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All travels begin as dreams. They start with a look at a map — from which sparks that irresistible trapping urge to explore — followed by the rhetorical consideration of “What if?” My past summer exploring the Himalayas of Bhutan and Indian Kashmir through the generosity of Mr. Burch began in such fashion.

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# LEARNING FROM BHUTAN AND LADAKH:

*A Journey Beneath the Himalaya*

I have always been attracted by that which is contrastingly opposite. People, places, and behaviors different from mine conjure a level of intrigue personally magnetic in nature. I yearn to learn the age-old question of ‘why’, and in so doing, hope to surface with a better understanding of my own actions and ideas.

As such, I chose to construct the theme of my Burch proposal on better understanding the philosophy and ideology of indigenous cultures of the Himalaya toward the modern world, and the future implications of international development and globalization on cultures in the Himalaya. The trip has always been a fantasy of mine lurking beyond the veil of my wide-eyed, childhood dreams. The



mountains resonate with my blood—no other force has compelled me with such haunting emotion and

to such an extent. Similarly, I have always been allured by the people of the peaks—perhaps through the combination of my own inexplicable envy for the livelihoods of such cultures, and my own incapacity to grasp the true personal nature of the mountains to my own life.

For eleven weeks, I explored Himalayan Buddhist cultures in Bhutan and Indian Kashmir, analyzing those peoples’ attitudes and behavior to the modern world and development by external forces. The quest for remoteness and isolation acted as my trip’s mantra, and as the mountain passes and lofty buttresses of the Himalayas gave way to the desolate Tibetan plateau, I began to come into contact with little pockets of human life along the bare-thread



300 goats up to the high-altitude pastures that blossomed beneath the never-ending nourishment of the town’s mountain glaciers.

And so, I began to learn.

In all of Ladakh’s alienness and isolation, I’ve yet to find a place that better exemplifies the ever-pushing human drive of humanity—the pursuit of survival. In

a world with illimitable conflict and difficulty, nothing is wasted nor taken for granted; such an attitude suffuses into Ladakhi religion, spirituality, and ultimately, the way Ladakhis live their lives. It is beautiful to see such wisdom and contentment in the simplest of actions. From the way sheep are sheered, the vegetables harvested, the grass trimmed, the prayers sung, Ladakhis understand their lives in a milieu of timelessness. The omnipotent existence of death and struggle, in all its irony, creates life. The irony!—that in a culture

glacial inlets and tributaries of the Trans-Himalaya. It was here in a place called Ladakh where my most memorable experience took place—an enchanting region of the world transposed in the world’s highest battleground between Pakistan, Tibet, and India. It was a place only recently opened to tourists, and one which physically obstructs itself from the rest of the world for nine months of the year due to a winter that reaches the –40 degree Fahrenheit mark. I reached Ladakh only after trekking by foot for 19 days over 9 passes with elevations in excess of 20,000 feet

Upon arriving, I lived in Hemis-Shukpachen—a village of 200—with a Tibetan family, reaping the benefits and incurring the challenges of life in one of the most breathtakingly extreme places in the world. The experience was emotionally sundry—beautiful, agonizing, confusing, frightening, and illuminating all at the same time. To such a culture, my Western neuroses served as mystifying enigmas. Why did I climb up the town’s neighboring mountains—screaming wonder-eyed from their summits—or read books covered with strange hieroglyphics? Or the Italian spaghetti sauce I found in Delhi and brought as a gift, how could such food be preferred to rice, two-year-aged yak meat, and thukpa soup? In learning these “basic

skills”, I was assigned an 8 year old boy whom functioned as my wise babysitter. Six days out of the week, I participated in the town’s August barley, alfalfa grass, and apricot harvest—crops which transform the seemingly endless alpine desert into explosions of green, yellow, and orange. Once a week a local Ladakhi girl and I shepherded the town’s communal



that believes in reincarnation—and thus assumes never-ending life—living in the moment with a simplistic contentment typifies Ladakhi life. It is this inner health that so captures the magic of the Himalayan peoples. Change and development—symbolized by modernity and manifested by my very own ability to enter the region—looms in the near future as an ever-clearer assumption; yet, it is the reaction to such change that presents me such fascination. In a society so preoccupied and wrapped up by that which takes place around us—one can truly learn from such pervasive contentment. If there is one thing I most learned from Ladakh, it is that some of the most beautiful and rewarding moments lurk subtly in the everyday of our surroundings. These are the moments we should live for, the moments that are full of meaning, the food for our neglected senses. I hope I never lose such a Ladakh residing in my heart.

