

Two Weeks in Tibet (sort of): The Value of a Cultural Exchange Between Science and Spirituality



I

“Oh, honey, that sounds amazing.”

Only thing is nothing about her voice sounds too amazed. Actually, it sounds more like the mopey feigned enthusiasm that my mother typically employs when I tell her I’m about to do something she’s decided will make her worry.

“What?”

“What *what?*”

“You don’t sound excited.”

“Well, honey, you know me. I get worried.”

I had just told her that I was invited to India to be a part of a program established by the Dalai Lama himself. I told her that I’d be working directly with Tibetan monks to help teach them science and teaching methods. I informed her that I’d play a part in reshaping the legacy of Tibetan monastic education.

“I am pretending.”

“Not very well.”

And then she says it—literally the most endearing thing I’ve ever heard come out of my mother’s mouth: “But, honey, I just don’t understand. Why do the monks need to learn science? Don’t they just spend all their days praying to Muhammad Ali?”

II

How can we make the wonderful developments of science into something that offers altruistic and compassionate service for the needs of humanity and the other sentient beings with whom we share the earth?

—The Dalai Lama

As adorably naive as my mother’s question was, she actually has a point: Why do Tibetan monks need to learn science? How is it of value to a Buddhist monastic education that has done fine for hundreds of years without western science? Why would the Dalai Lama upend 1,500 years of Tibetan tradition and drag foreigners halfway around the world to train monastics in physics, biology, and neuroscience?

For starters, it’s no secret that the Dalai Lama has had a soft spot for science since he was a young boy. Biographies and pop culture frequently depict the young Lama as a curious little guy playing with telescopes, taking apart (and then reassembling) watches, kickstarting generators to power old film projectors,

playing with the engines of old Fords, and interrogating Western visitors who had any knowledge of science and technology. And once he assumed his role as the religious and political figurehead of the Tibetan community in exile, he began traveling abroad where he developed deep relationships with Western physicists and neuroscientists, like David Bohm and Francisco Varela. No doubt the Dalai Lama's curious and inquisitive nature and his openness to new ideas are two of his most famous qualities.

But could a soft spot for science alone be enough to inspire him to reshape the tradition of Tibetan monastic education? Or is there something more to his purpose and vision? Are there deeper benefits for Tibetan monks to reap from understanding the nature of science and scientific inquiry? And if Tibetan monks have the humility to consider what science has to offer their tradition, shouldn't we as Western educators and scientists reflect on what we can learn from *them*?

III

Today, make time to play.

—Na'ama Yehuda

It is the first day of class. There are two teachers leading the educational workshop via the Exploratorium in San Francisco, California: Tammy and Zeke. Both are high-quality people. On trips like these you never know who you'll get stuck with. Possibilities include the well-intentioned nerdy type who struggles desperately to connect with people or the education ego who talks relentlessly about "what happens in *my* classroom." Tammy and Zeke are neither of these types. Within minutes I wonder how I got lucky enough to get to work with these two educators. And as good as Tammy and Zeke are, they don't betray a trace of educational superiority. Something about them immediately sets me at ease, and I don't feel any need to prove my own ed creds when I'm in their presence.

So Tammy and Zeke are at the front of the room about to start their first session. They are going to deliver a clever lesson on water pressure designed to explore how we know what we know in science. It's a unique and humbling audience so I

think maybe everyone was a little nervous. Not only are these real life Tibetan monks, but many of them are the leaders of the science centers at their monasteries. Thus, this workshop is geared more towards teacher education than science content.



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Me, specifically, I was freaking out and I didn't even have to lead this lesson. I was thoroughly starstruck. Ever since watching the movie *Seven Years in Tibet* as a teenager, I'd developed a fascination with Tibetan culture and a pretty consuming crush on the Dalai Lama. I read everything I could get my hands on: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Freedom in Exile* (the Dalai Lama's autobiography), and tons of other Buddhist literature. And now, almost 20 years later, I'm in a classroom in India filled to the brim with Tibetan monks, in their traditional maroon robes, gathered here to learn about what I've dedicated my life to—science education. This wasn't supposed to be how this worked. It was supposed to be the other way around.

