Circumambulations, Prayers, and Meditations

A Journey to Kawagebo

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From a Buddhist perspective, sacred environments... are not places to escape the world, but to enter it more deeply. The qualities inherent in such places reveal the interconnectedness of all life and deepen awareness of hidden regions of the mind and spirit.

- His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (Baker 1)

For the past six years I have found solace in the mountains. In remote alpine cirques, hemmed in by jagged rock spires, I have felt most at home. In that raw terrain one gets a look at the ‘real’ world. There is no façade of buildings and roads, no curtain of brick and cement, only ‘what truly is.’ So in these places that lack the clutter of human existence, my mind has been equally uncluttered. The beauty of my surroundings has infused me with calm and awe. I often think more clearly, aware of this place, the here and now, without dwelling on past problems, future plans, or present responsibilities. Time alone with my mind is always refreshing, and the ending of one trip has me planning for the next. The mountains are my church, and I am a pious parishioner.

In the high peaks of the Rocky Mountains, Alaska, and now southwest China, I have experienced something of faith, of spirituality. I have never tried to define it as such, but I now believe it to have been so. Although my outdoor adventures are often recreational in nature, there has always been something more that I gained from my time in the wild. I am not just seeking fun, I am seeking refuge. Refuge from clutter, from haste, from the sensory overload of my every day existence. The mountains offered refuge that I could not find elsewhere.

I had been without a well defined religious belief, community, or practice for years. I was raised a Christian by parents that believed, but that belief never awakened within me. Once on my own, I stumbled through several belief systems, trying to establish my thoughts and values
in an organized manner. Searching while unaware that the search was taking place, I glossed over several topics in my university studies that began to affect my ways of thinking and how I formed my own inner beliefs. While studying mountain geography, my class learned briefly about sacred geography. Sacred mountains exist throughout the world and have significant roles in the lives of those that hold them as sacred. With the expanding of population and development throughout the world, there is also a rising conflict between religious interests and economic ones in regards to hallowed terrain. Conflict has also been stirred as mountaineering has increased in popularity, and the ongoing search for unclimbed summits brings people deeper and deeper into sacred terrain. Although I had held mountainous environments as very special before, this class introduced me to the idea of sacred geography on a much larger scale.

Soon after I was introduced to the teachings of the Buddha. It began with an interest in meditation that drew me to buy several books on the topic. After some practice I found small successes in meditation and found it to be quite valuable. A year later my studies led me to a class on East Asian religions at my university, and I thought Buddhist philosophy fascinating. Although some of the beliefs seemed to fit in line with mine at the time, I did not dedicate myself completely to learning more about the path and the practice.

In this time my experiences and readings had helped me to form my own types of spirituality, something unique and personal. Yet there were some things that my beliefs could not fulfill for me. Certain ethical questions and habits of thought and action plagued me. I wanted more yet still did not know it. While studying sacred mountains, I had learned that some of the most sacred in the world existed in Asia, in the Himalayas. It was not surprising that the world’s tallest mountains were also the most holy. I learned that the Buddhism most practiced in the area, Tibetan Buddhism, was one of the faiths that had a close connection to its lands and communicated with them through practice. Yet I still made no connection between my interest in
Buddhism and the concept of sacred geography. They remained separate interests.

In the whirlwind of new experiences that has been my past three months in China, I have been introduced to many new ideas and ways of living. In order to adapt to this new influx, I have been very open to changing the way I live and think. I have been trying hard to assimilate into the Chinese and Tibetan cultures, their languages, eating habits, living situations, and belief systems. In this new openness I have found the willingness to completely dedicate myself to a new and foreign practice. In the adoption of many new activities, such as praying and prostrating\(^1\), circumambulating and making offerings, I feel that I am breaking down old habits and ways of thinking that are allowing me to see myself and my experience with more clarity. Before coming to China I had been unwilling to give myself up so completely, to open myself without inhibitions to something totally new. Only here have I really tried to believe.

It is in this new environment that I have been introduced in whole to the beliefs and practices of Tibetan Buddhism, also known as the Vajrayāna or Secret Mantrayāna branch of the Great Vehicle, begun to develop faith in the Three Jewels\(^2\), and decided to undergo a pilgrimage to the sacred mountain Kawagebo. My old interests in Buddhism and sacred geography, my experiences of spirituality in the mountains, have now found a better defined place within me. Moving from an academic outlook to include more spiritual experiences, I have found a means to fuse many different fields of my study. The physical sciences, personal experience in the mountains, and Buddhist philosophy and practice have merged into one in the form of pilgrimage. Kawagebo, the largest mountain in Yunnan Province and a sacred mountain in Tibetan Buddhism, was a natural choice for my new experience.

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\(^1\) Prostration is a “gesture of reverence,” where the practitioner touches his hands to his head, mouth, and chest (an offering of the mind, speech, and body) before kneeling down and touching the forehead, hands, and knees to the ground (P. Rinpoche 419). Prostrations are often done before a sacred object or while visualizing a particular deity.

\(^2\) The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The Buddha is one who has attained liberation; also the historical Buddha. The Dharma is the teaching of the Buddha, the path to liberation. The Sangha are practitioners of his teaching.
In the first section of this paper I will give a brief introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, sacred geography, and pilgrimage. First, I will discuss some of the basic precepts of Tibetan Buddhism, and how it differs from other branches of Buddhism in belief and practice. I then will address the role of sacred geography in this belief system and in the lives of the Tibetan people. Finally I will talk about the connection between the people and their sacred places expressed in the form of pilgrimage. In the second section of this paper I will recount my personal experience of my spiritual journey to Kawagebo. From the spiritual preparation to the circumambulation, I will relay my observations and experiences on the path.
Part 1: Tibetan Buddhism and the Role of Sacred Geography

Noble one, you should think of yourself as someone who is sick,
Of the Dharma as the remedy,
Of your spiritual friend as a skilful doctor
And of diligent practice as the way to recovery.

- Sūtra Arranged Like a Tree (P. Rinpoche 16)

Tibetan Buddhism is one of the three major schools of the Buddha’s teaching. All
Buddhism originates in the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni³, but over time different
techniques and practices were used to accommodate many different kinds of teachers and
students. The result at present is three major branches of the teaching: the Theravāda school, most
prevalent in Southeast Asia and stressing ethics and moral discipline; the Mahayāna school, also
known as the Great Vehicle, preserved in China, Japan, and Korea and focusing on compassion
for others; and the Vajrayāna school, or Secret Mantrayāna, practiced in Tibet and utilizing a wide
array of techniques to achieve liberation in a short time-span, even in this lifetime (P. Rinpoche
xl-xli). All three branches have the same core beliefs and teachings, but stress different aspects of
the teachings and pursue liberation for different reasons and with differing practices.

The Vajrayāna school, more widely known as Tibetan Buddhism, has many initial
practices in common with the Mahayāna school, especially the development of compassion for
all beings. It addresses existence through the teachings of the Four Noble Truths universal to all
schools of Buddhism: first, that existence, samsāra⁴, is suffering; second, that this suffering is
carried by conditioned perceptions of existence that cause us to commit negative actions out of

³ Buddha Śākyamuni is the Buddha of our time, who lived around the 5th century BCE, and was named Siddharta Gautama.
⁴ Samsāra is “the cycle of existence in which in is endlessly propelled by negative emotions and the karmic force of one’s actions
from one state of rebirth to another” (P. Rinpoche 430).
ignorance, and that these actions have a negative karmic\textsuperscript{5} effect in this life and future lives; third, that there is a means to liberate ourselves from samsāra and escape the cycle of birth, death and rebirth that proliferates our suffering; fourth, to attain liberation, nirvana\textsuperscript{6}, the basic path is to accumulate positive actions and to practice meditation (P. Rinpoche xlii-xliii). Positive actions help us to accumulate merit, which counteracts negative actions of past lives, and to gain the blessings of the Three Jewels. Through meditation, we can break through our ignorance and misguided perceptions and discover an inherent awareness that resides in us all, the ability to see the world as it truly is (P. Rinpoche xliii). One can attain liberation with two types of motivation: for the benefit of oneself, and for the benefit of all beings. The former, the path of the śrāvaka, brings one to very advanced states of awareness, that of an arhat, but not to complete Buddhahood. The latter, the path of the bodhisattva, brings one to true enlightenment and Buddhahood. Through intense compassion for the suffering of all beings, some bodhisattvas choose not to attain Buddhahood in order to stay in the cycle of samsāra and help other beings to achieve enlightenment (P. Rinpoche xliii).

Tibetan Buddhism greatly stresses the importance of practicing with a realized teacher, a spiritual friend. Without the help of a spiritual friend, an individual can still escape samsāric existence as a pratekyabuddha, but with only a “half-realization” of the true nature of existence (P. Rinpoche 428). This path is also seen as infinitely more difficult without the guidance of a spiritual friend to keep you on the path. Patrul Rinpoche says:

Indeed, all beings, ourselves included, show particular talent in discovering wrong paths to take - while when it comes to following the path leading to liberation and omniscience we are as confused as a blind person wandering alone in the middle of a deserted plain. (137)

\textsuperscript{5} Karma is “often used loosely to mean the result produced by past actions,” but is more accurately described as “‘the effects of actions,’ actions and their effects,’ and ‘the principal of cause and effect.’” It translates literally as “action” (P. Rinpoche 420).
It is only through the teacher’s infinite compassion and knowledge of the path that we can accomplish true liberation, and, with diligence in practice, in this lifetime.

The teacher with infinite qualities complete
Is the wisdom and compassion of all Buddhas
Appearing in human form for beings’ sake.
He is the unequalled source of all accomplishments. (P. Rinpoche 142)

By completely opening ourselves to a spiritual friend, we begin to shed some of our misconceptions about ourselves and our existence. The teacher can fashion the teachings to our level of awareness and intelligence, our learning style and life style. He is an invaluable asset on the path to liberation.

An aspect unique to the Secret Mantrayāna vehicle of Buddhism is its use of the tantras. In advanced stages along the path to realization, the practitioner utilizes the techniques of the tantras to achieve enlightenment more quickly than other schools. Tantric teachings originated in the practice of Indian Hinduism, and are defined as: “text[s] based on the original purity of the nature of mind, whose fruit is the realization of that nature” (P. Rinpoche 435). In Sanskrit, tantra literally means “the continuum or thread of innate wisdom permeating all experience” (Baker 449). Tantric techniques work with the energies that pervade all existence. The Kriyayoga Tantra of Vajramala says:

This energy is the sustainer of the primordial intelligence which perceives the phenomenal world. This energy gives impetus both to the enlightened and confused states of mind. It is indestructible in the sense of being constantly ongoing. It is the driving force of emotion and thought in the confused state, and of compassion and wisdom in the enlightened state.” (Trungpa 218)

It is potentially dangerous to attempt to harness these energies too early in practice, as they can

6 “The state beyond suffering” (P. Rinpoche 426). Attaining nirvana is often likened to the extinguishing of a flame.
awaken incredibly powerful negative emotions that can cause the practitioner to act as a “drunken elephant” running rampant (Trungpa 219). But for the advanced practitioner, tantra can allow one to see existence with incredible clarity and precision, to bring nirvana into samsāra (Trungpa 220).

