

Aug 23 (New York -> Tokyo)

I wake up dreaming I'm on a solo trip to research family history. I'm looking out of the train and I see an extraordinary low black cloud. It's already dark and raining and about to get much worse. As I stare gloomily at the black mass, its upper edge grows clearer and I realize it's in fact a range of low hills. I feel no less gloomy; it was a mistake coming to England on my own. My aunt just told me my great-uncle Arthur once sold insurance door to door. *"It was the worst job I ever had,"* he said, *"and like most people in those days, I had to do some very bad ones to survive."*

Now I look out of the plane window and in real life the skies are clear, we're on our way to Tokyo and life is good! In my dream I substituted my uncle for my father and transposed the Tibetan creation myth to the land of my birth. In the beginning the void was filled with a wind, storm clouds brewed and let fall torrential rain, the ocean was formed, the wind churned it like milk, and land emerged like butter.

We pass the Bering Strait over which, when it was bridged by the last Ice Age, people came and settled in the American West. Others from Mongolia went the other way and settled in Tibet. The new civilizations they established lasted for millennia until they were destroyed by more technically advanced societies seeking mineral wealth and certain of their moral superiority. That's what I think now; I wonder if what I see in Tibet will change my ideas?

My aunt was in my dream because I just got a letter from her with quotes about kindness from her Quaker discussion group and I've been pondering Quaker kindness and Buddhist compassion. Compassion is larger but less active, perhaps? I ask Felicity. She says compassion is deeper because it includes understanding, which kindness may not. Compassion as Buddha meant it leads to giving but compassion in the Western sense implies sympathy but not necessarily action. Kindness is a separate thing that may be motivated by sympathy or simply be a good daily practice.

I guess Quakers and Buddhists both believe in a feedback system where doing nurtures being, and being is the origin of doing. This is worth a lot more thought.

One of my aunt's quotes is from Pearl Buck and I'm thinking that most of the people in "The Good Earth" are good, mostly, and I'm wondering why? Maybe if you behave badly you must be more competent to survive? Murderers in Iceland were banished, for example, and very few of them survived. Eyvind stayed alive only because he found a hot spring and ate animals that came there, too. Because you must be both tougher and luckier to survive on your own, it makes sense, if you're going to prey, to prey on other creatures, not ones who, if you prey on them, will make you an outcast.

It's now several hours later. We've been in the air eleven hours. My nostrils are desiccated, blocked, and no longer functioning; ditto my brain.

Aug 24 (Tokyo -> Bangkok)

"Add one, day is night and it's probably tomorrow," that's how I used to figure out the time in Australia. It is in fact tomorrow. We're in Tokyo and it's afternoon but my body, by which I mean my mind, believes it's last night.

Our flight to Bangkok is delayed two hours. A tall young Japanese man walks by in a T-shirt that says, *"My Wiener is a Winner"*. The skies are gray and it looks like England. We go to a café for a bowl of noodles. The steam helps my nostrils but my brain continues to deteriorate. I try to phone the hotel in Bangkok so the taxi will come later but the phone politely explains that, so sorry, my credit card is not one it knows.

The 23rd hour of the journey begins. We're still in Tokyo airport. The three young women who staff the café where the airline mollified us with "light refreshments" begin closing up but they stop and look happy when a supervisor comes and promises them overtime.

As the 24th hour approaches we're taxiing toward takeoff into a "category one typhoon" which the pilot warns us will require seat belts to be worn for longer than usual. There are few passengers and the crew of 13 is very cheerful. The purser apologizes for our delayed takeoff and explains, *"The pilot who was scheduled for this flight had a stroke this morning and his replacement had to get here from Hong Kong"*. A few minutes later the air grows choppy but the crew continues to bustle about preparing food carts. *"Did you remember to switch off your pacemaker?"* one asks another. The turbulence increases. The storm is slowly approaching Tokyo and is forecast to get there tomorrow. *"You're lucky we got out tonight,"* the steward tells me. *"The planes may be grounded tomorrow."* I hope David and Ilana get through.

Heading toward hour 30, the air was OK when I woke a few minutes ago but it has turned choppy again.

