

Bearing witness, creating change.

17 Paths to Enlightenment (working title)

Treatment

Title: History books tell us that six-year-old Abraham Lincoln walked six miles in winter to get to school.

Today, for some, similar journeys await.

Act One

We see a quick flurry of shots of kids bundled up on horses, wearing cool sunglasses, but freezing, looking worried, some trudging through the snow on foot. Some fathers carry kids on their backs. Where they are going and why, are unknown. But they pass through forbidding, snowy mountaineous landscape, and they don't look happy.

Cut to a monk blowing a conch shell high on a monastery overlook. It is summer. Monks gather in a courtyard and file in, ordered from oldest to youngest. This is a call to prayer. Gathering in a sun-dappled temple, they sit in long rows and fervently chant. Two monks seem particularly engrossed – Damchu (DM) and Geshe Lobsang (GL). Though thrown into this unknown exotic locale, from the painted Buddhas and red monks' robes, we know these are Buddhist monks.

From a close-up of GL chanting we cut to him talking on a cell phone in an outdoor cafe. In the conversation, GL explains that he plans to take 14 children from Zanskar to Himachal Pradesh, from Padum to Manali. The wealthy donor on the other end is pleased, and says he'd like to help.

GL & DM walk through Stongde village. Though the mountains are bare and dry, today in this high altitude desert the sun is high and warm and the irrigated fields are full of ripening barley. They explain further that they are soliciting children to be delivered to monasteries and schools in distant Manali. "We're called to do this because of the Boddhisatva vow. Buddha tells us we must do everything in our power to relieve suffering in the world." GL shrugs, concluding, "The suffering of the poor villagers in Stongde and villages nearby can best be relieved by educating the children." DM: "The school at Dhakpo Monsastery in Manali, founded by Tibetan exiles, is expanding. They have room for more students."

"Julay! Julay!" With a hearty greeting in the local Zanskari tongue, a local family welcomes GL and DM as they arrive. Greeted by burning herbs and a modest sampling of home-made yoghurt, they ceremonially enter. This is the home of Lobsang Dykit, a beautiful 11 year old girl. Her parents explain how they recently missed a chance to get her into a nunnery in Dharamsala and would like to try again. Though GL & DM are primarily focusing on getting children to schools in Manali, they say they will try.

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In the next home, Tenzin Phuntsok, a shy and feisty six year old sits in his parents' laps while they decide his fate. Later, he gets into a fight with his older brother, perhaps brought on by his own uncertainty and fear over his new future, perhaps instigated by his jealous brother.

Back at Stongde monastery, three adorable young monks, the oldest 11, explain that the prospects for local children are not good – if they can't afford to go to the private school, which is expensive, their only option is the government school which teaches them nothing of their own language, history, culture, and religion. They smile and explain that's what brought them to Stongde Monastery – the chance to be educated in the Buddhist traditions along with the Western. In a modest sunny classroom where the children sit on the floor, the monastery's head teacher Lobsang Jamba drills the students in Buddhist "dialectics," challenging them with questions that they answer back in unison. Jamba tells us "We are expanding the monastery school so more local children can be educated here for free. Though we only teach Buddhism now, eventually we'll use both Eastern and Western paradigms and curricula." While construction continues, Jamba tells us what facilities will go where. For now, the children do some of their classroom work out in the open air of the courtyard, where Jamba oversees jolly and lively dialectics exercises.

At Stongde's Lamdon Marling private school, orderly rows of uniformed kids do songs and dances from around the world under the watchful eye of Headmistress Teshi Lhamo. She explains, "Our school costs 1000R (\$25) to apply, and 1000R (\$25) a year for supplies. Three quarters of the children in surrounding villages can't afford us. It's sad." One of the neighboring fathers confirms this: "We'd love to send our kids there but we just can't afford it." Looking in on classes, Teshi explains "We do teach Tibetan language, along with Hindu and English, starting in the first grade. But we don't yet teach Buddhist history and culture. We hope to start when the kids reach the fifth grade."

Things at the nearby government school are even worse: Urdu, Hindu, and English are taught, and no one teaches the local children anything about their own language and culture. For this reason, many of the local families don't want to send their children. "Why send my son? They will only educate him in skills and values that will take him away from Zanskar. I want him to learn what he can do to help us, not leave us," says one passionate father. Unlike Lamdon school and Stongde which go year-round, the school is also closed for two months every summer.

DM explains: "Though our monastery is over a thousand years old, our traditions are in danger of dying out. If we don't do more to serve the needs of the local villagers, and provide the young with schooling in these traditions, it might all be gone within two generations." GL: "When I left Zanskar at 16 to go to the monastery myself all the kids spoke Zanskari. When I returned ten years later, they only spoke Urdu, Hindi, or English." DM continues: "And the new road being built right at our doorstep to connect Zanskar directly with Leh will change everything. Though it will bring increased access to medical care, basic utilities, and a tighter connection to the outside world, it will also bring consumerism and Western values which may overwhelm our people. We have to get ready NOW for the changes to come."