In the Buddhist sense, imagination does not so much transform [your environment] as reveal what is already present, the mind’s inherent creativity realizing its essential unity with all situations. Paradise is thus not so much a place as liberation into the fullness and bounty of everyday experience. (Baker 126)

Sacred geography is deeply embedded in Tibetan tradition, originating in the native Bön folk religion that dominated before the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet in the 8th century CE (Denison 3). The beliefs of the Bön infuse the landscape with innumerable natural spirits, gods, and other deities that are very active within their environment. Oftentimes they must be appeased or subdued so they do not unleash their wrath (Denison 4). This is done through ritual practice, making offerings, and following particular rules of conduct. Acts to be avoided include such as removing objects from hallowed areas, bathing in sacred lakes that are the dwelling places of spirits, and climbing holy mountains.

With the introduction and proliferation of Buddhism throughout Tibet, a fusing of belief systems developed. Sacred sites took on Buddhist attributes and many previous Bön deities became powerful beings in the network of Buddhist deities. There is still widespread belief in the spirits of the land and many Buddhist practices have developed to appease these spirits. Ian Baker says:

The intangible guardian spirits of earth and air … are called *suma* in Tibetan,
Incense and juniper are often burned as offerings to the Three Jewels in temples throughout Tibet, and many important spiritual locations will have a small clay or stone oven for making offerings of sweet-smelling smoke. At Feilai Si a row of eight stūpas overlook Kawagebo and the surrounding high peaks, and an adjacent offering oven is often seen spitting massive clouds of smoke into the sky. A stūpa (chorten in Tibetan), which literally means “support of offering,” is a “symbolic representation of the Buddha’s mind” and often “contains the relics of enlightened beings” (P. Rinpoche 434). They are the most commonly seen Buddhist structure in the Tibetan landscape, and “are believed to radiate healing energy throughout all existence” (Baker 449).

Tibet’s most sacred temple and revered pilgrimage site, the Jokhang in Lhasa, “stake[s] down the heart of a malevolent demoness, the Srinmo, whose limbs and energies were said to spread throughout the Tibetan landscape” (Baker 89). The rest of her body parts, shoulders, hips, elbows, knees, hands and feet, were pinned down by the construction of twelve additional Buddhist temples that to this day subdue her and allow Buddhism to flourish in Tibet (Baker 89, 457).

Not all of Tibet’s sacred geography has to do with hostile deities. There are very many
places, mountains, lakes, waterfalls, that are infused with spiritual energy and can yield positive results for those that travel there. These places are known individually as né, and are variously defined as “sacred sites, power places, or places of pilgrimage. Lamas distinguished between two types of nés, self-manifested natural power places as well as ones that result from the blessing power of highly realized masters” (Baker 448). Self-manifested natural power places are often large natural features of the landscape that are the residences of Buddhist gods and spirits, such as mountains and lakes. There are also many sacred sites that correspond to the chakras of major Buddhist deities. A chakra is a “wheel or junction of subtle energy channels within the body,” (Baker 444) and is associated with tantric practice. The second type of né is associated with the blessings of highly realized masters. These often take the form of caves where great yogis and lamas have meditated, accomplished great realizations, or attained enlightenment. Many locations throughout Tibet are nés attributed to the great Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche, who is revered by Tibetans as the Second Buddha. In the eighth century CE he “subjugated the evil forces hostile to the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet, spread the Buddhist teaching of Vajrayāna in that country and hid innumerable spiritual treasures for the sake of future generations” (P. Rinpoche 426-27). These locations are seeping with the spiritual energy of their associated deities and masters. Practitioners that travel to these special places can advance along the path much faster, accumulating massive amounts of merit and achieving greater realization in shorter periods of time.

The way the people of Tibet relate to their sacred places is through pilgrimage. In order to pay respects to and benefit from these sacred places, one must journey to them, but the nature of Tibet’s incredibly rugged landscape makes travel very difficult. The highest mountain range in

7 Yogis/yoginis are “tantric practitioner[s]; usually connoting someone who has already attained some level of realization of the natural state of mind” (Baker 450).
the world, the Himalayas, forms the country’s southern boundary. The massive geologic collision that created this range of giants also birthed numerous sub-ranges extending north and eastward, a collection of high, jagged peaks and viciously steep valleys. The Tibetan Plateau, which fills the northern and eastern parts of the country and extends into China, is a barren landscape residing in the rain shadow of the Himalaya. Tibet’s high and inhospitable terrain has created remote human establishments across its area, and people often have to travel long distances across roadless land to reach other towns, cities, or sacred sites. Attempts to develop roads and other means of transportation are often violently reclaimed by landslides and other natural mass-wasting events.

Pilgrims travel from all over Tibet to these sacred sites for a variety of reasons. The pilgrim’s experience is very relative to his motivations, expectations, and level of practice. Some pilgrims may chant mantras as they walk, some may stop to meditate in holy locations for long periods of time, and others may choose to show their devotion by prostrating every step of the journey. Yet all pilgrims view their journey with reverence and respect for the region they are in.

As His Holiness the Dalai Lama says:

In the Buddhist tradition, the goal of pilgrimage is not so much to reach a particular destination as to awaken within oneself the qualities and energies of the sacred site, which ultimately lie within our own minds. (Baker 1-2)

By immersing ourselves “in places where the physical and spiritual worlds are said to overlap,” we can break down conventional ways of viewing existence, habitual thought processes, and develop clarity in perception (Baker 74). The most common practice is for pilgrims to circumambulate the sacred object, which is an “act of veneration consisting of walking clockwise, concentratedly and with awareness” around it (P. Rinpoche 408). Ian Baker says:

Guided by an intuition that the sacred cannot be approached in a straight line,
still less by linear thought, pilgrims emulate the path of the sun and circumambulate... (272)

Sacred mountains are never summited, as it is seen as a sign of extreme disrespect that weakens the deity that resides there, and is the source of much conflict between the modern mountaineering community and the religious groups that hold these peaks as holy.

Buddhism is deeply embedded in the lives of all Tibetans. The unique combination of Bön folk religious influence, the Tantric practices of the Secret Mantrayāna, and the incredible geography of the region have formed an intricate construct of beliefs tying the Tibetan people to their land. To experience the energy and blessings of their land’s sacred sites, people make arduous pilgrimages over great distances. As I have often felt most comfortable and most true to myself in remote areas of great beauty, I saw the experience of pilgrimage as a means to fuse past feelings of spirituality with a new sense of the path, and to get a better understanding of the Tibetan Buddhist path and the people who follow it. For these reasons, I made the journey to Kawagebo.

the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, “om mani padme hum” (S. Rinpoche 396).
Part 2: A Pilgrimage to the Sacred Mountain

Ah! This beautiful mountain within a precious ocean,
Whose white-shining peak is ornamented by a palace of light and
Whose slopes are blue-green like a sapphire –
What lovely sight is this?
- Longchenpa (43)

According to a reincarnate lama met at the Tseng Pa temple outside of Long Pu village, Tibet has 121 major holy mountains and 1022 minor holy mountains. Among the four most important are Chomolungma (Mount Everest), Mount Kailas, and Kawagebo. Chomolungma, meaning “Mother Goddess of the World,” is located in the heart of the Himalayas, on the border of Tibet and Nepal. It is the highest mountain on Earth and is revered as the “Mother Goddess” by Tibetans and Nepalese Sherpas, as well as being coveted by many others as a mountaineering ascent (Baker 200, 455). Mount Kailas, a prominent snow-clad dome rising above the arid plains of western Tibet, is the source of four major rivers and is held by Buddhists and Hindus alike as “the meeting place of heaven and Earth” (Baker 192). Many consider Kailas to be the most sacred mountain on Earth and it is a major pilgrimage site for multiple faiths.

Kawagebo, monarch of the Mēilī Xuěshān range of mountains that forms the border between Yunnan Province and Tibet, is the protector deity of this region. Its summit pyramid rises to 6740 meters above sea level, the highest in Yunnan, and is stunning to behold from all directions. The high peaks surrounding create the divide between the Salween/Nū Jiāng and Mekong/Lāncāng Jiāng watersheds, two major river systems that flow through Yunnan and out of China. Many attempts have been made to climb the mountain without success, the most recent of which in 1991 ended in disaster.
Stories abound describing how Kawagebo came to be the protector of the region. One story describes Kawagebo as a terrible monster who had nine heads and eighteen bodies and terrorized the land. A mythical hero of Tibet challenged the beast and defeated him, cutting off all Kawagebo’s heads and bodies, leaving him with but one of each. Humiliated and wishing to renounce his past actions, Kawagebo was taken as a disciple of the Buddha Śākyamuni and studied vigorously for many years. The Buddha rewarded Kawagebo’s diligence with an army, sending him into Tibet to find an area in need of protection. He settled in his present location, surrounded by his soldiers and family that now make up the Mēilī Xuēshān range (Denison 8).

A second story describes Kawagebo as a powerful tsen, spirit of the atmosphere, that resided in the region of the present day mountain. He was summoned to India by the Buddha Śākyamuni and asked to become a protector of the Dharma, a guardian deity of the Buddha. After multiple refusals, the Buddha offered Kawagebo a massive army of tsen to help him protect the Dharma as well as his home region. Kawagebo finally agreed and returned to Tibet to settle in his present location with his army at his side. Many of the peaks surrounding Kawagebo have names and stories of their own, different positions within Kawagebo’s army and family, that describe their relative importance and why they possess certain physical features (Denison 9).

Kawagebo has two established pilgrimage routes, an outer and inner kora. In the 13th century CE, Karma Pakshi, the Second Karmapa, opened the pilgrimage routes and sacred sites surrounding Kawagebo (Denson 12). Ian Baker states:

The Tibetan word for pilgrimage, né-kor, means to circle around a sacred site and, throughout the Buddhist world... pilgrims seek religious merit by performing koras around places or objects that they consider holy. (272)

Tradition dictates that a pilgrim first complete the outer kora of a sacred place before moving on to an inner one (Baker 273). The outer path is often much longer than the inner, and helps the
pilgrim prepare spiritually for the treasures hidden closer to the center. The reincarnate lama at Tseng Pa confirmed these notions. Ian Baker describes “hidden lands” known as beyul, where the physical and spiritual realms overlap (7). These “paradisiacal realms… have outer, inner, secret and ultimately secret dimensions corresponding to levels of initiation in the Buddhist tantras” and advancing levels of spiritual attainment (443). One can imagine beginning along the outer and inner koras of Kawagebo, progressing further into secret and ultimately secret levels that penetrate deeper into the energies of the mountain. Needless to say, my experience was very much on the outer levels.