Our driver is not at the airport so we get one of the plentiful taxis at a third the cost of the one I booked. I mention to the hotel receptionist that our taxi wasn't there and she is very apologetic. We're shown to our room and start researching breakfast, then the phone rings. It's the receptionist. How long did we wait? The taxi driver is still looking for us. I guess he was outside having a cigarette when we arrived. I agree to pay for the taxi anyway because the receptionist is so apologetic. Then we investigate the mini-bar. It's now 2 am although Felicity's alarm clock says it's 3 pm yesterday and we're wide awake.

Aug 25 (Bangkok)

A big gin and tonic solved the sleeping problem. We wake refreshed and eager for breakfast then set out to see the temples. The doorman suggests a taxi to the canal, then a boat to the Wat Po. Our taxi driver is Tony, a Laotian refugee whose parents brought him here forty years ago. We chat about this and that, then he tells us that if we stop at the export shop on the way to the canal, our taxi ride will be free and he will get a coupon for gasoline because his prime minister is making a special deal today. We don't have to buy anything or stay more than a couple of minutes, so we agree.

"My sister is a tailor," he says next. *"Would you like a nice suit, sir?"* I tell him I'm very happy that I no longer need suits. The rest of the way he cheerfully proposes other investments we might make. In the export store we see some pretty sapphire rings and an amused Frenchman who quickly makes his escape. He sounds French and confirms it when I ask. Being French, he has no interest in where I'm from.

Our boat is a "long-tailed" one. They're long and narrow like a gondola with what looks like a car engine on a swiveling stand at the stern. The crankshaft is greatly elongated and there's a propeller at the end. We ride along the older canals where there are

shanties all along the water with skyscraper office buildings and hotels behind. The city is a harmonious mix of the high-rise architecture you find everywhere along with riverside shacks where life has been lived the same way for centuries. At the footing of one shack a large iguana stares intently into the water.







We disembark, walk about Wat Po and then marvel at the gigantic sleeping Buddha. It's very hot and sunny and the temple buildings sparkle. They're covered with mosaics of shiny tiles. We start walking toward the Grand Palace and a man who works there and notices us looking at a map tells us the palace is open only to Thais today. He marks our map to show what we should see instead – the Black Buddha, the Marble Temple, the Golden Mount and, of course, the Export Center.

A young tuktuk driver notices us and pulls over. *"You should take a tuktuk,"* our man says. *"It should only cost 40 baht, no more."* He shows the driver the itinerary and he agrees to take us to each place, wait for us, and we will pay him only 40 baht at the end.

Our tuktuk driver is studying chemistry at university and next year when he's 21, he will be a monk at a temple for three months as most Thai men do, and when he's 22 he'll go into the army for two years as all Thai men must.

He takes us round the Black Buddha temple where in addition to the black one there are twenty or more other statues of Buddha in a courtyard. They're from various places and times and in a few main poses. Some are exhorting their family not to fight among themselves, others are bidding the ocean to be calm, and some are contemplating. One is calming the rain, which seems more likely behavior considering that Buddha lived hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean.

Felicity wants to know why all Buddhas have tightly curled hair but our driver doesn't know. I wonder why the earlobes are so elongated.

We meet two men visiting the temple who are impressed by my beard and ask how long it has been growing. They say I look like a hermit.

We go to the Marble Temple after a visit to the export center where a man tries hard to sell us sapphires and rubies, telling us the mines are exhausted and we should invest now because there will be no more stones. He says the ones he has now will greatly increase in value but they're cloudy and I reckon they're already down to the dregs.





As we start for the Golden Mount our driver asks if we could help him. If we quickly stop at the Duty Free store he will get a coupon for 10 liters of gasoline. He's such a nice young man, so we agree. The greeter at the store tells us they're known for arts and antiques more than the expensive handbags at the entrance, so we go to the huge hall filled with carpets and masks.

We're not going to buy anything but I notice an appealing carpet next to a low door. I go through the door and see a magnificent Shiraz carpet from Kashmir. *"It's 75 years old and belonged to one of the royal families there, but there's so much trouble in Kashmir for the last fifteen years,"* the greeter says when I comment on its beauty. I ask its price. *"Well, it's very expensive, of course - \$3120."* I acknowledge that it is indeed expensive and start to move on.