On an animated map we see just how remote Zanskar is from the rest of the world. Surrounded by high mountains, threatened on the West by hostile Pakistan army forces, closed off from their natural trading partners in Tibet by the Chinese to the north, separated from fellow Buddhists to the East by the forbidding Zanskar range, Zanskar valley is nonetheless experiencing change on an unprecedented scale. "In a sense our very remoteness has protected us in the past, but now, well,

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now everything's going to change. And we have to change with it," declares DM. We see shots of the new road to Leh – extending impressively into the broad wilderness, we're left with foreboding about the changes it'll bring.

GL & DM visit one of the poorest of the poor village families. Without any livestock to support them, not only do they have less available food but they're unable to plow their own fields. The opportunity extended Tenzin Chemay, their 8 year old daughter, is almost more than they can bear. One grandmother breaks down in tears, pouring out the family's suffering to their understanding guests.

GL: "These families, because they're so poor, understand what it means when their child leaves to go to Manali or Dharamsala. Most likely they will not be able to afford having their children return for visits during the two month summer vacation. So they may not see them again for many years. In addition, there's no telling what might happen ten or fifteen years from now. Whether, once educated, the children will ever return home."

At the next family, young Tenzin Lhamo, a boy, six, looks to be almost physically overcome with emotion when his brothers and sisters start telling him what they'll say to him when the time comes for goodbye. His father knows full well what's at stake: "We hope he'll come back to help his community, his family – maybe become a doctor or a teacher. But we understand and accept the risk. He may never come back to Stongde again; we may never see him again. He might become seduced by the powerful lure of the West, by money, and that may be the end." Nearly reeling with shock, Lhamo's eyes fill with tears.

"This culture, this religion, it's totally dependent on lineage. It's not only about *teaching* the next generation, it's about *modelling*. We have to *inhabit* the dharma, to embody its virtues and morality, in order to successfully transmit it," DM explains. In the cavelike monks' quarters back at Stongde monastery a 77 year old monk tutors the 11 year old child monk who is his roommate and student. The boy pores over a book of Buddhist scripture while his elder listens and corrects. "I hope he'll stay with me until I die," the monk says. "But he's free to choose. He can go anywhere and live with anyone he wants. He means a lot to me." Clearly. The love goes into every correction, every explanation. And the boy knows it.

Assuming responsibility for transmitting the teachings is no small thing. DM: "In a sense, we become like fathers to the kids. It's not only about scholarship; it's about their very lives." GL tells us of the sizeable challenges involved in getting the children to Manali and beyond. "The lives and welfare of the children are in our hands." DM concedes, "the responsibility is almost unbearable at times. But we have to try." "What worries me the most is the amount of snow on the peaks. For this time of year, early October, it seems like a lot," GL opines.

They both join the monks in "the music room" at Stongde to chant and play sacred instruments. The lineage they speak of is embodied in the mixed presence of the older monks and the young ones. Rituals like this one are designed to purify them, readying them for the struggles ahead. Though extremely interesting and picturesque, watching them perform these centuries old traditions we're left wondering: Is this crazy? This is the 21st Century. How can they possibly succeed?!

Act Two

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All 14 children are loaded on to the bus in Padum to take them to Ruru, the starting point for the trek to Manali. One boy throws himself screaming onto the road. Most seem excited, however, open to the journey ahead. As they peer out windows, run from seat to seat, and their fathers load their few belongings on the roof, we flash back to brief scenes from the previous days:

- Over breakfast, GL & DM discuss strategy for the trek, especially how they'll be able to come up with 10 more horses on short notice. They bemoan the fact that the parents have not done what they were supposed to do – namely, to secure one horse each for themselves and for their child. Costing as little as Rs200 per day during the buyer's market in summer, they'll cost as much as Rs450 per day in the seller's market now.
- At Dykit's home, dad packs her entire belongings into his makeshift backpack: sleeping bag, coat, gloves, and hat, a pot and spoon. We see snippets of other family's preparations too.
- Over the mother's objections, one grandmother, worried about her granddaughter's welfare, cries and insists she will not go. The girl, afraid to go herself, has run away. GL and DM cross her off the list.
- GL and DM meet in the village with the parents and explain to them how jeeps will await the children on the other side of Shinku Pass in Darcha, to take them by road the last four hours to Manali. Trusting the monks explicitly, few ask questions, though the uncertainty ahead is visible in their eyes.