The outer kora circles around Kawagebo in a 7-14 day loop, beginning in the Mekong River drainage south of Deqin, Yunnan Province, and crossing west over a high pass into Tibet. The pilgrim then follows the Salween River north over several smaller passes before crossing back east over another high pass and into Yunnan. Due to recent snows, hazardous conditions, and an experienced friend’s recommendation I chose to avoid the final pass, Sho-La, and travel further north to finish the journey on a wider berth.

The inner kora visits several sacred sites on the eastern slope of Kawagebo, including the Sacred Waterfall, Shenpu, located in the Yûbêng valley and the Mingyong glacier. These sites have become very popular tourist destinations because of their relatively easy access and the stunning beauty of the surrounding areas, but this in no way has compromised their importance as places of pilgrimage. The inner kora can be completed in 4-5 days.

In contemplating my pilgrimage, the outer kora seemed the natural choice. It is longer and more remote, which immediately makes it more enticing. The time available for study was sufficient to attempt the kora, complete my research, and compose the paper. The reading I had done prior convinced me that the outer circuit was the first step in becoming intimate with the spiritual energies of the mountain. With these reasons in mind, I began my preparations.
As we collectively departed Kunming for our tour of northwest Yunnan, my pilgrimage began. We would be traveling for two weeks time, visiting many places and experiencing a variety of new things. The caravan would slowly be moving closer and closer to the starting point for the kora, and as such I included this time in my mental preparation for what was to come.

This consisted predominantly of reading a variety of texts that had been recommended to me by Sam Mitchell, my advisor for this project as well as guide for my initial steps in the practice of Buddhism. The foremost two books, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche, and *The Heart of the World* by Ian Baker, are the two major sources of information for my practice and my knowledge of sacred geography in Tibetan Buddhism.

Following the preliminary practices described by Rinpoche, I dedicated much of my time to contemplating death and the impermanence of all things. These practices sound incredibly morbid, and at first they are. To think of your own death and the deaths of those you care about is initially quite depressing. But as you progress in this thought, you come to realize that death is actually the only certainty in this life. Some would say “the only certainties in life are death and taxes.” And although this saying is quite common, it is amazing how many people will spend inordinate amounts of time paying their taxes and absolutely no time preparing for death. To live we must die, yet our whole lives we busy ourselves with what we think is important, either running from death or thinking it will work itself out when it comes (S. Rinpoche 8).

Every night we prepare to go to bed. We take off our shoes, change our clothes, brush our teeth, wash our face, do a number of things to get ready for bed. It would seem ludicrous to hop into bed fully dressed in our clothes from the day. Now imagine if we spent just that small amount of time every day preparing to die, how much more ready we would be when the time
comes! If it seems so silly to get into bed without preparing for it, how can people think that not
getting ready to die is an acceptable approach?

The reasons we avoid thinking about death begin to shed light on some of the Buddhist
teachings. We do not like to think about death because we like to think of ourselves and our
situations as being permanent, controllable. To think that we can maintain our current situation
makes us feel comfortable. We surround ourselves with material objects, which don’t seem to
change, to give ourselves a greater sense of security. Yet the all-pervading fact is: nothing is
permanent. Everything changes, everything dies. To grasp for this permanence, to believe we will
last, is to set ourselves up for a painful fall. It is the basis for all suffering. Gyalsé Rinpoche says:

Planning for the future is like going fishing in a dry gulch;
Nothing ever works out as you wanted, so give up all your schemes and
ambitions.

If you have got to think about something –
Make it the uncertainty of the hour of your death… (S. Rinpoche 21)

By planning for the future we are denying the impermanence of all things. We may die in our
sleep this very night. There is no certainty that any of us will wake up tomorrow. Yet how much
time do we spend planning for, dwelling on, and stressing about the future? If we were to die
right now while planning several months ahead, how could we be ready for death?

I committed Gyalsé Rinpoche’s words to memory and any time I caught myself thinking
about the future, I would recite them and return to contemplations of death and impermanence.
This is one way in which I approached the deconstruction of my habitual ways of thinking, and
these lines in particular turned out to be incredibly useful in the days to come.

The first two Noble Truths, the first teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni, address the
reality of existence: existence is full of suffering and the cause of this suffering is the
mis-perception of reality, often associated with the emotion of desire. Quite often our suffering is
borne out of a desire for permanence. We are happy right now, we want to remain happy; we have
a great job, a lovely spouse, a comfortable house – we want all of these things to remain as they
are. We want to keep living. Yet the fundamental reality is that nothing remains the same. Things
are always changing and they are out of our control. For many, to admit these realities is to admit
our own weakness, our own powerlessness to live as we choose. Admitting these truths attacks
our egos, our sense of self and that self’s importance. Especially in the United States, where we
value our individuality and freedom above all, we see the power to make your life as you want as
incredibly important. To admit that we do not actually have this power would be damaging
indeed.

I think one of the easiest ways to approach death and impermanence is to see the dangers
of driving a car. Think about how much time we spend in a car, or some kind of automobile every
day. If we view the statistics regarding how many people die or are injured in automobile
accidents every day and combine this with the amount of time we spend in a car each day, we
should come to the realization that dying is very much an every day reality. An unrealistic way of
dealing with this reality would be to ignore it, saying “it won’t happen to me.” This is the
approach of ignoring death, filling your mind with other thoughts or refusing the fact that you
will die, and could die this very moment. A second approach would be to say you will stop
driving, which is also unrealistic. Even if you are not the driver of the automobile you are in, you
are still at risk. This is the approach of “locking yourself in a room” for the rest of your life, if
you reduce the risks you take, you reduce the chance of dying right now. Instead, a better way to
approach this reality would be to spend your commute each day thinking about death. Instead of
talking on a cell-phone, yelling through your windshield at the driver next to you or simply
zoning out, you could spend that time contemplating death. In this approach, you are coming to
terms with reality. You are realizing that you can and will die, that you could die this very moment. You are seeing things as they truly are, instead of projecting a pre-conceived mindset on the reality of what is happening around you.\(^9\)

So I found myself spending much of our travel time as a group contemplating these two important realities. The Buddha said:

> Of all footprints
> That of the elephant is supreme;
> Of all mindfulness meditations,
> That on death is supreme. (S. Rinpoche 26)

Thinking about your own death, the death and impermanence of all things, is the first step to removing your attachment to the things of this life, and this life itself. It is the first step to breaking down the conventional ways of thinking that are so deeply rooted in our mind, and beginning to see existence as it truly is.

Now, these words may sound profound, because they are. They are the words of the masters who wrote the books I am reading. They are not my own. Much of my practice revolves around these concepts, making small realizations and continually working to deconstruct my ego, to reveal the true nature of my mind and of my surroundings. These small realizations come intermittently, and are often interspersed with frustration that I am not progressing faster, and doubt in this new faith. It is a difficult thing to cut through these barriers of perception I have had for so long and I cannot expect quick results, nor should I expect anything. The hardest thing to do is just to let the mind be what it is, without all the thoughts, emotions, and concepts we project into it.

With these contemplations in my mind, we arrived in Zhōngdiàn. The old caravan port

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\(^9\) Sogyal Rinpoche’s book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, is an excellent resource, very relevant and well-written.
town of Zhōngdiàn and its surrounds house several prominent Buddhist temples, the most well-known of which is the Sumtsenling lamasery, built in 1679 at the orders of the 5th Dalai Lama, located north of town. During our visit there we were blessed by the Rinpoche, head of the monastery and reincarnate lama. Rinpoche means ‘precious’ and is “a title used for highly learned or reincarnate lamas”, (Baker 448) also called ‘Living Buddhas’. The ceremony involved a tossing of small stones over all of us as the Rinpoche chanted prayers in a deep, resonating tone that brought ease to the ears and minds present. It concluded by him giving each of us a colorful braided string that we were to wear around our neck for three days. Three is a very prominent number in Buddhism, representing the Three Jewels, and permeates much of Buddhist practice. During their training, lamas will often remain in solitude for three years, three months, and three days in meditation. Many circumambulations of sacred objects, especially stūpas and temples, are done in revolutions of three. As we left, a monk gave us a small golden card bearing an image of the Wénshū Buddha.

There are three types of faith described by Patrul Rinpoche: vivid faith is the kind inspired within us when we visit a temple or meet a great teacher; eager faith is the eagerness to be liberated from samsāra, to engage in positive action when we know of the resulting benefit; and confident faith is the kind that rises from deep within our hearts when we recognize the extraordinary qualities of the Three Jewels and the power of their blessings (171-72). The visit to Sumtseling had caused an eruption of the first kind of faith within me. The Rinpoche’s resounding prayers, the immensity of the structure and the beauty of its architecture, the many inspiring representations of the Buddha. I left that day aglow.

Before departing, I spoke with an old monk with the translating assistance of Kazang, a Tibetan friend of ours working with Khampa Karavans. He taught me the refuge prayer in Tibetan, as well as I could write down the unfamiliar sounds. The standard refuge prayer for all
schools of Buddhism, and that which the monk taught me in his language, is (in my own free rendering):

I take refuge in the Teacher. (lama la jo sü jie.)
I take refuge in the Buddha. (songye la jo sü jie.)
I take refuge in the Dharma. (cho la jo sü jie.)
I take refuge in the Sangha. (gongji la jo sü jie.)

(P. Rinpoche 184)

There is a relaxing, cleansing characteristic to the Tibetan prayer that the English is lacking. In the days to come, especially once I began the kora, this version of the prayer would often be in my thoughts and on my lips. It creates a trance-like atmosphere when recited while hiking in the deep woods by yourself.

Taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the first step to ‘becoming a Buddhist’ and opens you up to the compassion and blessings of the Three Jewels; it is “the foundation stone of all paths” (P. Rinpoche 171). As Chögyam Trungpa so eloquently puts it, this does not mean “seeking shelter” or “protection,” worshipping beings greater or smarter than we are (27). Instead he describes it as follows:

I take refuge in the Buddha as the example of surrender, the example of acknowledging negativity as part of our makeup and opening up to it. I take refuge in the dharma – dharma, the “law of existence,” life as it is. I am willing to open my eyes to the circumstances of life as they are… I take refuge in the sangha… “community of people on the spiritual path,” “companions”… but I am not willing to lean on them for support… (26-27)

Following guidelines in The Words of My Perfect Teacher, I had already begun the process of taking refuge. Rinpoche outlines a more intricate ritual involving visualization of the Three Jewels, recitation of a longer prayer, and prostrations, an offering of the mind, speech and body in
It is recommended for those actively pursuing the spiritual path to repeat each element of practice 100,000 times (P. Rinpoche xxxvi). Indeed, Patrul Rinpoche writes about the refuge prayer: “Until you have said it at least one hundred thousand times, be sure to practice it in distinct sessions and make it your constant and most important practice” (180). A bit daunting! I am not sure where I stand…

I returned to Zhōngdiàn a week later on my own, after our group had dispersed to all corners of Yunnan. There was a large and beautifully constructed temple perched above the old town of Zhōngdiàn, made more remarkable by the massive prayer wheel erected next to it. Nearly one hundred feet tall, the prayer wheel took over ten people to begin its rotation and send its prayers out into the world. Inside the temple, there was a statue of the Buddha over fifteen feet tall, surrounding by images of smaller Buddhas and deities. The walls are adorned with beautiful murals of the path to enlightenment, the Six Realms\(^\text{10}\) of samsāra, and numerous Buddhist figures portrayed in brilliant color and style.