An older man suddenly appears. If I really like the carpet he could make me a special deal because there's so much trouble in Kashmir. The price drops to \$2,300. Felicity

comes to find out what I'm doing and responds positively when the man explains, so he says we must see the carpet on a wooden floor as it would be in our own house. We think it may be too bright so the man quickly gets the lights lowered but we still can't decide. Finally I tell him, *"I haven't fallen in love."* We thank him and start to leave. The greeter distracts us for a minute and when we reach the exit, there's the carpet again. We again decide against it and I say, *"We're just too tired to buy anything today"*. *"Ok,"* the man says, *"Your wife wants this carpet and I want you to have it very much so I will make you a very special price that you must accept. You can have the carpet for \$1,600."* I look at Felicity and she says, *"Yes"*. So, it will be shipped and arrive when we get home.



Our tuktuk takes us to the Golden Mount, we pay our driver an extra 50% because he was so helpful, he sets off to his university class and we climb the steps. The Golden Mount is an artificial mound at the top of which is a golden stupa containing relics of the Buddha inherited by his family. The stupa is surrounded by bells that tinkle in the breeze. The first mound collapsed because the earth was too soft and its replacement was built on top of and not completely covering the original. Near its base there's a ruined cemetery that's mostly buried. We pass a small shrine that's partly covered by a fig tree's roots that flow over the stone like a Dali painting. Before the shrine on a litter of dead leaves are four small plastic elephants flanked by equally small plastic horses, all in plastic wrap, and behind them stand two plastic figures. I think one is Tara.

We try to get a tuktuk or taxi back to the hotel but nobody will go that far so we get a tuktuk to the sky-train that stops close to the hotel. From up here we realize the city has much more than riverside shanties and high rises. Many small shops are selling dried fish and other staples, there's a street of small factories making carved wood, sidewalk tailors are at treadle sewing machines, there's all the stuff of any poor city.

I can't tell if this is a city in rapid transition or there's a likely-to-last harmony between rich and poor. It feels good-humored. The atmosphere is cheerful and calm, not frivolous, not aggressive, especially in the temples. People come in, kneel and pray, and move on. Worship is widespread, sincere, reverent and private although made in public. I don't know why, but belief in compassion as the greatest good feels inevitable here.

Back at the hotel we have a leisurely meal; Felicity has her beloved Pad Thai. At the adjoining Mexican restaurant two pretty girls, bubbly in Mexican costume, have the gift of greeting every man as the one man they are uniquely delighted to see at their party. Later, a man bounds out, seizes a straw sombrero from the plastic saguaro by the door, and dances. The girls look charmed but then he dances away and they're unhappy because he's taken the joke too far. When he returns many minutes later their greeting is enthusiastic but less spontaneous.

Aug 26 (Bangkok -> Kathmandu)

We set off for the airport and our taxi driver teaches us how to say *"hello"*, *"thank you"* and *"I'm very, very hot"*. The flight to Kathmandu is uneventful and David and Ilana are in good spirits. They had no trouble with the weather.

At Kathmandu airport, the visa application David got from the Nepali government website is declared by the immigration officials to be "no good" and three of them offer opinions about the proper forms. Ilana has already battled through this friendly confusion so she's able to resolve David's case, too. My immigration official says I look like a philosopher and I tell him I am one. He notes my previous visits to Nepal with approval.

At the Hotel Garuda everyone greets me like a long lost friend. I tell Felicity it's just natural friendliness but she thinks they really do remember. *"Perhaps it's your beard,"* she says. *"No, it's because you're John's friend."* The owner comes over. He does remember me, and we chat. He says business is very bad this year because of all the sensational publicity and the US Travel Advisory, which other countries have copied. He says the reporting is not accurate. For example, he knows the operator of the tour to Tibet on which two Russians were killed.

The Maoists declared a strike so the government organized an army convey for all the vehicles going to Tibet. Up in the mountains the Russians remembered leaving something behind and insisted on going back despite warnings that the Maoists enforce strikes. While the Russians were catching up with the convoy, Maoists threw a small bomb into their jeep and they were killed; there was no rifle attack on the convoy as reported by the press.

Also, the reporting was wrong when the home of a government official was bombed; the Maoists had warned everybody to leave the building. It's true, he says, there have been a few other bombings. For example, a massage parlor on the third floor of a building near here was bombed. The Maoists knew it was not a legitimate massage parlor and told them to close down but they stayed in business so they were bombed, just with a small bomb that blew out the windows after they told everyone to leave.

The owner tells us that for the Nepali people, especially in the west, the Maoists really are dangerous, but not for tourists or people in towns. The movement was instigated in India, he says, and like the Shining Path in Cambodia, got financing from the CIA.

