



a month in *Shangri-La*



RON GORDON, a friend of The Kilung Foundation, traveled with **KILUNG RINPOCHE** to Tibet for a month in 2001. With him came almost 300lbs of clothing donated by Patagonia for the Kilung and Ponru communities in Dzachuka, Kham. This is an edited excerpt from his journal. All photos by Ron Gordon

NOVEMBER 17 CHENGDU

We walked from shop to shop in the bright sun. People definitely look at Kilung Rinpoche; he is 31 years old, quite handsome, with the particular serenity that one encounters in recognized reincarnations, and an intense curiosity about the world.

The Chinese appear as fascinated with Tibetans as we are in the West, but I have the preliminary impression that they tend to view them, like Mongolians, as somewhat wild or primitive.

NOVEMBER 19

The 'delegation' designated to escort us to Kilung, two monks and a driver – the vehicle is a Toyota Land Cruiser – each handed

me a *khata*, a ceremonial scarf, when we met. Traditionally a *khata* is presented to a lama when meeting him. I couldn't believe it when the first scarf was presented to me! I looked to Rinpoche and asked whether to give it back. He nodded.

I really don't have a clue how I am viewed, or will be viewed, by the Tibetans I will meet. Rinpoche has lived with Westerners for some time and probably holds few illusions, but to these Tibetans I must be a true unknown!

NOVEMBER 20 KANGDING

Leaving Chengdu late in the morning, I was surprised how quickly we reached the mountains. We climbed in altitude. Occasionally a vista opened up, or an enormous snow peak peered over the top of the canyon.

At dusk we visited Rinpoche's niece, who studies at an enormous boarding school in the mountains. We saw her room – eight girls in a small room with bunks, stuffed animals, and posters of Chinese pop stars – it could have been the room of a teenage girl almost anywhere.

NOVEMBER 21 KANZE

I got altitude sickness, and was carsick – not surprising considering we drove over two mountain passes today. Tonight we're staying with friends of Rinpoche's family. Again I was

Dzachuk River valley, coming into Kilung



presented with khatas. I was blown away by the fact that they had a TV, which was going constantly as background noise. I don't know why I expect Tibetans to be any more immune to TV than other cultures.

NOVEMBER 22 SERSHUL

My fingers are numb. I'm realizing that Tibet is much colder than I could *ever* have imagined. I grew up in Wisconsin, and lived in Scotland but they are Caribbean vacations by comparison! I'm wearing wool socks, fleece pants, two fleece shirts, a fleece ear warmer, and sitting in a high-end down sleeping bag with a thick comforter over it (I'm in my bedroom). And I am really, really cold.

Kanze to Sershul today was huge, wide valleys backed by spectacular peaks. The villages are so tiny and isolated, they looked like they could vanish if you blinked.

The pass to Sershul was icy, windswept, and a hair below 15,000 feet. Nobody wanted to get out of the car. Just as we started down, a young Tibetan couple wearing 'street clothes' passed us going uphill on an ancient motorcycle. Truly unbelievable!

We stopped en route to visit one of Rinpoche's seven brothers, and were ushered into a traditional Tibetan house with thick walls, dirt floor, no electricity and very low ceilings.

We sat in a large room, both kitchen and living room, and I was given the seat of honor, literally the only chair – a blue plastic Wal-Mart special. Tibetan tea, buttered and salted, was served – if you think of it as soup it's not too bad.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the light (it was very dark), I realized there were people everywhere – seventeen in all. The men sat by the fire, and the women and children around the perimeter of the room. The lady of the house patrolled with the teakettle! Everyone shared a great sense of well being in that room.

NOVEMBER 23 SERSHUL / KILUNG

I'm sitting next to the stove in Ja-Me's apartment. Ja-Me is one of Rinpoche's brothers, and works for a government office in Sershul. He is also the "point man" in Kham for moving the Kilung Foundation's projects forward. His wife, Tsomo, is stern and loving with her two children and husband – and blessedly matter of fact about my presence!

Traveling with Rinpoche is probably the best possible way to see Tibet as all doors are open to us, and Rinpoche is an honored guest – it's kind of like tagging along with the Pope, only instead of autographs, people ask for blessings or to name their baby.