The week prior, I visited this temple and had a wonderful experience with the resident monk. I had circumambulated the central Buddha three times before beginning my prostrations. As I was leaving, he gave me a butter lamp to light and place on the main altar, showed me a

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\(^{10}\) The Six Realms are: the hell realm; the realm of hungry ghosts, or preta realm; the animal realm; the human realm; the realm of jealous gods, or asura realm, and the god realm. Each realm is dominated by a particular negative emotion.
picture of a tantric text, and transferred his blessing by giving me a *khata*. A khata is “a silk offering scarf often inscribed with auspicious symbols and signifying purity and goodwill in all transactions” (Baker 447). Once again I was filled with vivid faith.

On my return trip, I started in a similar fashion before beginning my refuge practice, reciting prayer and prostrating. Afterwards, I sat across from the monk in meditation as many practitioners moved in and out of the temple. At one point, I opened my eyes to see the monk smiling at me. He called me over and I knelt before him. From his robes he pulled a photograph of the Dalai Lama, which he showed me with a wide grin and pressed it to the crown of my head. He then exposed a small plastic bag filled with tiny balls, giving one to me and motioning that I should eat it. I followed his directions in wonderment and swallowed the incense-flavored object before returning to my contemplations.

Some time later I arose from my seat and began to leave. Once again the monk summoned me over and I knelt before him. He then began an elaborate ritual which lasted for several minutes. He began by chanting prayers over me in a low, reverberating tone that all Tibetan monks seem to possess. I kept my head low and wondered at the ritual. I tried to remain calm and let energies flow forth between us but I was so excited and anxious I could not maintain composure. He proceeded to toss small stones about my head and shoulders, similar to the Rinpoche’s actions at Sumtsenling. Next he rang a Vajra bell vigorously near my head, shocking me pleasantly from my stupor. The Vajra bell is a sacred object associated with the practice of the Vajrayāna, and its ring represents the Buddha’s speech, the sound of the dharma (P. Rinpoche 187). He concluded by washing my head with cold water several times then, motioning for me to rise, handing me a more elaborate knotted khata inscribed with beautiful Tibetan characters in an array of colors. Once again I departed overflowing with faith. I was amazed at the connection we had made on both of these occasions without exchanging a single word.
The following day I traveled out to the temple of Ringa-Né, east of Zhōngdiàn. On my previous visit I had learned that it was known as “The Gateway to Kawagebo” and that the ‘key’ to Kawagebo’s spiritual treasures was believed to reside there.\(^{11}\) I had decided to spend several days at Ringa-Né to prepare myself mentally for the coming kora, to get the blessings necessary for the journey, and hopefully to leave with this mysterious key. Ian Baker often discusses keys to unlock the most secret hidden lands in the depths of the Tsangpo gorges in southeastern Tibet, yet he finds difficulty in how to define what the key actually is. An enlightened vision, a hidden ritual text, or merging of mind and place? Dakpa Kelden had informed me that there was no special ritual or realization involved with getting the key, all you had to do was go to the temple. This seemed too easy, especially after reading about the great journeys and intense hardships Ian Baker had to undergo to attain his keys. With these shady concepts in mind, I journeyed to Ringa-Né.

A hidden treasure
Within and without the peak.
Hidden within us.

The hillside on which the temple was perched was adorned with a multitude of prayer flags hung amidst the forest boughs. Prayer flags are multicolored cloth flags that are inscribed with prayers and hung in special places. As the wind blows through the fluttering flags it becomes imbibed with prayer and carries the goodwill off to the rest of the world. They are abundant in holy areas in Tibetan regions and add a unique visual stimulus to the landscape. The forest surrounding Ringa-Né was saturated with prayer flags, as well as large white flags on which prayers and the names of dead friends and loved ones are written, believed to help bring them a better rebirth.

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\(^{11}\) Lobsang, a friend and guide for our first visit to Ringa-Né, first told us of this. Later, Dakpa Kelden with Khampa Karavans
Along the muddy road leading to the temple entrance were piles of *mani* stones stacked high, topping out in carved wooden post and forming primitive stūpas. Mani stones are flat pieces of rock, predominantly slate, often carved with the mantra of Avalokiteśvara and piled upon themselves. The mani stones surrounding Ringa-Né seemed particularly old, as many of them were weather-worn and being reclaimed by mosses.

Once leaving the road, I climbed up a long set of stairs, passing many prayer wheels as I ascended into the forest. Ringa-Né emerged before me. The temple structure and atmosphere was much different that that of the temple in Zhōngdiàn. The exterior was a wall of packed earth, cracked and deteriorating. The entrance courtyard was filled with goats and chickens, protected animals living within the temples walls. Inside it was dark and dusty. The walls were adorned with hangings and khatas, photographs of lamas, as opposed to brightly colored murals and wall paintings. The smell of the burning yak butter lamps permeated the senses in the close quarters of the temple proper. This place, although not as beautiful to behold as the temple in Zhōngdiàn, had a mystical and earthy quality to it that appealed to more than just the eyes.

In this place I spent two rather difficult nights. I went there with a certain agenda in mind, more than just relaxation and contemplation. Perhaps because the temple was supposed to be so important I felt I must fully dedicate my time to practice. The first afternoon I arrived, I wandered about the surrounding area, chanting prayer and battling bouts of loneliness. I began to feel that I was forcing some of my practice. I caught myself doing what had for a long time frightened me about religious practice, and reminded myself that empty ritual can fast destroy faith. I believe my general feelings of loneliness, distance from the group, from people and places back home, added to my distraught feelings as well. Yet even amidst these conflicting feelings about ritual, I found much comfort and satisfaction in my practice sessions of taking refuge.

reasserted the idea, and the lama at Tseng Pa confirmed it.
Reciting the prayer and prostrating in the main shrine room helped to ease my mind and brought my thoughts back to the teachings, to the reasons I practice.

The residents of Ringa-Né included a caretaker and two monks, an older and younger monk. During my two nights the monks were alternately absent but the caretaker was always there. Most visitors to the temple came in the morning, and it was during this period that the monk recited prayers, utilizing his drum and bell in his sessions, and the caretaker was most busy cleaning and speaking visitors. The afternoons were a bit quieter, with the caretaker often watching minority music videos on DVD on the temple’s one television set, and the evenings were ripe with viewing sessions of an old Chinese television show involving child protagonists constantly stumping the Japanese military, very similar to the *Goonies* movie. Since it was rather cold out and the television and stove occupied the same room, it was difficult for me to escape the TV. Not necessarily why I had come to Ringa-Né, the nights often found me disgruntled.

An additional difficulty, by far the most taxing, was that I got retchingly sick during my stay there. The first night I made the mistake of partaking in a mystery meat offered to me by my host. Since he was serving, I kindly ate the one piece he gave me, not thoroughly un-enjoying it but definitely wondering what type of animal it came from and what part of that animal’s body. The effects set in the following morning with by far the worst diarrhea I have experienced since I have been in China. And since the temple had no facilities, I found myself constantly running outside to squat on hallowed ground. That second day at lunch, my fears were confirmed when the caretaker opened a drawer in a dresser and unearthed that same plate of meat, offering it with a smile. I politely declined.

My sickness got worse as the day wore on, with my stomach twisting and turning over on itself painfultly, and the frequency of my trips to the forest increasing. That night I managed to skillfully avoid eating any meat, sticking to a rice only diet that was still difficult to keep down.
Of course, my illness only exacerbated my negative emotions from the day before, and a good portion of my afternoon found me lazing in the grass in the woods, uncomfortable and unhappy. I still found solace in the refuge practice, and later that night I came to terms with my suffering while walking laps in a room with a photograph of His Holiness the Dalai Lama as company. I reflected on my sickness and loneliness and found some comforting realizations in them.

Sickness gives us the opportunity to witness impermanence directly within our bodies. One moment we feel okay, the very next we are doubled over in pain. Since our condition is one of suffering, we can embrace the knowledge that it is impermanent and will not last. Either we will get better or we will die. And in this way we can also use illness to contemplate death. It is difficult to maintain discipline and train our thoughts on these topics while a parasite mauls our intestines and stomach, but it is during these more difficult times that we should take the opportunity to strengthen our faith instead of question it. I initially did a lot of questioning but that night found some solace.

The intense loneliness I felt, made worse by my pain, reminded me of my refuge in the Three Jewels. The Three Jewels are the only company that we will always have. Even friends and family cannot be with you always. Padampa Sangye says:

Friends and relations are like little birds on a branch; do not get attached to them.

(P. Rinpoche 98)

The greater your faith and devotion, the more the presence of the Three Jewels will be felt in everything you do. The refuge practice encourages the practitioner: “Whatever you are doing, never separate from a clear mental image of the refuge deities” (P. Rinpoche 182). In loneliness, all one must do is think of the infinite compassion of all the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and masters that have come before us to realize we are not alone on the path. My realizations that night were not quite so profound, but they helped.
After I had made my peace, I returned to TV viewings and the two younger monks playing with ring tones on their cell phones. I understand that the noble sangha is one of the Three Jewels and a representation of the body of the Buddha, and that “without having mastered your own perceptions, to look for mistakes in others is an immeasurable error,” (P. Rinpoche 147) but something about that situation just did not sit well with me.

After my stay at Ringa-Né was completed, I returned to Zhōngdiàn to gather gear and food before departing to Deqīn. Perhaps this parasite lingering in my digestive tract was the mysterious key to Kawagebo’s treasures? Back in the quiet solitude of my hostel room I continued my reading and practice, and prepared for the trip to Deqīn and to Kawagebo.

The Kora

At this time when your thoughts are unsteady,
The most important task is to make the mind turn within.
However, in the midst of multiple [distractions] it will rush after objects and,
Unable to stop for even a single moment,
It will run with its affective vagaries, even if it is well-guarded.
Therefore, I am no longer waiting to go into the wildwood to ponder this matter.
- Longchenpa (7-8)

After an afternoon and evening of rest I found myself scuttling along a narrow road heading south out of Deqin en route to the start of the kora. The single lane dirt path that our bus crept along had been precariously chipped out of the mountain side, skirting massive cliffs and landslides. Some of the smaller landslides had been left in place and now were just bumpier sections of the road that our driver had the pleasure to navigate. The winding path followed the meandering route of the Lāncāng River far below us, which I would have to cross on foot later
that morning.

I often find that Chinese bus rides make contemplations of death much easier. One approach would be to panic, grabbing with white-knuckles the seat in front of you or the person next to you every time you round a blind bend, expecting a massive Dōngfēng truck to careen around the corner and topple you. There are many opportunities for such action. Instead I like to capitalize on these moments of intense perceived risk to think about my own death, envision the reality of dying in a car accident, and how my emotions respond to such visions. I am not saying that these bus rides are incredibly hair-raising experiences, but you usually have the chance to see your own death two to three times per ride.