A few hurried goodbyes and GL grabs the open back door to the bus as it swings out of town. GL: "It only makes sense to go on foot to Manali. We could take the road through Kargil, but it's more expensive to go that way, it actually wouldn't save us much time, and it's always dangerous to go through Kashmir to Srinigar – there could be terrorists. Of course, going this way, we just don't know the condition of Shinku Pass. It could be very dangerous if we encounter a lot of snow." Returning to our animated map, we see how the route for the trek, going over Shinku Pass, is in fact the most direct. "But at 16,700 feet the pass could present real problems for this time of year. Let's hope the weather is good," he says, smiling. DM: "We have to get the children there as soon as possible. They have to be there for the new schoolyear which starts in March/April. If we don't get them there now, we'll have to wait a full year til next summer when the passes open again."

As the crow flies, it's not far. But this is Zanskar. It's no short trip. The first day's ride from Padum to Ruru, where the road ends and the trek begins, is only 23k – about 14 miles. The drive takes two hours. Getting to Shinku Pass from Ruru is only 100k (60 miles). The trip to Darcha, where the group will be met by jeeps, is 123k (74 miles) from Ruru. Along the way, the altitude ranges from 13,000 to 17,000+ feet. The available horses will carry food and supplies. Along with the adults, the older children will walk the whole way. Only the youngest will ride horseback.

As the bus rumbles along the dusty road, we bullet the information:

On the Trek

14 kids
11 fathers
1 mother
5 monks
4 horsemen

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16 horses
6 girls on religious pilgrimage
2 cooks
2 filmmakers

GL: “Frankly, it’s a much bigger group than we first imagined. People heard we were going and wanted to join. We couldn’t say no.” He laughs.

We introduce the children by freezing on a frame of them on the bus. We pair these shots with a similar freeze frame of their accompanying parent and ID them all so the audience can learn their names and begin identifying them as pairs. Half the kids have no parent traveling with them. “All wanted to go of course, but with all the other kids at home, and the expense involved, in time if not money, they stayed at home,” DM explains. Dykit is the only child with both of her parents along. Her father explains: “We left the other six kids with their grandmother. They’ll be alright for two weeks. It was important to both of us that she arrives in Dharamsala safely.” Her mother adds: “I’ve never set foot outside Zanskar all my life. For me, the chance to go to Himachal Pradesh is huge.”

Along the way, outside the village of Manu, GL meets with local villagers and horsemen, letting them know how many horses are needed, and when they should be delivered for the morning start.

Title: Ruru Village, 12,010 feet. Temperature at night: 30°F

That night, the parents and kids bed down in an open, stone enclosure. They cook tsampa and seem excited about the journey. GL asks one of the fathers to leave the group. He’s concerned about his drinking. (Chang, the local fermented barley beer, is a weakness for many.) GL is afraid he will become sick with withdrawal once his supply becomes irregular and that he will become a burden to the group. Another parent steps up to guarantee his child’s safe arrival in Manali.

Morning Ruru: a clear and beautiful dawn. Local village boys sing while they lead yaks around in a circle to thresh wheat. The kids crawl from their sleeping bags. GL puts English nametags on them to help him remember their names.

Due to the late arrival of horses, the group gets a late start on the trail. Though the horses are there partly for the kids, many avoid riding them out of fear, opting instead to walk. The younger ones who do ride insist on the leadership of the older kids who take the reins. The younger ones sit behind them and hold on for dear life. There is only one direction to go in and one path to take. But with so many parties moving at different speeds the group quickly gets dispersed along the trail. GL tries to reach DM on his walkie-talkie but can’t. “I don’t think he knows how to use it!” he laughs.

Reports from passersby are inconclusive: themselves only 2-3 days from the pass, some say the snow is no problem. Others disagree and say they’ve heard it’s quite deep.

Mid-day on day one the trail passes through a dangerous landslide area. The trail itself dissolves into a steep incline of shifting, soft dirt and the threat of falling boulders is real. GL directs the passage from a safe point ahead by the river, shouting instructions. Keeping an eye on the shifting rocks above, he tells them when they should wait and when it’s safe to run. He explains how his

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aunt died at this same location in 1988 while carrying her newborn baby – crushed by a plummeting boulder. Miraculously, the baby survived.

DM repeats the hundred yard sprint through the danger zone, carrying smaller children to safety. One group tries to bypass the trail by going along the river but the giant boulders there make that route impassible. Finally, with everyone safely across, DM hands out candy.

Title: Tsedang Village, 13,211 feet. Temperature at night: 20°F.

The monks pitch tents and the cooks prepare the evening meal. In keeping with Zanskari tradition passersby are always welcomed with food and shelter. So the families sleep in rooms or shelters provided by local villagers. But with Westerners commonly passing by now as well, some locals increasingly expect some sort of payment. “It’s getting to be a problem,” GL explains. When they see you guys they figure we have a lot of money and they want some. It’s really painful to see thousands of years of our Buddhist values evaporate right before our eyes.” He shakes his head.