We stopped off at Rinpoche's parents house on our Kilung Monastery, and Rinpoche also visited his son. I was per-



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plexed – I didn't know he had a son, and more so when a man older than Rinpoche was introduced to me. Rinpoche explained that in his previous lifetime as the fourth Kilung Rinpoche, he had fathered this man he called 'son.' The man called Rinpoche 'father.'

I'm now sitting in my room at Kilung Monastery, with my own yak dung stove, and I'm warm. It doesn't get any better than that.

NOVEMBER 24 KILUNG

The story of the Kilung Monastery is sad. According to Rinpoche, the location was given to a lama in a dream. He found the spot, stuck a pole in the ground to mark it, and immediately a spring gushed forth. The monastery and surrounding community grew and the monastery became famous for teaching a specific type of meditation practice through which many have attained enlightenment. In 1959, the spring was dynamited and mostly destroyed, along with the prayer wheel house and the monastic college. The temple itself was turned into a livestock barn.

Rinpoche re-opened the monastery, which had been unused and abandoned for 25 years, and projects [to re-establish it] are proceeding. The monastic college is nearing completion, and it is beautiful.

At Kilung the valley floor is more than 14,000 feet, with the hills surrounding it going up another 2,000. Old snow dusts the hills, which in summer, Rinpoche says, are covered with multicolored wildflowers.

Last night, the wind came through like a freight train, and I wondered how anything at all could live in such an extreme environment. Today, in the golden sunlight, signs of life are all around. Mostly there are birds: several sparrows, quail, crows, vultures, and hawks. Most spectacular was a bird, bald eagle-sized, with a similar wingspan, but a thicker body, light gray on top, and pale coral underneath. Rinpoche said Tibetans hold them sacred.

Today Rinpoche led a delegation of five around the corner of the mountain to a nunnery and a small village, where he presided over an impromptu 'town meeting.' An old woman did

most of the speaking. Alternating between lecturing, laughing and crying, she spoke of how difficult it was to keep the community together with Lama Lungtok's recent passing [Lama Lungtok was one of Rinpoche's former gurus], and with Rinpoche now in the United States.

Rinpoche then went to visit his 'son,' who is coughing up blood. Rinpoche, himself a TB survivor, will persuade him to see a doctor.

I'm fairly proficient at keeping a yak dung fire going in my room! One of Rinpoche's brothers came in to check on the fire, and we both just sat there, side-by-side, glad to be alive and warm.

Perhaps the Tibetan character is so strong because life is on the edge of what a human can survive. Here, blessings come in the form of warmth and food, and companionship is deep – everything else is fundamentally frills. It is easy to see why spiritual pursuits took hold here; the land itself is mind-expanding, and life free from nearly all the distractions we take for granted.

NOVEMBER 25 KILUNG / SERSHUL

I have become accustomed to the rhythm of the day here at Kilung Monastery. There is little inclination to get out of bed before 8:30 A.M., as the stoves have long since gone out, and you're basically lying in a freezer. But by 8:30 or 9:00, the sun comes over the mountains, the valley starts to warm up, and activity begins.

Step one is to light a fire, and warm up some water. A washbasin and cloth provide your daily 'shower.' A cup of tea is next, then the first meal – mostly tangerines and biscuits trucked from Chengdu. Nothing seems to spoil here, as a room with a fire serves as a refrigerator and, one without, as a freezer. Sometimes I go for some 'Tibetan Cheesecake.' The cakes are round, like the American version, but size and shape are all that is similar. They are made from yak cheese, little sweet potatoes, yak butter and cream, with the density of plutonium.

This morning we unpacked and sorted all the clothing generously donated by the Patagonia Corporation – three huge duffel bags packed with fleece jackets, shirts, pants, and waterproof shells worth thousands of dollars.



Kilung Monastery and village



Kilung Rinpoche

Rinpoche called the monks, one at a time, into the room with the clothing. The oldest came first, down to the smallest boy. Everyone got wonderful stuff and was all smiles. One of the littlest monks gave me a hug. Rinpoche told me he was an orphan, so I guess he doesn't get presents very often.