Eventually we stopped in the middle of the road, and the driver announced it was my stop. I was a little confused at first. There were several monks onboard and at least two other people I had surely pegged as pilgrims, so I wondered why they weren’t budging. I had convinced myself on the ride that I would be able to follow them and at least find the trailhead before setting off on my own. But I seemed to be the only one getting off here. Once I had all my gear, I confirmed with the driver several times that this actually was the place I was supposed to be, and nodding over and over he climbed back on the bus and drove away.

The number of hours traveled seemed to agree with the route description Dakpa Kelden had given me, so I threw on my pack and started walking. As I ambled across the bridge that would bring me to the west bank of the Lāncāng River, I thought back to my first crossing of this river over a month earlier. That bridge had been much more appealing, a beautiful suspension foot bridge draped with prayer flags and extending from a barren hillside into a fertile township, welcomed on the far side by a noble stūpa. My friend and I had marveled at its symbolism before we were threatened with a club and forced to cross it later that night. This bridge, although not as aesthetically pleasing, was much bigger in meaning, being the beginning of my spiritual journey,
and one I would be taking alone.

On the far side I sauntered through small town and came to a stūpa, which I circumambulated three times and made offerings. I had been circumambulating a lot of things lately, figuring the more I practiced on smaller objects, the better prepared I would be when it came to the really big one. As I continued on, the roar of three large waterfalls began to resonate off the canyon walls they were draped across. Questioning a man near the entrance to the gorge, I discovered that my trail led straight into it. I was overjoyed.

I climbed up to the trail leading into the canyon and found the best perch for viewing the two larger falls on the opposite side of the canyon. Recalling the Dalai Lama’s words that waterfalls are particularly useful for meditating on impermanence, I sat down on my pack, pulled out my prayer beads (mala), and began reciting a prayer on impermanence. I alternated between meditating with my eyes closed, staring at the wall between the falls with each in my peripheral
vision, and looking at each fall individually. Each curtain of falling water had its own unique character and I focused on each in a different manner. Once I removed my vision from the falls, the world seemed to creep upward around me, balancing the fall of the water in a display of altered perception.

Two falls stand sentient at the gates,
Falling smoke and a silk sword.
The walls climb up as the water falls down.

After sitting for a delightful duration, I shouldered my belongings and moved on. The sunlight pouring into the narrows of the upper valley illuminated the slopes above in soft tones. I followed the stream upriver, reveling in the beautiful weather and stunning terrain. I was happy to finally be out here, to finally have begun. I was relatively sure I was on the right path, but even if I wasn’t I really liked this path.

A number of modern signs lined the path, telling me in English, Tibetan, and Chinese, where I was headed and where I had come from. This helped to alleviate the few concerns I had remaining. I came across one that read, “Tibetan villager’s sacred cave,” and looked around eagerly. Since reading about Ian Baker’s remote month long meditation retreats and the cave along Kawagebo’s inner kora where Padmasambhava was supposed to have stayed, I had been dreaming of finding my own mystical cave to nestle in and attain enlightenment. There
was a small stūpa built of mani stones and a small offering oven bedecked with prayer flags, but I saw no cave. Wondering where it might be, I made offerings of incense and prepared to move on when I caught sight of something across the river. Squinting up my face and hunching forward, I managed to make out some dilapidated prayer flags hanging across the entrance to a cave some 200 feet above the valley floor. The way up to it appeared to be up a treacherous looking rubble-strewn, cliff-infested gully that seemed to be a preposterous undertaking. I was stunned. How many wandering yogis had attained realization there? I decided I was not advanced enough along the path to be worthy of such a cool looking cave, and moved on, already impressed at the twists of perception I had experienced this day.

Late that afternoon I arrived at the village of Yongdri, my resting place for the evening. The hike in had been delightful and the energies in my body were buzzing pleasantly. As I made offerings at the stūpa at the edge of town, two men arrived on a motorcycle. After I got over the initial surprise that they had just driven up the trail I had walked, I chatted with them about town and the kora. I had been given several photographs of a couple who had married four years earlier by my teacher, Sam Mitchell, with the mission to find the couple and deliver the photos. Pulling them from my pack and inquiring, one of the men immediately smiled wide and told me that the man in the pictures was his older brother. I was elated at how easy the task had been and how excited my new friend had become when he saw the pictures. I learned that the couple had moved to the Nū Jiāng valley, but the younger brother would deliver the photos for me. He invited me to stay at his house for the evening and I gratefully accepted.

Over yak butter tea (Ch: sū yóu chá) and roasted corn at his home, I asked him and a family friend some questions about the kora. They told me about 15,000 people make the pilgrimage to Kawagebo every year to circle the mountain along the outer kora, or zhuànjīng in Chinese. Out of the 400-500 people living in Yongdri, approximately 200-300 have made the
pilgrimage. My host was proud to tell me he was the only person in the village to have hiked the kora five times, and that several others in town had done it two or three times. People fifty years of age and younger were the most likely to make the undertaking.

After a wonderful dinner several villagers stopped by and pored over my maps with me, giving me many tips about the route (very few of which I understood). There was a mix of people’s feelings toward me. Some were incredibly excited, sitting close to me and chatting all about the trip, where I could sleep and where there was no water, while others sat back, eyeing me skeptically and shaking their heads. The most frequent question was: “Nǐ yīge rén ma?” (Are you traveling alone?), almost always followed by “Xiǎo xīn” (Be careful). I was told that the trail was pretty easy to follow: if there is ever a branch, take the wider one. Overall I got a pretty positive impression from the people and the place, and after the villagers cleared out I nestled into the incredibly comfortable bed and fell into a deep sleep.

Supreme happiness fills my heart as this place fills my being.

The following morning, fed and laden with fresh fruit, I said my goodbyes and found my way out of town. The trail continued to follow Sogye Creek upstream, the name of which I learned the night before. I soon came across a small mani stone stūpa and offering oven facing across valley honoring a thin, elegant waterfall that caressed the cliff faces from high above. The set of prayer flags that hung about the site were old and tattered, so I took the time to hang my first set, chanting a mantra to cleanse myself and the site as I acted. A woman looked on from nearby as she relaxed in front of her home, and as I was finishing she walked by smiling and “Tashi delay”ed my efforts. “Tashi delay,” the only Tibetan I know, is an incredibly versatile phrase. It is used as a greeting, farewell, good luck, cheers, and can be seemingly anything else you need it to. Pleased with my first hanging, I continued on.
The trail led me through colorful fall foliage as the valley tightened into a narrow canyon, the vertical walls extending well over 500 feet above the river bottom. I was surprised at how lush the vegetation was, a stark contrast from the arid Lāncāng River valley I had begun in the day before. Past a second, silkier waterfall, the landscape opened up into a glacially carved u-shaped valley, and clouds began to hug the slopes around me. As snow began to tumble out of the sky, the solace and silence brought complete me serenity. I was shocked from my semi-conscious state as a flock of small birds exploded off the ground like a gas burner left on before lit and relocated several hundred feet away. Heart racing and giddy with childish delight, I sauntered onward.

The snow fell harder and coated the landscape in a thin veneer as I climbed higher. I found a red scarf resting in a dry stream bed and collected it. In certain areas along the path, trees were draped with clothing of dead friends and relatives. It was left to help the dead pass through the intermediate state between lives, or bardo, if they needed it. It seemed this red scarf had originally been placed on a branch and desired a return to a loftier position. Tying it to a small tree filled me with happiness, and I recalled words from the Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish:

Do not take lightly small good deeds,  
Believing they can hardly help:  
For drops of water one by one  
In time can fill a giant pot. (P. Rinpoche 124)

The chill sharpened and snow accumulated. The trail passed by an abundance of boulders, large and small, that could be used for shelter. One small one in particular appealed to me and I paused, battling over whether or not I should stop. With at least two more hours of daylight left, I begrudgingly continued on and was relieved when the forest opened up into a sea of prayer flags, surrounding a smoke blackened boulder. I crossed the creek and wandered into a
beautiful camp site, capable of housing at least ten comfortably under the protection of the overhanging boulder. Tibetan characters graced the wall alongside offerings of money that had somehow been secured to the rock. The only downside to this mystical spot was the amount of trash piled up in the back crevices of the cave. The litter along the kora disturbed me the whole trip, and I would flinch any time someone I was traveling with apathetically threw their trash onto the ground. Garbage was strewn all along the trail, but the accumulation at camp sites was the worst. At least it seemed to sustain a pretty healthy field mouse population.

The cave had a secret quality to it, not noticeable to the eye. From afar you could tell that it was a special place, but not until you walked into it and were surrounded by its walls did it whisper in your ears. Within a small radius under the roof, the burblings of the passing stream were simultaneously filtered and magnified, transforming into a low rumble that seemed to emanate from the ground and walls surrounding. The lids of my eyes grew heavy and my body buzzed in rhythm with the surreal rumblings. I’m not sure how long I stood there that first time, but when I finally surfaced from the trance I still found it difficult to step out of that sphere.

After unpacking and settling in, I clambered up on top of the boulder and tied one of my silk khatas to a bush’s branchlet, conferring a blessing of my own to this magical place. I was soon joined by four more pilgrims, who I later learned were from Yongdri village. The man, who I must say had the cutest kid’s smile and a laugh that bubbled, was traveling with his wife,
mother, and a third woman. This was his second circumambulation but the women’s first. His mother, over sixty years old, was obviously delighted to be making the journey.

Sitting around the fire and drinking butter tea, the sun long down and still snowing hard, the conversation lulled and the mother began chanting. It was captivating. Soon everyone else joined in and I sat, content, fingerling my mala and staring into the fire. The circular chant continued and I entered my second trance of the day, deep and relaxing.

Some indefinite time later, we began to speak about plans for the following day. Since he knew the way, the man invited me to travel with their group. They were planning a pre-five a.m. departure. I was delighted and accepted, although the amount of snow on the ground and the rate at which it was falling worried me a bit. The next day we had to travel over a high pass, Duge-La, climbing up over 4000 meters in height. I kept my faith in the pilgrim’s knowledge of the route and left the decision to be made the following morning. With that, I slept.

I awoke to daylight, which was the first sign there had been a change in plans, and found the others still lazing about camp. I glanced out of the toasty refuge of my sleeping bag to find a good foot of snow on the ground and the sky still laying it on us heavy. Despite the pristine beauty surrounding me, my spirits dropped at the prospect of the trip ending so soon. I settled in for a little reading.

But then! A group of ten to fifteen more pilgrims rolled into camp and the atmosphere livened. I was poked and prodded by our new guests, and the materials of all my belongings stroked and laughed at, the usual fare. My friends from the night before chatted with the new group, and amidst laughter and conversation a decision was made. I was told to pack up, we were moving out.

