4) Involve the total person (physical, spiritual, emotional)
- 5) Teach rather than treat--physician as teacher
- 6) Identify the source
- 7) Prevention is the best cure

Abbot Francis very much enjoyed the reciprocity of working with other professionals: osteopaths, medical doctors, chiropractors, dentists, massage therapists, acupuncturists, and the like. He also very much enjoyed treating them when they came to him as patients. Along with clergypersons, Francis believed that healers of various types were folks that he was specifically called to treat. By treating those whose lives touched large numbers of people, Francis believed that he was using his skills in the most helpful fashion, a little like the miracle of the loaves and fishes in the Gospel.

It was time for a little continuing education. His nostalgic and reflective mood prompted him to dig out his transcript from the Central College of Naturopathic Medicine. Where did he need a little extra credit?

Anatomy & Physiology Org. Sys. I & II, Human Anatomy Lab I & II, Anatomy Musculoskeletal, Organic Chemistry, Organic Chemistry Lab, Nutrition I & II, Therapeutic Nutrition I & II, Pathology I & II & III, Pharmacology I & II, Physical Exam & Diagnosis I & II & III, Business Management / J.P. & M.E., Naturopathic Med. Phil. & Theory, Student Support, Environmental Medicine, Microbiology and Public Health, Botanical Medicine, Botanical Materia Medica, Phytopharmacology, Acupuncture w/Lab, Auricular Therapy, Chinese Medicine Theory, Chinese Patent Medicine, Counseling Techniques, Doctor/Patient Relations/Comm I & II, Psychological Assessment, Homeopathic Medicine I & II & III & IV, Naturopathic Manual Med. I & II & III, Naturopathic Manual Med. Lab I & II & III & IV, Physiotherapy, Gynecology, Cardiology, Dermatology, Eye, Ear, Nose & Throat, Gastroenterology, Neurology, Oncology, Urology, Clinical Application, Hospital Rotations.

The continuing education Francis was pondering wouldn’t exactly be from driving to Harrisburg for a convention, or some training in a distance-learning program--this journey and distance-learning program would take him into places and adventures he had never even dreamed of. How could anyone capture that on a transcript?

Chapter 5

The monastic community gathered after dinner for a meeting of the community, which is called “Chapter” in a monastery. Receiving its name from the tradition of reading a chapter of the *Rule of St. Benedict* at the beginning of the gathering, the intent of such a community meeting was to deal with the day to day running of the monastery, along with any exceptional situations which might arise.

The gold and pink of the setting sun washed in through the large windows of the sparsely adorned room in which the gray and blue clad members of the community sat together. The erratic hum of what was left of the summer crickets, along with the sounds of the birds quieting down for the evening, created a peaceful atmosphere.

How many things had been discussed at Chapter, thought the Abbot. Sister Scholastica was sitting there and mentally going over some of the issues that they had dealt with in the past--a kidnapping, a dead body found on the property, police involvement (both State and local), concerns that the Bishop had about the reputation of the monastery and the Diocese, headlines in the newspaper about the events this small community stumbled into from time to time. Though middle-aged, Sister Scholastica adapted well to the monastic life she had chosen less than ten years ago. Perhaps it was her quiet spirit of adventure that drew her to the monastery.

Brother Benedict entered monastic life in his middle years also, but before Sister Scholastica. This “older vocation” phenomenon was occurring throughout the country in various Religious Orders and monasteries. Changes in the world, in the Church, as well as in monastic life through Vatican Council II, dramatically reduced the number going into religious communities and attracted a different type of applicant.

In general, the numbers were down to just a little trickle and the age at application for membership had gone up exponentially. Since this shift had already occurred several times in the history of the Church, many were not particularly concerned, especially if one’s eyes were focused on following God and not on numbers.

Brother Benedict could feel something in the air and was curious about it. Blunt and to the point, he could help the group stay on task and come to a decision if he chose to do so.

The youngest member of the community, Brother Matthew, had taken his simple or temporary vows just about a year before after several extremely harrowing experiences. While he sometimes was self-conscious about his younger years both chronologically and in monastic life, Matthew was a bright and caring person who would offer his opinion and used his brain as needed.

Sister Jane de Chantal was somewhere around fifty years of age but looked a little younger. She was one of the first to enter the new monastery, right after Brother Benedict, over ten years ago. Both she and Benedict had solemn or final vows at this point in time. Jane would probably encourage the spending of money and upkeep of the house during Chapter deliberations, rather than scrimping at something and ending up with a poor result.

Thus, community members had their own unique personalities and opinions. It made for very interesting discussions.

“Sister Jane, would you open our Chapter meeting by reading from the next chapter of the *Rule of St. Benedict*?”

“Certainly, Abbot Francis. A reading from the Rule of our holy father St. Benedict.”

“Chapter Fifty. Brothers and Sisters Working at a Distance or Traveling.”

“Brothers or Sisters who work so far away that they cannot return to the Oratory at the proper time—and the Abbot / Abbess determines that this is the case—are to perform the Work of God (Liturgy of the Hours) where they are, and kneel out of reverence for God.

“So too, those who have been sent on a journey are not to omit the prescribed Hours but to observe them as best they can, not neglecting their measure of service.”

A mild electrical current filled the room. Abbot Francis, well grounded, kept right on going and went over schedules and ministries within the community for the next week. The community rotated the jobs of

cooking, cleaning, and shopping to some degree. Everyone understood what was his or hers to do and did it without much prodding from anyone else.

Next the Abbot talked about the ever-increasing cost of health insurance. The monastery was totally self-supporting although many people felt that the Diocese or some other agency supported them. This was certainly not the case. They paid for their own health insurance, which was a significant challenge. Abbot Francis mentioned that their coverage cost was to go up yet again. He explained the way he thought it worked.

“The insurance company sends us a letter saying that our premium is about to go up significantly, let’s say a hundred dollars more per person per month. That *is* significant. Much more of that and we won’t be able to operate at all in the black. We move between black and red from year to year anyway.

“At any rate, they also put a little notation in the letter that there are other plans one might opt into which are less expensive. Then we call and ask for information on those less expensive plans, the material is eventually sent to us, and we move to that plan. We lose a little in terms of services and our deductible goes up, but the amount per person increase may be about half as much as they initially indicated. So we are left paying about fifty dollars more per person per month and the insurance company thinks that we are now supposed to experience a feeling of relief because it wasn’t double that cost.

“Well, that worked the first time, but a year or two later I saw it coming and indeed they did they very same thing. At any rate, God has provided for us thus far, and our Holy Father St. Francis de Sales tells that the God who has been with us up to this point will not suddenly abandon us.

“While I’m on the subject of insurance, just to help you get a little glimpse into my day, the biggest stressor in my life is dealing with insurance companies for my patients. More and more of them are in managed healthcare plans so I have to fill out papers periodically and beg for additional sessions to be pre-certified. This requires that I keep careful record of when their previous pre-certified sessions expire and do the paperwork prior to that expiration or I will not be paid for my work.

“Sisters and Brothers, because so many patients change their insurance in response to the machinations of these healthcare providers, I have to keep track of that as well. I won’t get paid if I don’t remember who gets billed and *where* they get billed. It is extremely confusing. I am so grateful to this community and my administrative assistant Dottie who comes here periodically and bails me out. Let’s continue to keep her in our thoughts and prayers.

“I’m sorry if I got off on a tangent there, but I think it is good give you a glimpse into my life once in a while as well as letting us see the ups and downs of each others lives in general. That way we can continue to be supportive and prayerful for each other. That which unites us is our quest for God and a better world, and that which we do as our ministry, our work, is really the fruit of our contemplative life. This is quite different, as you know, from traditional more ‘active’ Order such as the Sisters of St. Joseph or the Jesuits. They were founded for specific apostolic or direct service work. Monks and nuns, monastics, are simply around to seek God. If others understand our life very well, I doubt that we are really doing what we are called to do. We need to boggle the mind of others--not only of one another—pun *intended*.”

This evoked laughter from the group and changed the atmosphere somewhat.

Brother Matthew commented. “Abbot Francis, there’s an excitement in the room and I know you’ve been wondering about the possibility of a journey to the Far East. Is that on the agenda for this evening?”

“It certainly is Brother Matthew. I am always slow to spend significant time away from the monastery because we are semi-cloistered. I am also slow to spend community money. Even though I manage the major expenditures and bookkeeping--thank God for our Quicken software--we hold all our funds in common.

“Some details, Brothers and Sisters. The proposed journey would take about a month of time and I would be going at a very reduced rate because we are planning things ourselves and I have some Frequent Flyer miles. They don’t call me the ‘Frequent Flyer monk’ for nothing! We are using the guidance of a tour company but doing the organizational and reservation work ourselves. Also, I was given a grant when I studied in Asia in the past, and see this as a continuing education project that will ultimately help to support the monastery. I need a certain amount of continuing ed to renew my licenses in naturopathy and psychology, but we don’t need to go into the fine points of that here. What do you folks think?

Brother Benedict offered his point of view. “We all need time away from one another. We live in a rather small setting for such a diverse group. God has always blessed your journeys in the past and, and as you reminded us, God will continue to be with us.”

Sister Scholastica was the next to offer her thoughts. “It seems to me, Abbot Francis, that this is simply a way of enhancing the ministry you have been called to do and thus ultimately enhancing the monastery. I'm honored that people such as Brother Matthew and myself, who do not even have solemn vows yet, are being consulted on this matter. Please go with our blessing. At least that's how I see it.”

The group gave a general assent and Francis said that he would make a definitive decision in a day or two after he spoke with his friends and colleagues once again, then humorously cautioned them not to have too many wild parties in his absence if he chose to go.

The cranberry scented candle burned in a large old-fashioned jar on the Abbot's desk as he spoke with his colleagues on the conference call they were now holding. The candle was a gift from his married sister and brother-in-law and he mentally said a little prayer for them.

As promised, Mani did her homework. She had a more detailed list of places to go and experiences to have in Nepal, Tibet and Bangkok.

Creative as always, Mani continued, “You know about my obsession with energy medicine, folks, so this idea may not be very surprising to you. What I suggest is that each of us choose an energy or quality, a virtue if that is less abstract for you, to hold and pray with as we move from this point forward through the journey that we all just agreed to embark upon. For example, I am drawn to the idea of impeccability or purity. By that I mean that one's heart or intent be truthful and rooted in the present moment. I'll develop a little blurb about that more completely but that's the thought or ideal that I wish to hold for each of us. Perhaps it will help us all to experience more as we continue to prepare and to journey if we all do that. Would each of you be able to come up with a similar concept?”

Krishna responded for the group, “I'm sure we could, Mani. I am interested in the safety and the intent of the group. I want to help keep us physically safe and focused on the healing and spiritual aspects of our journey. None of us is interested in tourism as such but we can be drawn there if we're not careful. So, perhaps I could be a sort of ‘faithkeeper’ for the group.”

The group was in hearty agreement with that idea and quieted down a little as they waited for the next member to come up with his or her expression of energy to carry.

Flo was the next. “I believe that there can be no real spiritual or healing progress without forgiveness. May I carry the energy of forgiveness for us and with us as we prepare and as we journey?”

Again, rousing assent to this idea and a calming and quieting as the group contemplated the healing energies that would be the focus of their travels.

“David here,” said the New York born detective. “I am drawn to simplicity. I love to get to the heart of the matter in an uncomplicated fashion. How about if I focus on the idea of simplicity for our group?”

It fit perfectly! This was David. Even though his stomach was bulging a little bit more than might be healthy, and his blood pressure could spike once in a while, David was the man for this virtue. Again, a time of quiet ensued.

“I do much of my psychology work in the field of forensic psychology. As such,” Chantal continued, “I contribute to vindicating people and also having people put behind bars. I try very hard to seek out a justice which is built upon compassion. My feelings for the people of the Third World run deeper than one might expect. My feelings for the poor and needy are strong. Just between you and me and the electronic operator, I do what I can to contribute to good causes. I think I'm on every mailing list in the country. The Baptists write to me, the Lutherans write to me, the Catholics write to me, the secular charitable organizations write to me. I have more return address labels than I will ever use, gifts of these organizations. This is simply because I send some money from time to time and have also volunteered my services. I've helped out in some forensic tangles that these groups get caught in once in a while. That being said, I would like to carry the energy of compassion.”

Francis sat in wonder and awe as he experienced the reflection of each person coming through in the energy that he or she felt led to carry for the group.

He spoke up next. "I often feel far from enlightened, but I do seek enlightenment. I have had the good fortune of being on Mt. Tabor, where Jesus was revealed in a burst of blazing light or qi, the life force. At least this is how I interpret it. I know that Tibetan Buddhists, or any Buddhists, are on a journey to becoming a Buddha, that is, on a journey to enlightenment. This concept, this experience, is very powerful in the Buddhist tradition. If it is not too arrogant a notion, may I carry the energy of enlightenment for us?"

The group burst into applause. Everyone had easily come to a decision about the quality that he or she wanted to emphasize for the group. Furthermore, even though most of these people knew *themselves* rather well, there was a deepening of their knowledge of *one another* through this electronic experience.

Chantal, ever the organizer, said, "How about this--maybe Mani could type up a tentative itinerary, along with a blurb about each of the healing energies we have elected to carry with us. Mani, can you e-mail that to each of us and then we can see where we go from there?"

Mani was even more organized than Chantal. "Chantal, my dear, I have the itinerary typed up. It is very *tentative* so don't be concerned. However, I would suggest that each of you write up a little blurb about the energy you would like to carry and I will attach it to the tentative itinerary and e-mail all six blurbs back to each of you."

There was a sense that this adventure was flowing more easily than it ought. Francis wondered what that was all about.

Chapter 6

That evening, six computers held the following electronic document:

A Healing Journey to Tibet

Spirit is calling to the hearts of those who will be with us, and those who hold us in their prayers back at home. The following is intended for those who are holding the Tibet Travelers in their prayers. Some of you may want to join with the travelers closest to you in holding the energy they have chosen (see below). Some may wish to hold the entire group in prayer. Please hold the vision with us for transformation, spiritual enlightenment, delight, magic, and safety.

What Will The Travelers Do?

Join in a Healing Journey To Tibet for a memorable South Asian journey, visiting sacred temples, mountains, and monasteries throughout central Tibet, Nepal, and Bangkok, Thailand. We follow in the footprints of pilgrims, sages, and seekers who have been drawn to these pilgrimage sites for thousands of years for their beauty and subtle mysteries.

Our journey begins in Nepal. Together we explore numerous ancient sites in the Kathmandu Valley using traditional practices such as meditation and contemplation to sense the energy and magic of these places. We plan to spend several days in a monastery there. The journey continues northward to Lhasa, the heart and soul of Tibet, abode of the Dalai Lamas, a place of devout pilgrimage still today, and despite the Communist occupation, a majestic city of wonders!

Lhasa's main temples and monasteries are alive and thriving--you will be fascinated by the intense devotion and passion of the Tibetan people. From Lhasa we travel to Gyantse and the immense Khumbun containing many sacred Buddhist antiquities in seventy interlocking chapels. Then on to Shigatse / Xigatse, traditional home of the Pachen Lama, the second highest Lama in Tibet.

In Bangkok, we visit the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in the magnificent Grand Palace. Visits to Wat Po, the marble temple, the golden Buddha (five tons of gold!) will fill the days. Sacred shopping (visits to tailors and jewelry wholesalers) is possible.

Why

We can change the world by changing ourselves. It is only in changing ourselves that the world changes.

Enlightenment / Brother Francis

No definition of enlightenment can capture it. Since we are unique, so will be our experience of enlightenment. Concepts such as inner awakening, liberation, illumination, and *satori* attempt to convey the meaning of this experience. Inner transformation, self-realization, awareness, and a hunger for the “something more” which we may have glimpsed (my favorite) seem to come closest. Enlightenment comes in many forms--we may have a momentary glimpse of enlightenment, sense it from time to time, or we may experience its fullness, which is Buddhahood.

Compassion / Chantal

The energy of compassion grows out of our ability to love in a truly unconditional way. It is our ability to open our heart chakra, regardless of circumstance, and offer understanding without judgment. The Dalai Lama defines it “as a state of mind that is nonviolent and non-harming, or non-aggressive.” Compassion is not attached to relationship or intimacy, thus it is an energy we can carry at all times, to all people, in all places. To learn to carry compassion at all times is a big undertaking, and it brings us great tranquility. Being warmhearted puts us at ease with our inner being and others, thus bringing peace to the world. Compassion does not mean acceptance, but seeing past situations, into the heart or spirit of one another, remembering we are all creations of the same great Spirit. On our journey to Tibet, Nepal, and Bangkok, we carry this energy for ourselves, to light our way when politics, religion, and culture seem so foreign. We will work individually and collectively to know that we are one with all, to carry the intention that only good comes to all, and to harmonize ourselves, that we may bring that harmony into manifestation.

Impeccability / Mani

Authenticity comes with being our truest self, expressing our Light through action and Word with the highest integrity. It is the deepest inner core of who we are--our creative Spiritual Heritage in movement. "In the beginning was the Word" is as true now as when it was written, because every moment is the only beginning that exists. Let us cultivate our impeccability in every “right now” moment in order to radiate the Light of our Being through Word and action. Let us create true peace and healing wherever we walk and with whomever we touch, because we have cultivated our Purity/Impeccability.

Forgiveness / Flo

Forgiveness will be approached and defined as an energetic transaction. Our focus will be to reclaim that energy that can then be used consciously, positively, and directed toward wellness, peacefulness, and co-creating with Spirit. We will be exploring the work of Eckert Tolle’s *The Power of Now*. Forgiveness is the best energy gift we can bestow upon ourselves.

Faithkeeper / Krishna

The term “faithkeeper” seems to originate from the Native American tradition where one member of the tribe assumes this role. Such a person holds the faith together by remaining grounded in the vision of the whole, especially when obstacles and mishaps befall the group. Fluidity, openness, vigilance about both the inner and outer world, and discipline are essential parts of the faithkeeper role, as he or she is the one that the group relies upon at times of uncertainty, dissent, fear, and pain.

Simplicity / David

Singleness of purpose. No hidden motives in speech or behavior. One in heart and mind.

The Frequent Flyer monk awakened on his own about four a.m. on the morning of his departure for the Far East. Dew had settled over what is called “late summer” in Chinese medicine. Associated with this fifth season in Chinese cosmology are such things as spleen, stomach, mouth, lips, muscle, saliva, sweets, worry / openness, singing, afternoon, dampness, yellow, and the Peacemaker archetype. Depending on how these things are in balance, a person will experience good, or not so good, health of body, mind and spirit. Hopefully, some of these were in good balance for this trip of a lifetime.

Francis filled his mind with one of the spiritual thoughts offered to the monastics when they rose, found in their *Spiritual Directory*: “Sleep is the image of death, and awakening that of the Resurrection.” He next knelt for a quiet moment in which he offered his day, and everything in it to his God. Francis, in the spirit of the Saint for which he was named and their co-foundress St. Jane de Chantal, told God that he would try to embrace with equanimity and openness whatever came to him during the course of his day, be it something to his taste or something not so acceptable. The Lehigh University educated clinician within him chattered in the background of his mind--and I will try not to repress anything and deal with all of it in a healthy and realistic fashion.

