India 4: Close Encounters of the Buddhist Kind

A Judeo-Buddhist Disaccord

Just before we began our trek, we visited the monastery in Karsha. The nice monk there, who spoke English quite well, provided interesting explanations about their beliefs and traditions. I must confess that I was never too big on eastern religions and philosophies, and whenever I hear explanations about one of the oriental "-isms", I nod politely and very soon I find myself thinking about the philosophical errands that I need to run. But this time, with that monk, and with Gary as an "explanation enhancer" in the middle, it was truly fascinating. I will focus only on one of the many interesting things that we learnt that day.

Anu asked the monk about the concept of compassion in Buddhism. A Buddhist is supposed to have compassion to all human beings and he must exercise this compassion without thinking of any personal reward. Namely, no act of kindness or benefaction counts as such, if the person who did that failed by including himself in his thoughts by, say, expecting to be rewarded either in this life or in another life for his good act. Coupled with the concept of non-attachment, which means that Buddhists should not be attached to particular things (be it a person, a living thing or an object), this means that Buddhists should spread their compassion equally. For example, if one has a loaf of bread, he should spread it equally among all hungry people around him, and must not give larger portions of that loaf to his family. I found this a very noble and respectable ideal, but nothing more than a beautified ideal that cannot be realized. I asked the monk whether they too see it as a divine ideal, something that only Buddha achieved, while we (them) humble mortals can only aspire to. He insisted that this is not an ideal but an actual goal that a Buddhist should and can achieve, by means of meditation, pondering, praying and other spiritual techniques. My western brain couldn't understand that. I then spoke to him of the Ten Commandments, the religious and moral cornerstone of the entire Judaic and Christian faiths, and reminded him of the fifth commandment – Honour thy father and thy mother. I told him that this commandment disagrees with the principle of non-attachment (I always thought that this commandment, like the five "Thou shall not" commandments that follow, was universal, as opposed to the first four that
are not relevant to all faiths). He didn't get confused even one bit and immediately, and most confidently, confirmed my understanding. I was quite flabbergasted by that. I found that goal contradicting to human nature, or nature in general for that matter, and I couldn't believe that it can or should be achieved by humans. But then I decided that I would not judge a major religion based on one hour of conversation and I decided to focus on their lovely customs and eyewear (see pictures).

**Beauty and the Priest**

In the middle of the trek we rested in Lingshot ("It doesn't get much more remote than this") and visited the monastery there. When we arrived to the monastery, we stayed outside on the balcony while Gary went inside to call the head of the monastery that he knew very well from his previous visits there. In the meantime, we were admiring the amazing view and took pictures of it.

And then the monks started coming outside to the balcony to greet us. We all turned our eyes to them, and our mouths opened wide with astonishment. That was one helluva display! Let's see… How shall I put it?… Have you seen "The Name of the Rose"? Well, the lovely and jolly monks that greeted us reminded me of some of the characters in that movie (and I don't refer to those portrayed by Sean Connery or Christian Slater). What a splendid freak show! While we were admiring one of them and thought to ourselves which angles of photography might do justice to his amazing face, came out another whose looks completely dwarfed his friend's, and he became the next star until he was overthrown by yet another one. It turns out that being a hermit makes you look like a Kermit. Either Christian or Buddhist, if you're locked for years with other hermits in an isolated monastery and just worship the God(s) all day, and eat whatever they feed you in monasteries, don't count on an international modeling career 😁.

I am sorry if I am not too politically correct, but I never tried to be phony. Let me just add that they were all very friendly, they were happy to pose for us (and then see themselves on the little screen), and they found us as amusing as we did them. From what I could tell, they were also exchanging jokes and humoristic comments on our account! Who knows,
maybe when they saw me with my oversized nose, they said to each other "We bet that his bulging nose in his passport picture prevents him from closing his passport". Or maybe when they saw Mor they pitied him and said "Poor thing – tall like a giraffe. He will have hard time trying to find a girl that would marry him".

In any case, that was an enjoyable visit to both sides. Later, we returned to the monastery and joined the monks in their afternoon poojah (a ritual or prayer), while a cute kid (see below in the picture of a young cadet) kept filling our cups with butter tea. The monks included Mor and Tonya (who got engaged the day before) in their prayers and blessed them, so we can only assume, with a long and happy life together. We then went upstairs to the roof to look over the amazing beauty of the surrounding landscape that was only intensified at sunset.

A Trivia Gem

India's time is non-standard: GMT+5:30h. Do you know why? One explanation suggests that since India is large and insisted on having only one time zone (like China), the half hour offset offered the needed compromise between the eastern and western natural time zones. After being told that this explanation is wrong, I thought that the strange time offset is a manifestation of their independence from England and its Greenwich time. This week I learnt that the opposite is true. If you have an analog watch – turn it upside down. The hour that you see now is (roughly) 5:30 hours before the time. This way, the lazy Brits could tell the time back home without exerting their feeble brains too much!