At this point I made the incredibly bad decision of following them. Out of a desire to
push onward, something that has gotten me in trouble before, I ignored obvious signs of danger and resigned myself to following the herd. Common sense and good decision making were clouded by ambition. At my university in Colorado, I instruct avalanche awareness classes that are all about making observations of one’s environment, assessing the danger of a situation, and developing good decision making skills in hazardous conditions. We discuss the dangers of the mob mentality and the importance of acting as an individual. On this day all of that training went right out the window and I took my place in the back of the line.

Amassing a pack of over twenty pilgrims, we began the slow trudge to the pass. At treeline the trail disappeared and trailblazers at the front of the line chose our course of travel. Although the leaders were now wading through over two feet of snow, the sheer size of our group gradually stomped down the snow and those of us near the back of the line had, firm, well packed out steps to walk in. Blazing a trail through fresh snow is cold and incredibly tiring, and I owe the leaders of that day tremendously. I never would have been able to find my way over Duge-La without them.

As we ascended into the whiteness, avalanches began to rumble off the slopes around us. Visibility was so poor, though, that you could never see them, just hear the phantoms roaring by. At first they were small, judging by what we could hear, but they continued to grow as the day wore on and the snow kept falling, and several were frighteningly loud. When the monsters let loose you could only pray that they would not sweep down out of the blindness and onto our party, which had become spread out across the route. Fortunately, many rumbled off a slope we had already passed and few were heard from above.

We climbed higher and higher, getting wetter and colder, and the terrain became more exposed. Slipping would have been a bad idea, especially without any poles or sticks to arrest your fall. I was cold and tired, and as I always manage to do in adverse conditions, I wasn't eating
or drinking enough. At one point our party split into two, making me extremely unhappy, and visions of disaster surfaced in my mind. I found too many parallels between mountaineering disasters and survival stories I knew of and our present situation. Fortunately the group reunited soon thereafter and calmed at least one of my worries.

The situation was not looking great, and I continually questioned what I was doing and why I continued to follow the pilgrims up and up. Yet, I continued to follow them up and up. We finally spotted a bundle of prayer flags amidst all the white, buried in snow and flapping in the wind. High densities of prayer flags up high usually signify a mountain pass, and indeed we had reached Duge-La. Our leaders were now wading through over a meter of snow, wearing the paper-thin lightweight army shoes that many Chinese and Tibetans wear, and still moving faster than I was. Several pilgrims stopped briefly to hang prayer flags amidst the hostile weather.
As we crested the pass the wind picked up, stinging exposed skin with blasts of snow crystals. We began to descend down the other side when all of a sudden the procession stopped. There was a lot of yelling back and forth and several people began to stumble hesitantly back up to the pass. I wasn't terribly excited about the notion of returning down the other side, and wondered at the trouble. After a prolonged halt shivering in the whipping wind, we began to move on again tenuously. As I reached the former location of the leader, my suspicions were confirmed: he had triggered a sizable slab avalanche that ripped directly down our path of travel. It must have torn out below him, thank god, because he didn't get caught in it. I had a terrible time envisioning trying to lead a search effort in these conditions lacking the proper gear and the ability to communicate.

The slab was about two feet deep at the top (crown) and up to 70 feet across and ran all the way down our descent route, nearly 3000 vertical feet. Fortunately enough, once a slope avalanches, it is relatively safe to travel on. I was thinking about how to translate this while waiting in the battering wind earlier, but had given up. Although now safe from avalanches, the slope was a treacherous mess of loose snow and rocks that was nearly impossible to get any footing on. Regardless, my Tibetan companions absolutely hauled down it, and I think a couple got pretty banged up as a result of their haste. I had to do everything in my power not to tumble a thousand feet down it myself.

As the day wore on, I got colder and colder. Especially after a stint trailblazing at the front of the line, wading through over 3 feet of heavy snow, my feet were like ice. The temperature hovered around freezing, so the air wasn't terribly cold, but the snow fell wet and heavy, and I was soaked to the bone. Despite all my hi-tec good for nothing Gore-tex gear, everything was completely drenched and as night crept onto us in so did the cold.

Once we descended into the trees an interesting phenomena began. As I walked, it
became apparent that the forest had conspired against me. Every tree around had decided to wait specifically for me to pass under or near them before they unleashed the load of snow they had been carrying. If they could, they dropped it directly on my head as I passed underneath, filling my hood and flushing down my spine. If they weren’t so fortunate to be adjacent to the trail proper, they would at least wait until I was passing by their location to let loose. I wondered how my Tibetan companions were taking this. As I recalled from Ian Baker’s book, Tibetans are very superstitious of weather in holy places, seeing it as a manifestation of the suma’s, or guardian deities, approval or disapproval of those that enter. I had already wondered if my companions had attributed this sudden snowstorm to my presence, and I was positive they were noticing the forest’s actions. I have spent many hours in the forest in winter, and this experience was indeed exceptional. There is a Tibetan saying, “Kha sher lamkhyer,” – whatever arises, carry it to the path (Baker 104) – so I did my best to quell my frustration and take what came to me.

Further down the trail I had stopped to eat a little food when a Chinese man and his Tibetan guide came upon me. They were last in line, and the Chinese man was not in good shape. He professed to be very hungry (his English was quite good) and was shivering convulsively. Since his guide didn’t seem to be making any effort to better his condition, I gave him some food and recommended he change into some dry clothes. With the help of a friend and two of his guides, he changed out of his sopping wet clothing and almost immediately his condition improved. Having done a little guiding myself, I was upset that the Tibetans had let him get this bad and that they seemed apathetic to his mild-moderately hypothermic condition. He may have been a novice and a lightweight, but we were traveling in pretty hazardous conditions and he was their responsibility.

Even as I noted this man’s poor condition, the adverse effects of my dehydration were beginning to set in. While waiting for the Chinese man to change we had fallen very far behind
the main party, and once we began moving again I noticed I was having difficulty seeing clearly. I had foreseen snow blindness being a problem earlier in the day and had attempted to wear my sunglasses, but they were so wet and foggy and visibility so poor, that I often had to take them off just to see where I was stepping. The effects of my negligence were now manifesting themselves fast in the form of vertigo. I had difficulty keeping my balance and continually stumbled off the trail. My vision blurred in the cone of light my headlamp spit forth, and the pain in my eyes and head magnified. I stopped and was able to get one of my contacts out, thinking it might help, but my hands were so saturated with water that after several painful attempts I gave up on the second.

I stumbled on half blind in the night, now far behind my daytime companions. At this point I was alone with my headlamp and merely following footsteps in the snow, hoping they would not diverge into separate paths. I finally stumbled into an encampment of Tibetans who were wholly unfamiliar to me. But, as is their way, they were incredibly hospitable. They made room by the small smoky fire for me, gave me tea and offered me a place to sleep under a boulder among their camp. I wandered over to the boulder where I was to sleep, and viewed the niche that was mine, four feet long at its longest and perhaps two feet deep. It was more of a contortionist’s sick joke trick to try and jam a dehydrated, cramping body into the tiniest, wettest place possible than a real place to sleep. I would become much more intimate with this “cave”…

Unable to escape the cold by the small fire, I forced down several snickers and lurched my way back to my camp. My vision progressively deteriorated and my eyes grew more painful, to the point where I was desperate just to get in my bag and not have to function anymore. I clumsily pulled out my sleeping bag and bivy sack (waterproof shell for my sleeping bag) and after much trouble, crawled in. Immediately my dehydrated muscles began cramping and I initiated a ludicrous dance that lasted all night: extending my legs out into the air to avoid placing them in the snow, followed by short intervals tucked back into my niche before the pain became
unbearable and they would shoot back out. To compound suffering, my eyes pulsed in excruciating pain and my wet, aching body found no relief in the tight quarters. The environment also persecuted me, sending snow sloughing off the rock face and directly onto mine. My only company in the night was small mice that would scuttle on top of my bag and across my face when it wasn’t tucked safely in the confines of my hood. The night was long, cold, and miserable.

For Tibetans, the key to pilgrimage is *danang*, the sacred vision that transfigures the environment into a pure realm of enlightened energies. Even the most miserable of circumstances invites this shift in perception. In the Tantric tradition, the ideal of pilgrimage is not simply to visit sacred sites, but to facilitate an inner transformation at places that challenge conventional ways of seeing. In this sense, the more destabilizing the surroundings the better. (Baker 160)

Dawn the next morning found me completely blind in my left eye and nearly so in my right. I could open my right for only a moment before piercing light from outside would cause it to shut itself, streaming with tears and pain. My Tibetan companions tried to roust me and get me moving, but I refused. With a level head, I tried to explain to them in broken Chinese that I had plenty of food and water and (lying) that I was not cold. Unconvinced, they gave me a bottle of hot tea, and reluctantly left me behind.

Once they departed, I was able to stretch out into the full glory of my suffering chamber. Regardless of my location of repose, all snow and water coming off the rock face seemed to funnel directly into my bag and bivy sac. The latter, whose water proof shell is supposed to keep water out, seemed to do a much better job collecting incoming flow into a reservoir beneath my body. Whereas falling snow the night before was in crystalline form, today in came down in wet clumps, landing on my body and (somehow) more often on my face. All drops, rivulets, and streams of water found their way onto my face, in between zippers, and, through other stealthy
That day was filled with intense suffering, the pain in my eyes excruciating. I was still unable to remove my remaining contact after several more horrific attempts (my eye throbs in remembrance as I write this). Lying in a pool of water, I remained sedentary for the day, rolling around, shivering, and hallucinating. Although I have since come to terms with the suffering of that day and night, it was utter misery. I don’t remember much of the day, but I know simple acts such as drinking water, digging blindly through my pack for food, and extricating myself to urinate took inordinate amounts of time and concentration.

That night the suffering continued as I plunged into a series of incredibly vivid dreams and hallucinations. I convinced myself that I was still very near the Lâncâng River and the road from which I had begun the kora. I knew I had climbed the pass, but the river and the road still managed to be in proximity to where I slept. There was a village surrounding my cave as well and much of the SIT group was there, although they were not with me. I could not see any of this from my location, as it was just out of sight, just outside of my perception, but I knew it was there.

All night I dreamed that I had gotten out of my sleeping bag and was warming myself by a fire in one of village homes. I was completely dry, comfortable, and I could see. I was in the company of someone, talking softly, but I could not tell who. Then I would rise out of my dream, and I would realize I was still in my bag, wet and cold. Yet when I thought back to it, I remembered having a conversation with Ryan Thayer, one of the SIT members, or with a monk, telling me that I should come to the village and dry off. I was positive that I had had these conversations, and this helped me to confirm that the village was really there and that I should get up and go to it.

Wanting to be dry and warm, to be in one of those huts, I would motivate myself to get
up and leave my bag. But then realizing how cold I was and quickly losing motivation, I would slowly and with difficulty work my way backward through my thoughts until I finally realized that I had never had those conversations at all. This mental puzzle was so taxing that I would then immediately relax and relapse back into the dream of being in the hut, safe and warm. So my night passed in this cycle of battling to find reality: dreaming, waking into my present position but with the mis-perception of what really existed around me and what had transpired, and then struggling to realize how things really were.