At night, GL, DM, and Pema discuss tomorrow’s plans in the mess tent. A small generator chugs away outside, affording them intermittent light from an electric bulb. Only one day out, and the group is already a bit behind. “Due to our late start, tomorrow the group needs to go two hours further,” DM explains.

In the warm morning sun, while the horses graze and bathe by rolling in the dirt, some horsemen visit GL and DM over breakfast to discuss the prospects for Shinku-la. They agree that they should secure yaks to plow the snow on the trail going over the pass.

On the trail, things are unravelling: the horsemen drank too much chang last night and got another slow start. Some kids are crying, refusing to get on the horses. At midday, GL runs across the two cooks having lunch. He’s displeased. He thought they were hours ahead, already setting up camp for the night. They offer unconvincing explanations.

Walking along, DM gets reflective. “I myself went over this same trail when I first left Zanskar to go to the monastery in South India. It was 1972. I was 11. My uncle met with a Lama then visiting Zanskar – Lama Zutpa – and together they agreed I should go. But not before Lama Zutpa asked me, ‘Do you want to go?’ I told him, ‘Yes! I want to be a monk!’”

We flash back to a meeting between Lama Zutpa and DM in a Dharamsala hotel room. One of the early directors of South India’s Drepung Gomang Monastery, Lama Zutpa is now a high official in the Tibetan government-in-exile’s administration and a respected confidant of HHDL. DM and he compare notes on what it was like back in ’72. “All the parents were crying,” Lama Zutpa explains. “They didn’t want their children to leave – to go away so far, for so long.” Understandably. In photos from that period, DM looks even younger than his 11 years.

Back on the trail, DM ruminates on his own earlier passage on this very same trail. “Lama Zutpa left ahead of us. So my uncle and I had to walk very far, very fast to catch up. We had no horses. When we reached Kargyak at nighttime, we learned Lama Zutpa was still ahead of us, having left that morning. So we walked on through the night. Finally, I’d had it. I couldn’t walk anymore. We still had a long way to go over Shinku Pass. My uncle put me on his back and carried me over the Pass. On the other side, we finally caught up with Lama Zutpa and the others in the early morning.

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After breakfast and a brief rest my uncle said goodbye and walked back to Zanskar.” Emotional, DM concludes: “My mother gave me life, but I owe everything I am today to my uncle and Lama Zutpa.”

Outside the village of Tantse later that day DM discusses with five fathers and the cooks whether they should make camp right there or at Table, the original goal, a few kilometers further. The cooks don’t like Tantse because retrieving water from the river is difficult. The fathers point out that there are more places for them to sleep in Tantse. The sun already down behind the peaks everybody’s cold and tired; it seems nobody can make a clear decision. Finally, DM decides that the parents and kids will stay at Tantse while the rest push on to Table.

Title: Table Village, 13,897 feet. Temperature at night: 15°F.

In his freezing tent at night, GL gives us a rundown of what’s happening: some horsemen who’ve already been paid for the whole trip have taken their horses and left. They’re afraid of what may await them on Shinku Pass. They’ve promised to find replacements but GL is concerned. More importantly, and for the first time, GL expresses some of his own doubts and fears. “I thought I was going to die on the trail today. I had to run back five kilometers to Teta to get a pack one father had left. Then I carried it back. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this. I’m not as young as I used to be.” He shakes and lowers his head.

As the team breaks camp in the cold morning, GL talks about how, for tonight, at Lakhang camp, there may be problems regarding sleeping space – some of the uncovered shelters for the families may be buried in snow and the covered shelters may be too small to hold everyone. “Given how cold it’s going to be, it could be a big problem,” he says. “Plus, with others on the same trail, if they reach Lakhang before us there may not be room enough.” As for the coming day’s trek, he adds, “As the snow gets deeper it’ll become more and more important for the kids to ride horses.”

Later, along the trail, while some kids sing songs and enjoy the ride, others cry and refuse to be put on a horse. The team passes through the last village on this side of the pass – Kargyak (13,450 feet). From here until Ramjak—18k from Lakhang, on the other side of the pass—there are no local people to support them. Following the left bank of the Kargyak river, the steady climb up the long sloping valley to the foot of mighty Gomboranjun mountain beckons.

Walking along, GL reflects on his own journey that brought him here. “When I was ten, a neighbor came to our house and asked my father if I could marry their daughter. My father asked me, ‘What would you like to do?’ I thought the monk’s life was an easy life: chanting, drinking tea, good food... So I told him, ‘I want to be a monk!’ At that time, I had no interest in Buddhism.” He laughs. “I thought it would be relaxing!”