Our discussion ranges on over the history of Sikkim and Tibet. The owner escaped from Tibet through Sikkim to Darjeeling with his father when he was four and he was boarded at a Jesuit school. He was in effect an orphan and it was a long time before the family was reunited. His mother escaped by a different route through east Nepal into India and when he saw her again he didn't recognize her. Her face was blackened by the sun and exposure. She was ugly and he was frightened so he ran and hid from her. He ended up getting a very good education and has sent his own two boys to school in America.

He began going back to Tibet in 1996, especially to Shigatse where he was born, and he now goes every year. It's very painful to see what the Chinese are doing although they are doing some good in infrastructure building. When he retires he wants to go back to Tibet and train Tibetans in tourist services.

The owner fears India and China will agree to open a trade route via Sikkim. That trade now goes through Nepal and losing it would be a bad blow. He thinks the fall of Sikkim's monarchy and its loss of independence were provoked by Hope Cooke's meddling in politics, leading the Chogyal to overreach for independence.

The best way we could help Tibet, he tells us, is to see for ourselves what the Chinese are doing and publicize the environmental damage. He believes that can win support from many people all around the world. He is in favor of democracy but believes it's a luxury for which Nepal is not yet ready. There are much more important needs to be met first; peace and civility. The king told everyone in February that he needs three years to get Nepal ready for democracy, not three days or three months, but three years. America should support him in this work.

After Colin Powell, US Secretary of State, came to Nepal the tone of US Travel Advisories changed. Instead of "don't go to Nepal" they advised just being careful. But when Nepal was the first country to refuse to send troops to Iraq, the tone changed back. The King had slapped President Bush's face so Bush was angry and made Nepal pay for the insult.

The owner's comment about Buddhism was interestingly phrased; "*Buddhists say we are not meant to be here.*" You should do good in your life and when you have accumulated enough merit you are taken from your life and given a different one.

When we part after an hour or more we go out into the almost empty streets and are beset by more begging children than I remember from previous years. Many shops are closed. We go to the Yin Yang for dinner because the Garuda's owner told us its owner is thinking of closing up. He isn't getting enough business to pay his staff. I love being back in Kathmandu but it's a different atmosphere. The people are hurting and that's very sad because Nepalis are cheerful in the face of great adversity.

Aug 27 (Kathmandu)

Over a leisurely breakfast at the Northfield Café we discuss religion. Ilana says she can't relate to Buddhism's notion of karma. She says she can't get past the Holocaust; six million Jews did not deserve to die! There is no concept of sin in Judaism; the good and the bad are all part of God, who is everything. God created our world by withdrawing from a space where we could be, but there was a flaw in the container for that space. It broke and the points of light were scattered. We should work to repair the container by doing good.

I explain a Tibetan theory that their God was reborn as Chairman Mao to force them out of their familiar world where they could no longer progress spiritually. They were to disperse throughout the world to continue growing and make the wisdom available to everyone. The million or more Tibetans who died out of a total population of six millions were simply casualties in a development their God decided was necessary.

Ilana sees this as very similar to the Jewish idea but to me it's different because there's no sense of persecution in the Tibetan theory. Suffering is the central truth in Buddhism; it's neither deserved nor undeserved, simply the nature of life. It's each individual's responsibility to free themselves from suffering; one's life is not a possession but a vehicle for a stage in one's journey.

I later learned about Manichaeism, born in Persia in the 3rd century. Borrowing from Zoroastrianism and Christianity and persecuted by Christians from the end of the 5th century, it is based on opposing forces of light and darkness.

We take a taxi to Bodhnath, the world's largest stupa. Now, in the monsoon season, the white dome is delicate green and the wall below has vertical stripes of green algae. There are gray clouds and occasional rain but the light is very strong. Strings of prayer flags flutter and I feel a great calm. There are few tourists so most people here are pilgrims and it's peaceful.

Felicity says her first reaction to Thamel was negative. The beggars troubled her, especially the children, the narrow streets felt claustrophobic, and the humidity was oppressive, but today she feels good. She feels the peace at Bodhnath and buys a prayer wheel. I listen to a recording of chanting lamas and Felicity likes it, too. She meets an Englishman in a shop who just returned from Tibet and who says the Chinese are very strict now because of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Tibetan Autonomous Region. They go through your bags for pictures of the Dalai Lama. An Italian on his tour was jailed for three days because his guidebook contained such a picture. The Englishman was questioned by a monk about guidebooks he was carrying and only realized at the end of the conversation that he was Chinese and policing tourist behavior.

