

Pilgrimage

[*n.* a journey to a place with special significance]

At least once in their lifetime, Nepali people make a pilgrimage up to the ancient Hindu temples of Muktinath, one of the most important religious sites in the Nepalese Himalaya. It is believed that to take a bath in the 108 fountains will wash away lifetimes of karma. Yogi Krista Bernard takes us on her journey with her Nepalese yoga teacher.

The plane is rising, dipping and gliding through the Kali Gandaki canyon, situated within the highest range of mountains in the world, the Himalayas. Outside the window the sun strikes the dazzling white snow, piercing my eyes. Far below, the jungle becomes steadily sparser, altitude slowly rendering the land inhospitable.

The jagged ice peaks of the sweeping Himalayas slice through the blue sky. I feel like I have lived here in a past life, too distant to remember, yet too close to touch.

The tiny six-seater jet lands in Jomsom, at an altitude of 2770 metres. Our pilgrimage begins here. The group is made up of my Nepalese yoga teacher, Dr. Shakti, her 68 year-old mother Amma, myself and three other yoga students – Enrica, Sandra, and Cathy.

We disembark and stand in a huddle. The ground is bare and dusty, and a fierce wind whips through the valley. Although it is late morning, we are still in the shadow of Nilgiri, the largest mountain in the region, and the air is cold and clear.

LEAVING THE AIRSTRIP, THE SIX OF US gather on the steps of a stone building. Amma stoops to tie the laces of her new trekking boots. She is a Nepali woman of the Newari caste and has lived in the Kathmandu Valley all her life. Her feet have only ever been in thongs. She has a puffy down jacket over her sari and navy

fleece trousers underneath the thin folds of silk. Her face shines with excitement – she has waited all these years to make this auspicious journey.

I SLING MY RUCKSACK ONTO MY BACK AND it feels cumbersome and heavy. It is laden with extra rice and flour, fruit and sweets we have brought to offer at the temple when we arrive. In my Western mind, the concept of trekking with three kilos of extra food – which I am to offer to the temple deities in Muktinath – is strange and new. I remind myself that this is no ordinary trek and Vishnu the Preserver – to whom the temple shrine is dedicated – might be hungry. I help adjust the straps of Amma's bag and notice that Dr. Shakti has marched off already.

The sound of donkey bells echoes down the hill towards us. These pack animals are strong and sure-footed. Although huge, heavy hemp sacks are strapped to their sides, they don't struggle or stumble on the stones. The donkeys are colourfully clad in mirrored headpieces and hand-woven rugs of rich reds and greens. Their manes and tails are plaited with ribbons. A young boy follows behind, swiping the air with a stick and whistling brightly. There's a swing to his step and a lightness that speaks of contentment. His trousers are ragged and dirty and he wears only thongs on his feet. "Namaste!" he shouts with a grin – hands in prayer position.

The sun has finally risen over the Himalayan peaks and golden light floods the valley. Porters and guides slink off quietly, realising there is no business to be made from us. Tibetan women, wearing bright headscarves and stripy aprons, still hang around in the hope that we will buy trinket souvenirs from them a miniature prayer wheel, a turquoise necklace, a Sherpa knife.

We make tracks. Our route follows the course of the Kali Gandaki River, the deepest canyon in the world. We're taking the winter path, which sticks mainly to the riverbed. During this season, much of the water upstream is frozen but when the ice melts in the summer the river rages and high, steep paths must be made.

ON BOTH SIDES OF THE RIVER, 8,000 METRE mountains strike into the clear blue sky. The pure majesty of this landscape makes me blink back tears. Prayer flags bearing mantras and wishes for compassion catch the wind and mani stones engraved with the same prayers line the track.

The pilgrims rest on a rounded boulder. Amma is puffing already. At this high altitude, her asthma is exacerbated, and her steps are slow and breathless. Sandra offers to carry her pack and Enrica takes out some of the temple goodies. We scoff them secretly. Dr. Shakti is still pacing ahead.

Our trek to Muktinath is slow. Amma has been suffering with blisters and asthma, so Dr. Shakti hires a donkey from a willing Sherpa for her to ride.

MUKTINATH THREE DAYS LATER... THE mountains are silhouetted against the dawn sky. I get up and put on every single item of clothing I have – but I'm still cold. Amma and Dr. Shakti are already outside, stomping on the hard frozen ground. Their breath condenses in the icy air. Light sprinkles of snow dust the ground in small patches.

Muktinath sits at an altitude of 3710 metres and the temples we're visiting are about 200 metres higher. Once again Dr. Shakti marches on ahead. Enrica and I help Amma up the stone steps. The only sounds are slow gravelly footsteps and Amma's wheezing breath. My cheeks feel tight and my lips are beginning to crack a little. My hands are so cold that I place them under my armpits – when I become a better yoga student, I'll place my feet under there too.

By the time we arrive at the temple, Dr. Shakti's already taken a bath in the

sacred fountains. In the Hindu tradition it is believed that bathing here will wash away lifetimes of karma. I visit each of the 108 spouts, assiduously splashing water on my forehead, hoping for the same result.

Enlightenment doesn't strike this time, and instead Dr. Shakti orders me to collect firewood for our puja – an ancient yogic ritual. I have never taken part in anything such as this before and I feel slight trepidation.

We sit in a circle, cross-legged around the fire, which is spluttering as the wet wood does its best to keep alight. Amma anxiously fans it with newspaper every time it threatens to go out. The smoke is getting in my eyes and catching the back of my throat, but I keep on chanting the mantra Dr. Shakti has given us.

OUR DEVOTED YOGA TEACHER THROWS some dry herbs onto the flames. They spit and crackle, giving off a heady perfume. We chant some more.

Nearly an hour has passed and 108 slow rounds of this mantra. My voice and my heart have opened and I feel a strange sense of elation and calm mixed. The last

of the wood is put on the fire and when it dies out, we sit in silence for meditation.

The auspicious puja, this great ceremony, is over. Dr. Shakti unfolds her legs, jumps up and rings all the temple bells, one after another. We leave the rice and sweets in a neat mound in front of Vishnu and salute him with a final namaste.

SACREDNESS SURROUNDS THE MOUNTAINS and peace is echoed in the footsteps of those who have walked this path before me. Our pilgrimage has left me with humble gratitude and wonderment for the ancient yogic tradition. I hope some day to return to this place, to once again make temple offerings and chant to Vishnu, whose form represents the force that sustains the universe – without and within.

Krista Bernard is an Australian yoga teacher and writer travelling overseas. She is currently in the first stages of her next pilgrimage, cycling from London to Lhasa in Tibet. You can read about her previous pilgrimage in *Australian Yoga Life* issue three.