But, so anyways, Tammy and Zeke are about to start their lesson. The translator at the front quiets the room. Tammy is about to open her mouth to start introductions. And then something really weird happens: a *cell phone* starts ringing. I of course promptly check my phone to see if it's me. It's not. Everyone's looking around the room to identify the culprit. Finally, one of the monks stands up and pulls out a blaring cellular device. He starts laughing. The room starts laughing. Other monks start teasing him in Tibetan. And as the room roared, I learned my first two lessons about the nature of this group of students. The first is that if you think Tibetan monks are stuffy technophobes, you've got the wrong monks. In my two weeks in India, I saw monks pausing interviews to answer phones, monks pulling out their iPads to show me cool science articles, monks riding motorcycles, monks purchasing "Dark Fantasy" brand chocolate cookies, and monks sharing their top motion picture action hero (which apparently is Stallone, with Schwarzenegger taking a close second). The second lesson I'm

learning is that these are some *playful* monks. They tease each other relentlessly and crack one joke after another, but it's all done in the most affable nature.

Science explores the nature of reality through objective third person investigations, while Buddhists study reality through first-person subjective observations of consciousness in meditation.

But here's the takeaway: As the lesson gets underway it quickly becomes clear that this playful attitude makes them the ideal group of students. They are the perfect audience for exploring pedagogy and testing out lessons because they have all the best parts of children (the curiosity, the wonder, the excitement, the openness to play) mixed with all the best parts of adults (the focus, the drive, the commitment, the big picture).

It reminded me of an analogy in physics education: When we first learn physics we often omit friction and air resistance in order to simplify problems and focus on the most basic and fundamental elements of motion. This is a perfect analogy for what it's like to teach monks, especially for a young educator.

Monks are a special audience in that they are highly intelligent, mature, curious, and thoughtful students. And at the same time they come into the classroom with almost no formal science instruction, much as our own high school students do. And what they do come in with is often a series of deeply held misconceptions, also much like our own students. Most of what Tibetan monks know of physics and cosmology comes from a Buddhist text called the *Abhidharma*, which teaches that the universe is a flat world with a square core mountain called Meru, surrounded by seven concentric rings of fresh water seas and lesser golden mountains. You can imagine how little they know of modern science and the tangled ball of misconceptions they walk into the room with.

So teaching monks is like learning to solve physics problems without friction or air resistance. All the key challenges of building knowledge in another

human being are present because the monks are so new to science learning. And at the same time the auxiliary challenges of education like low-engagement, issues of belonging, struggles at home, and immaturity aren't present. Teaching monks is like having a testing ground for mastering the basic pedagogy of a lesson without having to worry about the other challenges that disrupt learning. It gives us a vision of what the ideal lesson *could* look like, so that we can then reflect and build on it to meet the more challenging needs that arise in a high school classroom.

Or as Zeke put it: "If the monks don't get it, no one's gonna get it. So figure out what you're doing wrong."

IV

The Duality of One is the Unity of two.

—Joey Lawsin

Day 2: A monk saved me from a pack of rabid dogs.

Actually, they probably weren't rabid. And they probably wouldn't even bite. But they were scary, and I'm a bit dog-phobic so I was scared.

I was still jet lagged and woke up well before breakfast, so I decided to take a walk. At some point on this walk a pack of dogs start barking ferociously. An old Tibetan woman runs out of her house, picks up a handful of rocks, and starts hurling them at the dogs until they cower away. She starts walking down the street, victorious, while I turn around and start walking back, not interested in testing fate. Only thing is after a few more steps the dogs are back and barking louder than ever. The old lady notices and offers me her rocks with some hand gestures. I decline. But as I keep walking, the dogs get closer. And louder. And I get scared. So I cave in and pick up some rocks for myself. And as I wind up, about to pitch one, I hear, "No, no, no they won't bite."

It is a monk named Ngawang. He is the monk I'm most familiar with at this point of the trip because he is the lead science teacher at the Sera Jey Monastery where we're staying and he's been the guy to get us settled, make us feel welcome, and

tend to our needs. He is a calm, soft-spoken man with gentle eyes. And as I look at him looking back at me about to throw a rock at a dog I feel a bit ashamed.

But there's zero judgement in Ngawang. He just explains the nature of the dogs here, which apparently is the nature of most dogs anywhere—all bark and no bite. So I'm mostly relieved, and now we have a nice walk back to the guest house where breakfast will be served. I use the opportunity to ask him about his experience of becoming fluent in science. He is one of a small cohort of monks who had the chance to attend Emory University for a few years and take college level science classes with the goal of bringing back that science mastery to his own Sera Jey Monastery. He tells me about how grateful he was for the opportunity but also that it can be hard and isolating building a science program at a monastery without the traditional supports you might get at a Western school or university. I then ask him why he feels like this work is important. What does it add to a monastic education? Why struggle through it when the inertia can be so great? In other words, I'm asking him my mother's question: Why do monks need to learn science?

