



Newsletter No. 5: Ladakh + Updates

Hi Everybody! Here i am back again with a load of pictures and stories from India and Myanmar and herewith is Newsletter No.5. I hope you are all well and happy and that you enjoy some more adventures!!!

Ladakh

The trip began with the basic 5 hour wait in a Delhi hotel lobby. It is always best to do it this way. You arrive late at night and Delhi is over 38 degrees Centigrade, Ladakh 23 degrees max + 3500 meters of altitude and the flight is early. This means that there is not much point getting acclimatized to Delhi so one sits up all night... The miracle was that i met up with the family (accompanying me) on time and so we all sat there -- while the children snored. Off to the airport at 5 am and then the flight (uneventful -- phew) to Leh. India is getting ready for the Commonwealth games and to this end has re-vamped the Delhi airports = WoW. A great improvement because now there is more room for everyone to push and shove in. (Please see: **Lesson Learned** below.)

Leh... What a magical place! The trip started with a bang as two couples from my village had been trekking in Ladakh and were due to leave the next day. I wanted them to come and spend time with the family and so I embarked on 48 hours without sleep (= a truly terrible torture.) Not only did we spend a wonderful couple of hours together but we went to the hospital that Lama Chogyal (Ladakh Heart Foundation: www.ladakhheart.com) is building and even visited his temple, Spitook. (The first Buddha at the top of the page is from there.) Here is Lama Chogyal at his temple on the left. I hoped that the things for the children's ward funded by Children's Hope Foundation would arrive before I left...



It is always nice to come together with my friends in Ladakh! We calculated that we had known each other for 36 years and although I could never go every year, there have many many, visits to Ladakh! We decided how to spend the next few days considering all the restrictions of work and the baby to take care of and the need to discuss the DA Campbell Cultural Preservation Center in great detail.

The next morning, off I went to meet the family accompanying me at their guest house. Of course everyone was a little under the weather – or should I say, altitude. It is no joke going up that high (3500 meters) and staying there. We were all a little off but with lots of remedies... Then I returned to the house and found some strange people there! It was my cousin Ivan(on the right with Otsal) who I hadn't seen for 25 years with his wife Mae. The family found the reunion extremely amusing and we all had a great time together.



Let me introduce you to the family so that you know who is who for future reference – and especially if you ever go to Ladakh – which you should do some time in your life.



Here they are from left to right: Mipham Otsal, Gune and Spalzin, Otsal's daughters (Jimmey the youngest is about to have a baby in Delhi), Yangchan Dolma (Otsal's wife), Yangchan's mother and Gune's baby, Jigmet. Kim Kyunghee is looking on.

Otsal is president and founder of the Ladakh Theatre Organization (website coming soon) and his wife is one of the foremost musicians and dancers of Ladakh.

Here is another truly lovely picture:

Then there is the other family of Otsal's sister Yangsin Dolma. After many years we all managed to meet up and have dinner together. Here they are:



So from left to right: Thustop, son, Yangsin Dolma, Otsal's sister, Thinley son, with his daughter, Angmow, daughter, Padma, daughter-in-law + son and Jigmet, son.

This was an extremely jolly occasion, a chance to catch up and learn about what is going on. For example: Ladakh has 800 NGOs but little solar energy; an antiquated huge generator which is class Z in energy efficiency; no proper public toilets, and so on...

A short explanation of Ladakh. Originally a matriarchal society (the girl married all the brothers and all inheritance passed through the

daughter), today everyone has one spouse but (I was assured) the women are still "very powerful." The result is lovely because the women give the men their place and the men are gentle and not so charged with having to be ... Also, Ladakhi families do not have a last name, each person has two names (the vast majority have Jigmet somewhere!!!) and are known by their house name! The family house is passed down to the oldest daughter and so whomever she marries must leave his home and move to hers.

I heard a lovely true story this time; it happened some weeks ago. A young girl was going to her future husband's home to meet him. On the way she noticed a deer by the roadside which was just sitting there. On the way back she noticed that the deer was still sitting there and that there were tears coming from its eye. She went up to the deer which remained where it was. Surprised she went to consult a lama about this and he told her that the deer had been her mother in a previous life.

The next day was reserved for one of our famous picnics. They had chosen a spot near to Shey Palace where there is a lot of water. It was green and lush and the great savior of the day was the donkeys who were persuaded to carry the children around. Tents are put up, carpets laid and lots of fantastic food prepared.