Dissolving away into photographs and memory, he continues: “In the monastery in South India we had two teachers: a home teacher and a philosophy teacher. The home teacher was like a parent. The philosophy teacher was in charge of education. He was very compassionate – teaching us even though he was sick, sharing his food with us...” “Later, when I finished my Ph.D., His Holiness the Dalai Lama asked me, ‘So, what are you doing now?’ I said, ‘Nothing.’ He said, ‘Now you finished your education you have to look after your country, your people.’ I had mixed feelings. On one hand I was very happy to receive his clear direction but I was worried about taking on so much

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responsibility. But I made a commitment and I knew I had to keep it. For us monks, to tell a lie is forbidden, unthinkable.”

On the west face of Gomboranjun when the group finally approaches Lakhang, sure enough, some open shelters are completely covered in snow. On the walkie, GL learns from DM that the families have divided into two groups and will cram into the two covered stone shelters ahead.

Title: Lakhang Campground, 14,435 feet. Temperature at night: 0°F.

The trek cooks pitch tents in the snow, setting up camp. The horses are turned loose to graze on small patches of green emerging from the freeze. Inside nearby stone shelters, the kids play and chatter, having a grand time. Few fully recognize the severity of the challenges ahead. “Tomorrow’s going to be the hardest day, I know,” Namgal says. “If we don’t make it we all have to go home!” Tenzin Phuntsok pipes in, smiling – himself unclear of his own words’ import.

The parents are more reflective, freely ruminating on the challenges ahead. One father says, “I’m really concerned about the snow. If it’s too deep, well, it may cause a lot of problems.” “The cold and altitude really haven’t been a problem for the kids,” says another, “it’s just being on the horses in uncertain footing that gets scary.” “It’s really all up to the weather. If the weather holds we should be fine. If it turns, well...” Tenzin Munden’s father trails off, leaving everyone’s fears unspoken but palpable.

In their tent that night GL, DM, and Pema hold a puja – a ritual ceremony, a prayer for everyone’s safety and success. “It’s actually not specifically about tomorrow,” DM explains. “It’s really for the safety and sanctity of ALL beings for ALL times. We don’t distinguish one event, one day from the rest and make it somehow more special.” Maybe. But as the candles go out in the tent and the moon rises over crowding, nearby peaks, anxiety remains unabated.

The next morning dawns clear and bright, not a cloud in the sky. It seems the weather gods have continued their trek-long smile. GL and DM have secured 10 yaks from local herders to lead the party. Yaks are fearless in deep snow and will act as snowplows, clearing the trail for horses and those walking. Everyone seems upbeat and excited. Without proper boots, fellow monk Pema cuts up plastic milk cartons and ties them over his ankles and sneakers. He’s not the only one. Some of the children have painfully inadequate footwear. Leaving by 7:30, GL, ably assisted by 12 year old Tsultim, leads the yaks from the stone shelter up the hill and on to the trail.

The going is hard. Though the snow is not especially deep at first - 1-2 feet - the footing is slippery and uncertain; falling is a common occurrence even with good boots. The children are barely able to hold on to the horses. Some have already been thrown from falling horses and are too scared to get back on. Some fathers carry their kids on their backs. Two hours into the climb up _____ valley, GL makes a decision to move the team from the North slope to the South. Though it will mean traveling farther, the southern slope, by virtue of its greater exposure to the sun, has less snow and ice. Forging a small frozen stream, the group reassembles on the southern bank for a quick snack. For the first time ever, GL looks drawn and worried. Concerns about the footing for the horses are expressed; packs and children are redistributed, and they’re off again.

Within an hour the team has closed the gap on _____ valley and started the final ascent up _____ col to the pass. Now at 16,000 feet the snow is over three feet deep. But the group is only two hours

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from the pass. Still, each step takes slow, measured consideration and one misstep means the burn of dozens of additional calories in a quick fall. GL's group meets two men who've just come over the pass on foot. That itself is encouraging. At least, until they question them.

Further up the trail, DM and some fathers review options. The discussion seems heated. The horses fall repeatedly now and are refusing to carry anyone. Fathers are not only carrying children, they're starting to haul baggage too. Word comes from those in the lead that the yaks have turned around, refusing to go forward. More troubling, GL learns from the two local men who've just come over the Pass that the snow is even deeper on the other side. "I am a Buddhist man. I can not tell you a lie. The snow is even worse. It is very slow going, extremely difficult to walk," GL quotes him as saying. Farther up the mountain, independently of each other, DM's party is coming to a similar paradoxical conclusion: they might be able to make it over the pass but only without the animals. They can carry the children and get themselves across. They might even be able to carry the baggage. But without the animals, they can not make it down the other side, all the way to Darcha. They can not carry all the children, all the baggage, all the way. It is impossible.