Francis had given himself a haircut the day before. The five-dollar yard sale electric clippers worked well on the silver / brown band of hair which extended from one temple, around the back, and on to the other temple. Not only did this self-barbering process save money, it more importantly saved time.

Shaving, showering, brushing his teeth and taking the Chinese herbal formula and EPA / DHA oil used to lower his cholesterol took only minutes. Ever since the familial high cholesterol revealed itself in Francis, he treated himself, finding a natural way to do this very effectively. He now was treating a number of people for the same condition. Many of these patients were extremely grateful because years of a near starvation diet, eating practically nothing but birdseed, yielded little benefit. It’s not in the diet, he thought, it’s in raising the good cholesterol to chase out the bad.

Back to thoughts of you, my God. Help me now to prepare my day simply and peacefully. This process, done at rising each day, was something Francis found especially beneficial. He took a momentary look at the events that might occur during the day: ride to the airport, flight to Los Angeles, meeting at Hampton Inn in LA, dinner with the group, getting some rest.

Francis thought about some strategies for handling these events. None of them was particularly challenging so there was not much need for strategy. His attitude would be one of grateful acceptance and flexibility. Every traveler needs flexibility. He prayed for that grace and committed himself to be open to cooperate with that grace, that gift.

Once again, the monk told the God to whom he was vowed that he would embrace and deal with everything that came his way. In the spirit of his founders, there was little need to find things that were difficult to deal with to create mortification, which is nothing more than an attempt at dying to selfishness. Life handed us enough and if we dealt with those challenges well, that would be enough to sanctify anyone.

Francis opened the doors to the hermitage to let in some fresh air, made his bed, and fired up the computer to check his e-mail one last time. He did not know how abundant computers would be in the Himalayan Mountains. *The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the Lord.*

Aside from some spam, junk e-mail inviting him to enlarge or adjust body parts, some of which he didn’t even have, there was only one message of any significance. It was an exuberant post from Flo simply mentioning the names of the group and in letters almost too large to fit on the screen the statement:

“We’re going to Tibet!”

Francis went into his spam catcher and deleted all the junk mail electronically caught there, then he continued on to his virus catcher and deleted the files trapped there also. Having cleansed himself and his computer, Francis logged off, turned off the computer and monitor for one last time, and began to head for the Oratory.

A faint trickle from the fountain in the garden caught his ear as Abbot Francis paused to lock the Hermitage door after him. The full moon washed over the dew-laden countryside, causing it to shimmer with an unearthly coolness.

He walked across the driveway, opened the white door to the small barn-like structure, which served as a house of prayer for the community. He climbed the two low steps and found himself filled with gratitude for his simple life. He was also grateful for the up-coming time in which he hoped to get a little rest and renewal. As Francis sat down in the chair behind his choir stall, something told him that this trip just might not be very restful.

Now why am I thinking that? We are going to see vistas of mountains and rivers. We will be with the poor and simple as Jesus was. We will be staying in perhaps rather primitive but nice enough accommodations. I won't have a computer or a telephone for the most part. The patients whom I love will not be there for me to serve. My intuition is working overtime again.

The twelve inch tall glass jar-like container, suspended from the ceiling in a holder by three chains and containing a beeswax candle, flickered in the far right corner. As Francis sat in his chair on the left side of the Oratory, he looked up and the icon of Jane and Francis, spiritual friends in the Christian contemplative tradition whom his community emulated as masters of the spiritual life. They seemed to dance together in the nearby candlelight.

Her eyes, closed in the painting, and his eyes open, suggested the contemplation of St. Jane and the action of St. Francis de Sales. In reality, both created a wonderful blend of action and contemplation, much like the Martha and Mary story in the Gospel. Martha was busy preparing a meal for Christ and Mary quietly sat at his feet. Both had something wonderful to do and the two of them together, in Francis' mind, symbolized the idea that we are all called to both sides of this precious coin that Jesus offers us.

Francis reached under his chair and pulled out his prayer bench, kneeling down on the floor he placed it over his ankles and sat back. Jesus was clearly this monk's master teacher. The Tibetans would call Jesus his "Root Lama." Francis was happy to learn, in recent years, more about other traditions of prayer and healing. He asked Jesus to teach him about the way the people he would be visiting believed, and to give him a reverence for their traditions that would in no way deny his own.

The Abbot thought about the Medicine Buddha. He viewed the Medicine Buddha as someone with saint-like qualities, someone highly motivated to help and heal all sentient beings. He thought of one of the many prayers to the Medicine Buddha that he had learned in his studies.

Medicine Buddha Prayer

May all the diseases that sadden the minds of sentient beings that result from karma and temporary conditions, such as the harms of spirits, illness, and the elements, not occur in the realms of the world.

May whatever sufferings there are from life-threatening diseases that, like a butcher leading a being to be slaughtered, separate the body from the mind in a mere instant, not occur in the realms of the world.

May all embodied beings be unharmed by acute, chronic, and other infectious diseases, the mere sound of whose names terrifies beings, as though they had been placed inside the mouth of Yama, the Lord of Death.

May all embodied beings be unharmed by the eighty thousand classes of harmful interferers, the three hundred sixty evil spirits that harm suddenly, and four hundred twenty-four diseases, and so forth.

May whatever sufferings there are due to disturbances of the four elements, depriving the body and mind of every pleasure, be totally pacified, and may the body and mind have radiance and power and be endowed with long life, good health, and well-being.

By the compassion of the gurus and the Triple Gem, by the power of the Dakinis, Dharma protectors, and guardians, and by the strength of the infallibility of karma and its results, may these many dedications and prayers be fulfilled as soon as they are made.

The words of the song by a contemporary married man who lives in a Christian community, John Michael Talbot, sprang to life within him. He repeated the words "Healer of my Soul" over and over in his mind. Francis drifted into a trance-like state for a long period of time. The neuropsychologist in him would

probably attribute the experience to an abundance of alpha waves. The spiritual side of the monk didn't much care what things were called, believed such phenomena to be vehicles through which one can experience God, and knew as a scientist that it was fascinating to study the physical and psychological correlates of various spiritual experiences. Francis was, in fact, in the midst of long-range planning for a course on science and spirituality that he had been invited to give in the future and his mind often turned to these topics.

The next thing that came to the meditating monk's consciousness was the sound of footsteps in the Oratory, the lighting of a candle on the altar, a ringing of the bell calling the community to prayer, and the entrance of the other members of the community into the Oratory. A neighbor named Hester frequently joined them and was with them this morning as they gathered to celebrate the office of Vigils--God breaking in through the darkness before the break of day.

After a series of Psalms had been sung and readings proclaimed the service concluded as Sister Jane de Chantal, Prioress of the community and the one who would be in charge during Francis' absence, prayed a simple blessing for travelers over the head of the kneeling monk. Next, she took a small bottle of holy water and sprinkled it over the Abbot's newly barbered head, inviting him to go in peace and with the prayers of the community. Standing up and placing his palms together in front of his heart in a prayer-like position, Francis gently bowed to each member of the community and took his leave. There was a "rightness" about this trip in the air, but there was also an ungraspable sense of uncertainty as to what would happen.

Francis' drive down Route Thirty-three and then over Route Twenty-two in the "new used car" the community had purchased was accompanied by a Chinese medicine teaching tape. This was Francis' third time listening to this set of tapes of over a hundred hours in length. There was so much to learn in a five thousand year old system of healthcare he thought, as he smiled to himself.

As was characteristic of him, after he did some learning, he would reward himself with books on tape. His present craze was a series of mysteries about a yoga practicing, karate doing, older women from New Brunswick, New Jersey named Mrs. Pollifax. She often found herself involved in international intrigue and mystery, not too unlike some of the adventures Francis and his friends had found themselves in over the years.

In just over a half hour Francis was pulling into the long-term parking lot at the Lehigh Valley International Airport. He would leave the community car here and a bus would take him to the main terminal. The fee was modest for the convenience of leaving the car there and having it there for him upon his return from the Orient in the middle of the night next month.

One large black canvas suitcase on wheels and a blue backpack were all he needed. Francis disciplined himself not to take too many books. He had a habit of bringing a variety of books because he didn't know what way his taste would move when he traveled and so would have three or four subject areas to read from. More often than not he used only one of the books in his travels. This time he brought along the usual Liturgy of the Hours to be able to pray with the Church as he traveled through the world. He included a book on Salesian spirituality and a small New Testament. He also had a Brother Cadfael medieval monastic murder mystery tucked away in his backpack, along with earphone and a Walkman--which he often thought might be better called a "Walkperson" these days.

He parked the car in the semi-darkness and struggled with the electronic remote control that would lock the doors and activate the alarm system. The other community cars were so old that none of these new-fangled gadgets were part of them. After more beeps than he cared to remember, the car seemed to be resting peacefully, even projecting the feeling of a living being.

Brother Francis walked to the little metal open-air shelter where a shuttle would pick him up and transport him to the main terminal building. He was enjoying the cool quiet of the morning when a shiver moved up either side of his spine. Francis had the distinct feeling that he was not alone yet could not find anyone else around him. Movement about a quarter mile away caught his eye. A young lady with a small suitcase was making her way to another shelter to wait for the shuttle as well. Hers was not the presence he felt.

Even the paranoid has their enemies. It wasn't that he felt particularly frightened; it was simply that he felt the presence of another in his space.

As he was struggling with this feeling, a minibus roared up to his bench and opened its doors in welcome. The driver wished him a good morning and invited Francis to make himself comfortable. The warmth of the driver was representative of the warmth of the people of the Lehigh Valley in general. As

Francis settled himself he thought of his long-deceased father, a bus driver for many years in Philadelphia. They stopped at the next bench and picked up the young lady who was dressed in the clothing and attitude of an executive. Her laptop computer case was quiet evident, and her struggle to carry the suitcase, laptop and herself while looking completely confident was also evident.

Francis, for his part, tried not to think much about what he looked like, having lived with the certitude that the freest people of all are those who are beyond what others think of them. They stopped at yet another bench and the driver got out and assisted a blind man in his sixties into the minibus. In just a few minutes they were at the front of the main building. The driver helped the visually impaired man to connect with an airline representative for assistance, and Francis and the young lady exited the bus after that.

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, airport security had been increased. Francis went to the Delta counter and got in the long queue of people waiting to be taken care of. He was the required two hours early for his flight.

Abbot Francis usually flew on United Airlines because he was collecting his Frequent Flyer miles all on one airline these days rather than shopping around for the rock bottom price. When United did not work out, Francis would then choose Delta because their Sky Miles would transfer to United and he was more likely to get a free ticket at another time that way.

The ticketing went smoothly. Francis showed the agent his driver's license and print out from an electronically purchased domestic ticket. She tapped on the computer a few times and boarding passes magically appeared. She handed them to Francis. His luggage was searched and x-rayed, and various stickers were placed within and without the baggage, and he half expected a sticker to be plastered on his forehead too. He moved on to find the down escalator so that he might proceed to his proper gate. He got in line on the lower level but this process was slower.

The men and women charged with the safety of travelers questioned, frisked, electronically monitored, and every sort of thing imaginable, the people who waited in line. This reminded Francis of his flights to Israel. El-Al Airlines are reputed to be the safest in the world. They are very cautious and the procedures being done throughout the United States today have long been standard for the safety of travelers on Israel's airline.

Francis had the procedure down. He took the glasses, keys, and change, out of his pockets and placed it in a rubber tub. Next he took his Abbot's cross from around his neck and put that in the tub as well. Finally Francis removed his Birkenstock sandals and added them to the collection. He had a little competition with himself these days. He wanted to see if he could get through the line without being beeped at. Everything seemed to be beeping at him these days in this electronic world.

Everyone was gracious and Francis did not get beeped, or even frisked, but he did have to show the underside of his belt buckle to someone. On the other side of the x-ray machines, Francis collected his tub and began to reclaim his possessions. A businessman mumbled, "I guess it's okay for us to get dressed again."

Down the hall and up another escalator he went. The excitement was building and he was shaking the sense of foreboding and presence that had come and gone in recent days.

It was time for breakfast. He pulled an apple out of his backpack and purchased some decaf coffee and an egg and cheese sandwich. He really wanted a piece of the gooey looking breakfast cake in the display case but thought that something with a little protein would be better for him during his travels.

Francis still had over an hour before his flight so he pulled out his trusty Walkman and continued listening to his Chinese medicine tapes. When he finished this complete tape he would then move on to Mrs. Pollifax.

His gray hip length cowl-shirt attracted some attention, but not as much as his long habit. The cowl-shirt was simply a loosely fitting tunic-like garment with a blue hood that rested on his shoulders, and was worn with gray pants. His Abbot's cross hung around his neck. This traveling apparel would be folded and put in his suitcase when he moved toward the Communist countries if necessary.

Francis would not deny or hide the fact that he was a Catholic Christian monk, but in such circumstances he did not unnecessarily call attention to that fact. He did not relish the idea of several hours of questioning in an airport and missed flight connections.

Before long Francis wandered back to his assigned gate. He had been walking up and down the concourse of the airport as he listened to his tapes. The ground agent was making his first announcement for

people with some sort of priority status or physical challenge, and then families traveling with small children to board first. Francis waited his turn and eventually the people of his section were invited to board.

He made himself comfortable in the less than spacious seat and tried to take a little catnap. Before long they were taxiing down the runway and lifting up into the blue sky. An avid people watcher, Brother Francis looked around the plane from time to time to see who his traveling companions were. Later, when he got up to stretch his legs he saw that the woman executive, as well as the man who happened to be blind, were among his fellow travelers. The sense of foreboding returned momentarily. Francis shook the feeling out of him and sat down, lowered his tray in front of him, and thanked the flight attendant as he handed Francis the tea he had requested. *No decaf or green tea. Oh well, all is gift.*

The change of planes in Cincinnati was uneventful, except for a rush from one terminal to another. Before long he was back up in the sky hurtling his way forward to Los Angeles.

A movie began. Francis enjoyed airline movies because they made the trip move along more quickly. His only difficulty was that he would fall asleep periodically throughout the movie. Thus, when he'd wake up again, someone who had been alive and well earlier was long dead. Sometimes, people that did not like each other were now madly in love. It was a little like doing psychotherapy with a former patient. When they return things have changed, often for the better, but with that might often come one or two new challenges that these changes have evoked.

Francis unbuckled his seatbelt and got up to stretch and to use the lavatory. There were his two earlier traveling companions, the man and the woman. *That's interesting, with all these people and flights we have wound up on two flights together.*

After a combination of sleep and wakefulness, interspersed with movie clips, the aircraft landed in LA. Wading his way through the chaos, Francis retrieved his baggage in one piece and made his way out front to the shuttle vans, one of which would take him to the Hampton Inn. The fumes of the vans lingered in front of the airport so Francis kept his breathing to a minimum. *No deep belly breathing here.* The van ride took only ten minutes and Francis soon found himself in a small comfortable room. He had learned from the desk clerk that his other five fellow travelers were not yet checked in.

Since they do not have TV at the monastery, Francis thought he would give himself a treat and see what other people are looking at these days. A talk show hostess was interviewing a psychic. The psychic gentleman was encouraging the viewers to pay attention to their gut feelings. "Do not dismiss out of hand *anything* that you feel," he cautioned. There is a great deal of information available to us if we would only attend to it. "Too often," the psychic stated, "we ignore subtle thoughts and feelings and lose valuable guidance."

Francis thought about the Holy Spirit, the one expression of God who is venerated as being the Source of all wisdom and inspiration. He prayed to the Holy Spirit that he would be mindful and attentive to whatever was necessary and that he would be able to discern between good and evil, and choose what is most life giving during this journey.

Eventually Brother Francis floated into a deep and dreamless sleep. He was startled out of his stupor by the jangle of the phone on the night table next to his head. He picked it up and croaked "hello" in a voice reminiscent of Tallulah Bankhead. It was Chantal.

"We're here, Francis, we're all here. How about if we meet in the dining room for dinner?"

"You're here, but you're not all there. Couldn't resist. Sounds great to me Chantal. I'll see you there and hopefully I'll be awake by that time." He replaced the phone and went back to sleep.

This time Francis dreamed. He dreamed that there were inner promptings that he was not paying enough attention to and that his six-pack of travelers might be in danger if he did not listen more carefully. Francis woke up with a start. He had always been rather intuitive. This gift was especially helpful in treating patients, but it also helped him guide the community and his own personal life. Why was he getting a message like this now?

He took a quick shower to wake himself up, and went down the stairs to the first floor where a very nice family style restaurant was located. Unless used in unavoidable circumstances, Francis believed that elevators were a health hazard. Seated at a spacious round table in the far left corner of the dining room were Dave, Chantal, Flo, Mani, and Krishna. What a wonderful reunion! This journey was certainly going to be healing and spiritual—he hoped.

Chapter 7

“It’s nice to be together when there’s no crime to solve,” commented Chantal while raising a glass of water to her lips.

“I don’t know,” Krishna responded, “I sometimes think that I would like to live closer to you folks so that I could be in on the adventures.”

David Gold broke into a half smile. “With all my years on the police force, the most unusual and bizarre cases I have encountered have been with some of you people. There’s always that tinge of the supernatural.”

“My late husband used to look at me as if I were from Jupiter,” Flo quipped with a nostalgic grin. “I can’t imagine why. I guess energy medicine and Registered Nursing just didn’t go together for him.”

Francis added, “I was just listening to some audiotapes by a neurobiologist on the flight here to LA and got a huge laugh out of something she said in her lecture. The scientist said that when researchers get older they tend to ‘go mystical.’ Funny. I *started out* that way!”

The college-age Asian appearing waiter came over with a large tray heaped with pizza and salad and began to arrange the food on the table. He seemed to pick up on the warmth and openness of the group and felt free to ask, “Are you people on your way to someplace exciting?”

“Tibet,” Francis answered, “by way of Nepal on the way in, and Bangkok on the way out. We are actually going to spend much of our time in Lhasa but will travel beyond there many miles into the highest parts of the Himalayas.”

The waiter’s hand trembled as he poured red wine into a glass and he splashed some red stains on the snowy white tablecloth. “Please excuse me, please excuse me, and please excuse me. I will clean that up right away.” In a flash the waiter was gone. He was back momentarily with a large white napkin which he unfolded and placed over the stains.

“Will this be acceptable ladies and gentlemen?”

“Certainly, certainly,” the group murmured and nodded. They were more focused on how upsetting their itinerary was to this young man than on the wine stains.

The waiter left and the group continued on in a lively and jovial fashion. They shared stories, catching up on the months in between when they had not all been together.

“Of course I want dessert,” Brother Francis said. “It’s my favorite vice.” Everyone in the group enjoyed a dangerously delicious ice cream sundae, various flavors selected by each person.

