

## ***Nomads With Needles***

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8,000 feet above the world, at a monastery tucked into the foothills of the Himalayas, resident monks and nuns emerge to greet us, a group of visiting acupuncturists from the United States. Prayer flags flutter in the breeze. And the stone façade of the Nepalese monastery stands as it has since the Middle Ages, holding the prayers and meditations of countless Buddhists over the centuries. During our visit, those steeped in the ancient Buddhist traditions will receive traditional treatment with Oriental medicine. The art and science of acupuncture comes from this part of the world. Our group of volunteers from Acupuncturists Without Borders are bringing it back to this community. Our guides on this journey, residents of Nepal, are Wild Earth Journeys' leaders Carroll Dunham, anthropologist, and Thomas Kelly, photographer .

As we insert five little needles in each monk or nun's ear (needles brought to these free treatments thanks to a generous donation from Lhasa OMS,) the hum of talking, chanting, movement, and maroon robes swaying, begins to quiet. A deep silence falls on the group as they settle into the moment. We finish our work and check to make sure each client is sitting safely and comfortably, ready to plunge into a deep state of healing. The treatment helps each person's nervous system recover from any loss of emotional or physical equilibrium they may be experiencing, as they relax and feel safe and nourished on a profound level.

Every now and then the silence is interrupted by the deep quick tones of the music coming from inside the monastery. The monastery is deep in the midst of puja practice for an honored teacher who is near death. For us as westerners used to meditating in silence or with quiet music, this cacophony of sounds seems unusual.

At the end of the acupuncture treatment, our hosts applaud.

Being from the United States, it's hard for us to contemplate the discipline it takes to sit in spiritual practice for hours, days, weeks, and months, chanting and meditating like these hundreds of monks and nuns do every day. Their faces and the energy they exude is gentle, sweet, and kind. Imagine 15 year old boys in the U.S., hundreds of them, living this way!

Life for us as visiting Americans at the monastery challenges our normal habits. For example. bathrooms at the monastery guest house consist of several Turkish sieges (a porcelain piece on the ground with a hole in it, and 2 foot steps astride the hole). Some of them have a flush which is more than I've seen in other countries with the same type of set up. The guesthouse was built by a group of Tibetans from Switzerland, as a place for Tibetan refugees to stay after coming across the border into Nepal. It is still used for this purpose. When the refugees arrive they have walked for weeks over the highest passes in the Himalayas bringing nothing with them but the clothes on their backs.

We are lucky to have this place to stay.

Accommodations are simple...small rooms, each with two twin beds, a thin mattress, a sheet and a pillow. The building is pine construction with no insulation and no central heat. In fact, there is no such thing as central heat in these Himalayan villages. People live in warm clothes and stay by their fires. Some kitchens still have the fire in the kitchen with no chimney, so respiratory problems abound.

Dr. Rigzin is a traditional Tibetan medicine doctor, (called an amchi,) in residence at this monastery. His somber expression belies the enthusiasm with which he welcomes our group. After we spend a few days together, he is convinced he wants to learn our treatment methods. On our next trip to Nepal we plan to train Nepalese healing practitioners how to use Oriental medicine techniques to treat members of their communities. Our focus will be on assisting these healers in addressing the residual trauma in their country left over from many years of internal struggle and conflict. In this way, we hope to support the current fragile peace in this nation. When unresolved trauma abounds, it can seriously interfere in individual and community progress toward peace.

Micah O'Neal, acupuncturist and trip participant told of her visit to the monastery:

“After Lama Kelsang blessed us with his teachings about the Buddhist traditions and the true meaning of happiness (letting go of the materialistic mindset of most Americans,) AWB had the honor of treating over 80 young monks. What a powerful experience!

Because there were so many eager monks who wanted to be treated, AWB volunteers divided into three areas. In shifts, we gave our initial demonstration of what the healing session would be like. With the help of an interpreter from the monastery, we showed the young monks the needles, described how to clean their ears properly, and demonstrated how the needles would be inserted. We encouraged them to close their eyes and relax during the treatment.