At this moment, presumably from the cold, the camera malfunctions and records only a digitally scrambled half-image. GL radios to DM that they need to return. DM and some fathers start the descent. Dykit's father starts shouting and waving to his wife to come back. Walking with tremendous resolve, she is well ahead, walking with the lead party, ahead even of the yaks. She either can not hear him or is refusing to return. Later, she admits: "I was so excited. I was leaving Zanskar for the first time in my life! I was making a beeline for the pass. The last thing I wanted to do was go back!" For his part, the father confesses: "I was torn. Here I was with Dykit, my daughter, knowing I should go back to protect her. But my wife was up ahead and my duty was to be with her. I didn't know what to do!" He continues to yell and wave his arms, imploring, "Come back! Come back!"

The fateful decision is sinking in. GL says, "We can't risk the lives of the kids, the lives of everyone, and push on. We can't. Still, we're just so close. We've come all this way and we're only two hours away..." He shakes his head and sighs in frustration. Tsultim, trudging through the snow effortlessly, like an adult, later says, "I thought that was it. It's over. I'm never getting to Manali. I'll never get into the monastery." Dykit concurs: "I thought, 'Well, that's it. I'm never going to get to the nunnery. Forget it.'" For Tsultim, his own disappointment was never paramount: "To tell you the truth, I was mostly concerned about the younger kids. I thought they'd never make it. I thought for sure somebody was going to die."

Jigmed's father, having given his sunglasses to Tsultim, has gone snowblind. "I didn't want to take them. But he insisted – he didn't want *me* to go snowblind," Tsultim explains. Clearly in pain, the man squints momentarily at the trail, then shuts his eyes and maneuvers down from memory. GL takes him by the hand and leads him onward.

Other parents and children chime in with their own disappointment. More weary from disillusionment than tiredness, the horses and yaks, the fathers, monks and children, make their way down the still slippery trail. It's not yet noon. There is no wind and the sun is blazing high in a brilliantly blue, cloudless sky. But as the group makes its way back to Lakhang gray storm clouds blow in. The very next day one of four men crossing the pass on foot will freeze to death on the other side.

Act Three

Title: Three days later, Ruru

Covering over 70 kilometers in two long days' hiking, GL and DM sit exhausted in their tent. Two of the fathers have volunteered to get up at 3:30 am and walk the additional 23 kilometers from Ruru to Padum to secure a bus and a jeep. There are no telephones, no telegraph lines or cable, no way to communicate between Padum and Ruru. GL explains the new plan: "We'll have to try and make it there by road. The first hurdle is to get a bus to pick us up here in Ruru. Once we reach Padum then we have to secure a bus to get us to Leh. DM will go ahead with some of the kids in a jeep and secure places for the kids to stay in Leh."

We revisit the animated map of Zanskar and Ladakh. We zoom out from Ruru and Padum to reveal the completely circuitous route through Leh the children must now travel to reach Manali and Dharamsala. The drive from Padum to Leh is about 30 hours. It passes through Kargil – directly on the border with Pakistan, and goes over two passes. Right now, one of the bridges is out. The Indian government officially closes this road during the long winter months, basically from October to June. Though the road may be passable at times during those months, the government does not maintain it and drivers maneuver around the roadblocks to travel at their own risk. If for any reason drivers get trapped by snow, avalanche, or any emergency, during those months they're on their own. The police and army will not send out rescue teams.

The bus breaks down six hours outside Leh. The kids, who haven't had food or water for 24 hours, wait while GL hitches a ride to Leh and gets help. Meanwhile, DM secures places for the kids and their parents to stay. This means staying in a relatively squalid part of Leh which houses many Zanskaris, usually sleeping seven to a small room. Tsumit: "I didn't like Leh. There's no place to go to the bathroom!" In fact, many of the public toilets are simply locked by city workers who don't want to clean them. Though still not out of Zanskar, Dykit's mother has had a better experience: "It's the first time I've ever been to such a big city. I couldn't believe all the shops, and all the people!"

GL talks to drivers and dispatchers at the bus station trying to find someone to take them to Manali. During winter the unionized government bus drivers cease traveling the closed roads. They comprise over 95% of the regular traffic. As recently as two months ago the road was closed for a week due to a landslide. The only drivers willing to take the risks are private operators who charge double the in-season rate. GL finds an operator and makes a deal.

The next day everyone gathers to leave. The drive from Leh to Manali is about 18 hours and goes over four high passes. GL and the drivers decide to leave around noon in order to minimize the risk of encountering ice on the road near the passes. As usual, the kids seem largely oblivious to the dangers and play on the bus before it leaves. A French tourist who's been trying for days to reach Manali arranges a ride with DM for ~\$20. DM could easily have charged much more, covering much of the whole cost in the bargain. "As one of 40 passengers I didn't think it was fair to charge him more than 1/40 of the total cost," he shrugs and smiles. Another bright and sunny day it is, and the bus is off.