As they were finishing their luscious desserts, Flo asked the group if they were all taking their Ginkgo. Everyone nodded in the affirmative. Flo continued, “Francis, that was a wonderful message you sent to us. I was glad to get the information you provided. The last thing any of us needs is Acute Mountain Sickness. That can even result in death I understand.”

David chimed in with, “Yes, I wish I had brought my copy of that e-mail post along.”

Chantal pulled a paper out of her bag and stated, “I have it right here.”

An Ounce of Prevention...

The following material is offered as informal information only, not as a professional medical or psychological consult. While we care about the well being of everyone going on our journey, and will be as helpful as possible, each person is ultimately responsible for his or her own health during our trip.

We will be spending time at high altitudes (Tibet is often referred to as “the top of the world”) and our bodies need to acclimatize to thinner air. There are certain normal physiological changes that can occur during adaptation, e.g., hyperventilation, increased urination, etc. One possible adverse reaction to decreasing oxygen can be Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS). Symptoms may include loss of appetite, nausea, fatigue, dizziness and more.

Additional helpful information about acclimatization and AMS can be found at www.high-altitude-medicine.com. You may find the Ginkgo Biloba study for the prevention of AMS especially interesting. Check with your Doctor before taking Ginkgo, especially if you are on blood thinners.

We encourage you to:

- 1) Consult with your health care provider;
- 2) Get on a healthy food plan;
- 3) Do some exercise to stay / get in shape;
- 4) Practice some qigong (e.g., Bone Marrow Cleansing, pp. 194-199, in *The Way of Qigong* by Ken Cohen (NY: Ballantine, 1997);
- 5) Meditate regularly, e.g., the Microcosmic Orbit or another meditation you may be familiar with;
- 6) Smile!

The friends stood up as if reading one another's minds. They gathered together in a group hug and departed for their rooms, knowing that tomorrow would provide the next step on their Asian adventure. Francis was too wound up to sleep so he went back to his room, picked up his bathing suit and made his way to the gym in the hotel. To his delight there was a bubbling whirlpool waiting for him, illuminated by soft green lighting. Swaying with the swirling water, Francis drifted into a semi-sleep. He awakened sometime later, as a young man and woman giggled their way into the whirlpool. They looked like honeymooners. He gave them a silent blessing.

Francis began his journey up the stairwell to the thirteenth floor, firm in his belief that elevators and moving stairways in airports were health hazards. As he climbed the stairs, the monk thought about the young waiter and his startled reaction in the restaurant. His clinical curiosity was starting to get the best of him. Maybe I can find him tomorrow and gently ask if everything is okay.

As he got closer to his room, Francis pulled out the plastic key card and put it in the slot above the handle on his door. Green lights flashed and the door opened easily. More electronics he thought. Today we always seem to be getting beeped at or have little lights flashing in our eyes.

As he entered his hotel room he did what he automatically does in his office. He looked to the phone to see if the message light was flashing. He certainly did not expect a message here, but to his dismay and surprise the red light was indeed flashing on the telephone. In a new-fangled electronic way he was told to press a few keys and the soft voice of a recorded message eventually whispered into his ear.

"Dr. O'Neil, this is Ang Nyi-ma, your waiter from earlier this evening. I am so very sorry to bother you sir, but it would be most helpful for me to speak with you. Can you call me on my cell phone? Again, I am very sorry but your assistance would be greatly appreciated and I cannot be very public about what I have to share."

Francis keyed in the cell phone number and received an immediate "hello" from the other side. "This is Brother Francis, aka Dr. O'Neil, returning your call."

An intense voice responded with, "I have some information which might be helpful to both of us if you have a few moments to spare. May I come to your room, Doctor?"

"Yes, that will be fine. I'm a little too excited to sleep this evening, and our flight out is not until tomorrow afternoon at two-thirty."

"Very good, sir, I am just getting off work. I will be at your door in about fifteen minutes if that is acceptable."

Francis assured the young man that it was and they hung up. The monk took out a black leather bound zipper case containing his Office Book through which he celebrated the Liturgy of the Hours when traveling. He sat quietly in a corner and silently prayed the Office of Compline, Night Prayer. As he prayed the final prayer of this part of the daily Office, the words which he had sung or said thousands of times over the last forty years seemed to be more alive to him than ever.

"Let us pray: Visit this house O Lord, drive far from it all the deadly power of the enemy. May your holy angels dwell here to guard us in peace, and may your blessing rest upon us always. Amen."

As the traveling monk whispered his last "amen," of the day, there was a soft rap on his door. Francis peered through the viewer on the door and saw a nervous young Asian man standing in the hallway, complete

with the white shirt and black pants of a waiter with which he was dressed in the hotel dining room. Francis unchained the door and welcomed the young gentlemen in. They sat at either side of a small round table, which held a lamp. The young man introduced himself as Ang Nyi-ma.

“Can you tell me, sir, how I might address you? I saw from hotel records that you are listed as Dr. Francis O’Neil, and yet you referred to yourself as ‘Brother Francis’ on the phone.”

“Both names are correct my friend. I am a Catholic monk and have no desire to hide that fact. When I travel to Communist countries I sometimes use ‘Dr. O’Neil,’ because it just makes things simpler moving through airports and security. I am what I am and will take whatever consequences entail wherever I go. If I can avoid it, however, I don’t want to wind up being interrogated or sitting somewhere in a room with an airport or police official for hours unnecessarily.”

“Truly the Buddha has sent you to me.” The young man spoke with astonishment. Mixed with his expression of astonishment was joy and relief. That is what I have come to talk to you about Brother Francis.”

“I’m sorry; I’m not following you. *What* is it you want to talk to me about?”

“I want to talk to you about some monastic people. My two aunts are Buddhist nuns in Lhasa. I myself am from Nepal, my parents being from Tibet originally, but leaving there when the country was being taken over in the late fifties.”

“I see” said the Abbot. It is most interesting to speak with you and I am happy that we have made the acquaintance of one another, but I’m not sure what your family tree has to do with me.”

“My father, after a hard life, is now deceased. My mother lives in Nepal very quietly and scratches out a living by guiding people to various temples and shrines in Nepal. My two aunts, her sisters, are in Lhasa. One of them lives in a nunnery and another lives in a tiny house by herself, though both are nuns. The latter has been politically active and very vocal about human rights issues. For this she had been in prison for a number of years and after her release finds it most appropriate to live by herself, not trying to draw attention to her larger nunnery.”

Francis listened with the ear of his heart. “Your two aunts are in some danger then. I take it that your mother is also in danger.”

The waiter’s head bobbed vigorously, “Yes, Brother Francis, all three are in danger I believe. You see, there is a small metal object used in Tibetan Buddhist prayer services called a Dorje. One particular Dorje has been the property of my parents for many years and was taken out of Tibet with them when they fled.

“Through Internet searches I have learned that the Dorje, which is kept in my mother’s house, is of great interest to many people. I myself do not understand what the attraction to this family Dorje is. Whatever is going on, I am wondering if it will attract unsavory characters to my mother.

“I do not know how much of this is simply all in my head and how much is *real* danger. I would certainly leave at once to be with her if I thought danger was truly at hand. Working as a waiter and going to graduate school, I just about have airfare back to Nepal if it becomes necessary.”

“Your aunts live in a type of *chronic* danger I suppose,” Brother Francis ruminated out loud.

“That is correct, sir, but when my mind starts to wonder about the matter, I wonder if that Dorje would bring bad luck to not only my mother but to her sisters as well.”

“If you write down the names and addresses of everyone I will see what I can do to find some information for you. I have never been to this part of the planet before and don’t know if I will even be able to find them, but I will gladly do what I can. Please write your name address and cell phone number down as well.”

“This relieves me so very much, Brother. How can I thank you?”

“Just hold us in your thoughts and prayers, Ang. Our group of six friends is going on a pilgrimage to learn about Tibetan medicine and the spirituality of Asia.”

“I am so pleased,” said the young man, with a look of relief on his face and even more of it in his voice, “to have met you. I am also pleased to learn about ecumenism, and now to experience it personally. I have been to some Christian churches with friends of mine since I’ve been here in the United States. I hear them talk about respecting the differences in spiritual traditions and celebrating and enjoying all that we share in common. This, to me, is what the Buddha talked about. I believe, if I am correct, that Jesus spoke in much the same fashion.”

Francis smiled. *If only the rest of the world could understand this and have the wisdom of this young person. All would truly be well.*

The events of the day danced through Brother Francis' dreams during the night. By dawn, even though he had a three-hour jet lag, Francis was wide-awake and ready to face the day. He threw back the heavy drapes in the hotel room and greeted the rising sun and a Los Angeles expressway far below.

After a shower and shave, Brother Francis did a little yoga and prayed his Liturgy of the Hours. He then sat in meditation for about an hour.

The phone beeped at him. He picked it up, only to hear Mani asking him where the heck he was. He would be right down for breakfast he assured her.

Breakfast was quick and delicious. The travelers ate well because they wanted to have lots of energy for the arduous journey ahead. On the way out of the dining room they each took a piece of fruit from a large crockery fruit bowl in anticipation of eating that when food might be scarce. As Francis picked up a pear, he saw Ang out of the corner of his eye, just leaving a table he had served. Ang gracefully joined his hands together in front of his heart and gave a slight bow in Francis' direction, then moved on to take the orders from another table full of breakfasters.

The hotel shuttle van was packed with luggage and people. An additional four people joined Francis and his five companions. Francis couldn't help wondering if he had seen one or two of them somewhere before. Maybe it was just around the hotel, he thought, trying to reassure himself. Within minutes they were on the grounds of one of the largest airports in the world, commonly known as LAX. The international terminal looked like the Epcot Center at Disney World. People spoke a variety of languages and were dressed in various garbs. The travelers stood in several long lines and had their luggage searched and x-rayed.

The fascination with the lively and colorful atmosphere of the international terminal made the time go by quickly and it was even enjoyable. Once the group had passed through security and found the gate from which their Thai Airways plane would leave, they found a restaurant and had a light lunch. Several people in the group ordered a type of Asian noodle soup, which was consumed through a process of using chopsticks and drinking from a bowl.

"Might as well practice" smiled Krishna, who was quite comfortable eating with his hands and drinking from a soup bowl as he did in India during his youth--and still did with his family. They wandered back to the gate and very shortly began boarding. The plane was quite visible through the gate windows and it looked to be the size of a football field.

Brother Francis smiled to himself as he thought of his dear sister-in-law who claimed that flying is "unnatural." She resisted doing it whenever she could.

The flight attendants were more than enough to put anyone at ease. Their gentle Thai mannerisms and smiles melted one's heart instantly. The women were dressed in traditional Thai garments, colorful and simple. The male flight attendants had gray blazers on with the emblem of Thai Airways--a small orchid embroidered on the pockets with orchid colored thread.

The movie screens lit up with information about what to do in the event of an emergency. This was followed by something unusual for Western travelers. A video about various exercises of the legs and feet was presented. In the video people were encouraged to walk around and to drink lots of fluids. Clearly the health of those who were flying was an important issue for this airline. Asian music wafted through the cabins as the plane taxied down the runway. Almost imperceptibly, the enormous aircraft lifted off the ground and soared into the silver / blue sky.

After chatting and napping for a while, Francis took out his Walkman and began listening to a Mrs. Pollifax mystery book on tape. Little did he know that he was about to star in his own next mystery.

Day and night began to merge into one as Francis felt that somewhat familiar feeling of being half awake and needing a shave. *I must be going to Asia again.* As Francis walked up and down the aisles periodically, he spotted some Buddhist monks and nuns on the plane. He recognized by their maroon garb and shaved heads that they had vowed their life to seeking Buddhahood by developing compassion for all sentient beings. This indeed was the quest of all Buddhist monastics.

The monastic life is found in all cultures, Francis thought. Even though my master is Jesus and theirs is the Buddha, there is a deep bond between us. There is also a respect for the masters of one another. Thank God for Vatican Council II which encourages such mutual respect and common bonding.

The people in the aircraft did various things to help the time pass. Some people slept, some people tried to immerse themselves in the movies that were being shown. After a few hours, there was not much talking. There would be a brief layover in Bangkok, and by the time they got to Kathmandu, they would have been on the road or in the air for about twenty-four hours.

After a series of meals and movies, interspersed with Mrs. Pollifax, breakfast dishes were cleared and the announcement to prepare for landing was made. The female flight attendants had exchanged their Thai garb for simpler suits of clothing by this time and were stationed throughout the aircraft to assist with passenger exiting.

The six members of the mystery team commented to one another that the flight went well as they exited. Flo, however, said, "It's okay if you don't mind feeling like you've been hit with a truck several times over." They all had a good laugh, even though as a group they felt light-headed and half asleep.

They moved through immigration without incident. Their passports were stamped and given back to them and they made their way into a sea of people in the airport lobby. Many people held cardboard signs up in the air with the last name of travelers or groups. Eventually Mani spotted a man in his forties with mahogany skin and a bright smile holding a cardboard sign with beautiful script spelling out: "Healing Journey to Tibet."

They gently elbowed their way through the crowd and over to the man who would be their guide in Nepal for nearly a week. The smiling gentleman introduced himself as Karma. He explained that his name means "work" but the group knew that there was a much deeper meaning to Karma and let it go at that for the moment.

Each of the members pushed individual steel carriages with suitcases on them. Once in a while they would collide with one another, or with another traveler going in the opposite direction. They found a medium sized and very well used van in the parking. Karma unlocked the van and helped them load. They rumbled along the parking lot and Flo mumbled something about them not believing in shock absorbers in Nepal. Clearly this woman needed a shower and a nap!

The hotel was simple, but warm and welcoming. Located on a busy street in the heart of the capital of Nepal, it was clean, had running hot and cold water, and very well used beds.

Karma suggested that the group try to stay up until evening so that each person would begin to get into the biorhythms of this part of the world. If one were not able to manage that, he suggested that the nap be very brief. The six weary travelers made their way up to the second floor.

Dave and Chantal found their room easily. Across the hall was a room for Flo and Mani. Next to that Krishna and Francis had a room.

A shower and stretching revived Krishna and Francis. They thought alike in many ways and their biorhythms were similar as well even though they were separated by some twenty years, Francis being the elder. Some tea drinking and chatting followed a brief walk. Then it was time for sleep for everyone. The next day held much in store. Francis slept uneasily, still trying to adjust to yet another time zone—this one half way around the world.

The group met in the lobby after breakfast the next morning and Karma took them in the van to the holiest shrine of the Hindu culture in Nepal, Pashupatinath. They drove through a broad valley at the edge of the Himalayan range. The architecture was a blended manifestation of Hindu and Buddhist spirituality. Before long they reached the Hindu temple.

The temple was located on the Bagmati River, where many prayer services and cremations are carried out. If one is not a Hindu then one is not allowed in the temple. In his usual caring style, Krishna forsook going into the temple, even though as a devout Hindu he could do so. He stayed with the rest of the group on the opposite side of the river, which looks over at the temple. Looking down across the river a group of people surrounded the corpse of a woman clothed in red. Her son was dressed in white robes and chanted the appropriate prayers for the cremation ritual. The body was ignited.

We watched the flames and wondered to ourselves. Are we really here watching a cremation? In that frame of mind a monkey suddenly leaped out of a tree and landed on a large platter full of fruit being carried by

a woman dressed in a beautiful rose sari. She screamed as the monkey grabbed the banana and toppled the tray of fruit. The monkey screamed back and hopped up into a tree before anyone could react. Everyone nearby helped the woman gather her fruit offering and dusted off her clothing and feelings as best could be done. She smiled gratefully as her startled response turned into laughter. Though we did not speak the language of one another, except for Krishna, we were one during that incident and shared the common language of laughter.

We saw a variety of holy siddhus praying and meditating. Some of them appeared genuine; others appeared to be putting on a show for travelers to make some money. One siddhu of indeterminate age let his long hair fall down practically to the ground when he saw us. He raised up his left leg and wrapped it around the back of his neck somehow, and balanced himself by holding on to a sword which touched the ground to his left.

After our morning experience and a brief lunch we headed for the holiest shrine in the Buddhist culture in Nepal, known as Boudnath. This is a place of pilgrimage for many devout Buddhists, something like Jerusalem for people of the Jewish tradition. In the center of town is a large *stupa*, a white washed dome as large as several city blocks with a point on the top. Such *stupas* contain the remains or relics of famous Lamas. Devout pilgrims were circumambulating, walking around the *stupa* over and over again. Some prostrated themselves repeatedly.

Chapter 8

Krishna sat upright in his bed while meditating. Francis marveled at how completely comfortable his friend appeared to be without the support of anything to prop up his back. He felt like he was living with a Buddha.

As Francis unzipped the leather cover of his Office Book, Krishna's large brown eyes fluttered open and he asked Francis if he could join him in the celebration of Morning Prayer. Together they alternated the verses of the Psalms back and forth. Krishna listened attentively as the beginning verses from the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, Chapter 13 were read.

"If I speak with the eloquence of humans and of angels, but have no love, I become no more than a blaring brass or clashing cymbal. If I have the gift of foretelling the future and hold in my mind not only all human knowledge but also the very secrets of God, and if I also have that absolute faith which can move mountains, but have no love, I amount to nothing at all. If I dispose of all that I possess, even if I give my own body to be burned, but have no love, I achieve precisely nothing."

They spontaneously prayed for the needs of all God's people, especially those in developing countries. They asked God to send food and medical care to those most in need. They asked God for the freedom and flexibility to provide any medical care they could to the people whom they would meet on their journey.

Francis confirmed the plans for the day with the group during breakfast. They would search out the house of Tar-chin, the mother of their waiter from their dining experience at the hotel restaurant at Los Angeles.

"Ang Nyi-ma, Ang for short," explained Francis, "wants us to check on his mother who lives here in Nepal. He believes that she might be in some danger but he has little to base this suspicion on other than an intuitive sense and some messages passing over the Internet."

"What are these messages about?" questioned Mani.

"It seems that there is a Dorje," Francis continued, "which is considered very sacred and has been in the family line for generations. Ang's mother is in possession of this Dorje and some people on the Internet have a desire to obtain it for some reason. Ang does not understand the attraction to this Dorje, since millions of these small scepter-like instruments are all over Asia. A Dorje is held in the right hand and moved back and forth as a part of ritual in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. A bell is held in the left hand and moved in a similar fashion."

Dave the detective commented, "If we understood the *motivation* for the attraction to the Dorje, we would have a much better handle on understanding the entire situation. Without that, I think it is our Judeo-Christian Hindu duty to see what Tar-chin, mother of Ang, is up to."

Francis spoke again. "I know we discussed this situation and agreed upon it yesterday, but if anyone would rather go somewhere else this morning, please don't feel obliged to seek out this place with me."

Everybody was in agreement about going. No one wanted to miss another possible adventure with the mystery team. This one, however, sounded pretty tame in comparison with past adventures. Why they had not even stumbled upon a dead body as yet!

Karma was only too happy to guide them to the address scribbled on the piece of paper from the hotel in LA. "It's not far," he said, "but we do have to wander through a maze of small streets, and perhaps hop over some puddles."

