

*Erik Steffens*

**Picking Up After the Buddha's Dog**

**Y**ears before, I plodded up the last incline to the fifteen thousand foot pass in the Himalayas, sucking as much thin air into my aching lungs as they could stand. Thick snow swirled around my numb face, yet sweat trickled down my back as the heavy pack dug into my shoulders.

From above, a man materialized out of the white. He was pencil thin, and wore only an orange loin cloth, bare feet sank deep into the snow. His only possession was a trident spear as tall as his shoulders, which he swung in cadence to his steady stride. Snow plastered his long dread-locked beard. His brown skin was lustrous, neither wet nor cold. He passed without recognition, his gaze fixed ahead into the storm. Lips trembled with ancient words. I watched him fade into the snow, and realized, sadly, that I was the fool of us.

Granted, I was not a mantra away from hypothermia, but he had pared his existence down to the true fundamentals, and his dis-attachment to the gross physical world opened up far vaster spiritual realms I would never reach. He was practicing what the Tibetans call Tummo, an ancient yogic breathing and visualization technique that elevated his body temperature – despite the thin air and only eating a handful of rice for breakfast. I envied his devotion to the pursuit of the soul. I was just on a trekking vacation, a frozen slab without my layers of plastic clothing. It was shocking to realize how little is needed – not even clothes in a snowstorm – with pure purpose.

**I** had returned to the same pass, and the memory of the ascetic gave me pause as the reason for my journey was only slightly more noble than the last time.

I was on a quest for panda poop.

It was monsoon, and the pass was now a verdant alpine meadow hidden in steamy clouds. Moisture hurtled from the warm Bay of Bengal four hundred miles away onto the mountains so abruptly that the air still smelled unmistakably of the brine of the sea. It was extraordinary to be three miles up in the clouds, and yet feel the tropical ocean in my lungs.

I descended from the pass on a trail that could be more aptly described as a cascading torrent. As night fell I reached a small shack perched on a ridge and gladly threw off my immense backpack. While I sat inside rubbing my sore knees, the monsoon pelted the tin roof and gusts rattled the thatch walls. Steam swirled upwards from my hiking boots next to the crackling fire. Blackened pots filled with rice and lentils bubbled over the flames. An elderly Sherpa woman stirred them, babbling in a high nasal voice at her husband who sat cross-legged next to me staring at the fire, his weathered face and large hands perfectly still.

The elderly Sherpa woman kept on talking in her high voice and her husband kept on staring at the fire. At last she turned to me and switched languages to Nepali so I could understand.

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“Grandson, what are you doing?”

“I’m researching red pandas. Are they around here?” I asked. With its adorable white face and auburn fur...accoon on serious cute steroids – the iconic red panda is a staple of western zoos. But little is known about their wild counterparts on the remote forested slopes of the Himalayas.

“Aaunghh,” the old man said, snapping out of his trance. The fire danced in his old brown eyes as he looked at me. “They’re here. But you won’t see any. They are ghosts of the forest. It’s a great fortune, a blessing, to meet one. They are like the Buddha’s dog that way.”

“I’m just looking for their gyackpa,” I said. The old Sherpa woman cackled in her high voice and said something in Sherpa to her husband.

Part of my red panda research – and the reason the Smithsonian Institution paid for my plane ticket – was collecting poop. My backpack was full of plastic bags containing 3-inch oblong pellets packed in drying silica crystals. I had learned every Nepali slang word for poop. “Gyackpa”, the local Sherpa word, was a personal favorite.

“Gyackpa is easier to find than the Buddha’s dog,” the man chuckled as he took off his cap and rubbed his shaved head. “What are you going to do with this gyackpa?”

“I’ll take it back to Am’rica.”

The Sherpa lady shook her head while she stirred the rice. “Why grandson?”

I had long given up trying to explain in my colloquial Nepali the details of mitochondrial DNA analysis and preventing inbreeding of red pandas in zoos. It was hard enough to convince people that it wasn’t only poop, but also panda DNA from sloughed off intestinal cells. So I resorted to an easier – albeit flawed – explanation:

“I want to know what they eat.”

