

A Visit With the Dalai Lama

AS a contribution to the preservation of Tibetan culture and philosophy, the Theosophical Publishing House at Wheaton obtained the world publication rights to *The Opening of the Wisdom Eye* by H. H., the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, now in exile in India. This publishing achievement led to the suggestion that during our recent visit to India, Helen Zahara and I arrange a visit to Dharamsala (sometimes spelled Dharmasala or Dharmsala) in order to meet His Holiness. Miss Zahara, of course, had had considerable correspondence on publishing matters with the secretary to the Dalai Lama, Mr. Tenzin Geyche, and through his office an appointment was made.

An experience of such a nature as our trip to Dharamsala, the tour of the Tibetan refugee center in that north Indian mountain community, and our visit with His Holiness deserves to be shared, and therefore, in the belief that many members will find it of interest, I should like to relate something of our adventure.

Through friends in India, most of the preliminary arrangements for travel to Dharamsala had been made. Following our arrival in Delhi, after the long hours of the flight from New York, we rested briefly before going to the bazaar to purchase bedding—a thin mattress and two blankets—for the overnight train journey from Delhi to Pathankot. A ride in an Indian train must be experienced to be fully appreciated: our “first class” tickets entitled us to a bare unheated compartment, with European and Indian toilet facilities at the end of a corridor. While Helen spread out her bedding on the lower bunk, I clambered to the top bunk where my mattress and blankets were unrolled; no undressing was done because we needed every bit of clothing we had on, or with us, to ward off the cold of a December night! The closed and locked windows failed to keep out the chill wind and the sooty black dust which it carried with it. Dawn revealed the fact that we were one hour behind schedule but, eventually, at one stop, tea and the semblance of a breakfast were brought in.

Arriving in Pathankot, we hired a car for the nearly three hour drive to Dharamsala. Anyone who has traveled in India will know that most roads are narrow and quite often crowded, not only with pedestrians, but also with bicycles, buses, bullock carts, goats, cows, camels, dogs, and a variety of other animals and conveyances. The Indian driver proceeds by a combination of horn-blowing and skillful maneuvering, somehow managing to escape collision, collapse, and catastrophe. The usual hazards of the road in India were complicated on the drive to Dharamsala by the fact that, very soon after leaving Pathankot, the road began to wind uphill into the mountains, with numerous hairpin turns obscuring any vision of oncoming traffic. Dharamsala, a hill station in the foothills of the Himalayas, is gloriously situated against a backdrop of snow-clad peaks; here our accommodations had been arranged at the Government Tourist Bungalow, where again we made use of our “bedroll,” since only the bare necessities are provided the “guest.”

The following morning, a young Tibetan, Lobsang Wangchuk, who had escaped from Tibet in the great refugee exodus of 1959 and had been educated in India (he now holds a degree in political science), arrived at our Tourist Bungalow to serve as our guide for the day. Higher up the mountainside we were driven, along a road that had no guardrail or other protection against the precipitous cliffs. Our first stop was at the newly erected Central Tibetan Library and Archives, where we were introduced to Gyatsho Tshering, the acting director. (Later we were to meet Prof. Thubten Norbu, brother of the Dalai Lama and Director of the Library, with whom we had a long visit regarding publications and other matters.) We were shown through the rooms that house the large collection of manuscripts brought out of Tibet and on which translation teams are now working, the classrooms where lessons on the “Dharma” are being held, and other features of the library. A particularly interesting item was the Tibetan typewriter, the first of its kind

The American Theosophist

ever constructed, manufactured by Remington Rand of Calcutta; this machine will obviously greatly facilitate the work of the library and make possible xerographic copying of many of the Tibetan works.

From the library, we drove on up the mountainous road to a much higher elevation where there is located the Tibetan Children's Village, established in 1960 under the personal direction of Mrs. Tsering Dolma, elder sister of His Holiness, and now, since her death, conducted by His Holiness' younger sister, Mrs. Pama Gyalpo. Here some 800 children, between the ages of seven months and 15 years, are housed, cared for, and educated. Perhaps the most notable impression of our visit to the Children's Village was the happiness of the children; indeed, Tibetan children smile so easily and quickly that one cannot but respond warmly to their friendliness.