On the Bus

17 kids
9 fathers
1 mother
5 monks (but 2 new ones)
6 girls still on religious pilgrimage
3 drivers
1 tourist
1 filmmaker

“We picked up three more kids in Padum. Their parents decided they wanted them to go and we had room on the bus, so...” GL laughs. After only four hours the bus stops at Tanglangla Pass – at 17,582 feet it is the world’s second highest pass on a man-made road. The group circles around the ceremonial marker and does a quick Tibetan good luck chant, a “Hurrah!” then runs freezing back to the bus.

Everyone settles in for the night. Like all Indian buses there is no insulation and no heat. Fortunately, most of the windows close properly. It will be a long cold night for everyone.

The drivers drive like men possessed. The last thing they want to risk is getting stuck in any way on this forgotten road. Darcha, the roadside village where the trek was to end, is passed without fanfare. “After we couldn’t cross Shinku Pass, I told a group that was following us on the trail about the four jeep drivers waiting for us in Darcha. When they got there they took ‘our’ jeeps to Manali” GL explains. “I still have to pay them of course!” he laughs. Though no serious ice is encountered, the road is entombed by walls of snow near the last pass – Rothang. Finally, the sky lightens and Manali is imminent.

3:00 am. Weak, tepid light from small reddish bulbs in the ceiling. Kids and parents try to sleep but some stare out through puffy, bloodshot eyes. It’s been days since they had a good night’s sleep, and longer still since they were in their beds. Most are lost somewhere in between. It’s an in-between time. The time when dream and awake merge and shimmer in 3D. When old and young voices sing together. When fears, anxieties, hopes, wishes, uncertainties, and fantasies pour forth and dance in the bus’s narrow aisle. “I just hope we make it.” “After Shinku-la I thought it was over.” “I’m never doing this again.” “I wonder what Manali’s like – is it as beautiful as they say?” “How many monks my age are at the monastery?” “Will I ever see my folks again?” “I wonder if my little sister misses me.” Each voice is unique, and each voice is inseparably part of all. The bus headlights create a still-life spectre on the one lane road as the driver dodges snowdrifts. Hindi pop songs pour forth from his stereo, motivating no one. Framed by the blackness of night, at the front of the bus, colored Christmas lights blink on and off around the Dalai Lama’s portrait.

Pre-Dawn, Manali. The kids stumble off the bus in a daze. The twilight zone atmosphere of the night before still lingers. Slowly, as the sun emerges, the magical splendor of the region comes to light: the lush greenery, the city lights, the cosmopolitanism, different languages, the wetness, and the warmth! Somehow, Jigmed stumbles on a strip of 35mm film and holds it up to the light, enraptured. Daily temperatures must be 25°F warmer than Zanskar. “I’ve never seen so much green in my life! All the trees, my god! I may never go back to Zanskar!” Dykit’s mother jokes. Her joy bursts forth. For the first time in her life, she’s made it out of her native province. “I’d never seen a monkey before. I’d heard about them, but couldn’t believe they’d just be *there*, hanging around in the trees, on the roads, everywhere!” Tsultim exclaims.

The first order of business is to get the children a bath. From the guesthouse where they're staying, the kids are marched to a hot springs near the edge of town. There in the outdoors they take the first hot showers of their lives. Though gray and drizzly, the day has a festive feel. DM watches the kids to make sure they wash thoroughly. The parents scrub clothes while some already clean kids play with some new toys. [Add GL, DM reminiscences of their first days in the monastery?]

Next come new clothes. For the first time in their lives GL knows they'll need pajamas for sleeping in the dorms. And he wants them to have new clothes so they won't feel second class next to their new classmates. In the nearby town of Kullu the monks shop in a huge open air market along with bargain hunters from all over northwest India. They also pick up thin, sheet metal crates – trunks for the kids to store their few belongings. “Though we're now way over budget on this trip – what with the trek and then the busses – we're hoping that our friends in the States and elsewhere who've supported the kids thus far will help us cover these additional costs,” GL explains. At 50 cents or less per item for clothes, the monks are effectively spending money they don't have – cash donated to the school – hoping it'll somehow be recouped. “We trust that we're doing the right things. Then whatever happens will take care of itself,” he says.

Dhakpo Monastery, just south of Manali, is in the process of building its school and adding students. But when GL and the kids arrive, the headmaster tells them that he can take only eight students, not fourteen. While GL and the headmaster meet and negotiate this, the kids are taken on a little tour of the facilities to see the classrooms and the dorms. Finally the headmaster relents and the children are ushered into an office for their induction ceremony. Steered by GL and their fathers, they place a kata – ceremonial scarf – on the mantle next to the Dalai Lama portrait. Minimal key data is recorded on a sheet of paper – name, age, place of birth, parent's occupation, etc. Then they make a little pledge and are officially accepted as student/monks. Joyful smiles abound. The fathers weep tears of pride. This is what all the hard travel has been for.