Here are Lara and Jimin with the principal actor of the Ladakh Theatre Organization (website coming soon): Jimin befriended one baby donkey:



And we ate and ate as well as enjoying the performance of members of the theatre group who seem to love to take every occasion to dance, play the drums and wash clothes with Migros gloves!!!



Enough with all the fun and back to work! The DA Campbell Cultural Preservation Center in Ladakh is coming up as we speak. Here are photos of the foundations taken when I was there 3 weeks ago... (The cupola shaped roof you can see is the Parliamentary Assembly Hall – right next door.)



This year the walls and roof will be built and next year is dedicated to getting the interior done. We had a good look at the accounting for the Center and also projected what was needed for next year = the interior = 400 seats, curtains etc. Then we will have a huge opening to launch it (are you coming?) and Otsal will dedicate all his time to putting on shows, plays, doing theatre workshops for all ages, running a music school part of the time (the land is big...) and preserving something of Ladkhi culture.

The days passed quickly with all kinds of events and the joy of being together. I was able to buy mountains of stationary and socks for the poor students in Spalzin's school. In the pile there were hundreds of pencils, pens, boxes of colored pencils, exercise books etc. Apparently when the children don't have the right things they get into trouble and Spalzin had been buying from her miserable wages!!! Socks too had to be of the school uniform...

Tearful goodbyes (only place I ever cry in the airport) and off to the sweltering heat of Delhi and Sulabh International...

Delhi

The family travelling with me had gone off on a tour of Delhi for the day in the sweltering heat. Even so it is a must-see... So I was picked up to go to Sulabh (www.sulabhinternational.org). A bit of background first...

One particular interest of mine all these years has been toilets. Many countries suffer from bad toilets and India ranks high on the list. When I lived in India for about 5 years at a stretch at the end of the 70s (studying and practicing Buddhism, of course), I often found myself in special places and remembered the words of my godfather, "Always do the worst jobs. They take the least time, no-one bothers you – because they don't want to do it -- and usually you are appreciated." So I cleaned toilets.

When I encountered the name of Sulabh and learnt that they boasted the only toilet museum in the world, an email was sent, a reply received and the appointment set up. However I NEVER imagined it the way it was. Oh dear, just a moment. I forgot to say that one of my main aims was to find ways of introducing a public toilet system to Ladakh.

So off I went to Sulabh where a traditional Indian reception awaited. The usual morning prayers consisted of the entire staff (2 – 300?) ready to chant and the founder Dr Pathak on the dais waiting for the guests, a head teacher and myself. We were garlanded and presented a hand woven shawl and then had the pleasure of listening to the chanting. There was great excitement in the air because it was just a couple of days before some of the ex-scavengers (women who carry nightsoil on their heads and therefore are untouchable) were going to address the parliament – an amazing first and a credit to Dr. Pathak's long struggle to bring change.

Needless to say, the museum was fascinating and the tour was incredible in the energy and love invested by our guide. The whole place is imbued with the spirit of Gandhi and the non-violent movement. Do look at the website... www.sulabhinternational.org

Anyway as far as Ladakh is concerned, the government had contacted Sulabh just a few days before (phew) and it was left to me to make sure that Otsal gets one of their units put up in the theatre complex – not very

expensive. The units are amazing using no energy at all, producing water from the waste for agriculture and dry fertilizer. They cost very little and are practical and easy to maintain. Dr. Pathak has invented various systems (biogas etc) all of which remain unpatented for anyone to adopt. It is fitting that India should develop this as they were the first to have toilets in 2500 BCE in Mohenjodaro...!!!! Then it was off to Myanmar...

Myanmar

Myanmar, Yangon, is another magical place. It is different from Ladakh but magical all the same. Nge-nge and her husband met me. I was longing to see her parents who are friends from long ago. So off we went to their house. Lovely Myanmar is suffering. The roads are full of holes and have little asphalt left. The electricity is almost hopeless, being often absent or so weak it can hardly run a fan. We all sat down to decide what to do. I had money to spend (some from different people) and so it seemed a good idea to just follow Nge-nge. Then, in the sweltering (it always is) heat, I went with a helper to the markets to buy stationary and stuff – takes hours...

Our first port of call was to be Nge-nge monthly treat for hospice patients. There were about 30 being beautifully cared for in a hospital but they looked forward to something nice to eat before they die. This is Nge-nge's monthly run and she told me how much they look forward to juice and cake. So I bought juice and cake and we went and distributed it all. Next it was the stationary to 410 young monks,



then 250 nuns.