His answer is straightforward and powerful. He tells me that the traditions of science and monastic inquiry aren't all that different. He tells me that they are both empirical ways at getting to the true nature of reality. Only the methods tend to be different. Science explores the nature of reality through objective third person investigations, while Buddhists study reality through first-person subjective observations of consciousness in meditation.

"So you feel like learning science actually *reinforces* your Buddhist practice?"

"Yes, I do. But it's deeper than that even. For example, Buddhism teaches us about the fundamental law of impermanence."

He's referring to the Buddhist notion of *anicca*, which ultimately states that all physical and mental formations that we believe to have enduring identities are actually in a state of constant flux and change. The Buddhists believe that one of the roots of suffering is attaching ourselves to objects which are inherently impermanent and without true substance. He continues:

And even now modern science is teaching us that on the most basic levels of

reality that nature is always changing and is highly impermanent. That at the deepest levels of reality, things do not have a fundamental existence. There are many examples where science actually confirms the teachings of the Buddha. There have been many books, since as early as the 1970s, which seek to find a convergence between modern physics and Buddhism. There is some controversy around these books, with some of the opinion that these authors have tried too hard to discover resonances between science and spirituality. But for Ngawang at least, these similarities clearly speak to him in a deep way. As if each contains the seed that completes the other.

V

Just as a goldsmith would test his gold by burning, cutting and rubbing it, so must you examine my words and accept them, not merely out of reverence for me.

—The Buddha

The Tibetan settlement we're visiting on this trip is deemed a "protected area" by the local state government. This means that all foreigners who intend to spend the night need to apply for a protected area permit (PAP). This sounds like it's probably a good idea for a settlement of peoples who have been through as much turmoil as the Tibetans have. Only problem is the local police station seems unnecessarily ornery about doling out these permits and no one quite knows why. Nevertheless Tammy, Zeke, and I need to pile into a car and head down to the Bylakuppe police station to wrap up the paperwork required for our permits. There are foreboding hints that this might take a preposterous amount of time, but no one says it outright. We're escorted by a wonderful monk named Khechok (who I affectionately dub Ketchup after he explains that his name is pronounced like the condiment). There is something almost maternal about him—maybe grandmaternal would be closer to what I'm getting at—despite being a 37-year old man. He exudes a 24/7 concern for our wellbeing and comfort, and he's always trying to help in whatever ways he can. He also may be the most humble

man I've ever met.

And so Khechok has all of our paperwork, all of our passport photos, all the things we need to get our permits wrapped in a nice bow, and he hands them over to the station. Two hours later we discover that what should be a quick 10-minute stamp might end up taking over three hours.

On the bright side, I'm able to get to know Khechok quite well while we're waiting. Among many other things I ask him a question that I've been dying to ask. It occurred to me that while science and Buddhism seem to compliment and even *confirm* each other, surely there are aspects of science that come into conflict with Buddhist beliefs. One quick off-the-cuff example would be their conceptions of the start of the universe. Buddhist texts claim that there is no beginning of time, because all material things require a cause. Modern cosmology, however, claims that there is ample evidence for a singular event—the Big Bang—that kicked off the universe. And from my experiences with my own culture, established religions' traditions often have a hard time accepting scientific findings that contradict their beliefs. So I ask him:

"Khechok, what happens if science comes into conflict with one of your beliefs as a Buddhist monk?"

"That would be fine."

I thoroughly did not expect this response.

"It would be?"

"Yes, of course. The ultimate purpose of both science and Buddhism is the Truth. So if some other method of investigation proves one of our beliefs to be wrong, then we would need to change that belief."

I was moved by this response. No doubt it takes courage to be able to let go of a deeply held belief when evidence seems to refute it. Especially since it is such a natural human instinct to identify ourselves with our beliefs. It also reminds me of something Bryce Johnson, the American coordinator of the Science for Monks¹ program, had said to me during dinner. "For these monks," he said, "there's no line between science and spirituality. There's just investigating reality. Sadly, in the West it seems you're required to pick one side or the other."

VI

Every giant leap for mankind resulting from a technological advance requires a commensurate step in the opposite direction - a counterweight to ground us in humanity.

—Alex Morritt

Today is Thanksgiving.