The lady stopped her ladle in mid-stir and gazed at the fire. She again mumbled something to her husband in Sherpa, undoubtedly concerning the white guy who spent the equivalent of their entire life earnings on the plane ticket to Nepal in order to tromp around in the monsoon looking for wild animal shit to answer a painfully obvious question.

“They eat bamboo,” the old man grunted as he pulled off his cap and rubbed his head. “Now...,” he said as corners of his mouth turned up, “why don’t you dump all that gyackpa out of that big backpack of yours and put me inside and take me to Am’rica instead?”

His wife cackled. I pretended a smile as I hunched over to keep my head below the descending cloud of smoke. Tomorrow promised more rain, more panda poop jokes, and the renewed hope of seeing one of the animals I was so diligently picking up after. I looked at my huge bag of shit from an animal I had never seen, and wondered what the naked ascetic would think of the burden I had given myself.

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"You must be tired and hungry. We are almost at the lodge and you can rest there," the National Park employee said, almost sincerely.

Indeed, I was tired, but I wasn't ready to give up. Despite the local's insistence that there were plenty of pandas around, we had come up empty. Our trail had straddled the exposed knife-edge of a long ridgeline jutting south from the Himal. Pandas preferred the lush ravines further downslope where bamboo grew thick.

"Wouldn't you rather look this way?" He asked, pointing towards a scrawny forest laced with livestock trails. No panda in its right mind would go there, but it was convenient, flat and contoured directly towards the lodge.

"I'll see you at dinner," I said, starting down the steep trail next to a small creek tossing itself down the mountainside. I heard his footsteps behind and cursed under my breath. For a week, I had listened to his constant barrage of whining, thinly disguised as considerate advice. He was trying his best to subvert my research into an easy trekking vacation. His insistence went beyond laziness, it was his cultural duty to take care of the white guy. "Guest is God" in South Asia, and a good guest should relax and spend most of the day drinking copious amounts of tea by a warm fire.

I missed the enthusiasm and knowledge of the local guides I had hired in other places. Instead, the National Park assigned him as my guide. His career seemed to me rather ill chosen, given that he showed a complete dislike of nature and being outside.

"Why do you work for a National Park?" I asked him as we walked down the trail.

"I didn't want to work hard as a farmer. I used my family connections to get me this job so I could eat a government salary."

I was taken aback by such an honest answer, and one I couldn't argue with. Subsistence farming on the slopes of the Himal is backbreaking work with few certainties apart from an annual risk of starvation. A government job, on the other hand, meant an easy life sitting in an office, reading the paper, fixing tea for the boss and, most importantly, participating in the many schemes that siphoned money from the budget and into their pockets.

The forest grew lush as we descended further into the small canyon. Rhododendron trees formed a thick canopy thirty feet up. In the spring, these forests turn shades of red, pink, white, yellow and lilac. Gusts of wind send thick flurries of petals falling in a breathtaking display of natural confetti and carpet the ground in bright colors. But now in the monsoon everything was deep green. Dense, six-foot tall bamboo formed thickets around gnarled, mossy trunks. This was a forest worthy of a Buddha's dog.

"I'm going in there," I say, pointing to a particularly thick patch of glistening wet bamboo. "Why don't you look down the trail?"

His eyes flitted between the gentle path and the steep tangle of bamboo. "Yes, better to split up since there's not much daylight left."

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I rolled my eyes and plunged straight into the bamboo. My destination was a large sprawling tree fifty yards away. With its horizontal, thick branches, it was the kind of tree red pandas liked to poop in. I clambered up eight feet to the first fork.

There it was. A pile of the freshest panda scat pellets I had ever found, unblemished from the rain that had let up an hour ago. I picked several up with a plastic bag and felt their warmth.