Again the drive continued upward, to the area known as Upper Dharamsala (altitude about 5400 feet), where nearly 2000 Tibetans have nested huts among pine trees and established second homes for themselves in an environment nostalgically Tibetan in character. The Tibetan village, with its interesting bazaar, clean streets, and charming shops, is, so far as the residents are concerned, the "legitimate Lhasa," for wherever "Yeshi Norbu" (Precious One) resides, there is the Holy City. In the center of the village is a stupa, or Buddhist Temple, with its prayer wheels in almost constant motion. Here also is an astro-medical center, where astrological computations and Tibetan calendars are prepared, Tibetan medicine (compounded of herbs, minerals, and animal bones) made, and a small hospital maintained for those undergoing Tibetan medical treatment. Nearby is the handicraft center, where some 80 skilled weavers work at producing the beautiful hand-woven carpets for which Tibet has long been famous. In the village we paused for lunch at a tiny Tibetan restaurant; such a delicious meal, reminiscent in some ways of Chinese cooking, for it included an egg soup and a delectable noodle and vegetable dish!

A further drive brought us to the large compound which includes the Dalai Lama's residence, the central cathedral or temple, and the Tibetan Secretariat. We visited first the large temple, adjacent to which are living

quarters for about 70 monks. Within the temple, monks were gathered for the chanting of the Kanjur and Tanjur; each of these famous works takes about six months to read or chant through. In the temple are a number of relics and mementos brought out of Tibet, as well as the three main images of the Buddha, the Guru Padma Sambhava, and Avolokitsevera. In the small room used by His Holiness is one of three most sacred statues of the Lord Buddha, a small exquisite statue brought out of Tibet at the time of the "exile." Beside the little statue is another, equally exquisite, of Tara, Goddess of Mercy. On the wall is the first Tibetan written letter.

Moving to the residential buildings, we were met by the Dalai Lama's secretary, Mr. Tenzin Geyche, with whom Helen had preliminary discussions concerning publications and other matters. As Helen and Mr. Geyche talked together, we were suddenly aware of a movement of people outside in the courtyard: a large group of pilgrims, mainly Bhutanese women in colorful native dress, had been admitted for the afternoon's "public audience" with the Dalai Lama. When His Holiness appeared on the verandah, just one step above the courtyard, the pilgrims placed white scarves on the pavement before them, bowing or prostrating in reverence; one sensed at once the simplicity and gentleness of His Holiness as he motioned to them to place the scarves, now blessed, about their own shoulders and then continued to speak to them for several minutes.

Soon it was time for our appointment. Ushered into a simply furnished living room, we were greeted cordially, with a firm western handshake, by His Holiness, who put us at once at ease with his friendly and warm manner. At the outset of the conversation, he spoke mainly in Tibetan, with his secretary serving as translator. Our initial discussions concerned his writings, his interest in visiting the United States, and other topics generally related to the business aspect of our visit. Tea in the English style, served in delicate china cups, was brought in as we continued our conversation, the discussion turning more and more to points of philosophy, questions on Tibetan Buddhism, the work and writings of H. P. Blavatsky and her Teachers. Increasingly, as he answered our questions, elucidating the "Dharma," His Holiness spoke directly to us

The American Theosophist

in English, exhibiting a fluency in the language, although occasionally he would turn to his secretary for the translation of some technical or philosophical word. What emerged from our visit was the realization that we were privileged to sit and talk with a rare individual, one not only highly educated in the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, but deeply compassionate, spiritually reflective, vitally concerned with human problems, yet withal a man of gentle humor, well-read on current world affairs, and keenly interested in all that was going on about him. He laughed easily and smiled frequently, mingling serious discussion with moments of lighter conversation.

Our visit concluded, we retraced our steps: the return to the Tourist Bungalow for a second night, the drive down to Pathankot, the train journey to Delhi, and so on to Adyar. Never to be forgotten, however, was the day spent among the Tibetans in Dharamsala and the memorable afternoon visit with His Holiness, Tenzin Gyatsho, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, a man who is not only head of state in exile, but an individual whose sympathy for the human condition would make him at home anywhere in the world.

—Joy Mills