Towards morning, I wondered if all my suffering, my cave, my blindness, my everything, was not just my own creation. If it was constructed by me I should also be able to end it at will. Could I just turn my suffering on and off as I pleased, like a light switch? I then did this, switching from my dismal loneliness to something brighter. Three times, I would flip the switch and what I perceived to be around me would change. It was the exact same location, same scene in my mind, but with a different hue of light and an awareness that the conditions were different. Before I hit the switch, the scene was darker, the weather was poor, I was filled with pain and loneliness. When I hit the mental switch, I still saw the same scene, but in a brighter, softer hue of light. Even though I still could not see the village or the people I knew they were there, I could feel it, and this brought me comfort. My pain subsided and I was able to think more clearly.

I flipped this switch in my mind three times, witnessing the changes that would occur in my environment and my body. Eventually I wondered if I needed no switch at all. Since this whole scenario of suffering was created by me, perhaps I just needed to get up and end it. My memory fades as to how the rest of that early morning passed. I do remember that when the sun had brightened and I prepared for the day, I was still very unsure as to what would await me outside my sleeping bag. Had the village been there the entire night, with warmth and company? When I finally got out of my bag and faced the day, it was with the motivation to go and find out.
The time has come to recognize that negative circumstances can be transformed into spiritual power and attainment… Utilize adversities and obstacles as the path!

- Padmasambhava (Baker 268)

Daylight also brought the realization that I could see! Although still completely blind in my left eye (it would be so for 6 more days) I was able to creak open my right at intervals, still painful, but enough to move around camp. I spent all morning packing up my soaking wet gear, struggling with the cold, the wet, my achy body, really struggling with everything. I initially put on my eye-glasses but the brightness of my environment caused me to think otherwise. I wasn’t willing to risk putting a contact lens back in my eye, so I hid, half blind and blurry, behind my sunglasses for protection.

When I finally left camp, it was with very slow progress. My eyesight was incredibly poor and my footing clumsy. I quickly found two small sticks to use as guides for my steps and crutches for my falls. I stumbled onward through the snow for several hours, mumbling to myself, feet completely soaked. The footsteps of my many friends from the days prior were still very clear and of one mindset, and I hoped they would remain that way. Frequently, I would have to make a tricky stream crossing and would switch over to eye-glasses for several sketchy steps before going blurry again on into the snow.

Much of that day my head was filled with the events of the past few days. I chastised myself for all of my dumb decisions on Duge-La, especially blindly following others into a dangerous situation. I reflected on my day of sedentary suffering, and especially the vision of the light-switch. The ease with which one could flip from a world of suffering to one without based on one’s perception really grabbed hold of me. I began to think more broadly than my own
experience, projecting my vision that day onto all experience. I was still amazed at how lost I had been between the realms of reality and dream. It had been so difficult to differentiate between what was real and what my mind had constructed. And isn’t what we perceive as reality just a projection of the mind onto our surroundings?

As my mind rambled on, I periodically thought about my eye. It still hurt tremendously and garnered attention in that manner, but I now I began to think: what if the vision never comes back? Instead of despairing at the thought, I tried to address it realistically. I realized a fast evacuation was not a possibility, that I was traveling slowly and still many days from any semblance of a road. So I began the long process of coming to terms with it. I dealt with the situation just as I had reflected on death. I told myself over and over I would no longer have my left eye, and I listed all of the things I would be unlikely to do ever again as a result. At times I still struggled with the notion, but I was learning how to accept things as they are.

The trail opened up into a broad meadow and two perfect campsites unveiled themselves before me. Immediately this lightened my spirits. As they were both empty, I took one with a downed tree across the top, so to give me something on which to dry out gear. Nearly the moment this thought passed my mind, the clouds opened up and spit forth a ray of sun directly onto my camp. I smiled. I spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing, unwinding, and drying out gear.

Sunshine woke me the next morning. A lazy morning chatting with myself, my mouse companions, and drying out gear gave me plenty of time to soak up the goodness. The night’s sleep had been wet and cold, and it would be three more days before I had a dry, comfortable night’s rest. After much anxiety, I worked up the courage to finally remove my second contact and got a look at my eye, which was not reassuring. The white part of the eye was blood red, and the color and pupil were swimming in a milky white cataract. A frightening spectacle, but not
wholly unexpected. My vision confirmed this. When I finally opened my left eye all I could see was a blurred whiteness. The pain had dulled a little, yet my eye continued to stream with tears and other fluids throughout the coming days and weeks.

The right eye accepted a contact lens, and about noon time I headed out. The snow storm that had swept in on us had caught the whole valley unaware. Much vegetation still had all of its leaves, still green, and as a result heavy damages were inflicted on the forest. Massive trees and branches broke under the weight of the surprise snow and the forest was a mess. This made travel much more difficult as portions of the trail were devastated and unrecognizable. Quite frequently I was forced to clamber through tunnels of vegetation and dangle myself over precipitous drop-offs to skirt around what should have been trail. I was amazed at the amount of downed trees, all of which had met their demise in the past several days. There were moments when I had no idea where the trail went until I bashed my way through ten feet of branches and brambles, emerging beaten and winded on the other side.

The terrain of the surrounding valleys and peaks was stunning. The severe steepness of the landscape was jarring to the senses. The hillsides rose out of small creeks and climbed up massive cliff faces and dangerously steep slopes over 8000 vertical feet to the peaks surrounding.
And these were the small mountains, mere spurs and ridges that led up to monsters out of sight and often in the clouds. Somehow, incredibly lush vegetation managed to cling to the mountain sides and an ocean of green always surrounded me. Birds chirped and chattered on the breeze and I imagined what other life this untouched haven held. For days I seemed to have this entire Shangri-La to myself, to soak into my being.

The lands unfold before our eyes
   And we are lost.
   Thought halts,
   Time stills,

   The only moment that has ever exited is this one.
   And we smile.

And so this was the beginning of my journey around Kawagebo, the staggering difficulties presented at the very start. I continued on in the remote mountains for several days completely alone, trekking along at my own pace. My days were filled with steep trails, prayers, hanging flags, hopping streams. A delightful bridge swathed in multi-colored flags. Contemplation of many things as well as the complete absence of thought. Wonderful.

After a cold night sleeping up high in a small shelter with the company of mice and a smoky fire, I was blessed with the first views of the high peaks, of Kawagebo. He was only out for an hour or so before choked in clouds again, but I was quickly reminded what I was doing there, why I had come. I spent that sunny morning up high ambling around naked in the sun, finally drying out the last bits of wet gear and soaking up the solitary wonder I was immersed in.

The next leg of the journey brought me out of that lush wilderness and into a more populated (a VERY relative term) region of Tibet, where I frequently traveled with large groups of pilgrims and covered greater distances. Up until this point I was moving at a very leisurely
pace. I was frequently wet, couldn't see, and was clambering through difficult terrain choked with
downed trees, so I was in absolutely no rush at all. One morning I spent several hours making a
tricky hanging of prayer flags across a small stream whose only flags had faded to whiteness. I
spent my time as I wanted.

This second leg I often found myself following the schedule of others, a very different
but equally rewarding experience. We traversed down magnificent gorges with steep canyon
walls, but of a different nature than the area I had just exited. The valleys were drier and more
sparsely vegetated and there were more attempts to tame the land. We walked along many failed
roads that had been reclaimed by the landscape by abundant landslides and other powers of
erosion. We walked alongside beautiful engravings of Tibetan script, prayers and mantras in the
cliff walls; large murals of Buddhas and masters adorned the cliffs, meticulously carved with
incredible detail, and some at very great heights.

This section took us along much larger rivers and through larger river valleys, into small
townships and smaller temples. I traveled for several days with a group of ten or fifteen pilgrims
from Northern Tibet, only two speaking any Chinese at all. They were wonderful company,
laughing and smiling and allowing me to become a part of their group, while still giving me
freedom to wander at times as I pleased. Our company was brief but I will remember them
always. I made a promise, if at all possible, to a deliver a photo to their village next time I return
to Tibet. It will be a serious undertaking, I think, but I will do my best to fulfill my word. Maybe
by then I'll know a little more Tibetan and be able to chat with them in full.

Moving as slow as one possibly could and finishing by a different route, the full kora
took me sixteen days. This included two days stationary, bus and truck travel, and lots of resting
time. The second group I traveled with liked to take a lot of breaks. Tibetan pilgrims usually do it
in seven or eight days, old and young alike. They were able to perform this super-human feat
because they got up between three and five o’clock in the morning and hiked until dark, with brief stops for breakfast and lunch. Every meal required a quick fire built along the trailside, hacking firewood apart with their distinctive blades that each person carried. The knives were usually eight to twelve inches long, housed in a decorated scabbard and tied to the waist with cloth or ribbon. They were an indispensable tool, used for everything from trimming calluses to chopping wood. Once the fire was going, the pilgrims filled a large lightweight tea kettle with water and a mild black tea, heated it up to boiling and added yak butter to make sūyóu chá (yak butter tea), a thick, yellow, salty substance that has really grown on me. They usually drank three to five bowls and then added tsampa, ground up roasted barley, to make into little grain patties. Every meal consisted of butter tea and tsampa.

The Tibetans traveled only with the clothing on their backs, bedding rolled up in a tarp and lashed onto their bamboo baskets or wooden frames, and a bag of tsampa and yak butter. Yak butter is an amazing substance. It remains a quite sturdy solid at room temperatures, only melting when added to boiling black tea. It is also extremely flammable as I witnessed on many occasions, and I wonder if they don't use it to quickly start their fires. Traveling in this fashion, the pilgrims hauled many miles, chanting prayers while they walked. Every break and meal was filled with laughter and joking, of which it was warming and pleasant just to be around even though I couldn't understand what they were saying.

When I parted with this group from northern Tibet in the town of Tsawalong along the Salween River, I met who would be my companions for the rest of the journey. Four Tibetan guides/porters, a Chinese engineer from Kunming, and a Japanese photographer writing a story about the Tea and Horse road. I had met them the day we climbed Duge-La but split off the night I stumbled into my cramped cave. The Chinese man was the same man whom I had helped after descending from the pass in his cold and hungry state. He remembered this and went out of his
way to show his appreciation for the remainder of our journey.

Our head guide, Xiāoyong, who was on his 21st kora around Kawagebo, recommended that we avoid the final and highest pass of the kora, Sho-La, because the snow had made it too dangerous. Instead we would finish much further north, traveling several days by truck and bus through Tibet to return to Deqin, the starting point for us all. Up until now I had been unsure of my plans. I knew Sho-La would be difficult and dangerous, but the weather had been fair and would have given the snow time to settle and stabilize. This would mean nothing if no one had blazed the trail first, as navigating above treeline would have been impossible without help. Yet I knew no other way of returning to Yunnan without taking this path. I also considered the state of my eye and whether I should attempt to evacuate myself to some kind of medical care. After seeing the state of the roads in the area I mused that I could probably make it out quicker on foot. I also visited a small clinic in Tsawalong and received some medicine for my eye. So, although this problem had been mulling about in my brain for several days, the answer seemed to present itself and I continued on with my new companions.