Treatments lasted 30-45 minutes. The young monks were instantly pros - so brave and eager to try something new. In the room where I gave treatments, the youngest monk was 4 years old. With the help of an adult we taught the young monks how to breathe in and out as the 5 needles were inserted into each ear.

As the sun shown through the monastery windows, the young monks glowed with peace and relaxation. I've never witnessed anything like it and feel honored to have been a part of AWB international work. After this experience none of us will ever view ourselves or this world in the same way. I now feel that the world is not as big, and human beings are not as different, as I once felt they were.”

AWB originally sprang into action in 2005 in response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita in New Orleans. The organization trained over 80 acupuncturists to work in the wake of this disaster of huge proportions, and offered over 8,000 treatments to flood survivors and rescue workers. Acupuncture treats the emotional toll taken by such a disaster as much as addresses the physical trauma.

A year after the hurricanes, when AWB was having a Board meeting in New Orleans, a waitress at the Hotel Monteleone, (which donated the use of rooms to AWB,) came up to one of the Board members and reported that the treatments she received from AWB after Katrina saved her life, since before treatment she was very depressed and even suicidal. The treatments used in the wake of disaster are often based on a protocol originally developed by the National Acupuncture Detoxification Association (NADA) for supporting recovery from substance abuse. That protocol is now recognized worldwide as being highly effective for treating post traumatic stress disorder, as well as stress in general.

There are many explanations for how acupuncture works. What we know for sure is that it has been used successfully for at least 3,000 years, around the world, to treat a wide variety of conditions. In the treatments AWB provides, endorphins are released, (the body's natural "feel good" chemicals,) and the sympathetic nervous system's fight or flight response is calmed. The deep peace that treatment recipients experience seems to help them connect to a quiet space inside themselves from which they can begin to heal many kinds pain, imbalance, and trauma.

Because it is so simple, and requires so little technology, acupuncture lends itself to being a type of "barefoot" medicine as it was used in China throughout the Cultural Revolution, which was of course a particularly difficult time in Chinese history. Acupuncturists Without Borders is now sharing this profound healing practice internationally.

"Acupuncture can help to revolutionize health care among communities in need around the world," says Cynthia Neipris, Director of Outreach and Community Education at Pacific College of Oriental Medicine in Manhattan, and also an AWB Advisory Board member. "It is perfect for rural, hard-to-reach communities, with little or no access to other forms of health care." Neipris adds: "The western medical world is only now realizing what a great complement acupuncture is to what western medicine provides, because of its low cost, low-tech versatility and orientation toward prevention."

Acupuncturists Without Borders is bringing training as well as treatment to underserved communities internationally. The trainings teach health care practitioners basic acupuncture techniques and other methods common to Asian healing practices, (such as the use of metal balls called "ear seeds" on acupuncture points, and qigong - pronounced 'chee gong" - energy practices for deep body, mind, spirit healing.)

In addition to the work at the Monastery in Nepal, our group visited people in their homes and gave treatments in their kitchens, while we were served Nepali Masala tea. When we sat on wooden benches, in little hut-like kitchens, dark and smoky with big brass and copper pots lining the walls, (a sign of wealth,) the camaraderie and warmth of spirit was priceless. What a gift it was for us to be able to bring healing into these people's lives.

In the village of Phalpu, (Diana, where in Nepal? North? Central?) we visited the local health center. Because of funds brought to this project by a European funder, the health center is quite nice compared to what it might be without this outside investment. People struggling with a variety of illnesses sat outside on the grass, feeling the sun, and noticing the visitors. When we arrived we walked into a room

where there was a young man who hadn't been able to walk for a week. He was despairing, feeling that he might never walk again. The next day one of the acupuncturists from our group went to treat him, forsaking the climb up to see a view of Everest, as the rest of our group slogged uphill. By the end of his treatment, the young man was doing deep knee bends. Everyone was ecstatic. The acupuncture had brought him hope, and there is nothing more healing than hope. The next day, he was out on the grass and had taken 15 steps.