I've lived away from home for a long time. And I've never felt especially homesick on any holidays I wasn't able to spend with my family. But there's something different about this one. This time I'm *really* far away. Almost exactly halfway around the world. Which means we're in radically different time zones so *my* Thanksgiving is *their* tomorrow. Technically, I won't even *have* a Thanksgiving. I'm in India where most people don't even know it's a thing. And so this time around I'm feeling homesick.

But as it turns out there's a loophole. Bryce decides to cancel classes this afternoon in order to hang Tibetan prayer flags and then indulge in a Tibetan feast on top of a restaurant in the middle of town—our very own *Tibetsgiving*. And so now I'm watching these jolly monks climb trees and hang Tibetan prayers as high as they can get them, so the wind can blow those prayers out into the world, and in this moment there's no way my homesickness can live here. It's too rich; the vibe is too familial. In Buddhist culture there are three refuges to sooth monks through their toughest moments: The Buddha himself, the Dharma (the teaching), and the Sangha—the community of monks with whom you live. In this moment I can see why the Sangha is a precious refuge. The monks are a true family to each other. Their love and concern for one another is palpable. While immersed in this family, it's not possible for me to feel homesick.

There's something about being immersed in a community of monastics who have dedicated their lives to meditation and

mindfulness that flips a switch. Their commitment to conscious and peaceful living is inspiring even to a hardline skeptic.

After we finish hanging prayer flags, we walk about a mile through rural Indian countryside to the restaurant. And soon I find myself deep in a conversation with a monk named Thabke. Immediately I feel a strong kinship with him. We start talking about his time at Emory University and the frat parties and beer pong matches he observed while he was there. We got into a deep conversation about the nature of pleasure vs. happiness. And we agreed that there are certain limits to the amount of happiness that can come out of extreme bouts of frat party sex, drugs, and rock and roll-based pleasure. He quickly segues into some lingering quantum mechanics questions he had for me, and as we bounce ideas back and forth I realize that this guy is really, *really* smart. Like somehow not getting a degree in physics did not put him at any disadvantage in this discussion. And when the conversation finally subsides I ask him why he thinks it's so important for him to learn science. Much as I expected he offers a perspective I hadn't heard yet. Thabke tells me that it is a way for Tibetan monastics to stay relevant in the modern world. "If we are to continue to attract Tibetans into monastic studies we need to be able to offer them a modern education as well as a spiritual one," he tells me.

"Are you saying you're afraid Buddhism won't be able to excite Tibetan youth into monastic education unless that education modernizes?" I ask him.

"Yes. How can we expect students to study in Tibetan monasteries when that education has little relevance in the modern world?"



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This is a sentiment that seems to recur again and again in my conversations with monks. There is an overwhelming sense that the Tibetan community is at a critical point in history. It is a culture that is caught between the forces of

maintaining a rich and historic tradition (elegant maroon robes and solemn vows and rituals) while embracing the modern era and globalization (the iPads and motorcycles). And in a strange way, one gets the feeling that the movement for Tibetan leadership to implement science programs for monks is as much about cultural preservation as it is about modernization.

His answer also reminds me of a crucial point the Dalai Lama made in his book, *The Universe in a Single Atom* (2006). It is a book that explores the important relationship between science and spirituality. In it he observes that if Tibetans are to uphold their vow of service to the planet, then they are going to have to be literate and credible participants in the scientific debates that will help determine the future of science and technology policy. He admits to being very concerned about the ethical consequences of climate change, cloning, and genetically engineered foods. He also suggests that as remarkably important science is, it is often not tempered by ethics. And so if the Tibetan monastic community is going to have a place at the table in discussions that help shape policy, they need to be able to have a credible, modern, and relevant voice. And there's no way to do that without a strong foundation in scientific knowledge.

VII

Faith in the possibilities of continued and rigorous inquiry does not limit access to truth to any channel or scheme of things. It does not first say that truth is universal and then add there is but one road to it.

—John Dewey

It is Sunday.

After five days of intensive inquiry lessons (including but not limited to learning about neuroplasticity through distortion goggles, exploring air pressure through the three-holed bottle experiment, navigating marbles through mazes with nothing but breath, designing lessons and exhibitions via the 5E model of lesson planning, and a bazillion other teacher techniques) we finally get a day off.