And after that 250 orphans and some others besides. We also went to the blind home where we offered a much needed gas rice cooker (electricity is so unreliable) for 50 people and The children were glad to receive new tooth brushes as well.



Here are the girls:



Here are the boys:

Quite an undertaking to buy hundreds of pens, exercise books, tooth brushes, tooth paste, pencil cases and so on. It took hours in the wholesale market with lots of laughter and bargaining... But we did it and it was clearly a good thing as all of them needed these basic supplies. Also the things go directly without any intermediaries...



One of the monks that I admire enormously is Venerable Nyanissara or Sitagu Sayadaw and so one of my main plans was to go and see him and see what I could do to help in the future.

He is involved in numerous projects and has just distributed 8 million dollars in aid to the area hit by Hurricane Nargis travelling on foot through much of the region!!! He is adored by everyone and supported by everyone. But of course it is never enough. To meet Sayadaw is a true delight as he is a very jolly far-thinking person who inspires everyone. I travelled up to Mandalay because I wanted to see how everything is after so many years (last visit at least 15 years ago.)

The hospital was thriving. The superintendent was a charming host and I enjoyed visiting wards and the new additions of an eye center and labs. The atmosphere of dedication and love were very impressive. There is a long tradition of doctors coming in groups to work from all over the world. This winter alone there are 12 groups expected with one group numbering over 20 doctors.

Then we visited the area again and I enjoyed seeing some of the traditional sites of the Sagaing Hills..



Back in Yangon, Nge-nge and I talked about future projects. I was amazed to find out how wrong the news had been about Nargis. In fact everyone collected whatever they could and headed down there to help out whenever they had time. The extent of the damage was extreme and one interesting fact that emerged from a particularly active volunteer was that there were no boats left after the hurricane, all had been destroyed. This included all the naval vessels – the storm hit the base first – and the fishing vessels. The result was that it was almost impossible to get to the stranded. Somehow many people have been able to help giving out cash, food and clothing, reconstructing schools and clinics, supplying local hospitals and so on. Another person I met is reconstructing whole villages...

After some more sad goodbyes, it was back to Delhi for a few days before returning home.

Delhi

It was hot as ever but somehow I like this amazing town. Long discussions with Amita as to future projects were very fruitful. We are thinking of setting up some classes for the children running around who don't go to school. In fact, the Indian education system is apparently very good and almost everyone does go to school. However there is nothing for the young and not much attendance by migrant workers. As there is a park near her home, we talked about setting up a tent, getting a teacher and making her husband supply a midday meal (he is greatingp a restaurant nearby.) We will see...

Lesson learned. Indians have a different way of doing things than we do. In all the long years of adjusting, i have grown used to the manifold cultural changes i subject myself to but, every now and again, my European self rises up. Sitting on the plane from Bangkok to Delhi (after 6 hours in the Bangkok airport -- ugh) that part of me came up. As i looked at all the Indians on the plane pushing and shoving and being awful, i thought, "Really this is too much." One particular man near me stuck out. He complained about this and that. Anyway fast forward to the arrival lounge and the absence of the person who should have been meeting me. Everything was in chaos after heavy rain and I found that I didn't know how to ring my friends. As I was asking the man there what to do, the "awful" man from the plane rushed up and insisted I use his phone to find out what to do. How kind! I thanked him and off he went. Then about 20 minutes later there he was again!!! Amita had called on his phone to say that the person collecting me would be very late and this kind man had come all the way back to the airport in the traffic to tell me!!!! I learnt a good lesson that day – Don't judge.



Cambodia

Do you remember Kong Thai? The girl we had the hare-lip operated on? Well she finished her training as a beautician and with her sister wanted to set up a shop. We managed to get the required US\$400 for basics and here she is with her sister in action!!!

At present, as far as I can see, this seems the best way to go: to identify and work with small projects. Of course I would like to change everything that is wrong in the world over night – who wouldn't? But it is all not that easy so little steps, careful suveyance and encouragement seem to be the best policy. What do you think? Any suggestions???

Let me end with the beautiful Schwedagon Pagoda. Here is it early in the morning.

Any suggestions or comments are gratefully received.

Thank you for your interest et à bientôt, mujin

PS I try to make this short. However, if ever you would like MORE information please don't hesitate...