"Okay, let's head to the van," said Flo.

Karma said it would be much better to walk. "It will only take about fifteen to twenty minutes and we would not get out of the van very close to the house anyway. The streets are too narrow and the people and animals too many."

"I'm just recovering from yesterday," Flo groaned, "but I'm in." After a quick trip back to their rooms, the seven people gathered in the lobby of the small hotel. A statue of the Hindu Deity Lord Dakshinamurti seemed to be smiling at them.

Krishna explained to his five fellow travelers that this Deity was a manifestation of God as the destroyer of ignorance, illusion, and darkness.

"May he be that for us," Chantal prayed, as they went off on their errand of mercy.

The area around the hotel in Lhasa was busy with cars and divided by several main roads. After about ten minutes of walking the group was in a quieter yet more crowded section, at least in terms of buildings, people, and narrow streets.

Eventually the group walked into an area that held a number of what appeared to be apartment buildings. In the United States these would be similar to something built in the nineteen forties. Window boxes filled with colorful flowers brightened the neighborhood. Men and women walked the streets on their way to the shops, spinning their prayer wheels and praying on *mala* beads--much like a Christian rosary. Prayer flags flapped in the breeze. The triangles of various colors had mantras painted on them. A special mantra was also embossed on the metal prayer wheels. It was also written on cloth and placed inside the prayer wheels.

This mantra or spiritual phrase, which is repeated over and over again, is sometimes found in Sanskrit and sometimes in Tibetan. The words are: "*Om mani peme hung*" in Tibetan, and while "*Om*" means God in Sanskrit, these sounds are beyond translation into mere words in *any* language. This *mani* mantra is often called the "Jewel in the Lotus" mantra and can be thought of as a prayer said to purify the six realms of existence in the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology—gods, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell.

The *mala* beads are used to count the number of times the mantra is prayed over and over again. The spinning of the prayer wheel is a way to send these prayers to God, as Westerners would see it. Nature prays for everyone as the wind blows the rows of prayer flags to and fro, offering this prayer to the Lord Buddha for all of creation, along with the spinning prayer wheels and whispering people.

The Buddhists do not believe in a personal God as a rule, but rather in a form of cosmic consciousness, which was very much manifested by the Buddha, and in which everyone shares. The journey of each of us, in the Buddhist tradition, leads us to enlightenment. This enlightenment is a complete experience of the consciousness of the Buddha and all that is.

Francis mused over the Christian rosary and how it is primarily the repetition of a prayer called the "Hail Mary." That's much like a mantra he thought. Saint Bernard, in fact, called the rosary the "ladder to contemplation." Contemplation is, in the Western tradition, that wordless, quiet, experience of the sacred.

Francis also thought of the similarity between the mantra and the Jesus prayer. He had read *The Way of a Pilgrim* at the advice of his spiritual director long ago. It is the story of a Russian monk who spent much of his time walking in pilgrimage to sacred sites and repeating over and over a Christian mantra from the Gospel, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me."

Mani lightened things. "I'm named after the *mani* in the *mani* mantra--not for Manny, Moe, and Jack--whoever they are. I may not be the 'Jewel in the Lotus' but I am deeply committed to bringing unity and healing to our world. It's a name I chose and don't even think it. I will never tell you my legal name because I hate it, and don't look over my shoulder when I have my passport open either!"

“Here we are,” said David, with a hint of trepidation in his voice. “I don’t have a great feeling about this,” he continued.

“You’re off duty Detective,” Chantal chided.

“I know, I know, *mea culpa, mea culpa*, isn’t that what you Catholic types say?”

Krishna interjected, “Hindus say it too sometimes.”

Francis added, “You know what clinical psychologists say, “Jews are born guilty and Catholics go to school to learn it!” The crowd let out a big laugh, including their leader Karma.

Karma thought about the meaning of his name—the positive and negative impact of our behavior from present or past lives upon us right now. *I guess we Buddhists have inter-generational guilt!*

“Maybe it would be best if I knock on the door and explain just why we are here,” Karma offered.

“Sounds good to me,” Francis responded.

Krishna rapped on the old door, clean but much in need of paint, which corresponded to the house number they had been given. They waited expectantly but nothing happened. Krishna rapped a little louder and the group became a little more silent. Again, there was no response from within. David Gold muttering a *mea culpa*, walked over to a window and peered in. He pulled back in alarm and went to the front door and began pushing on it as he explained that there was someone lying on the floor in there.

Remarkably, to the mind of most Westerners, the front door was unlocked. David started to step in, and reflexively reached for his gun that was not there. He called out “Anybody home?” and listened for the sound of movement, running, slamming doors, opening windows, but heard nothing. A simple wooden frame couch stood in the middle of the room with a woman, perhaps in her sixties, lying on the floor face up in front of it.

“One of you Doc’s better get over here. This woman looks very sick. Krishna’s experience in emergency and family medicine ignited him instantly. He knelt on the floor next to the semi-conscious woman, taking her pulse and looking into her eyes, which he had to examine by opening her eyelids with his fingers.

Her pulse is weak and thready; we better get her to a hospital at once. She is slipping into a coma.

Karma spoke, “There is a clinic not far from here. It will serve us well even though it may seem small in comparison to what Westerners are used to. The quickest thing we can do is carry her there, since we have no vehicle, and by the time one gets here we would have wasted many precious moments.”

Krishna and Flo checked the patient, to the best of their ability, for broken bones or bleeding and could find nothing that would totally rule out moving this ailing woman. They devised a stretcher of sorts from bed coverings and linens and gently placed the woman on it. She could not have been much more than one hundred pounds, and with six people carrying her on the makeshift conveyance, they were able to take her the three blocks to the clinic.

The clinic looked like little more than a storefront “Doc in the Box” type of dispensary. Beyond the waiting room, however, were about a dozen beds, most of which were occupied by people with IVs dripping into them.

A Western trained Tibetan physician ran some lab tests on the mildly restless woman and told the group that she most probably had been poisoned. His equipment was not sophisticated enough to do a toxin screening and find out exactly what drug was used. In Tibet, he continued, there were so many herbal preparations that he was not sure which one it may have been, if indeed it was herbal and not a Western drug. Tibetan medicine is far from dangerous, far less than Western drugs. However, medicinal herbs can also be abused.

He pointed out that the Chinese herb *Ma Huang*, often referred to as Ephedra by Westerners, is an herb meant to be used in combination with other herbs and in a small quantity. He said that this was a very effective treatment for respiratory situations and has been used by millions of people throughout the world for centuries.

“Westerners,” the Tibetan continued, “think that if a little is good, then more is better. They began taking ephedra in large quantities, for other purposes, and without other herbs in a formula to balance it. Thus, they got in trouble and this caused sickness and death for some. It wound up on the lips of Barbara Walters on the 20/20 show,” he exclaimed. “I saw it when I was a medical resident in Boston.”

Francis silently nodded his head in assent. There was so much misunderstanding about Asian medicine in the United States.

Flo got right to the point, “Do you have a treatment plan in mind, Doctor?”

The young man responded, "Watchful waiting and re-hydration via IV. I will also have some lab studies done at the large hospital in Lhasa and see if we can come up with whatever this toxin may be."

"If you can come up with it?" questioned Krishna. "Won't that be fairly easy? You seem hesitant."

"With all the medicines, legal and illegal, floating around, we may not be able to figure it out entirely. Certainly, we will do our very best."

"Shouldn't we move her to a larger hospital?" Mani questioned.

"You may certainly do whatever you wish," the Doctor responded, "however, I would not suggest it. This lady is semi-conscious and near her home. We can keep her well cared for here and I feel that the trip may be not only stressful physically, but also her distance from her neighborhood might stress her spiritually or psychologically, whichever concept you prefer."

A gentle voice, which had not been heard from before and a nurse at the clinic, entered into the conversation. "I know this woman. She is Tar-chin and lives on the next road over from me. She is a lovely quiet woman who seems a bit mysterious to her neighbors, but one whom we all hold in some esteem. I will personally do everything I can to see that she is taken care of and I know the Doctor will give her the very best attention as well."

Dave offered a plan of action. "If we all agree, how about we leave Tar-chin here for now and go back to her home and see what we can find?"

Or not find, Francis thought to himself.

Chapter 9

Vendors populated the streets now. Dozens of people selling fruit, herbs, and clothing eked out their existence each day this way. The prayer wheels seemed to be spinning more vigorously and the prayer flags flapping more powerfully as the mystery team walked down the street toward Tar-chin's house. A crowd of about twenty people, mostly black-haired older women with strands of gray, sat or stood in front of the door. It appeared to be a spontaneous type of prayer meeting. They said hello to the group and walked in unencumbered. The door was still partially open, just as they had left it.

The simple apartment was nicely kept. It was clean and orderly. In addition to the living room where the sick woman was found, there was a small kitchen and two bedrooms. Each room contained the basics for life in Nepal. This included a lamp, a chair, a bed in each of the two bedrooms, and colorful rugs worn thin by the passage of time and many feet. The tiny bathroom was neat with the exception of a crooked towel on the towel rack and a few splashes of water on the perimeter of the sink as well as on the floor.

Brother Francis went into the smaller of the two bedrooms, presumably the one in which Ang stayed when he visited his mother. He had borrowed a cell phone from Flo and began dialing the number that had been scribbled on the scrap of paper back in Los Angeles. After a few rings a young man's voice responded with a "Hello." In the background the clattering of dishes could be heard.

"Ang, this is Brother Francis, I'm calling you from Nepal."

"Oh, hello sir, it is so nice to hear from you but I am fearful that your phone call is bringing some bad news to me."

"I'm afraid so Ang and I wish I could tell you this in person but it is, of course, about your mother."

"Please tell me, Brother, what is it about my mother?"

"Ang, we found her semi-conscious in her apartment, stretched out on the floor in front of the couch."

"May the Medicine Buddha protect her and you. I will make plans to get to Nepal as soon as possible."

"We have taken her to the clinic near her apartment. The doctor and staff there are doing everything to help her. She is presently on an IV for re-hydration and some laboratory studies are being run at Kathmandu Hospital."

"But, Brother, what is it that has caused this state to come upon my mother?"

"Ang, we do not know yet. That is why the studies are being run. It is theorized that she ingested something that did not agree with her."

"Do you mean she may have been poisoned, Brother Francis?"

“No one is saying that for certain, Ang, and I certainly don’t know what to think. My best advice is for you to try to remain at peace and to get here when it is reasonably possible to do so.”

“Thank you and the others for your help, Brother. I will be there in the next day or so. I will take a leave of absence from school and, hopefully, from my job as well.”

“In the meanwhile Ang, we will be holding you and your dear mother in our prayers. I very much hope to see you when you get over here but may not be in Nepal when you arrive. I’m sure we will meet again.”

“I am also sure my Brother. Thank you. Good-bye.”

Francis had barely hung up when the cell phone rang again.

“Brother Francis, it’s Ang again. Please forgive me. I did some electronic wizardry and was able to call you right back. Can you tell me, please, what about the Dorje?”

Francis paused for a moment and then responded. “I’m sorry Ang, I had almost forgotten about that. It may be of interest for us more now than ever. I will make sure we look for it and we will certainly keep you informed.”

“Thank you, Brother. Good-bye.”

Francis returned to the living room to find the other members of his group scouring the little dwelling. They were reverently opening and closing doors and drawers and looking under pillows and furniture.

Mani exclaimed, “I really don’t know what we’re looking for but I think we’ll know it when we find it.”

Francis was about to ask them if they had found a Dorje when David came in from the larger of the two bedrooms with a small wooden box with dimensions of about twelve inches by 5 inches and lined in red velvet.

“I found this opened and empty on the bureau in the larger bedroom. From the bar bell like shape of the red velvet it looks very much like it would hold a Dorje. Anyone see a Dorje?”

Chantal lightened the atmosphere, “Never did I think I’d be looking for a missing Dorje--much less even know what one is!”

They continued searching the apartment and found nothing that appeared to be out of place and nothing else which appeared to be suspicious. David made copious notes and the group left the dwelling with bows back and forth to the people praying outside the apartment.

Krishna asked the group if they might stop at Kathmandu Hospital so that he could check it out and compare it with Western standards. The group was in complete agreement and, upon walking back to the hotel, they got into battered but reliable van.

Before long Karma had them at the front door of the hospital. He dropped the group off and went to park the van, saying that he would meet them in the parking lot whenever they were ready to return.

Upon seeing five Westerners and one Indian-looking man enter the building in a group, the woman behind the reception desk gave them her complete attention. Krishna explained who they were and asked to speak with the Director of the hospital. The travelers were escorted down the hall to a suite of offices and asked to wait in an anteroom.

After about fifteen minutes the Director of the hospital welcomed them to his hospital and shared with them everything he could about Kathmandu Hospital. It was founded in 1933 as an eighteen-bed facility and had now grown to a fifty-bed hospital. “Kathmandu has all the departments of a typical Western hospital. It also provides traditional Chinese medicine to patients. TCM, as it is called, is certainly not native to Nepal but has infiltrated the healthcare system and is widely accepted in Kathmandu.”

“We are not cutting edge,” the Director continued, “but we certainly are a respectable and well run institution. He appeared to feel a little threatened and seemed to be trying to state his case as strongly as possible without offending anyone.”

Krishna felt relieved and responded for the group. “We can see that very clearly and I am grateful for your time and explanation. We have a sick friend who has had lab work sent over here to your lab and we wanted to understand just a little bit about your facility before we leave this country—or this *Kingdom* actually. Her son is soon to arrive and we want to have everything in place as best we can. Thank you again for giving us your time.”

Good-byes being made, Francis led the group down the hall and out of the building.

Karma’s bright smile could be seen many yards away in the parking lot as the six journeyers, like a small gaggle of geese, made their way to the battered van.

“Well,” mused Chantal, “we didn’t get to see the temple of the living goddess or Dubar Square, or,” she continued reading from the itinerary, “Swayambunath--a two hundred year old Buddhist shrine overlooking the city and known as the ‘monkey temple.’”

Mani, exercising her dry humor joked, “I have wanted to visit the monkey temple all of my life!” The weary travelers burst into laughter once again.

Flo contributed to the conversation. “After the experience with that monkey stealing the fruit from the lady worshipper yesterday--at the height of a cremation--I think I’ve had my fill of monkeys for a while.”

Karma turned slightly and hollered back to the crowd, “Dubar Square is the central square of the city and we will ride through it often during our travels. You will not miss much. We can go to all the things that you would have gone to this afternoon tomorrow, or we can pick up our journey as listed on your itinerary for tomorrow.”

Flo read for the group: “Early breakfast at the hotel before driving to Kopan Monastery on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Meditation instruction will be given by one of the monastics. Overnight dormitory accommodations and shared bathroom facilities are provided for the group.”

The van rumbled to a stop in front of the Kathmandu Hotel. As the group walked into the lobby they joked good-naturedly about how different their day was from what was on the itinerary that they had so carefully planned.

“Well,” Mani stated, “there certainly was a strong interest in looking into medicine on this side of the world. It appears we got a very up close and friendly look, even to the point of interviewing the Director of the largest hospital here in the capital city of Nepal.”

“Not only that,” David contributed, “we have a patient on our hands. I wonder if it has something to do with our *karma*.” Everybody laughed, including Karma the tour guide.

Each headed to his or her room for a time of quiet and opportunity to digest the events of the day. They dined as they wished, alone or with one or another companion. Krishna and Brother Francis wandered the streets near the hotel for a while, stopping into a little teashop for some Nepalese food and a hot beverage. There was a chill in the air--especially in the unheated hotel rooms.

Later that evening, Krishna sat upright in the lotus position on his bed while scratching away in his journal. He was completely absorbed in recounting all that had gone on during the day in and the trip thus far. Francis took what was for him a more comfortable position--lying down in bed--and listened to the tapes on Chinese medicine that he had studied some years ago when he took his years of training in Chinese herbal medicine. This five thousand year old practice seemed to be bottomless in its intricacies and wisdom. Although he had long ago achieved his Certificate of Completion from the Institute of Chinese Herbology, Francis continued to listen to the tapes regularly so as to pick up finer points of information that he may have missed the first or second time. He was finally able to skip some of the tapes, suggesting that perhaps he had mastered the material to some degree.

The alarm clock beeped at Francis and Krishna. Francis tried to take some thought about the Resurrection and new life on rising, as the Rule of his monastery counseled him to do. Today, however, he succumbed to mumbling a stream of something about it being dark and cold and not wanting to move even if he was in Tibet--the other side of the world--and would probably never be here again, and most people never get here at all, and this land is filled with mystery, intrigue and all sorts of things to learn. “So there.”

“Ditto,” groaned Krishna.

Surfacing back up from the Netherworld, Francis heard someone banging on the door.

“Go away,” both he and his roommate shouted.

“Not on your life!” Flo yelled back through the door. “We are here to have the most profound experience we can, even if it means getting up at four fifteen in the morning to go to the local temple and pray with our Tibetan Buddhist brothers and sisters.”

“Can’t we just say Morning Prayer later?” hollered Krishna.

“You can do that too,” Flo yelled back, “but get up now or we’ll break the door down.”

Francis threw back the covers with a shutter, even though he had a sweatshirt and sweat pants on for pajamas, and hollered, “Alright, I surrender. I’ll be there shortly.”

When Francis returned from his shower, Krishna was seated in a chair in a corner of the room devoutly chanting Bhajans, Hindu devotional chants. Krishna cleaned up and the two of them met the other four pilgrims in the lobby. They opened the door of the hotel and walked out into a street filled with people dressed in Nepalese garb, some in Buddhist monastic robes, and a few in Western clothing. Two blocks away was a Buddhist temple where a pujah, or Hindu worship service, was about to begin. Nepal is such a mix of Hindu and Buddhist cultures and spirituality that one can find both of them anywhere in the Kingdom of Nepal.

They watched the white-robed Hindu priest chant, ring bells, light incense, and offer fruit and flower petals before an image of a Deity for about half an hour. There were orange-robed people in the group as well.

Krishna explained that the three men and one woman who were swaddled in orange sheets were swamis, or in the case of the woman, a swamini. The swamis are very similar to Christian monks. Their life is vowed to seeking the sacred, they are celibate, and they can live alone or in community. The white-robed priest was almost certainly married.

After the pujah, the mystery team walked up the street and wandered into a Tibetan Buddhist temple, complete with a myriad of Buddhas sitting serenely throughout the temple. Monks were chanting in a droning sort of sound, singing the praises of Buddha consciousness and seeking enlightenment. Bowls of water were lined up in front of the Buddhas as an offering, and devout people from the neighborhood sat on the floor or on cushions mesmerized by the experience.

The six friends made their way back to the hotel, on fire with devotion. Even though everyone did not completely understand the rituals they had just experienced, they certainly created a common bond for all who seek what is good and holy. This resonated deeply with all six of the travelers, each in his or her own way.