Bryce planned an excursion for both the monks and teachers, first to a lake where

we plan to picnic, and then to an elephant training camp called Dubare. Like most of this trip I hadn't any idea what to expect so I just rolled with it and waited cautiously to see what would happen next. I wasn't let down. Within minutes of parking at the lake, a soccer ball comes out, and suddenly we're playing a pickup game of soccer on a grassy knoll with about 20 monks. Robes are flying everywhere, sandals come off. And, as it turns out, the Tibetan monks take their soccer *very* seriously. Teams are made. Things get competitive. But as with everything else, it's all done with the most lovingly kind vibe (in spite of the elbows thrown).

Shortly after the game settles down, food arrives. We're talking pots of momos, which are like Tibetan pierogies (and for those that don't know pierogies they're basically Polish raviolis). Tibetans feel about momos how Americans feel about pizza. And it's easy to see why: They're delicious and addictive, though probably slightly healthier than pizza.

Once sufficiently stuffed, I start talking to Khechok and Soren, a Danish graduate student who has immersed himself with the monks to do research on the Tibetan diaspora. And so I ask Khechok:

"Why do *you* think it's important for you to learn science?"

He pauses for a moment and considers my question.

"I believe there are many methods of investigating the truth of reality. We can not be so proud as to think that ours is the only right way."

"So you believe Western science has developed methods of understanding reality that might assist Buddhists in their own search for truth?"

"Yes, I do. I mean look at all that modern science has discovered. This can't be ignored."

He tells me about the annual Mind and Life Conference in which the Dalai Lama brings physicists, cognitive scientists, psychologists, neuroscientists, and biologists from around the world to discuss how science is making progress in uncovering the secrets of consciousness. Then he adds:

"In the same way I think that Western scientists could benefit from studying within, and learning about consciousness that way. They can learn from our

methods of investigation too. After all, it is the only way that consciousness can be directly observed— you can't do that with an EEG.”

Then Khechok smirks at me with as close to a tongue-in-cheek look as a monk is capable of making.

VIII

In our country religion is not different from philosophy and religion & philosophy don't differ from science.

—Virchand Gandhi

The Tibetan monks I spoke with were humble and forthcoming about the benefits they received from studying science and the scientific method. So it seems important for the sake of this story to reflect on the ways in which Western educators and scientists can benefit from our working with *them*. Outside of their being the ideal students for testing out lessons and their supreme dedication to the search for truth even at the expense of their own beliefs, what can we as Western educators and scientists learn from teaching and dialoguing with Tibetan monks?

Perhaps the most poignant answer comes out of the story of the guy who's worked with these monks the longest. Just before Bryce started coordinating the Science for Monks program, he was wrapping up an M.S. in environmental engineering at the University of California, Santa Barbara. As he got closer to the finish line he started to become disenchanted with science. He felt that in spite of all of science's triumphs, it didn't really teach us anything about how to be a good person and live a good life. He said that in many ways, for all its successes, science had nothing to say about the stuff that *really* matters.

And so one day he was sitting in the office of his Religious Studies professor, who had just received a letter from the office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama looking for someone to start up this program where Western teachers teach science to monastics. The professor, who couldn't accept the invitation because he was knee-deep in his quest for tenure, looked up and said:

“Hey Bryce, wanna teach Tibetan monks in India?”

And so started his 15-year journey coordinating the Science for Monks program. While he never had any intention of donning maroon robes, he thinks that building relationships with this community and immersing himself in its culture has given him something that science never could—a different take on how to live. And when you watch the playful way he interacts with the monks, it’s obvious. He is genuinely happy in their presence, and it is equally obvious that they’ve grown to deeply love and respect him.

I was only in their presence for two weeks, and I felt a bit of this transcendence. There’s something about being immersed in a community of monastics who have dedicated their lives to meditation and mindfulness that flips a switch. Their commitment to conscious and peaceful living is inspiring even to a hardline skeptic. It was rejuvenating, and to be honest, something I felt I really needed, professionally speaking. The job of education is no doubt one of the most demanding jobs there is. It is no secret that stress-related illnesses and even alcohol abuse correlate with the stresses of teaching. And while there’s some debate over the exact numbers, some studies show that as many as 50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years.

At the same time, another swath of modern psychological research has confirmed the healing capacity of practicing mindfulness, both in meditation and in daily life. Working with these monks, it is clear that this deliberate, aware, and non-judgemental stance towards life is healing in and of itself. In my two weeks in India, I worked hard to find a monk or nun who came off as impatient, frustrated, irritated, or bored while I was at Sera Jey monastery—I couldn’t.

