

# Tea in Tibet: All in the Family

by Robert Wyss

**D**iversity, like Beauty, is really in the eyes of the beholder, isn't it? Who among us bright-eyed Ball State undergraduates participating in the university's London Center Program back in 1985 will ever forget the bold hypothesis suggested by our professor, Dr. A. N. Bradbury, curator of the Tate Gallery, during the first class of our modern art course in the dusty basement of that London museum: "An object is beautiful insofar as it is unusual, out-of-the-ordinary, different."

As the end of the course drew near, I found myself still struggling to esteem the "unusual" Picasso or the "out-of-the-ordinary" Dali over the "classic" masterpieces rendered by the capable hands of my favorite Renaissance virtuosi. I had, however, learned something indispensable: exposure to diversity expands horizons, enriches life.

This maxim finds its truest expression in the sphere of human affairs. Contact with people whose cultural, ethnic and linguistic orientation differs from our own challenges our most hidebound assumptions. Last October, my wife and I set out on a six-week excursion across the Tibet Plateau high in the Himalayas in search of the Diverse — or rather, what we expected to be diverse.

The arduous hike, which began at sunrise in a faraway Chinese village, eventually culminated in an epiphany at 15,000 feet: rising ahead of us in the open plain the whitewashed Tibetan Buddhist monastery radiated in the stark sunlight of the autumn afternoon. While we explored the 400-year-old abbey of the Gelug sect ("Virtuous Ones"), a monk wearing a crimson woolen habit called us over to a stone wall enclosing a dirt courtyard. It seemed as if the cleric, who introduced himself as Kom, had been expecting us. "Come, come," he said. "Let us have tea."

We followed the gracious monk past a temple where the perfume of burning incense emanated from a glowing interior brightened by votive candles. A group of young devotees had gathered and were seated in lotus

posture on long cedar planks where they repeated a mantra counted on sandalwood prayer beads.

Once inside the shadowy solitude of the abbey's spacious, sooty kitchen, the monk shared with us his thoughts about the Chinese occupation of his country. "We try to live in our own way, but it is difficult because so much has been taken from us," he said, laying twigs in a wood-burning stove in preparation of the traditional yak butter tea. "But if the pandas have a right to survive, then so do we!" he added, beaming the warm smile characteristic of the people of the plateau. After the tiring 10-hour hike through the mountains, the steaming cups of tea and Kom's affability were revitalizing.

Kom explained that he has lived at the monastery as far back as he can remember. Orphaned at four years old, he was taken by relatives to the abbots, who trained him in their austere discipline — a regimen based on the memorization and recitation of ancient prayers and strenuous daily meditation. Last year he was appointed one of the order's 12 chief scribes. "When I was a child, I began writing every day at five o'clock in the morning," he said. "I learned the ancient calligraphy and copied the sacred texts over and over again all day [in order to honor] Dalai Lama."

Although Kom has never met the Dalai Lama, he draws his inspiration from Tibet's exiled spiritual leader. "Everything I know comes from Dalai Lama," he said, folding his hands and bowing his head in reverence each time he uttered the name of His Holiness.

We asked Kom about his family. "My family?" the scribe responded quizzically after a long, reflective silence. "You are my family," he exclaimed, looking us squarely in the eye. "You in America and all over the world. We are all one family."

And so it is. Trekking across the "rooftops of the world" in those remote, rarified mountain ranges, encountering people as culturally diverse as they are geographically distant from the lifeways of my native home in the vast cornfields of northern Indiana, I concluded that the same fundamental themes of living must surely sustain people everywhere. The will to live freely, the opportunity to cultivate and refine personal talents, the need for relationship with one's family and with the sacred, the need to feel a sense of community with others: these strands come in different colors but interweave the fabric of all our lives, wherever or whoever we may be.

"We all need help in life," Kom concluded as we said our goodbyes. "You help me, I help you." He reached up and grabbed a bulky, cone-shaped block of yak cheese from a shelf. Breaking the cheese in two and offering half to us, he said, "Thank you to all the people in the world. Thank you for your friendship."

Given the pluralistic society in which we live, embracing diversity doesn't have to involve travelling far. In Indiana alone there are hundreds of organizations that offer a multitude of activities and events all year-round. A glance at upcoming events listed in *Branches* or other publications reveals any number of ways interested Hoosiers can explore and further their intercultural interests and expand their ethnic horizons while promoting unity in diversity in Indiana. Seek Diversity, if you haven't already, and don't be surprised if you find your life enriched in some significant way for the experience. ♡

Robert Wyss is a Fort Wayne native who currently lives in Milan, Italy, where he works as a freelance language consultant. He recommends the Web site [http://klingon.cs.iupui.edu/~smckee/ethnic\\_indiana.html](http://klingon.cs.iupui.edu/~smckee/ethnic_indiana.html) for links to more than 100 ethnic organizations throughout Indiana representing dozens of countries. Photo at left by Regimella Sala.



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