Chapter 10

The group immediately fell in love with Kopan monastery. It was a little city, containing several thousand monastics and many lay devotees who went there for a few hours, a few days, or even a few months of retreat. The prayer wheel next to the office where people were welcomed and assigned rooms was so large it had its own room.

About twenty feet high, the beautiful red and gold metallic cylinder was centered in a room large enough for people to be able to walk completely around the prayer wheel and out the door again when they completed as many revolutions of the prayer wheel as they wished. A red metal railing was attached to the huge cylinder about three feet up from the floor so that one could hold on to the ring of metal and pull the prayer wheel around as he or she circled within the room.

This huge prayer wheel made Brother Francis think of some of the amusements that he would ride on as a child when they went to the amusement park on a school picnic. Bells jangled as the prayer wheel spun. Perhaps that auditory trigger was what evoked the memory for him. One of the monks assigned room numbers to each person and led the way to their quarters in one of the retreat houses.

After they had walked about ten minutes, people in the group began to wonder just where they were going to be located. At one point they passed a very dilapidated guesthouse and hoped against hope that they would not be housed there. Fortunately, they were relieved to see that their monastic guide continued right past the dilapidated guesthouse to a very new building. They later learned that the building was so new that this group of six people from America was the first to be housed in it.

The building was bright and clean and had several large common rooms on the first floor. Up a wide staircase was a second floor with six large rooms each containing three or four beds. The six pilgrims paired themselves up in the same fashion as at their hotel in Kathmandu. After the guest master monk had left the building, the six friends tiptoed out of their rooms into the spacious hallway, smiled, and did a group hug.

“Wow, that was close,” said Chantal. “I wasn’t sure where we were going to be housed but I was bracing myself for the worst.”

After washing up and a brief nap the group headed to the dining hall. There were, in fact, several large dining halls. They found the appropriate building after a walk of about eight minutes, but walked into a large room filled with about a thousand young boys in maroon habits.

“They are little ‘monkettes,’” said Mani with a sigh. The air was charged with the electricity of youth, and all of them pointed up to the ceiling as if to say you need to go to the next floor. Out went the gaggle of travelers, up the steps, and there they found a similar room to the one below, but this one was filled with adults. A thousand or so grown up monks, and a few hundred lay people, inhabited this space.

The room had a large outdoor patio covered with an awning that would be a delightful place to eat in the daylight. Several large urns of tea were placed somewhat precariously upon a large table in the center of the dining hall. On the next table pots and pots of rice and vegetables emitted aromatic smells.

Mani had done some fancy footwork in arranging for a birthday cake to be brought to their table. It was Flo’s birthday and it was celebrated in grand style here on the other side of the world. The cake looked much like an American birthday cake but the icing and colors were much more vibrant and alive. Candles were lit and the group sang to their birthday girl. All of the monks and guests stopped in mid-chew and stared, their eyes wide with wonder. When the song was over the little group clapped, and then the entire dining hall filled with people began clapping. They weren’t quite sure why they were clapping but they seemed to be enjoying themselves just the same.

Francis remembered that clapping could be a sign of welcoming to the Buddha or welcoming to a guest. Whatever symbolism one associates with the clapping, all of it was very positive indeed. The birthday cake was a large square sheet cake, which could easily be divvied up into about fifty pieces. The entire group turned into brain surgeons with large and awkward looking knives as they cut the cake. Each of the six travelers took a few pieces on paper plates and wandered through the dining hall giving out cake to whoever seemed interested. When they got back to the table there were still a few pieces left for them to enjoy.

Flo’s eyes were moist. She told the group, “I will never ever forget this most wonderful birthday. Thank you so very much.”

Tibetan names were all running together in their minds. The guestmaster monk, no one could quite remember his name, who had taken them to their wonderful new quarters, appeared at their table. He told them that the Abbot of the monastery was having a service of blessing that evening. If they wished they could bring a kathak with them and take it up during the service to have the Abbot put it over their necks as a sign of welcome and blessing.

Everyone was excited about being part of such a ceremony but it was Mani’s turn to be a bit under the weather.

“I’d like to be there but I’m just soooo tired. Would someone please take a kathak with him or her and have the Abbot bless it for me?”

Flo volunteered. She had been given an injection of new life through her birthday party.

Yak butter lamps flickered as the five dear friends entered the temple. About three thousand men, women, and children--lay devotees as well as monastics--filled the huge prayer hall. Drums and cymbals were being pounded which, at first, sounded harsh to Western ears. This was what eventually lulled the entire assemblage into an altered state of consciousness. The added chanting only deepened the surrealistic quality of the adventure.

The Tibetan Abbot began teaching. From time to time the guestmaster, who always seemed to be there when needed, would translate a phrase or a few of the words. The Buddhist theme of developing compassion for all sentient beings was being expounded upon. One way to develop this intense compassion was with the help of meditation. The Abbot spoke briefly about the positive benefits of meditation and welcomed the group of six travelers from America, who would be receiving some private training on meditation during the next two days.

Deeply moved, the five pilgrims simply looked to the ground, greatly humbled and awed that they would be singled out in such a celebration.

Everyone in the hall then was invited forward to receive a kathak of welcome from the Abbot. In the midst of the crowd, on the way to the Abbot, the guestmaster walked up to Flo and told her that she had two kathaks draped over her folded hands rather than one. Flo explained that she was bringing a kathak for a friend to have it blessed by the Abbot. The monk smiled kindly and mentioned that this was not necessary. Blessing

is available for all and one need only be open to it. *Hmm*, Flo thought to herself, *this is a little different from we Papes.*

The monk continued, "If you wish, however, feel free to take both scarves with you."

One by one, the American travelers approached the Abbot with the silk scarves draped over their folded hands. The Abbot took the scarf and placed it around the neck of the traveler, something like the way one would wear a scarf in the West or similar to the wearing of a liturgical stole during a religious celebration. The whole experience took on the ambience of a wedding, funeral, Bar / Bat Mitzvah, confirmation, ordination, profession of monastic vows, and Baptism. The inner connectedness of all things sacred was very apparent, along with the healthy desire to stay rooted in one's own spiritual tradition.

The crowd dispersed into the night in an atmosphere of relaxed silence. The American travelers walked back to their guesthouse at a leisurely pace, each savoring the events of the day. They walked as if they had lived here forever, feeling completely safe and welcome. When they arrived at the guesthouse, a large beige dog, as welcoming and friendly as he was huge, stood by the doorway they were trying to enter. They each patted him and made their hellos. The dog seemed to communicate that all was fine and that you can go in now. One by one they did so. It didn't take long for any of the group to fall asleep. Mani had been asleep for several hours already.

Francis woke about four in the morning. He quietly got out of bed so as not to disturb Krishna, who would probably be up shortly anyway. He made his way to the common showers. He shaved without cutting himself, which is a blessing, because it took him a few minutes to remember where he was when he first woke up. He quickly showered and returned to his room.

Francis dressed in casual clothes and began tiptoeing out of the room when he heard Krishna say, "Good morning, my brother."

"Good morning back to you, my friend. I'll see you at breakfast." With that, Francis closed the door behind him and quietly descended the steps to the first floor of the guesthouse. As he tried to open the door, he realized that there was something in front of it and that the door would open no more than a few inches. As he pushed a little, the object blocking the door moved a little. He pushed a little harder and all at once was free. There, standing in front of him, and looking up at him, was the huge beige dog that had welcomed him the night before. The dog had been keeping guard throughout the night at the door of the guesthouse. Francis smiled and patted the dog gently on the head.

"Don't get too frisky Brother dog. St. Francis of Assisi is the patron of animals. The patron of my monastery is St. Francis de Sales--but I am still grateful for your vigilance." He made his way along the dark road and down to the large temple once again. Entering it, he sat quietly in the light of the yak butter lamps. He meditated and then prayed some of his Office by heart.

After being in an altered state of consciousness for he didn't know how long, Francis stood up and then did a little yoga. No one was in the temple yet so he was sure he was not disturbing anyone. Francis did the Sun Salutation yoga asana and then the Five Elements form of qigong.

Feeling invigorated in body, mind, and spirit, he made his way to the outdoors where the first rays of light were streaking the sky with color. He sat quietly on a bench not too far from a colossal incense burner, about the side of a little cottage. It was about ten feet tall and had smoke billowing out from the top of it. The big contraption created a plume of smoke that was healthy enough to power a locomotive. Since Francis was upwind of this, he enjoyed the aroma of it without feeling like he needed to cough or gag. Brother Francis continued his meditation in this healing and peaceful atmosphere.

Eventually one of the little boy monks, a child of about ten with a shaved head and maroon habit on, crossed the courtyard in front of the temple. He struggled with a huge wash basket full of something between his arms. The little boy walked up to Brother Francis, bowed to him, and turned on an electric smile. He used his eyes to point to the contents of the basket as if inviting Francis to help himself. Francis looked down to find hundreds of delicious looking cakes generously imbedded with raisins. He took the one closest to him and bowed to the young man. The boy nodded to the basket again as if inviting Francis to please have another. Francis happily obliged. The two had communicated on a deep level, sharing Spirit and sharing food. The little boy wobbled off with his burden toward what Francis took to be a common room in a large building near the temple. Evidently the little monks were having a collation prior to their time in the temple and breakfast.

Francis wondered about the tradition of taking boys and girls at so young an age into monastic life. Certainly this would never happen in the Roman Catholic tradition today. It did happen in the Middle Ages, but that custom has long been abandoned. Even having high school students enter a junior seminary or live in a convent or monastery as an Aspirant has been discontinued almost completely.

The children certainly look happy and free. He was sure that, for many of them, life here was better in terms of food, clothing, education, medical care, and housing than it would be otherwise. What about the theology of call? Wasn't a vocation, a God-given invitation rather than an attempt to gain security?

Perhaps God's hand was in this too, just in a slightly different fashion. *Who said we all have to look the same or be the same?*

Drums thundered through the monastic compound. I much prefer a bell, Francis thought, as he landed back on his bench--it's a little less jarring. *But whoever said we all have to be the same?*

The Christian monk stood up, stretched, smiled, and peacefully walked across the courtyard and re-entered the temple for a different experience of Morning Prayer. It was a lot louder and more energetic than he was used to at his monastery. It did, however, wake him up and get his day going. The smell of incense wafted through the temple and mixed with the "aroma" of yak butter. In a smaller space the yak butter might be difficult to take, but here there was lots of air and the aroma of incense and it was fine.

After prayer the community made its way to the dining room, the little monks in the lower dining room, and the older monks in the upper dining room along with the guests. His five fellow travelers caught up with Francis in the dining room and took a table in the awning-covered patio for breakfast. As they ate their Asian fare of steamed vegetables and breakfast soup, their eyes gazed out and drank in the beauty of the mountain around them. Surely this was a magical time and place in the life of each one of them.

Their attentive guestmaster appeared at the table and invited them to join him for a walk to the nunnery. He said that there was a community of several hundred nuns who lived just down the road. They had invited the Americans to visit, have a tour of their monastery, and join them for mid-morning tea. The seven people met in the temple courtyard shortly after breakfast and began their walk over a somewhat rocky road downhill toward the nunnery.

On their way they passed an older woman carrying two large buckets of water to her little home. Francis smiled at her and took one bucket from her, David took the other bucket, and they walked the few remaining steps to her house and left the buckets there for her. She smiled and bowed to the group as they left. The woman stood in front of her house continuing to wave like a loved one or family member would do when someone from the household is off on a journey.

Chatting amicably with one another during their twenty-minute walk, they arrived at the nunnery in what felt like minutes. The nuns all seemed young. Many of them appeared to be in their twenties or thirties, but the group later found out that a number of them were in their fifties and sixties--the older ones just looking very young. There were two young nuns, little girls of grade school age who, like their contemporaries at the men's monastery, were there to become nuns.

The community members helped support themselves by making incense and the travelers were taken through the incense factory, given a tour of the library, and then given time to pray in the quiet of the large temple--complete with more yak butter lamps. The temple seemed just a tad cleaner than the monk's temple. Francis found this throughout Asia. Sometimes the contrast was quite dramatic, the monk's communities not having temples quite as clean as the nun's communities. *Some things are universal.*

After two hours of touring, talks, and prayer, the group joined some of the nuns for tea. The tea was delicious, laced with ample amounts of milk and sugar. Francis had several cups of this delicious brew, as did most of his group. He probably wouldn't sleep for a week with all that caffeine and sugar in him, but he enjoyed every moment of it. Later the nuns who were students, perhaps a thousand of them, filled the courtyard to do their debating.

In the Tibetan monastic tradition, the monastic person in formation learns about the teachings of the Buddha, the Scriptures, and other holy books partly by debating about them in small groups. The students are given topics to debate on and assigned different sides to take as they debate. The debater slaps his or her one hand with the other when making a point and inviting another from darkness to light, from confusion to enlightenment.

After the slap, which is a kind of cognitive shock treatment, the hand is slid up the inside of the arm toward the shoulder. This combination of fast and slower moves made Francis think of the yin and yang of Chinese medicine and of life.

The guide gathered his flock together, reminding them that they too had a class. They walked back to the monastery and shortly gathered in one of the smaller temples where a nun was prepared to teach them a very fascinating form of meditation.

The six members who were traveling together were shown into a small temple along with three or four additional guests who were there as individual retreatants. A woman in her late forties entered the room. She had short brown hair, closely shaven, almost to her scalp. She wore a long maroon dress and sandals. Her smile and deportment suggested that she was very happy to be with this group. Everyone stood up and said hellos to this Buddhist nun. The nun had grown up in Switzerland, became a Buddhist, and moved to this monastery some twenty-five years ago upon entering monastic life. Her name was *Ani* Karen. She explained that "*Ani*" is the title one would give to a Buddhist nun and used much like "Sister" would be used for Western Christian nuns.

The group sat down, trying to settle in on pillows placed in a variety of unstable formations. *Ani* Karen said that if it was too uncomfortable for people to sit in that fashion, that they were welcome to sit on a chair, or lean up against one of the six square pillars that were part of the structure of the temple.

Brother Francis was in the back, struggling to settle into several pillows when *Ani* Karen invited him to move forward. She hollered back to him that he was not very visible and therefore probably couldn't see the instructor very well. Francis was just as happy to stay in the back but the whole group said that they wanted him to move forward so that he could see well. Francis cooperatively picked up his pillows and walked to the front of the group and sat down. He began to arrange himself on the pillows. By force of habit he slipped his fingers within his waistband to arrange his clothing and everyone burst out laughing. The monk was certainly startled by this and asked the group to let him in on the joke. It turned out that as he adjusted himself, a little bit of the waistband of his "Fruit of the Looms" was very visible. When he finally understood what the group was chuckling over, *Ani* Karen smiled and quietly said, "People certainly get to know one another very well on a trip like this, don't they?" Everyone laughed even harder, including Brother Francis.

As people settled into a more contemplative mode, the nun began to talk about meditation in general, its benefits along with its challenges. She outlined various common practices such as styles of posture, breathing exercises, and objects of meditation that might be used, some of which could be mental mantras or imagery.

Now the people making up this group were not expert Buddhists by any stretch; most of them were probably committed Christians. *Ani* Karen believed that an ancient Buddhist meditation practice known as *Tong Len* would be the most interesting practice for the people gathered. The English translation of *Tong Len* is "giving and taking."

The Buddhist practitioner explained that, "In the West, I understand, it is very common for people to shy away from the negative energy, or contaminated qi, of others. Even healthcare practitioners, energy medicine healers, and medical qigong doctors, have a certain resistance to healing when the negative energy of another is present in large proportions. They practice lots of ways to shield and protect themselves from this negativity.

"An ancient Eastern sage, for example, might visualize a bucket or cauldron of flames on the floor next to him or her as the healer works with the person in need of healing. The sage would pull out and throw into the cauldron the negative energy to be burned up.

"The practice of *Tong Len*, then, is respectful of this avoidance of negativity, but moves into and deals with the 'unhealthy' qi or suffering of others in a very direct fashion. In *Tong Len*, there is a conscious choice to collect and take in, albeit momentarily, the negativity of the other."

The lecture certainly caught the attention of the people in the room. The Tibetan Buddhist nun was right on target with the differences between Western approaches to energy medicine and some of the practices of the East. A few of the listeners fidgeted a little bit in an unconscious expression of resistance and tension about what was being stated.

Ani Karen suggested that the group take a little break, and promised that when they re-gathered she would lead them in a *Tong Len* meditation if they were interested.

During the brief break, David said that he didn't know what any of this was about; he had heard people talk about such things and was willing to go along for the ride, so to speak. Chantal was a little more cautious but always an adventurous person, plus her psychological research background made her curious. Mani was definitely and chronically cautious. The approach *Ani Karen* was describing flew in the face of everything that she had ever learned or done. Flo was a nurse and very focused on keeping any kind of disease at bay, be it psychological or spiritual. Krishna trusted in God and God's many manifestations and was very open. Natural healing had always been an interest of this Western-trained physician. Brother Francis was captivated by the idea. It was he, in fact, who suggested the topic of *Tong Len* for the group. The handful of other guests were perhaps not as informed about the topics under discussion and saw it simply as another type of meditation.

When the break was over, the juggling for comfort on the pillows began anew. This time Brother Francis was careful not to adjust his shirt and waistband prior to the class! *Ani Karen's* deportment was even more serene and focused at this point. She began to talk about the practice of *Tong Len*, explaining that there were many forms of it and that this was a rather simple beginning class that could lead them very deeply into a new way of relating to what is sacred—as well as more deeply into the suffering intrinsic to life.

She invited the group to sit comfortably and to take some gentle relaxing breaths. She suggested that people either close their eyes or leave them slightly open, just enough for some light to get in so that they would not fall asleep. If anyone kept his or her eyes open, *Ani Karen* suggested that the person gaze at a spot on the floor several feet in front of oneself.

She invited the people to think of someone who was sick or dealing with an emotional problem, perhaps even think of the pain of the entire world. She said that it was sometimes more helpful in the beginning to think of a specific person, maybe sitting in their living room with them in an invisible fashion. Perhaps it was an older aunt, a parent, or a friend who would come to mind.

“Use the gift of your imagination,” she counseled. “If you are not a very visually oriented person, simply *think* about that person or situation. Some people can make pictures in their mind easily, others have a stronger sense of sound or smell, or a feeling in the gut. One is not preferable to another, simply use the gifts you have-- the way you are wired, so to speak..”

The room held a palpable sense of silence and focus. The serenity of *Ani Karen* penetrated into the heart of each person in the red and gold painted temple.

“Now think of the person you chose and invisibly sit or stand with him or her, perhaps in their homes, and visualize the blackness that runs through their body—a representation of sickness, evil, or pain that this person has had to deal with in the past or is presently dealing with. See this blackness circulating through the person you have in mind and begin to invite that blackness to move out of the body through the nostrils slowly, like smoke or ink.

“Have this negativity float upward and cleanse the person as it is expelled through the nostrils. This may take some time. We will pause for ten minutes or so to allow you to move into that process.... As the black inky substance moves up and out, it collects into an olive-shaped image in front of the person you are thinking about. This is thought to be a condensed form of the suffering of that person floating out in front of them.”