Of course, they are still just men and women. They are not gods. Conflicts do arise in the community. Egos can flare. But on the whole, the nature of these men and women is ebullient, light, playful, patient, and perpetually curious. The experience of working with these monks would invite even the staunchest naysayer to consider the benefits of a more mindful lifestyle. No doubt working with these monks and nuns is a window into another way of being. It offers some confirmation that there are lifestyles and attitudes towards living that can nourish

health and peace of mind.

Or as Tammy put it whilst we waxed about the peaceful vibe emanating from these monks: “I want some of *that*.”

IX

In the backdrop of all these benefits there looms the thing that I find to be the most important thing we stand to gain from working with these monks and nuns. It is the insight that working with this community is a poignant reminder that *our role as educators and scientists is so much bigger than merely teaching content and discovery.*

What do I mean by this?

Ultimately, it reminds us that when we educate our next generation our purpose is bigger than simply passing on the legacy of Newton's Laws and Punnett squares. We are training those who are next in line to take care of our planet and species.

Upon ordination, every Tibetan monk makes a pledge called the Bodhisattva Vow. It is basically the monk/nun version of the Hippocratic Oath. Except that the Bodhisattva vow carries with it a solemn obligation that infuses the entire life and identity of the monk. Actually, it would be more true to say that it is intended to infuse countless lifetimes.

The Bodhisattva vow is a pledge to devote one's entire existence to alleviating the physical and psychological suffering of all sentient beings. As such, every action taken by a monk carries with it the spirit of this vow. No deed is done without (ideally) first considering its immediate impacts on all of humanity and sentient life.

When the Dalai Lama established the Science for Monks program in 2001, one of his primary reasons was his belief that Western science could stand to learn something from the Buddhist focus on altruism. In a world filled with an underlying anxiety about technological woes like climate change, genetic modification of life and food, cloning, artificial intelligence, heightened isolation through entertainment, and what seems to be a growing pathological dependence on technology, the Dalai Lama saw an important opportunity to bring a spirit of ethics and altruism to the pursuit of science.

I say all this because it defines the purpose and spirit with which the monastics in the Science for Monks program approach learning. These monks are here to learn science not simply to understand reality, but also *to serve humanity*. And there is no way to work closely with and educate these monks without that spirit and intention seeping into your own practice. Ultimately, it reminds us that when we educate our next generation our purpose is bigger than simply passing on the legacy of Newton's Laws and Punnett squares. We are training those who are next in line to take care of our planet and species.

I'm of course not suggesting that there is no merit to science for its own sake and that we all need to throw on a robe and start saving the world. But I do believe that because the scientific method has worked so well, and because for so long it has been the pursuit of Truth most grounded in reason (at least in the West), an arrogance has grown around it. It seems to me that science in its pursuit of discovery and progress above all else has lost its ethical compass.

Maybe it is more true to say that it is *us* as a society in our methods of using and exploiting the truths uncovered through science that seems to have gotten lost. Maybe there's a far more collective responsibility for the vessel with which we carry the fruits of science. But either way in a world where every major threat to the survival of our species is science or technology-based, it seems more important than ever to teach our youth in a way that makes them feel marrow-deep the responsibility that we have both as scientists and as citizens of our planet. And I know of no better reminder than living in dialogue with a community of men and women who have committed their lives to this very purpose.

X

The work of the heart is never done.

—Muhammad Ali

It is the last morning of my stay at the Sera Jey Monastery.

I'm eating one final breakfast in the guest house with Tammy, Zeke, Bryce, and our class of monks. It feels bittersweet, like I'm about to walk away from something I'll always want to relive again for the first time. And to add to the already emotion-packed moment, Bryce calls me up to the front of the dining hall and decides to make the goodbye a public one. He hands me a satchel filled with gifts on behalf of the monks, wishes me safe travels, and welcomes me back to teach in the future. I'm typically very uncomfortable with one-person goodbyes, let alone goodbyes in front of a room packed full of monks. So I just tell them, via our translator, Karma, that it was an honor, and they'd all better be better teachers than me by the next time I come back.

Outside there is a taxi waiting, and half the monks hang back to see me off, even though it means being late for their first class of the day. Then I say a second, and then a third, goodbye, before getting into the car.

When I get to my hotel in Bangalore, I call my mother to let her know that I survived India.

"Glad to hear, Bud. How was it?"

"Just like you said."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So what'd you do?"

"Ya know, we spent most of our time venerating heavyweight champions."

"Not funny."

¹You can find information on the program at scienceformonks.org.

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