Rinpoche also gathered specific items together for families and individuals he knows are in need. From what I've seen, this includes just about everyone. I don't think Patagonia has any idea how much good they've done.

We've just arrived back in Sershul. Gyamtso, our driver, took us down the valley. He has installed the world's funkier car stereo and is very proud of it. He has one tape, a man singing in Tibetan, accompanied by a string instrument – it is somehow the perfect musical accompaniment as we bounce along in the jeep. Bounce is the operative word. Even "highways" we've traveled are only partially paved, and now that we're off the highway, there are only tracks. Sometimes there are no tracks, and Gyamtso literally chooses his own road.

NOVEMBER 26

The Chinese authorities have confiscated Ja-Me's jeep. Apparently the registration was not complete; that is, not all the taxes were paid. I asked Rinpoche why they hadn't been paid. There are so many, Rinpoche replied.

I started practicing my Tibetan with Jamyang, Ja-Me's seven-year-old son. First we practiced the alphabet, then I tried a few phrases – to his great amusement. The grammar is not difficult, but pronunciation is a killer. Age works against you when it comes to learning languages – Jamyang already has Tibetan and Chinese down, and is working on English.

NOVEMBER 27 PONRU

Rinpoche's Kilung Foundation has built a school for nomad children in Ponru and we got the grand tour. [Classes began March 2002 with 32 children]. The rooms are big and bright, there's a large central courtyard, a large kitchen, and classrooms. We took photos of the incoming students [which The Kilung Foundation has put on its website for sponsorship] with a digital camera. The whole community stood around enjoying the show as one child after another stood in front of a backdrop and smiled for the camera. Most of the children, and their parents, had never even seen a camera, much less had their picture taken before. The parents looked so proud. I suspect many of them, being nomads, had no opportunity to go to school themselves. This school is a real blessing.

NOVEMBER 28

I looked out "my" window this morning at Ponru Monastery. Someone in the valley was riding a Tibetan pony. Suddenly the window went dark. "Thangka," I heard someone say. Outside a huge thangka was being unfurled from the roof. It depicted Padmasambhava in the center, surrounded by various buddhas, and was made from thousands of pieces of hand-woven silk from Varanasi. I've never seen anything like it! [See page 29]

NOVEMBER 29 SERSHUL

I provided great entertainment for everyone as I began communicating in Tibetan with my *Lonely Planet Tibetan Phrase Book*. Some of the phrases are quite useful ("thank you for your hospitality"), others ("I am pregnant") less so. We swapped vocabulary, and taught each other counting, simple greetings, etc.

I just took a long sunset walk. Sershul is so windswept, it's an undertaking just to take a walk; you put on a bunch of layers and waddle down the streets, which are all but empty. Cars, trucks and people are few and far between. Occasionally



Kilung monks in their new Patagonia clothing



Ponru village – the school is the white building in the foreground



Ponru school children have their pictures taken.



Ron Gordon with two Ponru School friends



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someone comes past on horseback, or leading a yak herd, thus increasing the surreal quality. It almost feels like a movie set, except that from time to time a shop door opens, and the life going on behind it comes brimming out.

NOVEMBER 30

Two monks and I climbed a tall peak. The side facing the town is nearly vertical, but we took a path up the back that is just a very long uphill walk. At the summit, which was strewn with prayer flags, we sat down and I shared my last peanut butter hi-protein bar, which I'd been saving for just such an auspicious occasion. The entire town was spread out at our feet, and the whole valley in view. The highway forked to the right – the road to Lhasa.

The road to Lhasa is to Tibetans as the road to Mecca is to Muslims. In the jeep the other day, we passed two men doing prostrations in the middle of the highway. Up ahead we came upon a large cart. Rinpoche explained that the men were on a pilgrimage to Lhasa, that they push the cart containing clothes, food and bedrolls about 200 yards up the road, then they walk back to the point where they had started, face the cart and do prostrations until they reach it. And begin the process again. Rinpoche said it would take them “at least six months” to reach Lhasa.