My time with them was interesting indeed. We often ate very well, dining in Tibetan households, small eateries where they existed, and one night at a temple. The trail intersected with many local paths through this area and I thanked the leadership of my Tibetan friends in showing the way. Our travel days were usually fast and short. At times I battled with the pace of the group, wanting to make better use of daylight and continue on. Instead I was blessed with the opportunity to practice patience. We were fortunate to visit several small village temples along the way and I was to hold several audiences with a reincarnate lama at the Tseng Pa temple outside the village of Long Pu. My Chinese friend Tsēng Yuăn acted as translator.

Our final days eating and sleeping in Tibetan homes gave me yet another perspective into this wonderful land and its people, and the relationships between pilgrims and homeowners.
I often relaxed in small villages that I likely would have bypassed on my own. We were often invited to take our meals in the homes of villagers and spent long afternoons sipping butter tea and eating tsampa. At times I felt the need to hurry on, but soon realized I had nowhere to go and nowhere to be other than right here.

The final three days of the kora took us through a "closed region" of Tibet, where foreigners are not allowed without special permission. To be in Tibet at all, you need a special visa, yet along the kora itself it is unnecessary. Since we had to diverge from the standard route to avoid Sho-La, it exposed me to a new hazard very different from those we had faced on Duge-La.

Travel in this area was illegal, and felt like it. We had to cross several guard stations in the biting cold of the wee hours, hoping the guards would be absent from their post. I had to travel incognito on a crowded bus amongst many Tibetans, burying myself and trying to cover up my white skin. In the town of Zezhong I was thoroughly self-quarantined as we were forced to wait a day for our bus. We stayed in a hotel where my companions had connections, and I was restricted in movement to the hotel quarters and quick trips to the restaurant below to eat. We found out that only the week prior a foreigner had been jailed there for three days, and I was happy for our caution. Even running up to the outhouse behind the hotel in broad daylight had me creeping around like a convict. I felt much like illegal aliens must feel when crossing the border, scouting for police and hoping not to be inspected.

After a long and bitterly cold truck ride, stalling out and flat tires, lockdown in Zezhong, and a painfully crowded two day bus back into Yunnan, I arrived in Deqīn, the starting point of my journey. As we looked on from the row of stūpas at Feilai Si, a spectacular sunset beamed forth rays of fire from behind Miacimu, Kawagebo’s consort. He remained shrouded in cloud. My companions and I ate one final meal together, exchanged gifts and contact information, and settled into mildly intoxicated sleep.
The following morning I awoke drowsily, glancing out the window of our room to see the sun’s soft morning rays climbing slowly up the high peaks. I scrambled to dress and find my shoes. Unable to gather my boots, I donned a pair of pretty pink sandals several sizes too small, and pranced out into the biting morning air. Kawagebo and his army stood before me. Too cold for clouds, the sharp outline of his brilliant form dominated the sky. My eyes glistened and my lips curled slightly. My heart was full.

… there, soaring into the gap, and magnificent in the full shimmer of the moonlight, appeared what he took to be the loveliest mountain on earth. It was an almost perfect cone of snow, simple in outline as if a child had drawn it, and impossible to classify as to size, height, or nearness. It was so radiant, so serenely poised, that he wondered for a moment if it were real at all.

(Hilton 75)
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**Appendix A: Description of Illustrations**

5. The Tsa Yachu River winds its way past the village of Lada, Tibet. Photo by author.

9. Stūpas overlooking Miacimu, 6054m, from Feilai Sì, Yunnan Province. Photo by author.

22. Buddhist temple and prayer wheel overlooking the old town of Zhōngdiàn, Yunnan Province. Photo by author.

30. Waterfalls at the gateway to the kora. Photo by author.

31. Prayer flags hang at the entrance to a cave high in the cliff face. Photo by author.

35. The boulder Karmapa, resting in a sea of prayer flags along Sogye Creek. The steep climb to Duge-La begins here. Photo by author.

38. Pilgrims and prayer flags atop Duge-La, 4479m. Photo by author.

47. Unknown river valley along the kora. Photo by author.

53. Kawagebo, 6740m, from Feilai Sì, Yunnan Province. Photo by author.
Appendix B: Route Itinerary and Expenses

11/7/2007 I rode a bus from Lijiāng to Zhōngdiàn, 35元, and stayed one night at Kevin’s Trekker’s Guest House, 20元. I then traveled by taxi to Ringa-Né temple, 80元, and stayed there two nights, 100元 donation. 11/10 I returned to Zhōngdiàn by taxi, 80元, and stayed two nights at Kevin’s, 20元. In Zhōngdiàn, I had laundry done at Kevin’s, 10元, bought food for the kora, 250元, bought some extra necessary gear (sleeping pad, socks, rain pants), 250元, and spent 30元 on cab fare around town. 11/13 I bused to Deqīn, 40元, and stayed one night at Tashi’s Mountain Lodge (Zhāxī Shān Zhuāng), 25元/night + 35元 for dinner. Taxi around Deqīn cost 60元. 11/14 I bused to the start of the kora, 16元, asking to get off at Yongdri. That night I stayed at a house in Yongdri and gave the family 20元 as compensation (forced it on them). The next 16 days I was on the kora and spent very little money. In the town of Tsawalong, day 9, I spent 10元 for a room one night. You can eat some spectacular Sichuan style food in Tsawalong if you so desire. I donated 200元 to various temples along the way. Once we arrived in Bitu, we were able to arrange a truck to drive us to Zezhong, for 100元 per person (700元 total for our group). We stayed at a small hostel in Zezhong for two nights, 30元 (15元/night). The following day we took a 2 day bus to Deqīn, 150元, getting off at Feilai Si. I bought some food for the group that night, 110元, and paid for our room, 105元 (15元/person). I arrived in Deqīn around 11/28. I then stayed for six nights at Tashi’s Lodge outside of Deqīn, spending a total of 560元. Dorm beds are 25元/night, breakfast is 25元, dinner is 35元, and you can purchase other amenities there as well. A final sleeper bus deposited me in Kunming on 12/7, for 220元. I spent 30元 for some delicious yak meat along the way. While on the kora we often ate in Tibetan’s homes. My Japanese and Chinese companions paid for much of my food and lodging during this time and helped to cut my costs.
Appendix C: Additional Resources

Zhōngdiàn area

Dakpa Kelden ph: 13988778781

Dakpa works with Khampa Karavans and was something of an advisor to my project, or at least for the kora itself. He gave me some very useful advice and a detailed route itinerary, which was severely damaged on the trip, otherwise I would have included it in the paper. I got the impression that he is a very busy person, but still managed to see me on two different occasions. He speaks English, Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages.

Kevin’s Trekker’s Guest House ph: 08878228178

Located near the northern entrance to Old Town on Tuanjie Road, around the corner from the Tibetan Café and down the street from Khampa Karavans’ office. A good central location, both of the owners speak very good English and are really nice, and you can do your laundry there for only 10元. There is a large grocery nearby where I did my shopping for the kora. Dorm beds are 20元/night.

Noah’s Café

Located across the street from the Tibetan Café. Great place to use internet, hang out, and get coffee.

Deqīn area

Tashi’s Mountain Lodge (Zhāxī Shān Zhuānɡ) ph: 868878416630

A great place to stay, especially if you plan on writing your paper in Deqīn. It is located
about 20-30 minute walk outside Deqīn on the road to Feilai Si, a quick 15元 cab ride during the day (it goes up to 20元 late at night). It is a beautiful building, quiet, with a roof perfect for taiqi (when it’s not too cold). They have a computer with Word, although their internet connection is an unreliable dial-up (which was a godsend for me but may not be if you want to do internet research). I was the only guest for the whole duration of my stay. The food is a bit expensive, but delicious and convenient, and the people that run the place are great, although they don’t speak any English. Dorm beds are 25元/night, breakfast is 25元, dinner is 35元, and you can buy a number of other snacks and drinks at the Lodge. You can also store gear here for 2元/day, which was necessary for me to shed books I needed for research but wouldn’t be taking on the kora with me.

Migratory Bird Café ph: 08876895030

Located at Feilai Si. It is a nice place to hang out and grab a bite to eat, but it’s greatest asset is a very good map of both the outer and inner koras, 10元/each, that I didn’t find until after the trip. And they are in English! There is a cheap place to stay right next store, beds for 15元/night. It is well worth staying a night at Feilai Si in order to see the sunrise on Kawagebo and the high peaks. Truly stunning.
Appendix D: Future Projects

Unfortunately, I think my epic journey has removed Kawagebo’s outer kora from the list of options for an ISP. I apologize to all future students for my actions that led to this. I think there is a tremendous amount of work to be done on sacred geography and Tibetan Buddhism. I had only one major source on sacred places and unfortunately the library here is slim on the topic. There are many great books on the topic if one has the foresight to bring them ahead of time.

My Chinese language skills are mediocre at best, and Tibetan language skills especially would be tremendously helpful in being able to interview pilgrims. My project was almost purely observational and experiential and leaves a lot of room for research involving more discourse with the pilgrims themselves. There is also another cluster of holy mountains in southern Sichuan Province, in the Yading Nature Reserve, that could be explored as a future ISP. Unfortunately at present the Reserve is closed due to a conflict between locals and government authorities. You can still get into the Reserve at an exorbitant cost.

Exploring beyul and terma, the secret hidden places and the hidden treasures that show us the way, are fascinating topics that delve deeper into tantric mysticism. Further study on tantra and tantric pilgrimage would also be an amazing topic. Ian Baker’s book is an invaluable resource in regards to these topics. I highly recommend his book as a starting point to learning more about sacred geography, as inspiration for study of a variety of subjects, and as a great read.

The three ISP papers I site also have good suggestions regarding topics on the inner kora and in the proximity of Deqin.
Appendix E: Names of Places

Many places in Northwest Yunnan have multiple names. Often the Chinese, Tibetan, and English names are very different and may all be used in conversation. I have compiled a very brief list here for different places and geographical names to avoid confusion. I first give the name in Tibetan, followed by Chinese, and finally English.

Zhōngdiàn area
Gyalthang
Zhōngdiàn (Xiāng ge lǐ là)
Shangri-la

Ganden Sumtsenling Gompa
Songzanlin Si
Sumtsenling Lamasery

Ringa-Ne
Dàbāo Sì
“Gateway to Kawagebo” Temple

Deqīn area
Dechen
Deqīn

Kawagebo (Khawa Kharpo – Lhasa dialect)
Měilǐ Xūēshān
Meili Snow Mountain

Mekong River
Lǎncāng Jiāng

Salween River
Nǚ Jiāng

Tsa Yachu River
Zhā Yù Jiāng