From the high of this moment it's a sudden and precipitous drop... It's time for the fathers to go. The children are gathered in the small room with their storage lockers. When they realize what's happening, hell erupts. While some kids stand by uncomprehending, four go berserk - screaming, crying, thrashing their bodies, pulling down furniture, wailing...pouring out rage, fear, anguish. This is the deepest expression of family ties, of filial piety, of all that binds us by love, at its most raw. It's heart rending. DM, GL and some teachers do their best to stop the children from hurting themselves or others, but they will not be consoled. This is primal pain; the heaviest price to pay by far for a life-changing opportunity.

Cut to Dharamsala. Dykit and her parents are shown around Dolma Ling nunnery. Dykit's eyes are wide with wonder and excitement. Though she will not be able to be admitted in the school until March, she has already been adopted by three girls from Zanskar. They help her out of her clothes into her new nun's robes. GL makes a quick phone call and voila! He's found a place where she can stay for the next five months. GL conducts a brief ceremony, officially accepting her as a renunciate and Boddhisattva in training.

Later, GL takes her to her new “Auntie's” - a woman from Zanskar who works for the Dalai Lama's brother in his Mcleod Ganj guesthouse. She is briefly introduced to the parents and she promises to teach Dykit how to read and write so she'll be ready to start school in March. GL gives “Auntie” a “donation” of some 600R (\$15) which will cover Dykit's food and other expenses for these five

Bearing witness, creating change.

months. Then it's time to leave. As Dykit, holding her "Auntie's" hand, disappears into the paradisaical greenery and luxury of the Kashmir Cottage guesthouse, her parents do all they can to hold back the onrush of tears. But their sadness overwhelms them. They know it may well be the last time they see her.

Finally, only Tsultim remains. Along with Dykit it is he we've grown most attached to. He is brought to a different "Auntie" – GL's cousin, herself a nun – who will put him up in her tiny one room cottage until she drops him at Sherabling Monastery (two hours away) later in the week. By far the most mature of the children, he seems more than ready for the changes ahead. "I want to be a monk so I won't be scolded anymore by my family," he says. After a brief hug and goodbye with GL, Tsultim is left standing outside the door, staring up into the trees. Some monkeys sit in the branches above. His eyes widen and he breaks into a huge grin.

Back at Stongde Monastery construction work on the new school facilities continues. "Getting the kids to Manali and Dharamasala was good but what we're doing here is much more important. Within a few years we should be able to serve as many as 50 children from neighboring poor families," GL states. DM: "Some people try to make something special out of what we've done. Really it's not. The Buddha challenged us to relieve suffering wherever we encounter it. This is one small way of doing that. We each do what we can. That's all."

GL and DM visit Dhakpo Monastery outside Manali. Those same children, last seen screaming and crying hysterically, now with their heads shaved, play happily in the courtyard. They surround GL, hug and hold him, their faces beaming. It's hard to tell who is happier – GL, the kids, or the exiled Tibetan headmaster watching them all.

Postscript

Months later, in Dharamsala to attend His Holiness' teachings, GL decides it is a good opportunity to report to him on what they've been doing and to seek his further guidance. He prepares a letter for him, summarizing the activities of the last few years building the Stongde Monastery school, taking the kids to other schools and monasteries, and more. He decides it will inspire the children to meet him as well, so he arranges for them all to come to Dharamsala.

The children are let into His Holiness' private compound. GL and DM bow obsequiously before him as their tradition demands. The Dalai Lama reads the letter they've given him, which we hear explained in VO: "As advised by Your Holiness, since 2001 we have introduced the study of Buddhist dialectics in Zanskar Stongde Gompa. We are also assisting in the building of a new school in Stongde Gompa. In 2004, we provided full assistance to 17 very poor children to go to school." HHDL reads and grunts approval; the monks wait, and sweat. "15 of them have been put in the Dhakpo Sherabling Monastic School in Manali and one was put in Sherabling School in Bir. Another one has been put in the Dolmaling Nunnery in Dharamsala. Our organization will fund their education until they finish all their studies. We are also providing the same help to some very poor and needy people living in the Zanskar region." HHDL asks questions seeking clarification, commends and blesses them.

Then the kids walk through the line, holding katas for HHDL to ceremonially place around their necks. A great fan of children, he smiles and blesses them. Some beaming, some unsure what is going on, we watch them all, even the littlest ones, approach him for their blessing. In VO, GL

Bearing witness, creating change.

outlines the road ahead: “We have to look after the kids all the way through school, university, and beyond. It’s a big responsibility. Life-long.”

His Holiness suggests a picture. Flanked by GL and DM, the kids line up for a photo. GL: “Meeting him again, something moved inside our heart... After all these years, these different trials, we are completing all our promises. It is deep fulfillment.” Someone says, “Julay!” and HHDL laughs. “Julay!” he repeats, joyously. Everybody laughs.

Fin.