DECEMBER 1

Last night everyone was sitting around Ja-Me's family's living room. We started off listening to a CD Rinpoche had brought of a Tibetan lama chanting. Following this, the children put on one of those ubiquitous disco tapes sung in English by vocalists who don't have a clue what the words mean, except perhaps, “Baby, baby.” No matter, it's got a great beat.

My foot started tapping, and Jamyang, who'd been watching me closely for some sign of interest, grabbed my hands for some serious dancing! I'm no great dancer, but it's nevertheless safe to say I am the Michael Jackson of Tibet. I had a great time and everyone was wildly amused. But after the fourth straight dance my heart reminded me that there's no fool like a high-altitude fool and discretion prevailed.

DECEMBER 2

This morning Rinpoche's 'son' returned from three days in hospital. He was diagnosed with lung and heart problems. The hospital wanted him to stay for three weeks to treat him, but it costs US\$24 per day, and he has no money. I had assumed that the government provided medical care – there is free care for the poor, but because the lama has a family he doesn't qualify.

Tonight was 'paint-the-town' night in old Sershul. I had offered to take everyone out for Chinese food, so seven of us crammed into the jeep and went to town. Rinpoche found a place offering a hot shower for one dollar, so we enjoyed the unbelievable luxury.

We found a restaurant and were given a private room with a coal stove. It was perfect. I told the others to order whatever

they wanted. We had a real feast! We toasted friendship, and Jamyang hugged me and said I was his best friend. It doesn't get much better.

DECEMBER 4 SERSHUL/ KILUNG

The driver of the jeep back to Kilung Monastery hasn't shown up. Rinpoche had Gombo, one of the monks, learn to drive it, but this morning he backed into a fence!

We made it [back to Kilung] after all – with Gombo driving! Imagine teaching your kid to drive a stick shift, then throw in cratered 'roads,' crossing two ice-covered rivers, tracks and roads with “I don't wanna look” drop-offs down to the valley floor, and headlights that wouldn't attract a moth. Fill the jeep with five people and luggage for ten more. Ignore the fact that the tires look like they haven't seen a groove since James Brown. This is how they have fun in Tibet!

At one point, I looked out the window, saw iced-over rivers way down in the valley, and saw we had about a foot of road to the right before the drop-off. This seemed like a good time to start drinking!

DECEMBER 5 KILUNG

This afternoon I took one of the longest walks I've taken in Tibet – six miles up to the head of the Kilung Valley, and back. At one point, rounding a curve, a man on horseback passed me, going in the other direction. He almost slid off his horse he was so surprised to see me. I motioned that I was heading up the valley, then coming back. He looked puzzled, perhaps confused by the notion of a recreational walk.

Being in Kilung focuses my mind and slows down the thought process – the constant replays of past, and apprehension about the future. It's easier to be still, and present here than at any place I've been before. A bird sings and the song comes out of a silence so deep, it's as if you never heard a bird sing before.

DECEMBER 6

Today I have been alone almost all day. It's clear that the Tibetans have a different attitude about solitude – it's only natural with so few people and so much open space. When I see a lone herdsman watching his flock, or someone rides by on horseback, I don't know what they're thinking, but they don't look bored.

The only Tibetans who look remotely bored are the young men who sit out on the streets of Sershul, wearing sunglasses and riding motorbikes. You know they have a television at home and are struggling with the advertisements that urge them to acquire things that, until recently, they never knew existed.

I was going through my Tibetan phrasebook earlier today and was mildly shocked to see the phrase, “I am bored.” I mean, you come all the way to Tibet, and the best you can tell some local is “I'm bored?” And what's he supposed to say back? “No problem, let's go to the disco?” Well there it was, on another page of the phrasebook: “Are there any discos here?!” I memorized the phrase and put it to the monks. At first, they looked

at me like I was crazy, but when they realized I was joking, they thought it was hilarious.

Rinpoche brought his father back to spend the night at the monastery. I don't think I've ever met anyone as old, yet as full of life, as Rinpoche's parents. Their happiness comes from a deep place.