The room moved into an even deeper silence for about ten minutes when time and space was suspended. Geography also disappeared.

Eventually *Ani Karen* spoke again, very gently, “This is the part that Westerners would call ‘dangerous.’ I am going to suggest that you allow the olive-shaped form of evil and suffering to begin to liquefy, change again, so that like smoke or ink it can move forward and into your nostrils. Please do *not* do that now.

“Let me continue explaining, she cautioned, “As the black smoke moves in through your nostrils and down the throat toward the heart, just let it go at its own pace, perhaps using the breath as a type of pump, so that each inhalation takes in the evil a little further.

Here we have the heart of the matter. When the smoke reaches your heart, let the *very beginning* touch of that smoke upon the heart ignite the negativity like a case of dynamite or a nuclear reaction. Then let that fire move up and out to the rest of the olive-shaped image of evil and burn it up in a nanosecond. In that way, the negativity is not taken into you in a permanent way but is dissolved.”

Ani Karen invited those who wished to do so to begin that process. The atmosphere of suspense and tension was palpable. After a few moments, several of the people jumped on their cushions or in their chairs. An energetic connection with the entire universe was happening, along with a bonding to all the suffering that people have had to deal with. Francis saw in this experience much about the heart of Christ and his passion. He also saw the compassion of anyone who would dare to pray in such a fashion.

Chapter II

There was a message waiting for Brother Francis when they arrived back to the hotel. The man behind the desk at the Kathmandu Hotel was taller than average for a Tibetan, being a little over six feet tall.

He waved to the group as they entered the lobby and hollered over to Brother Francis, “Monk Francis, you have a message here for a few days.” Francis went over and accepted the paper that the smiling man was waving in the air. On a very ordinary looking piece of white 8-1/2x11 paper was written the following:

THE DORJE IS IN TIBET

“Everything okay, Francis?” Krishna asked as they walked up the stairs to their room.

“I imagine so,” his friend responded. “This note puzzles me. What do you make of it?”

Krishna took the message from Francis and read it, his brow wrinkling and his face becoming quizzical. “It probably refers to the Dorje missing from Tar-Chin’s house. What really puzzles me is why would anyone care enough to leave this message--and how would they know where the Dorje is.”

Francis picked up on the theme. “I can’t figure out whether this person is friend or foe. We are on our way to Tibet tomorrow morning--the zenith of our journey. I wonder if the creator of this cryptic message knows that.”

At dinner that evening, Francis shared the mysterious note with his five fellow travelers. David suggested that they speak with the manager of the hotel to see if anyone remembers who left the note, or when it was put in Francis’ mailbox behind the reception desk of the hotel.

The group was excited and a bit on edge. They were already at an elevation of four thousand two hundred feet in Nepal and they were going to a significantly higher level of elevation. The travelers were concerned about their ability to handle high altitude illness. They were also excited about going, finally, to the mysterious land of Tibet. This was a land that, up until the last few decades, was almost never seen by Westerners. Tibetan spiritual and medical teachings were highly guarded and not shared in any complete way with others. Now this.

Francis brought the group up to date on their favorite waiter, Ang. “Ang will be landing at the airport in Nepal around the same time we are leaving. Maybe we will bump into him in that crazy crowd of people. If not, I would like for us to connect with him again somehow.” Everyone was in agreement--they wanted to be as supportive as possible to this young student.

Flo had been keeping in touch with the clinic where Ang’s mother lay semi-conscious. “The doctor there says that Mrs. Ang, I can’t pronounce her name, is holding her own. She appears to be no better, but is no worse. It makes the doctor wonder if it really is a poison causing her symptoms. The labs are back from the hospital and they have found nothing. They are going to send samples out to another hospital for a more advanced screening in order to continue the detective work that way.”

Francis, David, and Krishna went to the front desk while the “girls” went to their rooms.

“No sirs, I really don’t know who left this message for you. It has been in your box number, Dr. Francis, for at least twenty-four hours. I remember seeing it here yesterday. I will leave a memo for the other people who work the desk and see if they know who got the note in and possibly when. Is everything else satisfactory?”

David, always the detective, would give out as little information as possible.

“Everything is fine, sir. We are very pleased with the hotel and your service. We are, however, curious about the note that was left for Brother Francis. It is somewhat ambiguous and we want to get some more details.”

“Very good, sir.”

The detective and the doctors climbed the stairs for an evening of rest.

Thousands of people milled around in the Kathmandu airport. A number of the women had orchids on, indicating that they had flown Thai Airways. This was the airline Ang was to fly in on.

Krishna spoke up, “Ang is inbound on Thai Airways and we are outbound on China Southwest Airlines. I don’t think there’s much possibility of us connecting.”

After several hours of waiting in line, examinations with electric wands, and being patted down, all of which made them feel like criminals, the six pilgrims were ushered into the secure part of the airport one by one.

As Francis was making his way in, the last of their group, far across the terminal building he glimpsed Ang rushing along with a carriage full of suitcases, a fatigued and worried look on his face. Francis called out to the young man but it was futile. An airport security guard started to give Francis a strange look so he prudently kept quiet and walked into the secure area of the airport. The flight was just under one hour from Kathmandu to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. During their travels, they would be up close and personal with the Himalayan mountain range and even Mount Everest! Peaking above the other mountains, Mount Everest stood like a glistening silver triangle to their left.

A snack was served. It consisted of an empty hamburger roll (the kind that looks like white cotton and has next to no nutrition) wrapped in cellophane and a little plastic cup of water sealed at the top with tin foil.

The group ate, grateful for what they had and very well aware that most people have far less, especially in this part of the world. Some of them smiled as they made a mental comparison between this airplane ride and the one on Thai Airways. The flight, otherwise, was quick and easy and shortly they were leaving the plane and walking on the tarmac that covered this little portion of Tibet.

Within seconds the world started to spin around. The travelers became lightheaded and had to stop and lean on one another. The experience passed quickly but it was a good reminder that they were certainly at a much higher altitude and would need to take care. They walked slowly. They were able to breathe, but breathing went much more slowly and they had to wait periodically until their breath caught up with them.

They went through immigration. After several lines, and lots of paper pushing and rubber-stamping, all six pilgrims had visas for the Kingdom of Tibet. Out on the pavement in front of the main building of the airport, the six grouped together, luggage carriers brimming over with suitcases that now and then would fall to the ground. Flo, it seemed, had the most luggage. She often reminded the group that her bags was partially empty so that there would be room for her to put her treasures from “sacred shopping” in on her way back.

A man in his late thirties with a long black ponytail and reflective sunglasses was across the driveway waving a sign that read: “Healing journey to Tibet.”

Flo pointed to him and said, “I think we’ve found our driver, folks.”

They made their way to the gentleman who, as it turned out, spoke very little English yet rattled off all their names in English and bowed. When he mentioned Brother Francis, he referred to him as *Geshe-la* Francis. The group would be told more about what that meant later. The driver introduced himself, claiming a name that sounded remarkably like a form of meditation to most of the group.

They packed the little van with their luggage and barely managed to get the back door shut. Inside, especially when the driver began turning the key, the van smelled like gasoline.

“Aromatherapy,” muttered Flo.

The group rested, trying to adapt their breathing to the much thinner air. In about twenty minutes they were driving down a wide street in the capital of Tibet. It was lined with street vendors and people of all sorts, young and old, mostly looking somewhat poor financially but rich in spirit. Their warm smiles and welcoming waves as the van rumbled down the street felt like a homecoming. Brother Francis thought of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Hopefully these people would not turn on them as the people did shortly after Jesus’ triumphal entry.

“Lhasa Hotel, Lhasa Hotel,” shouted the driver as he pulled in head first toward the curb in front of a very non-descript building that sported a tonka, about as heavy as a carpet, tacked over the doorway to keep the wind out. The travelers got out of the van and began, once again, to lug their luggage into another hotel. Upon entering, the group was greeted by Jasmine--not the herb or the tea--but the person. She was a lovely Tibetan woman of twenty-six years of age. People in the West might refer to her as a “Barbie.” This Barbie, however, was as genuine and sweet as a summer morning.

One of Jasmine’s relatives, no one was ever sure about the relationships because an entire family owned and ran the hotel and restaurant connected to it, came into the lobby with a tray of steaming tea. The group very much appreciated the welcome that revived their dreary spirits, but they really wanted to get to their rooms for some quiet time and a nap.

Flo asked where the elevator was.

Jasmine responded with, “What is elevator?”

Flo rolled her eyes and everybody laughed. Jasmine and her family members didn’t really understand what was so funny but joined in the laughter. The group trekked up the steps and found that they needed to rest every few steps in order to catch their breath again. Flo thanked the Holy Mother of God that their rooms were only on the second floor.

Francis commented, “Flo, you get so prayerful under stress. It’s one of most your endearing qualities.”

The laughter literally took their breath away! There was no fear experienced with their shortness of breath because it returned almost instantaneously upon stopping movement or laughter.

“It looks like we’re to the left of the stairs here and our rooms are near each other once again,” Dave offered.

They used the same rooming system throughout the pilgrimage: David and Chantal, husband and wife, in one room; Flo and Mani, good friends in another; and Krishna and Francis, also good friends, in a third room.

“Banana Lassi for me to drink please,” Krishna said to the waitress. She left, having taken all their orders and went into a kitchen, which was emitting wonderful aromas. Krishna explained that the head cook was Tibetan but that she had lived in India for about twenty years so the food would be a reflection of both cultures, and he assured everyone that it would be delicious.

“Please don’t give in to the stereotype that everything will be hot and spicy. I can assure you that you will **love** it.” They had a wonderful dinner and especially enjoyed the spring rolls. Service was in Tibetan style—slow, warm, and friendly. This was a different tempo from what this group was used to and throughout their time in Tibet they tried several gentle maneuvers to speed things up, but to little avail.

After dinner the travelers retired to their rooms. Showering, stretching, and thinking occupied the rest of the evening, each in his or her own fashion.

“It is a little brisk in here, don’t you think?” Francis asked.

Krishna nodded his head in assent. “I think there are some extra comforters, or whatever they’re called in Tibetan, in the closet. Let me look.” He found two more and placed one on Francis with a thud.

“I may never be heard from again,” Francis muttered, his head wrapped in the hood of the white sweatshirt he was sleeping in. “Little did I realize that my Lehigh University sweatshirt would make it to the other side of the world—indeed, to the *top* of the world!”

Krishna might never be found again either. Slight of frame and lean, he could be totally absorbed by the mattress, blanket and comforter by morning.

Ugh, how do we turn the light out? Francis’ arms slowly reached out from beneath the mounds of protective gear and, after knocking over the radio and travel alarm he had placed on the nightstand, he managed to click the light switch, which plunged them into darkness.

Something far, far away chirped at them. What a repetitious and boring bird, thought Krishna. When he realized it was their alarm, he bravely made his way, arm by arm out of the covers, and searched for the travel alarm on the nightstand. It wasn’t there. He followed the sound like a bloodhound, and moved closer to Francis’ bed, literally underneath it, to pull out the travel alarm that made its journey there last evening.

“Time to get up Francis.”

From somewhere beneath the comforter a muffled voice responded with, "I'm not home; go away."
"You can do it. Today is the day when we see the home of the Dalai Lama and several temples and hospitals." That sentence went through Francis like a bolt of lightning and he sat up.

What a picture--Krishna in his surgical scrubs and Francis in his sweats--both looking like they had been struck by lightning. One bathed and shaved while the other prayed and exercised. What a compatible set of roommates.

Meanwhile, down in the dining room, the others had gathered.

They tried again for quicker food service. The woman who was waiting on the table seemed very sluggish and in pain, but trying to keep up appearances. She went from person to person and wrote down their orders. There were three or four American selections to choose from and each one arrived individually--and then the next person at the table would wait for his or her food to arrive. The whole process took about a half hour for everyone to be served breakfast.

Krishna, the compassionate one, sought out the waitress and asked her if everything was all right. She mentioned that she had a pain in her jaw. He conducted a brief examination of her mouth and jaw in the corner of the restaurant. Krishna told the waitress that she had a bad tooth and that she needed to visit the dentist as soon as possible or it would become severely infected. She thanked him, somewhat relieved, and said that she would certainly make sure she got to the "dental doctor."

Karma at the wheel, the group motored its way to the Potala Palace. The huge structure on a mountaintop had been the center of Tibetan government for many generations, as well as the main home of the Dalai Lama. After Tibet was taken over by the Communist government, the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans fled to India and other places. The Potala Palace today is a large museum and is said to contain about a thousand rooms, twenty thousand statues, and ten thousand altars.

Our guide whispered to the group upon getting out of the van, "this place is very bugged."

David Gold questioned him. "Do you mean like with microphones and cameras?" Krishna nodded. This symbol of the Dalai Lama is the most sensitive place in all of Tibet and the most politically controversial.

There were many steps to climb in order to reach an entrance to the Potala Palace and the group had to stop periodically because of losing breath. Eventually they were inside and were immediately assaulted by an array of art and artifacts from generations gone by. Room after room, stairway after stairway, the pilgrims were visually and, with the help of tour guides, verbally given lessons in Tibetan history.

At one point, they walked through the Dalai Lama's bathroom. Flo thought it was fascinating that even Dalai Lamas needed one of those!

Eventually they were on one of the upper roofs of the palace. The height and thin air was dizzily exhilarating.

Francis and the others were tired. They stopped in a little teashop on an upper level and had some refreshments. They made their way down, stairway after stairway, and eventually reached the outdoors. Just as they were getting in the van, a man who looked to have been severely burned, garbed in monk's robes, put his hands out for a donation. They had been told not to give donations because it might generate disagreements among the beggars and also because they might become swamped by beggars.

Krishna could not resist, and put a ten-dollar bill in the man's gnarled hands. The beggar bowed and bowed profusely. In the van, Krishna told the group that he understood the compassion of the group and respected it. He also wanted them to know that monk's robes were easy to purchase and that the man may or may not have been a monk. In any case, he was certainly physically challenged and in need of whatever help could be provided to him.

It was on to the Jokhang Temple, the center of religious and spiritual life in Tibet. This temple is a massive stone building located in Barkhor Square, in the heart of Tibet. Thousands of pilgrims were milling about inside and out, praying and chanting.

The group wandered through the maze-like stone structure. The air reeked of yak butter from the huge number of lamps burning. There was little ventilation and a few of the pilgrims were getting somewhat nauseous. Francis wound up wearing a surgical mask over his face for most of the tour. Captivated as he was

by things Eastern and spiritual, this was not a high point for him. He, above all, was relieved to get out of Jokhang Temple and breathe fresher air once again.

The temple was within walking distance of the hotel, and some members of the group chose to walk back as a way of acclimating themselves to the neighborhood. The walk was only about fifteen minutes and when Francis and Krishna got to the front desk of the hotel, they asked Jasmine where the nunnery was. She said it was out the door and to the left, up the street on the right about a half-mile. Francis and Krishna looked at one another, both thinking that they must have passed it on their way back to the hotel. They made their way back up the street and almost passed it again, because an outer wall flanked the nunnery and housed a courtyard, and the outer wall blended in with the buildings on either side of it.

The two men walked up two steps and through a doorway in the outer wall and entered into a serene courtyard, complete with flowing water, hanging plants, and several large prayer wheels which they turned upon entering. Very shortly, a young woman in her thirties, with short hair and a long maroon habit greeted them. She spoke a little English and appeared genuinely happy to see them. She went off for a few minutes and returned with a woman in her seventies, shorter and heavier, who smiled and bowed deeply at the guests. This was the Abbess of the monastery. She, in Tibetan, welcomed them profoundly and then pointed to the younger nun as she made her exit.

Beautiful flowers, thriving in window boxes or hanging from the roof, animated the second floor porches of the three buildings that made up the two sides and back of the courtyard. These rooms, the guest mistress said, were the rooms of the nuns. On the lower floors were workrooms and common rooms, such as the dining room and kitchen. In the middle of the back wall, flanked by nuns' rooms on the second floor, were about a dozen old stone steps. The trio walked up the steps and found themselves in a beautiful temple dedicated to the Medicine Buddha.

Front and center in the temple was a statue of Buddha, about fifteen feet tall. In his right hand he held a branch-like cluster of the myrobalan plant, revered for its healing properties, while in his left he held a blue alms bowl symbolizing herbal medicine in the form of medicinal nectar. The Medicine Buddha was colored a vibrant blue the color of lapis lazuli, a very precious mineral drawn from the earth. Tonkas depicting various manifestations of the Buddha, many old and tattered, were hung throughout the temple.

Six large square pillars, as is the case in so many Asian temples, supported the roof and were lined up three by three, dividing the room into thirds both horizontally and vertically. Wooden platforms about one foot high and covered with well-worn cushions were used to sit on for prayer and meditation. Francis asked the nun if they might meditate for a while. She said that that would be perfectly fine because she could simply continue cleaning the temple, which she was doing when the guests arrived. She had, in fact, left the bucket she was filling down by the well near the main entrance when she spotted the visitors.

Krishna and Francis settled in for a period of meditation, reflecting back on their experiences of *Tong Len* at the Kopan Monastery that they still wanted to share with one another.

The nun mopped in a far corner of the room while Francis and Krishna went into their meditation experience. After about a half hour, Francis slowly opened his eyes, and out of the corner of his right eye he could see the heads of several young nuns peeking around one of the pillars and staring at them. As soon as he moved the heads disappeared. He wasn't sure if he heard some giggles or not.

Francis beckoned to the young nuns and they all walked outside and sat on a bench. He said that he was looking for a nun who lived there by the name of Cho-Nyi. One nun, the guest mistress, looked more than startled.

"I am Cho-Nyi; how is it that you know of me?" Before Francis was able to respond, she mumbled in a half daze, "my nephew."

"Yes, your nephew, Ang. We had the good fortune of meeting him in Los Angeles on our way here to Tibet. He was a waiter at the hotel restaurant." Cho-Nyi was nodding her head in understanding and her smile head the radiance of the Dharma, the very meaning of her name.

"I have not seen Ang in some years but have fond memories of our entire family. The political situation makes it difficult for us to visit one another. Some are not allowed into Tibet and others are not allowed out. Even if one were to get beyond those barriers, there is always the risk of not getting back in or out again."

"Ani Cho-Nyi, your sister Tar-Chin in Nepal is not well."

The nun's face clouded. "What's the matter?" She didn't quite lose her calm but was moving toward that state.

"It appears that she is in a semi-coma. On Ang's suggestion, we went to visit her in Nepal and found her partially conscious. She is being taken care of in a clinic near her apartment and Ang has probably gotten there to tend to her by now. The staff at the clinic is running tests to try to see if your dear sister ingested some sort of toxin, either accidentally, or perhaps at the hand of another. There is no way of telling."

Cho-Nyi looked at them with eyes like laser beams. "Does this have anything to do with the family Dorje?"