Fresh tracks led from the tree into a small hole in the bamboo. I tried to follow by pushing my way in, but soon got stuck amongst the interwoven culms. Instinct took over. I crouched down until my world was the bamboo, and still went down until I was on my knees and my hands felt the cool dirt. I lowered my head until it entered a ground-level tunnel weaving through the bamboo stalks. I was on an ancient highway worn by countless panda feet as they gnawed away at the bamboo above. I crawled forward, completely absorbed in the subtle yet telltale signs of the red panda that had taken this path only minutes before: the tip of a leaf nibbled off leaving a jagged edge from the panda's sharp teeth; a stalk bent over, and the succulent new leaves nipped off. I too bit into a leaf and chewed. It had a pleasant, sweet grass flavor – with the unfortunate texture of a scouring pad. I swallowed and felt its coarseness scrape down my throat.

Water dripped down my neck and my clothes were soaked. I didn't care. Crawling through the bamboo felt entirely natural, pure. My universe was the damp soil, the bamboo and the crooked trees. I wasn't just following a red panda, I was one. I had shed everything except the present moment, here in the Buddha's dog forest.

The trail meandered towards a single large tree. I stood up and strolled towards it, grinning from ear to ear. I knew that's where the panda was, undoubtedly curled up in a high branch, rusty fur blending into the red-dish moss.

This was why I had come to Nepal. All the effort to get here – the physical toil and danger, the mind-numbing days spent working through permits and grant applications, the weeks of kissing up to corrupt officials – was worth it for this opportunity, this moment. I was about to meet my first red panda in the wild.

The sun even broke through beneath the clouds, painting the forest a rosy sunset hue. Thousands of dewdrops glistened in the light. I got out my camera and slowed to a creep as I neared the tree and scanned the branches. Any moment now I would spot it.

"AAAAAAUUUUUUUUUGHHHHHHHHHH," the park employee screamed somewhere down the valley. I froze and listened.

"AAAAAUUGGGGGGGGHHHHH."

I looked at the tree. There wasn't daylight to come back. After all I had endured I wouldn't have minded if a Himalayan sun bear was gnawing on his leg.

Finally my conscience got the better of my judgment and I shouted, "What's the matter?"

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“AAAAAAUUUUUGGGGGHHHHH.”

“What’s wrong?”

“AAAAAUUUUUUGGGGGHHHHH.”

I took one last longing look at the tree and the panda that I knew was staring at me through the leaves from its hiding spot. I turned and bashed through the bamboo towards the screaming. As I got closer, I yelled again. No answer. Bad sign. I burst onto the trail and ran around a bend.

The park employee sat on a rock by the trail looking out across the valley.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

He gently nodded.

“Why were you yelling?” I asked.

“Maybe there are bears around.”

“Why didn’t you answer me?” I screamed at him.

He shrugged and continued to look at the sunset. “I didn’t want to be alone.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying my hardest to cage the raging bear inside me, the one far more dangerous to him than his imaginary bear. I turned up the trail and shouted all the swearwords I could string together as I chuffed up towards the lodge.

Later that night as I lay in my sleeping bag, I remembered a time sitting cross-legged on the floor of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Kathmandu, listening to the teachings of a famous Lama. He talked about how difficult it is to cultivate compassion and instill calmness in our lives, that we must mindfully practice not reacting to daily tribulations, and to work on empathy towards everyone, particularly those who rile us.

Somebody had asked him if we should go out of our way and search out difficult situations in order to help us practice. The Lama had smiled, refolded his maroon robes, and said that there was no need – life had a way of providing plenty of them.

I had failed miserably. I could not find any sympathy for the park employee. I had my best – and perhaps only – chance of meeting the Buddha’s dog and he spoiled it. Plus I had let him ruin the moments of purity I did have. I was still angry, carrying his actions with me, instead of feeling happy and blessed for the perfect moments in the bamboo, I was briefly a Buddha’s Dog, but all I could think of is how the jerk ruined it.

In the morning I received a consolation prize for my anger. After breakfast, the park employee faked a cough and said, “My throat hurts. You should go out by yourself today.”

“Okay,” I said, rushing out the door into the morning sunshine.