We walk slowly round the stupa, stopping to look in shops, then climb onto the stupa and circumnavigate. Many of the people have a red dot between their eyebrows, which I used to think was a Hindu caste mark. In fact, it has nothing to do with caste. Hindu temple priests apply the red powder, kumkum, to all worshipers, and because religion is such a mixture in Nepal, the only thing you know about someone with a red dot is that they recently worshiped at a temple. They could be Buddhist, shamanist or Hindu.



We return to the hotel, rest for a while, then wait in the lobby for John. *"He should be here in 5 or 6 minutes"* the man at the desk tells Felicity. A few minutes pass and then I hear an exuberant *"Namaste!"* and a cheery reply. Sir John has arrived.

Aug 28 (Kathmandu)

I wake up pondering one of the Garuda owner's questions when we were discussing Tibet. *"Are you a teacher?"* he asked. *"No, I'm retired."* *"That's not good; the Chinese don't trust people who don't work. What did you do before?"* *"I was in the computer business."* *"Oh dear, that's not good either. Tell them you're a factory worker. That's what they like best."*

I'm wondering what I really am. A writer? It's what I'm working at, but the Chinese wouldn't like that. Trekker? That's only a small part of what I do. Traveler? Again, only one thing I do, and it sounds restless and uncommitted. Explorer? That's better. Travelers at best find themselves but explorers may get broader understanding.

Suddenly I feel a small stone on my tongue. It's a filling I recently had replaced. Kathmandu is a good place not to have dental treatment so I look around our room to distract myself. Because Tibetans aren't allowed pictures of the Dalai Lama they have pictures of the Potala Palace. Tibetan refugees often have a picture of the Dalai Lama at their private altar and the Potala Palace somewhere else. Our room has one with

cranes winging toward a stupa. With necks outstretched they look like the decorations at the roof corners of temples in Bangkok. What do cranes symbolize?

We meet Dhiren for breakfast and the discussion turns to penguins and their intelligent behaviors. We're always surprised when we notice intelligent behavior by animals. That's like assuming people in other places are stupid and discovering they're quite smart when we get to know them. If we observe animals with a clear eye we notice they aren't stupid either.

After lunch we walk to the Fair Trade store that Ilana has read about. David and I chat on the way back. He's working three days a week for his friend, Ted, and mostly enjoying it but he's concerned that maybe he's just doing what's comfortable. He wanted to ask if I had any suggestions about retirement. I tell him my ponderings about being an explorer and he points out that there's doing and being. Writing is what I want to do and an explorer is what I want to be.

Over dinner the conversation turns to altitude sickness. Ilana is concerned because her Diomox prescription seems to require her to take four times as much as Felicity's. *"What you really need to do," John says, "is relax. My perception is it's a matter of body tolerance. People who push themselves and live on the edge don't have any tolerance so they succumb. You can always tell who's going to get it."* Ilana protests that she's very laid back and everyone laughs. *"People who lean forward to confront the gale of life with teeth bared must expect some cosmic retribution,"* says David. Ilana turns to him, aghast. *"Oh wait!"* he says. *"I'm on your side!"* I'm impressed by Ilana's thoroughness of preparation and her courage.

The discussion turns to how you can recognize safe mushrooms. Felicity says how much better field mushrooms taste than store-bought Portobellos that are treated to stay fresh for weeks. Field mushrooms start to liquefy within a couple of hours. Then the conversation returns to Buddhism. *"What do you think you were in your previous life and what will you be next?"* Ilana asks. Nobody has an answer. It occurs to me that if I'm reborn as a mushroom it'll be very hard to build much good karma.

Aug 29 (Kathmandu)

I'm getting a cold.

We have the usual leisurely breakfast. Ilana wants to help the Fair Trade people with marketing advice and asks John how to start. *"This is Nepal,"* he says, *"so you need a patron."* He suggests going to the US Embassy for contacts. We meet David and Ilana later in the Internet access place in the Garuda lobby. The US Embassy website has much information but not its address. David is trying other searches but it doesn't look promising. Perhaps keeping their location secret is a security precaution?

We spend quite a bit of time packing for Tibet and doing nothing else worth noting today.