Krishna took his turn communicating. "We did find an empty box that probably housed that Dorje. It was very old and lined with red velvet."

Cho-Nyi nodded. "I'm sure it was taken."

Krishna continued, "*Ani*, do you have any idea why that Dorje is so attractive?"

"Monetarily, it is not worth a great deal. There are far more beautiful Dorjes all over the place in Tibet. It is typically kept with a bell of about the same size and the two are used in Tibetan ceremonies to express the union of male and female, and the blinding power of wisdom. It does belong with a bell and perhaps someone is a little overly zealous in trying to unite it with its mate. The mate is probably long gone.

"I can see no other reason than that for anyone seeking out our family Dorje. It has been in our family for generations. It was the property, so to speak, of an uncle of long, long ago who was a very well respected monk in our tradition. The value is much more spiritual and sentimental than financial, I assure you. The family has always been overly protective of the relic," the nun continued, "and I sometimes wondered why."

Cho-Nyi continued. "I will beseech the Medicine Buddha to bring healing to my dear sister and to our whole lineage. Something has been violated and it must be made right. The law of karma will take care of this but I want to cooperate as fully as I can."

Promising to keep her informed, the two friends left the nunnery and returned to their hotel. On their way out, Francis took a few dollars out of his pocket and left it as a donation. A doctor nun, who was in a little clinic housed in the front wall to the left of the exit, saw this and came up to Francis and pantomimed, inviting him to hold onto his wallet. Francis eventually understood what she was getting at and so he put it in his coat pocket rather than his pants pocket. This wasn't good enough for this nun.

She pantomimed taking the wallet out of his pocket and running away. Eventually she sorted through the folds of her habit and came up with the most gigantic safety pin the men had ever seen. They wondered if it had been used to help diaper baby elephants. At any rate, she reached into his jacket and fastened Francis' pocket with the pin, thus making the wallet more secure. The trio bowed to one another and Francis and Krishna stepped over the threshold and into the narrow street that led back to the hotel.

It was early to bed that evening, because the next day was filled with an excursion to Ganden Monastery, about a two-hour drive from Lhasa where they were staying. Sleep didn't come easily, however. When the friends returned to their room, they found that a scrap of paper had been slipped under their door. On it were the words:

THE DORJE IS AT A HIGHER ELEVATION

Chapter 12

After a drive of two hours, the group was at Ganden Monastery. This monastic community was founded in the year 1409 and is one of the most spectacular sights in all of Tibet. The monastery once housed four thousand monks. During the Cultural Revolution, however, much damage was done to the monastic complex. Major repairs were underway. The pilgrims were able to look at and touch bullet holes in the brick wall.

How ironic, Francis thought, the word "Ganden" means joyous, and here we are looking at the pain of these people.

A famous monk named Tsongkapa, who established the Gelugpa Order within Tibetan Buddhism, founded the monastery. This sect, a tour guide explained to the travelers, wore yellow hats, looking something like cock's comb on the top of their heads. This is the lineage of the Dalai Lama. Another large monastic branch or order of Tibetan Buddhism wears red hats.

Red hats, yellow hats, thought Chantal, just so they're decent people.

It was snowing on the way through the mountains to the monastery. After a period of meditation in the monastery temple, the group went outside to return to the van. It took only a few seconds before a snowball fight erupted. The group laughed playfully, reminding each other that it was barely October and there was snow swirling around them.

When they reached the van, about a hundred men, women, and children were there to greet them and cheer them on. The small band of travelers gave out toothbrushes and toothpaste to the grateful Tibetans.

In the van, Krishna thought about what a mixed blessing this experience was. They had so little to give to the people here and there was so much more that could be done. He tried to content himself by doing what he could and living peacefully with the results of that.

They were back at the hotel in Lhasa in time for dinner--and a walk around the neighborhood for those who chose to do so.

Francis and Krishna went on one of their evening walks, stopping at a Tibetan bakery to pick up some delicious sweets to be enjoyed later in their room along with tea.

The friends chatted about their mutual frustrations in being so limited in their ability to provide more for these good people. Before they turned in for the night, Brother Francis remembered something.

"Krishna, when I was down by the main desk of the hotel, Jasmine was arranging to send an electric heater up to someone. I didn't know we could do that. This room gets pretty frigid. How about we call down and see if they can rustle one up for us?"

"Great idea, Francis. I still have India in my blood and it does get pretty cool at night."

Francis made the phone call and about ten minutes later a young woman who appeared to be about sixteen appeared at the door with an ancient electric heater. It was a good three feet square with a series of about fifteen electric coils running from top to bottom within the square frame. The electric cord attached to it looked as if it had survived the Cultural Revolution. On second thought, maybe it had not survived!

Krishna and Francis tried to help the young woman but she was determined to serve her guests. She lugged the contraption into the room and plugged it in. It immediately starting giving off sounds of something like popcorn popping. The girl stepped back about a foot, the gentlemen jumped back about six feet. She seemed used to this. A few of the coils sputtered into an orange day glow kind of light. The young lady did not seem completely happy yet and took out a wrench and began banging on the side of the contraption. Eventually another, another, and then another coil lit until all but one or two of the heating coils were glowing and humming a dangerous tune. With a smile to the gentlemen that seemed to say, *See, didn't I do a good job?* the young lady left the room.

The guys fell into their beds for a good night of sleep. Tomorrow they would go the ancient town of Gyantse. This would involve a nine-hour bus ride, often over very high mountain passes, sometimes being at an elevation of 17,500 feet. This part of their journey would certainly test their Ginkgo Biloba, taken as a preventative. Their *Hong Jing Tian*, also known as Rhodiola and made of flowers that thrived in high altitudes, would be taken if the Ginkgo didn't keep them well.

Lights out, and buried in comforters, a slight problem became evident. The room was bright enough to film a movie in. Everything was painted orange from the heater. Francis mumbled something beneath the comforter.

"We have a choice," Krishna hollered back, "heat or darkness."

Francis got up and retrieved the blindfold he had been given on the airline to help him sleep. He found one for Krishna as well and gave it to him. Francis' final words were, "If we wake up with sun poisoning, I'll treat you with Chinese medicine if you'll treat me with allopathic medicine."

Francis heard a soft "deal" and then there was blessed sleep.

In the morning, about six a.m., everyone was in the dining room. They had put in an order the evening before for six plates of scrambled eggs and toast, along with some tea.

“Western ingenuity,” Mani said. “A little preplanning is all it takes.”

Nonetheless, breakfast still took about an hour before they were able to be served and eat.

“Thanks for trying, Mani,” Flo smiled.

They picked up their bag lunches on the way out of the hotel restaurant and boarded the van. It would be an almost steady climb into the Himalayan Mountains from here on. The van hummed along, seemingly helped by the inertia of a long ride. Within an hour they were far from civilization as they knew it. The largest population in the area seemed to be yaks. The ox-like animals wandered around in total freedom, up and down mountainsides.

When the group roused from the semi-conscious lull they had drifted into for the first hour or two of the ride, David offered a few thoughts about yaks. “Those are the creatures that yak butter lamps and yak butter tea are made out of. Thanks, guys, for your contributions. I’m sure they’re very helpful in a pinch but they’re not exactly *my* cup of tea.”

They stopped at the crest of a mountain about noontime. A Tibetan man in colorful garb held a rope that was attached to a ring that was attached to the nose of a mammoth yak. The fact that there were tassels made of red yarn tied onto the tips of the yak’s horns did not fool anyone for a moment. The Americans were leery of the yak but the gentlemen assured them that the yak was gentle and that for a few coins they could enjoy a ride on the yak.

Flo, the raging extrovert, got on the yak almost immediately. She screamed for the entire five-minute ride, again getting into what Francis called “foxhole religion.”

As she dismounted, Flo said, “I really don’t want to join my departed husband just yet. I thought I was going to wind up falling over a cliff. That yak is a pretty sure-footed animal. He’s bigger than me and certainly more sure-footed.”

Three or four other tourists, most likely from Asia due to their accent and skin color, lined up for their rides. The tourist population was just about nil at this remote site.

The group contentedly munched on their cold fried egg sandwiches and fruit. They passed around canteens of green tea and felt their muscles begin to unwind from the first part of the journey that morning. A gorgeous lake of crystal clear serene water lay in front of them just down a small slope. The pilgrims agreed to take about a half hour to meditate quietly, either sitting alone or walking along the shimmering lakeside before they resumed their journey.

Karma, their faithful driver, went back and chatted with the yak man.

Later, back in the van, the atmosphere shifted. A few of the travelers felt light-headed, and all of them felt excited about being so far away from everything that they knew of or were familiar with. Only Flo, yelling some of her jailhouse prayers whenever the van was on the edge of a cliff, which was probably half the time at this point, broke the quiet. Mary, the Mother of God, was invoked over and over again but in a scream rather than a hymn or soft prayer. Flo’s companions gave her no sympathy at all. They either had their eyes closed or were laughing at her

She retorted, “All right for you. If any of you need a nurse, don’t come looking for me.”

Darkness descended and painted the sky with colorful swirls of beauty as it did so.

“I hope we don’t hit a yak,” Francis mumbled to no one in particular.

Nine and a half hours from the start, complete with the changing of a tire, the group saw a beautiful new building lit up a mile or so up the road from where they were driving.

Dave wondered out loud, “How did that thing get there? I thought we were going to be in very primitive circumstances.”

Karma called back to the group, “There are sometimes government officials who come here. There is talk about developing this part of our country. These officials stay at this hotel. You will be staying at a very new hotel that is very out of place in this terrain.”

“Sounds good to me, since I’m out of place in this terrain too!” Flo hollered out, having gotten over her mystical experiences of prayer and danger.

The group settled into their surprisingly comfortable rooms and freshened up. They met in the dining room to feast on a buffet of Eastern and Western foods. Krishna, the Hindu Good Samaritan, was the last to arrive. He went up to Brother Francis and asked him if he had anything for cold and fever. Francis said, "Yes, I do, are you not feeling well?"

"It's not for me. The woman at the reception desk is not up to par. I've examined her but I don't have any Western meds left to treat her with. I thought perhaps something Eastern would be helpful."

The Catholic monk with Irish and Hungarian roots gave some Chinese medicine to his Western-trained Indian doctor to treat the Tibetan woman. "I love it!" he exclaimed, as he thought through what was happening.

In the morning they took a short van ride to a nearby monastery. Francis, and he thought the rest of the group also, was getting a little weary of monasteries. He wanted to be back at his own monastery. He was also paradoxically having the time of his life.

A monk who had been imprisoned for twenty-two years showed them through an ancient temple. The only words he said in English were "twenty-two." When he spoke he touched one wrist to another, symbolizing the handcuffs he was bound with during practically all of that time. The radiation from his smile was inescapable. Having learned that Francis too was a monk, though of the Christian tradition, he referred to Francis as *Geshe-la*.

Karma explained to the group the term *Geshe* refers to a monk who has a doctorate, perhaps in medicine or philosophy. The syllable *la* is added to the title as a term of endearment.

The rest of the group asked the two monks to stand on the steps of the temple and have their picture taken together. It was a pure joy for Francis. The group was then taken into a little brick house, darkened on the inside by years and years of burning fires to cook with. Another monk had a similar living arrangement on the other side of the steps to the temple. This monk came over to have tea with the group. Lots of pantomime ensued.

Upon getting up to leave, the temple guide monk pulled Francis aside into a back room. He opened an ancient little cupboard, the door falling off its hinges as he did so, and reached inside. He pulled out a beautiful bag, about eight inches by ten inches, which closed with a drawstring. There was a metallic clank as he handed the bag to Francis.

Francis understood that this was some type of gift from his host and had mixed feelings about taking anything from someone who was so obviously poor himself. The Tibetan monk seemed to read the Christian monk's mind and pushed the bag more firmly into Francis' open hand. Francis looked at this former prisoner and bowed to him with deep reverence. They left the little hermitage and walked to the van. As they were walking, Francis placed the gift in his backpack.

Chapter 13

They next made their way to a small Tibetan medicine factory. There was a larger one in the capital, along with a famous medical school, but this smaller one had a special charm. Large rooms filled with machines created round balls about half the size of a marble. Some were a little larger, and some were a little smaller, depending on the particular medication. In the not too distant past these pills were rolled by hand. Everything was very clean and orderly.

They left the factory itself and, across a large courtyard, went up two steps into a long and low structure of one floor that housed the Tibetan medicine pharmacy. Several rows of people were lined up in front of a long counter, with Tibetan pharmacists at the head of each line on the other side of the counter. The people in queue held slips of paper in their hands--Tibetan prescriptions that were being filled. Each left contentedly with his or her bags of herbal medication from the factory. Some left with raw herbs which would be taken home and cooked into a gloppy, inky, perhaps odorous liquid that would be consumed by the patients.

The atmosphere was cheerful and compassionate. There was no smell of alcohol and no public address system.

"This is not at all unlike a Chinese pharmacy," Francis thought out loud, "except that the Tibetan patent medicines, the round prepared pills, are on average larger than Chinese ones."

“I understand,” said Flo, “that folks take the medicine home and break them up in a mortar and pestle so they’re more easily consumed.” Francis nodded, but his mind was still on the mysterious note that he had received yesterday.

It was time to go to the local Tibetan medical school. As they drove in, the campus of buildings looked more like a monastery than a medical school. A lovely lady explained that she was the Director of the medical school, also a Tibetan trained physician, while greeting them at the main entrance. She took them into the library, which housed a thousand books within and appeared quite Western.

On opening the books, however, the contents were very different. Most were written in Tibetan, some in Chinese. Other Asian countries such as Nepal and Thailand were also represented in the collection. They moved on to a large display room.

On all four walls were Tonkas of various sorts. Some of them were very old and just about falling apart. Others were fairly new. On some of the Tonkas were depicted the creation of life, the union of sperm and egg, in such detail that it boggled the mind because these concepts had obviously been taught long before the development of microbiology. About six rows of glass display cases housed every sort of botanical and animal medication possible.

Mani was a bit repulsed. “What are dried animal parts doing in a collection of herbal medicine?” she asked Francis.

“In the Asian tradition,” Francis responded, “there are animal parts, as well as minerals, which are all considered part of ‘herbal medicine.’ I avoid the use of those things in my practice. Westerners just cannot handle the idea of eating something derived from a praying mantis egg case or dragon bone, really from dinosaurs, to help them heal.”

Flo was eavesdropping. “I can’t imagine why,” she joked, “we always gave it to the patients in our hospital back in Pennsylvania. That’s why I moved to Kentucky!”

In the hotel that night, Francis was in his room alone trying to organize his life. He had plugged in the heater, tapped it with a sandal a few times, and ran into the bathroom before the thing exploded. After his shower, the room was peaceful and warm. He emptied out the contents of his backpack in order to organize it for the next day.

Scraps of paper, pens, and several samples of Tibetan medicine rolled out onto his bed. A book about Chinese medicine, along with his Walkman and a few tapes and spare batteries, tumbled out as well. One more shake of the Jamesway purchased backpack produced the colorful bag handed him by the monk at their earlier monastic visit. He heard the cushioned sound of a metallic clank.

Slightly reminiscent of a gift box packed within a gift box, and used as a joke when giving a present, a bell measuring approximately seven inches rolled out of the cloth container. The bell looked to be very old and well worn. What a meaningful gift, Francis thought. He picked up the colorful cloth bag and realized that something else was in it.

No, it couldn’t be. He gently reached into the bag and extracted a Dorje.

Everyone was fatigued at dinner that night. It had been an extremely full few weeks, few days, and present day. Francis and Krishna lingered over their tea in the dining room after the others in the group had said their goodnights. Francis shared with Krishna the contents of his gift.

In college he had taken two semesters of a lab course called “The Experimental Analysis of Behavior” in which he used machines called “Skinner Boxes.” These Skinner Boxes were used to “shape” the behavior of lab animals. The operator could press a button and the pigeon, rat, mouse, or monkey, would be fed a pellet of food or given a drink. This feeding was only done when the animal had performed the kind of behavior the experimenter wanted, much like reinforcing a dog in obedience school after it had done well.

“I get it,” Krishna offered. “The notes and gift are shaping our behavior on this journey, leading us to where someone wants us to go.”

The next day in Xigatse was filled with a trip to several shrines, a few small clinics, and the like. Francis needed some time and space to himself, and so spent most of it in the hotel or walking in the neighborhood. Remarkably, the hotel had a steam room and some exercise equipment. Francis treated himself

to a good workout and steam bath. These things invigorated his aching musculature from the bumpy van ride to this part of the world.

That evening at dinner, Francis shared with the rest of the group the story of his strange gift from the former prisoner monk. David reminded the group that this part of the world is replete with Dorjes and bells. They would need to check things out to see if this particular Dorje is the stolen one. That could be done when they returned to Nepal the next morning. Hopefully, Ang would still be there and hopefully his mother would be recovering.

After an early breakfast, and carrying their trusty bag lunches, the group braced themselves for the nine-hour ride back to Lhasa. The majestic rolling mountains, the beautiful lakes, the peaceful yaks, with nothing else to disturb them, was refreshing and restful, and a good counterpoint for the failing shocks in the van.

As was their custom on such journeys, the group stopped about half way to their destination, ate lunch, and meditated for a while. Back in the van the group settled into a quite semi-slumber. They returned to the Lhasa hotel as evening was settling in. The twilight created a contemplative atmosphere and the hotel felt like home, since part of their belongings had been left there in storage.

Jasmine greeted the mystery team warmly, like an old friend. Tired as they were, the group was even more interested in finding out what was happening with Ang and his mother. They made some phone calls and found that Ang was staying at his mother's house and that his mother was neither better nor worse. She continued in her semi-delirium.

The friends shared a quick meal in the dining room, everyone ordering the same thing and encouraging the waitress and cooks to move a little more quickly so that they could visit with Ang and his mother before it was too late in the night to do so.

Krishna went back to the kitchen and talked to the cook in Hindi, which produced some results. The food was served in record time and they were, albeit very tired, soon walking in a ragged procession to the clinic where Tar-chin was being cared for. When they arrived there, Ang was sitting at his mother's side.

He greeted his newfound friends warmly and thanked them repeatedly for their help with his mother. Ang said that the doctors had still not found any particular toxin to account for her delirium and that all other testing had proved negative. Francis gently and slowly told Ang about the strange gift he had received, and about the even stranger notes left in the two hotels where he had stayed. Ang's eyes widened considerably and his lips muttered Tibetan prayers for protection.

"Would you please look at the Dorje and see if it is the one that has been in your family for generations, Ang?" requested the monk / doctor.

"I would be happy to, Brother Francis, but I doubt that I would recognize it. There are so many around and it was never of great significance to me, although I respect my distant relative who prayed with it."

Francis took the Dorje out of the cloth bag and their patient immediately became restless. She seemed to calm down as Ang was examining the Dorje.

"Brother Francis, I can tell you nothing about this. If my mother were alert enough, she would recognize every bit of engraving, every detail on this metal object."