In Nepal, Acupuncturists Without Borders will provide training this year for Nepalese acupuncturists, Tibetan doctors, village health promoters, and nonprofits working with addiction recovery as well as to stop the trafficking of young girls and others. The practitioners who will be trained are very enthusiastic about learning how to do this type of treatment. A part of the training will include disaster relief skills, something AWB has been providing in the U.S. for several years. Nepal is a high risk area for earthquakes. The acupuncturists in Nepal are particularly eager to learn about the systems AWB has developed for treating survivors in an emergency.

On our trip, we felt the Nepalese people were very strong, physically, and in their spirits. When we trekked to the foothills of the Himalayas, each porter who accompanied us carried three large backpacks in homemade baskets on their back, with a band that went around their head. Each porter's load weighed 180 pounds. To get to the "job site" where they met us, the porters walked for four days from their homes, plus a one day bus ride. We, on the other hand, got on an airplane in Kathmandu and flew for 45 minutes. Some might say we are privileged to be so rich, (the average Nepali income is 2\$/day,) but I often wonder. I am envious of the warmth, gentleness, and person-to-person connections that we saw everywhere in Nepal.

And then, there are also circumstances that are difficult for us, as westerners, to understand. One day, walking through villages surrounded by rice fields and the miracle of terraced farming fields, we came upon a group of children playing on a huge swing made of bamboo. (I imagine that this is one of the few playful activities available to children, as we saw so many children working so hard. And to go to school, many of them have to walk for 3 hours one way.) Suddenly one of the children fell off the swing. Everyone was scared. The mother quickly came up and hit the child, perhaps out of her own fear.

Throughout our trip, we saw many children being hit, and my heart tore open each time as I thought, "What can I do?" We also saw animals being hit and kicked, or wandering the streets with deep untended wounds. It is certainly a different culture, difficult for us to understand, from our perspective of luxury and privilege. Traveling in Nepal challenges one to stay open to other cultural ways, and yet maintain one's own sense of morality, or simply keep one's heart open when it feels like it is breaking.

Other things in the US might hurt someone else's heart. When I came home I noticed on the airport train that no one looked at each other – there was no noise, no talk. This was in sharp, drastic comparison to the experience in Nepal, where it was as if everyone was a neighbor or a family member who would be helped if there was a need.

The dilemma of a traveler.

As I return home to all my material “stuff,” I wander over to the cabinet to get some tape. I notice the stack of 3 rolls of extra tape...enough to last a long time. I think back to Nepal. Acupuncturist John Ross had noticed that one of the sherpas was eyeing his roll of duct tape. John decided to give it to the Sherpa as a gift. When he handed it over, the sherpa’s eyes lit up...he graciously thanked John profusely, touching his whole body and bowing down and knocking his head as a gesture of thanks. The sherpa quickly went to hide it in his beat up old sack...twisting the top shut in a knot and making sure none of his Sherpa colleagues saw him put it there.

When we returned, one of our group members decided to sponsor a little boy who we got to know. Others came back deeply committed to continuing this work. We were sad at leaving one another from our traveling group; the bonds created on such a journey are life-altering. At the heart of what we are doing is a healing exchange that takes many forms. The monks exchanged their love with us, and we with them through our needles.

The amchis exchanged their professional expertise with us and this exchange was mutual. When we visited with the Tibetan doctors (Amchis), we weren’t sure how they would take to our medicine. But in these shared moments, we found they were so excited to work with us, to receive treatment, as well as to take our pulses and offer us their medicine. One of the participants walked away from their treatment with an Amchi saying, “How did he know I had an accident that hurt my back when I was young, just from taking my pulse?” We began to see the spark that can happen when visitors come not just to fill themselves with the riches of being in another culture, but also to bring gifts. In our case, these gifts took the form of healing treatments, offered for free and with no expectations.

When given the opportunity most people want to share and help each other: from the traveling acupuncturists to the Buddhist monks, to the overwhelmed mother who cares about the safety of her child, to Lhasa OMS, a U.S. company which donated the needles to AWB for the trip to Nepal. We are all one community.