DECEMBER 9 SERSHUL

It snowed last night – no more than a dusting, but just enough to make everything beautiful. We're leaving tomorrow.

Before leaving Kilung, we said good-bye to Rinpoche's parents, who gave me an 'only-in-Tibet' gift – a bag made from a baby goat's hide, filled with dried yak cheese. At the monastery I said my last goodbyes to the monks. Lots of affection has developed between us, as I became less of an oddity and more of a person.

I took a good long look at the valley, because I don't know when I'll see it again. The mountains are covered with snow, and in the late afternoon sun they are golden.

I shopped for some small thank-you gifts, and got a blanket cover and matching pillowcases for Ja-Me and Tsomo, and pocket calculators for the kids. Everybody seemed to like the things they got. It was a very small price to pay for all the nights I camped on their living room floor.

DECEMBER 10 KANZE

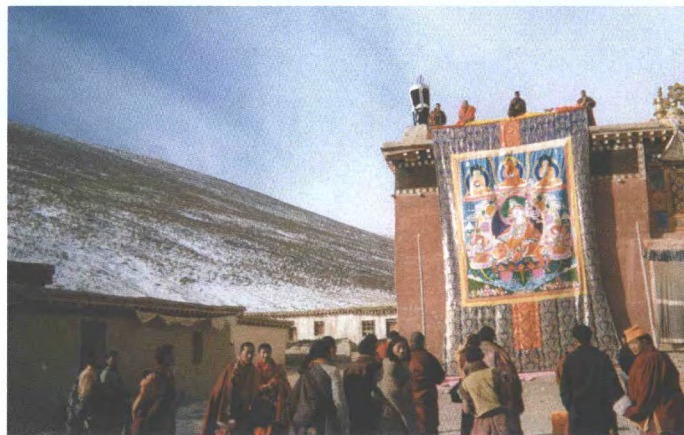
Fifteen minutes out of Sershul, a nun standing in the middle of the road flagged our car down, and asked if she could ride with us to Kanze. Rinpoche said we could only give her a ride an hour down the road to his brother's as the jeep was full. She was Chinese, and had come to Tibet to study Dharma. Until recently, she had been staying at Serthar Monastery, which made international headlines when the army violently dispersed many of the monks and nuns who lived there, as it was considered too large a Dharma center.

At Rinpoche's brother's the nun got out and started walking to a nearby monastery. But back on the road, after the visit, the nun blocked the car again, and Rinpoche relented.

Within a few minutes she began talking to herself, singing, moaning, crying, laughing and occasionally shouting. She also began hitting the driver's seat from behind. When she was asked to quiet down, it only got worse. It was clear that she was mentally ill.

We eventually reached a monastery, where Rinpoche could let her off with people who could look after her. We stopped at the driveway, and Rinpoche told her to go inside. Instead, she walked across the road and said she was going to bathe in the river, which was deep and dangerous. The monks returned her to the gates of the monastery. As we drove away she was dancing in circles with her arms outstretched.

Rinpoche said she had been talking about the incident where the army came through the monastery, and was "re-living" it. I guess we'll never know what happened to her at Serthar. I have been thinking about her all day, and I hope she is safe tonight.



Thangka at Ponru

DECEMBER 11 KANZE

Kanze is bursting with color and life. The people are dressed in all colors, and the streets are a tangle of people, dogs, yaks, horses and trucks with absolutely no traffic rules. The sun is brilliant today, lighting up the snow-mountains that tower behind the town. A huge monastery and temple are perched on top of the hill behind the town.

Rinpoche got a cell phone call this morning that his father has been taken seriously ill. He will return. Tomorrow at 6 A.M. I take the bus for Chengdu – two days with a sleepover in Luding.

DECEMBER 15 BEIJING

A winter morning in Beijing. I am watching TV, and find the portrayal of Tibetans on national television problematic. They are always shown at festivals: dancing, singing, in costume, racing horses, and so on. That is, they are depicted as quaint, cute and primitive.

There are no Tibetan community leaders shown, none of the poverty, and certainly no reference to the strongest characteristic of the Tibetans, their deep and abiding belief in and practice of Buddhism.