"There is more than one way to communicate information, Ang. In Chinese medicine we talk about the concept of qi, and about how it contains a great deal of wisdom and information. Qi, as you probably know, is the life force or vitality that flows through everything. With your permission, I would like to place this Dorje in your mother's hand and see if there is any communication from your mother which may take place."

Ang nodded in ascent. As Francis moved toward Tar-chin she became more and more restless. It was as if she were a Geiger counter responding to uranium. He placed the Dorje in the older woman's hand and she clutched on to it with a vice-like grip. She would not let it go.

Respecting the male / female, yin / yang balance, the monk next took the bell out of the cloth bag and placed that in Tar-chin's right hand. She clutched it with the same ferociousness, responding with increasing agitation as he moved toward her, similar to her response when he moved the Dorje near her.

Flo asked, "Now what do we do?"

"We find something to bring her out of this state," Francis responded with clarity and determination. "While you people were cavorting in the Tibetan medicine factory I did a little research in the library. I even

located a well-respected Chinese medicine reference book in English, and found a pharmacist who specializes in Traditional Chinese Medicine. I asked him for some *An Gong Niu Huang Wan*.”

David Gold muttered, “I have some in my shaving case.” Everyone giggled nervously.

Krishna added a thought. “I know that ‘wan’ means pill. After that I’m lost.”

“Right you are my friend,” smiled Francis. “The fact that this is in a wan or pill form will be a little challenge to us, but I do believe that it may help our patient.”

Flo asked what such medicine would be called in English.

“The traditional name for this formula in English is ‘Resurrection Pills.’”

There was a jolt of excitement in the room and Tar-chin became agitated once again.

Francis explained further. “A main ingredient in this formula--and Chinese medicinal herbs are almost always given in a combination or formula--is Ox gallstone.”

Mani mumbled, “Can’t we just do some kind of energy medicine thing?”

“We certainly can do medical qigong with this woman but I think that herbal formulas have their place as well and that this is a perfect time to use one.”

“Another name for Resurrection Pills is ‘Calm the Palace Pill with Cattle Gallstone.’” Francis continued by reading from a photocopy of page 416 out of his favorite reference book, *Chinese Herbal Medicine: Formulas & Strategies* by Bensky & Barolet, published in 1990 by Eastland Press, Seattle, Washington.

“The palace is a compound in which the Emperor resides. It is used here as a metaphor for the Pericardium, which surrounds and shields the sovereign organ (the Heart) in the same manner as a palace surrounds and protects the Emperor. This formula clears heat from the Pericardium and thereby calms the Heart’s spirit.”

The naturopathic doctor continued: “Indications for the use of Resurrection Pills include ‘high fever, irritability and restlessness, delirious speech, impaired consciousness, a red or deep red tongue, and a rapid pulse. Also for coma due to wind stroke or childhood convulsions with a similar presentation, and for stiffness of the tongue and frigid extremities.’”

David Gold observed, “This woman is semi-conscious. How will we get this medicine into her?”

Francis responded, “The Tibetan pharmacy did not have a liquid form of Resurrection Pills on hand, so we will have to liquefy it ourselves.”

While Francis was still speaking, the Tibetan doctor and Director of the clinic walked into the room. “Hello my friends. As you can see, our patient is about the same. We have run every test imaginable but cannot come up with the source of her delirium. Why is she holding a bell and Dorje?”

Chapter 14

Brother Francis explained, “We thought that these items might be of some comfort to Tar-chin. She is missing a Dorje from her home that has been in the family for generations.”

As he was speaking, Tar-chin became more animated and even tried to enter into the conversation. This startled everyone. Tar-chin said, “Dorje and bell are helpful. Give me your medicine.” Then she drifted back to her gray world.

The Director observed, “She is obviously drawing some benefit from holding on to those sacred items. I believe that I heard you talking about Resurrection Pills when I was in my office before I became free to come out here and visit.”

Brother Francis talked to the Director. “This is your jurisdiction, Doctor, and none of us wants to interfere. There has been no change, however, so I am wondering if we might have your permission to treat your patient Tar-chin with Resurrection Pills. I very much enjoy collaborating with other doctors and think that between us we might be of some benefit to this woman.”

The Tibetan was thoughtful. He knew the value of Asian medicine but had focused his professional life on Western medicine. *There is so much superstition mixed in with spirituality and indigenous medical practices, but there is also great benefit when Asian medicine is used wisely.*

“Very well, Brother, you may administer Resurrection Pills. I will record it on this patient’s chart.”

Francis explained that the only Resurrection formula he was able to obtain was in the pill form of delivery system and that this patient would probably have difficulty with pills. He asked the Director for a mortar and pestle and began crushing the pills with these pharmacy tools. He next asked for some boiling water, into which he placed the powdered pills and mixed them thoroughly with the water. Eventually he had liquefied the medication completely. Francis invited Krishna to intubate the patient with a naso-gastric tube and then administered the cooling liquid into Tar-chin's stomach through the tube and a funnel.

"We can do nothing now but continue our vigil. The last of the medicine will be taken in shortly and then we will need to watch for possible changes. Ang, is there anything you would like us to do, or anything we can do directly for you?"

"No, Brother, nothing else has been helpful. At least we are now doing something different. I have always believed that if one always does what one always did, one will always get what one has always gotten."

Flo joined in, "I understand, Ang, and I agree with you."

The Director went back to his office as the mystery team lowered the lights near the bed of the patient and kept quite vigil. Each person prayed or reflected in his or her own fashion. Some members of the group began to dose off. About twenty minutes after the medication was administered, Tar-chin began to stir, but in a less agitated fashion.

She mumbled, "Yes, if it means that much to you, you may have the Dorje."

All ears perked up. Ang went to the side of his mother.

"Mother, it is me," he said in Tibetan, "your small one, Sunday-born."

She smiled. "Ang my son, the Buddha has brought you to me. I would be happy to see you under any circumstances, but wonder what I am doing here."

"Mother, you have been very sick indeed. These kind people from the United States found you in a semi-coma in your home and brought you here. They then contacted me."

"I remember bits and pieces, Ang, but not everything."

Brother Francis interjected. "Give yourself some time Tar-chin. The memory has a way of rebuilding itself, brick by brick. Whatever is necessary for your health and wholeness can return, I am convinced, if you are at peace and give it some time."

"I certainly will *give* it time, *Geshe-la*, for my name means 'giver.' But perhaps I should call you 'Brother Francis,' which is what you are more used to."

"Tar-chin," Francis said in amazement and offered a question for everyone in the room, "how did you know my name? You have been just about comatose for days."

"I saw you. Don't you remember? It was the night I gave the Dorje away. You came to me. I suppose a Westerner in monastic robes appearing to me in my parlor should have frightened me, but there you were and I was not frightened. You asked me not to be and then assured me that all would be well, and so it is."

"What do you mean, 'there I was,'" prodded Francis.

"Maybe if I start from the beginning it will be helpful."

Tar-chin went into a reverie. "I was a little tired and grimy from a walk to the store and back so I went into the bathroom to wash my face, preparing to read a little bit before I went to bed. I heard a knock and went to the door where I saw a rather tall Western gentleman, perhaps in his early fifties. Again, I ought to have been frightened but I wasn't.

"The man told me that he was researching a book on Tibetan spirituality and healing and came across some references in his research to the 'Tar-chin Dorje.' You see, Brother, that is the name of the Dorje that my ancestor prayed with. He was a Buddhist monk whose name was Tar-chin also, and I have been named after him. There are those of us among our tradition who believe that I am his reincarnation, although I never really, how you say, 'bought into that very much.'

"I invited the gentleman in. He was very warm and gracious. He asked to see the Dorje and I took it out of the box in my bedroom and then handed it to him.

"He reminded me that Dorje and bell equal male and female and are really supposed to be used together. Judd, for that was his name, told me that he was on his way to Tashilumo Monastery in the city of Xigatse, Tibet.

“Judd’s research indicated that the bell that matches this Dorje was at the monastery and wondered if he might reunite them for me. I was hesitant to let go of this family heirloom, but also knew that one must live in a way that brings everything into wholeness. The gentleman seemed very sincere. I thought that I might give him happiness, along with whoever possessed the bell, if indeed that bell was truly the mate.

“With tears in my eyes, I handed him the Dorje, which he then reverently placed in a beautifully embroidered pouch. Judd promised me that he would be in touch and left my home. After that I became very dizzy, as if someone had unplugged an electrical cord that had been feeding my body. That is the last I remember until now, except for a moment or two here or there.”

David whispered, “Isn’t Judd the name of the man who is co-director of the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center in New Jersey?”

Francis nodded.

The Director of the clinic was at her bedside now, looking at Francis. “You can explain to us how this woman went into a coma, can’t you Brother?”

“Perhaps I can, Doctor.”

“As a clinical psychologist one might hypothesize that this woman had an emotion reaction to her loss of the family Dorje. This object, which had provided much meaning to her life for many years, was now out of her control. Some clinicians refer to the state Tar-chin entered as a ‘fugue state.’

“As a naturopathic doctor, one might hypothesize that Tar-chin swallowed some form of toxin, although lab studies have not identified any. Perhaps there was something in the water she drank, the food she ate, or the air she breathed while out on her walk. I suppose we will never know about that.

“A more wholistic and perhaps more spiritual explanation would be that Tar-chin was connected on a qi level to all of creation in a very profound way. This connection is really what keeps every one of us alive.

“For Tar-chin, however, the connection was mediated by the Dorje, because of its role in the life of her family.

“When she experienced the loss of the Dorje, even voluntarily and perhaps temporarily, she went into a state of suspended animation.

“When I placed the bell and Dorje in her hands, her hands seemed to know what they were grasping and the beginning of her ‘resurrection’ began. Administering the liquid form of the Resurrection Pills completed the job.”

The explanation set everyone but Francis at ease. *Tar-chin said that I appeared to her the night she parted with the Dorje. It was physically impossible to do so. I didn’t even know her then. Thank you, Jesus, for the gift of a curious and scientific mind, but a mind which is not limited by science and which possesses ‘the peace that passes understanding’ referred to in the scriptures when it can’t explain something.*

“I think it’s time for your mother to get some rest,” the Director said to Ang. “If she continues to make progress, and is strong enough in the morning, maybe we can think about sending her home.”

Ang brightened. “I’ll stay here this evening if I may, Doctor.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” the Director responded.

The rest of the group made their good-byes and walked the winding streets back to the hotel.

The next day the travelers took a one-hour flight back to Lhasa and, after resting, returned to their favorite nunnery down the road from the hotel. They visited with *Ani Cho-nyi*, who invited them to join her as she visited her sister, *Lhak-pa Gyal-tshen*. The Tibetan Buddhist nun explained that *Lhak-pa*’s name means “courageous speech” and that it fits her very well. She reminded the group that her blood sister, also a Buddhist nun, lived in a little house by herself. Because of her openness in working for human rights, she was not very popular with government officials, although the Tibetan people revere her highly.

The seven friends walked through a rabbit warren of Tibetan streets. After about twenty-five minutes of twists and turns they came to a small house in a relatively quiet neighborhood. The hermit nun greeted them with traditional Tibetan warmth and immediately began preparing yak-butter tea for her visitors.

Globs of yak butter, which looked something like lard, were plopped into a blender full of hot tea. Salt was added. The group didn’t want to think about what else might have gone in also! They looked away as the concoction was being created. All drank with gratitude, sprinkled with light conversation.

Flo wondered how far off the charts this yak butter tea was sending her cholesterol. *I've really got to follow up on that protocol Francis has for lipid management through pharmaceutical grade marine fish oil.*

As the group prepared to leave the little house, Brother Francis told Ani Lhak-pa that he wished there were a way that he could keep in touch with her. They seemed to have a similar value system and he felt as if he had known her all his life and that he would be hearing more from her somehow.

The nun smiled sweetly. "Sometimes it is better not to know things, but perhaps I can get a *note* to you," she said with a strange mixture of gratitude and humor.

Chapter 15

The few days in Bangkok on their return trip to the States were somewhat anticlimactic. The places the group saw were in much better shape materially than most of the places they had seen thus far. Everyone in the group agreed that the most impressive experience in Thailand was their visit to the famous Temple of the Golden Buddha. They sat on a large porch in front of the temple while an old monk told them the following story:

"In the late 1950s, a group of monks wanted to move a clay Buddha, about fifteen feet tall, to a nicer location. Chains and winch lifted the Buddha up, and then it began to rain. There was a crack forming at the base of the Buddha. Operations were suspended and the Buddha was reverently covered with a tarp. In the dark of night, the Abbot of the monastery returned to the Buddha with a flashlight and a few small tools. He peered into the crack at the base, and just as he remembered it, something glinted back at him. He prodded with the tools. The upshot of the venture was the discovery that a solid gold five and one-half ton Buddha was encased within a thin layer of clay centuries before in order to protect it from enemies."

Francis went into the temple and saw for himself that very Buddha. He knew that gold was considered precious but that never really impressed him. Today, however, he saw this Buddha of gold. It seemed to be alive, and it certainly appeared to shimmer under the track lighting in the relatively unadorned temple.

His clinical psyche produced thoughts about the tragedy of confusing what is clay and what is golden within us. Francis long believed that everyone is golden at the core, created "in the image and likeness of God," but that life puts mud and clay on our exterior. So do some of our own life choices. If we can center back into the gold through prayer, meditation, and simplicity, all will ultimately be well.

After an inspiring and prayerful morning, the group had a light lunch and proceeded to a famous Thai massage school. They moved through the school and watched people being pummeled, stretched, and kneaded in every possible manner. The people had comfortable clothing on, sometimes shorts, and the massage therapists were dressed in simple street dress. Aromas from the massage oil filled the building, and an atmosphere of peace and healing permeated even more profoundly.

The travelers were permitted to sign up for a Thai massage--and the therapists would come to their hotel. They went home and about an hour later a young man and woman knocked on Krishna and Francis' door. This was followed by two hours of Thai massage, which was deeply relaxing, sending those receiving it into a peaceful stupor. The only little ripple in the experience was that, about an hour into the massage, each therapist took a brief break.

The trip back to the States was a blur. The travelers felt somewhat like Tar-chin at her worst, drifting in and out of consciousness. After claiming their bags in Los Angeles, the group broke up and each person went off to his or her flight back home.

Flo smiled through her tears and joked that for an old rock and roller, "Breaking up is hard to do."

Back at the Salesian Monastery in northeast Pennsylvania, Brother Francis found all of his mail slit open and on his desk. His answering machine message light flashed furiously and hundreds of e-mails awaited his response as well.

As was his custom, the Abbot met with the community prior to Evening Prayer and shared a few of his experiences, assuring his sisters and brothers that much more would be shared with them when the rest of him felt like it was back from his trip. He left a shopping bag containing various books, papers, and objects from his journey for the community members to look at and make their own if they so wished.

After Morning Prayer and breakfast the next day, Francis began looking at some of his mail. He read a letter from an old friend whom he had not seen in some years, an airline pilot who spent much of his life flying around the world:

“Dear Francis, It would be wonderful for us to get together soon. I am sometimes concerned that your life is a bit too predictable and boring. If there is anything I can do to help just let me know. Perhaps I can get you some airline tickets. I’ll be in touch to liven up your life.”

Francis smiled at the irony, and then said a prayer of gratitude that nothing broke while he was away. The community members, water heater, cars, and the other major appliances were all intact.

Sister Scholastica knocked and then entered the Hermitage office of the Abbot. *Guess something did break, or some crisis erupted after all.*

“What’s happening, Sister?”

“Brother Francis, I chose that beautiful drawstring pouch from among the ‘goodie bag’ items you left for us from your trip. Thanks very much. Anyway, it crinkled when I touched it so I investigated and found these sheets of thin paper between the outer bag and the inner lining. The writing on the papers looks Asian, perhaps it’s in Tibetan.”

“Thank you for your keen observation and for bringing these to me. Yes, Sister Scholastica, it is Tibetan. That’s about all I know. I will follow up on the matter.”

Sister Scholastica left, happy to have a very colorful bag for her odds and ends. She would never realize the crucial role she had played in an international human rights effort that relied more on prayer and ignorance than on exact planning this time around.

“Hello Judd, this is Brother Francis,” he said into the phone. “Two things if I may. I understand that you were in Tibet recently. We have a mutual friend in Tar-chin. Secondly, I have in my hands some papers written in Tibetan that were found in a pouch I brought back from the East. Can I give them to you for translation the next time I visit you at the Tibetan Buddhist Learning Center?”

“No need to, Brother. I know the content of those papers. Let’s just call the papers a report from someone who spent twenty-two years in prison over there. I feel badly that *Ani Lhak-pa*, the Tibetan Buddhist nun activist, and I could not have been more open with you about what we were up to.

“I am so relieved that the report got here without incident. We thought that the less you knew about our efforts the better. We also believed that in your role as doctor, the immigration authorities on both ends would be less suspicious of you than me. Can I ask you to have Detective David Gold get those papers to the proper authorities in Washington, DC? The report will give those authorities a first hand glimpse at what can happen in a Tibetan prison. Then it’s up to them.”

Francis felt a bit confused and used. He also knew deep down, that there was a great deal of wisdom in the way the report was “delivered.”

“Was Tar-chin really sick, or was that also a part of the scheme to smuggle information into the States through me as well?” the monk asked.

“That part was real. I’m glad that you were able to help her, sorry that we needed to keep you in the dark, and grateful for your friendship.”

The men concluded their phone conversation with Francis agreeing to get the prison report to David Gold, who had also been left in the dark along with the rest of the mystery team.

The monk / doctor reflected on the old-fashioned words of an oath he had taken some years before, especially the words of paragraph three.

Naturopathic Physician’s Oath

I swear before God and those assembled witnesses, that I will keep this oath and stipulations as a Naturopathic Physician; to esteem those who taught me this natural healing art; to follow the method of treatment which according to my ability and judgment I consider for the benefit of my patients; to abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous.

With purity I will pass my life and practice my art. I will at all times consider the patients under my care as of supreme importance. I will not spare myself in rendering them the help which I have been taught to give by my alma mater.

Whatever in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I may see or hear in the lives of men and women which ought not to be spoken abroad, I will not divulge, reckoning that all such should be kept secret.

While I continue to keep this oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the natural healing art respected by all people at all times. So help me God.

The phone beeped. “Hello Abbot Francis, this is Diane from the Bishop’s office. His Excellency would like you to make an appointment with him for a little chat.”

Francis rolled his hazel eyes toward Heaven. “I really like our Bishop, but cringe when I get these ‘command performance’ calls. Do you have any idea what it’s about this time, Diane?”

“I suppose I shouldn’t tell you this, Brother,” the administrative assistant responded conspiratorially, “but I think it has something to do with a message the Bishop received about you cavorting with a politically active Buddhist nun. I’m not sure if he wants to congratulate you or read you the riot act.”

“Like life, Diane, it’s usually a mixture of both when we meet.”

Francis told himself that there would be no more big trips like the one he now needed to recover from—and then laughed at his own thoughts.

Om Mani Peme Hung