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The mossy roof of the cave sent a constant drip onto my sleeping bag. I sat up shivering and munched my breakfast of dry ramen noodles, sav-

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ing the last remaining package for lunch. My local guide Ganga Jung sat next to me crunching on his noodles. He looked happy, impervious to the damp wet conditions. His weathered face earned from a lifetime cutting wood and grazing livestock in this valley deep within the Himalayas. He knew it better than any other. Although thirty years my senior, he bounded up steep mountainsides and would wait for me at the top, puffing on his second or third hand-rolled cigarette by the time I arrived, wheezing in the altitude.

For the first time in weeks the mist parted. The massive north face of Mt Manaslu covered the sky, the eighth highest peak in the world, rising sixteen thousand feet straight up from where we huddled in our cave. It's hard to describe the sheer height of the Himalayas. Imagine a typical mountain range in the Alps or the Rockies with a big, billowing line of cumulus clouds over it. The mountains would be the Himalayan foothills, and the clouds are the same height as the peaks. That's how big they are. Their tops kiss the jetstream.

We set out and searched for pandas through ancient groves of silver fir, and tall bamboo forests. We traversed a grey glacier, and crossed swollen streams the color of milk. As the light faded, we crossed a thin bamboo bridge above a raging silty azure river, and trudged up to the shepherd's hut sitting on a ledge above the river. I was exhausted and soon fell asleep on a hard wooden cot listening to the torrential rain hammer the wood shingled roof.

I awoke in darkness to the wood of the bed vibrating and bouncing against my cheek. I waited for the earthquake to stop, but it only grew in force. I sat up alarmed at a growing roar that accompanied the shaking. I stumbled out to the main room of the shack, guided by the glowing embers from the evening's fire. Ganga sat next to it drinking Himalayan moonshine.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Ganga Jung extended his mouth out in a common method of Himalayan pointing, his lips protruded in a direction upstream. "Landslide." He smiled, but the wrinkles around his eyes betrayed concern.

The heavy monsoon rains had loosed an entire mountainside. I heard the tocks and grinding sounds of car-sized boulders rolling downstream. The ground shuddered under their progress. A chill crept down my spine as I realized we were trapped. The shack had a sheer cliff behind it. There was no escape if the river decided to come our way.

"Give me a drink," I said.

Ganga laughed and shrugged. "What to do."

I mostly hate the way Nepali's look at life. Fatalism, a central tenet of Hinduism, drives me wild; nothing can be done, nothing can be changed, so don't even bother trying. Our fates are pre-determined, written in an ancient, undecipherable language on the squiggly lines of our skulls.

But fatalism certainly takes the edge off living in such an uncertain and often life-threatening environment as the Himalayas. I was grateful that there weren't any other westerners around freaking out. Instead we

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just sat there, staring at the fire, drinking hooch and telling jokes. We were glad we made it here instead of being camped out on the other side of the river, miserably wet without food and no bridge for three days' walk in either direction. We were warm and things could be worse. If the river washed us away, so be it. It was already written on our skulls.

**T**he next day, as we picked our way down the muddy, boulder-strewn riverbank, I was struck with the realization that I had failed. It was time to return to the States and I had not seen a red panda, not even a hint of rust brown fur high up a tree. Sure I had collected hundreds of their turds, some freshly separated from their maker, but it was hardly the same. Poop just wasn't good enough for my biologist's ego, having to return without a single meeting-a-wild-red-panda story I could share. I've found that poop stories don't do that well at dinner parties.

Perhaps there was some truth in the old man calling them the Buddha's dog. To see one you either had to be incredibly fortunate, or have the determination and patience to slow down and become all Zen in their forests. I was too rushed, focused on the results, proving my worth to my academic peers. I wondered how many pandas had looked down on me in plain view as I scurried through their world; how many had wondered why I was so preoccupied with their poop to not see them? I had pushed ever forward onto the next patch of forest until there were no more. Now I wished I had a few less bags of poop and had spent more early mornings sitting still, and afternoons crawling on all fours with my head buried in a bamboo thicket.

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I landed in Seattle and fidgeted with my US Customs declaration card. Yes I did have something to declare: two oversized bags filled with poop that soon could be thrown in the garbage by a customs officer protecting the US from the parasites and germs of the Asian continent.

The officer stared over his reading glasses at me. "You've got what?"

I explained my research and the contents of my bags. He sighed and shook his head as he went back to a desk and made a phone call. As I waited I pulled out a few samples in plastic bags for his inspection.

"What are you doing?" He barked as he hurried back.

"I'm just showing you—"

"No, put them back. You can go."

"Don't you want to see?" I asked, holding up a plastic bag with a nice big turd inside.

He held his hands out in disgust. "Get out of here now," he growled and pointed to the exit.

I should have been relieved. My last hoop was over, and I could take the poop wherever I wanted to. But somehow it didn't feel right. On top of the physical toil and near death experiences of the research itself, I had spent a solid month in Kathmandu, kissing up to government bureaucrats, waiting for hours in dank hallways, schmoozing over dozens of cups of

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tea and bottles of Fanta to convince them to rubberstamp (literally) my research project. And now this guy didn't even want me to open my bag? Couldn't he have the decency to at least take a quick look?

Instead, he kept glowering at me – as if I was trying to make him get personal with hundreds of bags of shit. I reluctantly packed my poop away and walked through the shiny automatic glass doors back to America.

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The red panda uncurled from its perch high in the tree and climbed down towards me. Its back a burning rusty orange of luxuriant fur funneling into a bushy striped tail. The white tips of its ears shone a pinkish hue in the last sunlight of the day. For a moment our eyes met and I felt a zing of primal connection, before it descended further. It had a different climbing technique than I expected, preferring to step down from one branch to the next with a measured gait – an energy efficient laziness perfect for an arboreal life only fueled by gritty bamboo leaves. It explained a lot about the trees it preferred, and where it liked to poop.

I could have spent hours there, at long last communing with this enigma of the Himalayas, the Buddha's dog, but the National Zoo in Washington D.C was closing soon, and the lady dressed in khaki holding out a bowl of grapes for the panda was interrupting my reverie with the usual flowery zoo talk.

"Red pandas live in the same bamboo forests as the giant panda, but they actually aren't related. Giant pandas are bears. The red pandas closest relative is the raccoon."

"Otter," I grumbled under my breath.

The red panda snatched a gaping mouthful of grapes from the dish and hurried to a corner of the enclosure to avoid another approaching panda. As cute and cuddly as they look, they prefer a solitary and ornery life.

This particular panda had given the zoo staff a scare a few weeks before, escaping into the city before being caught in the Adams Morgan neighborhood days later. It pained me to think that some Washington D.C inhabitants had seen a "wild" red panda perched up in a tree in their neighborhood park, while I was skunked, staring up into the monsoon rain for three months.

Yet, in many ways I had learned more from not finding a panda in the wild. It made me acutely aware of the subtle clues it left behind. I could smell a steep gully and tell if a panda frequented it. I could scan thousands of bamboo leaves and find the telltale-jagged edge of a leaf where a panda had grazed. And, of course, I could spot from afar a tree where they liked to take a dump. Not seeing a panda had opened my eyes to both the minutiae and the whole of their world.

Perhaps more importantly, it forced upon me humility. There's nothing like picking up poop to remind of one's place in the natural hierarchy of things, especially from an animal I didn't have the fortune or patience to actually see.

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Meeting the Buddha's dog in a zoo felt hollow. There was no journey, no hardship, no dedication needed to look at an animal who had nowhere to hide. I realized what mattered was the experiences of the journey itself, and, perhaps more importantly, the recognition of my own shortfalls. I didn't slow down enough. I wasn't completely present for the Buddha's emissary to reveal herself.

I wanted to tell the panda about its ancestral home in the Himals, but it looked pretty happy with its Californian grapes, and the zookeeper was still giving the speech. I silently said farewell and walked away from my first encounter with the creature that had enlightened in its obscurity – and made me the butt of hundreds of poop jokes.