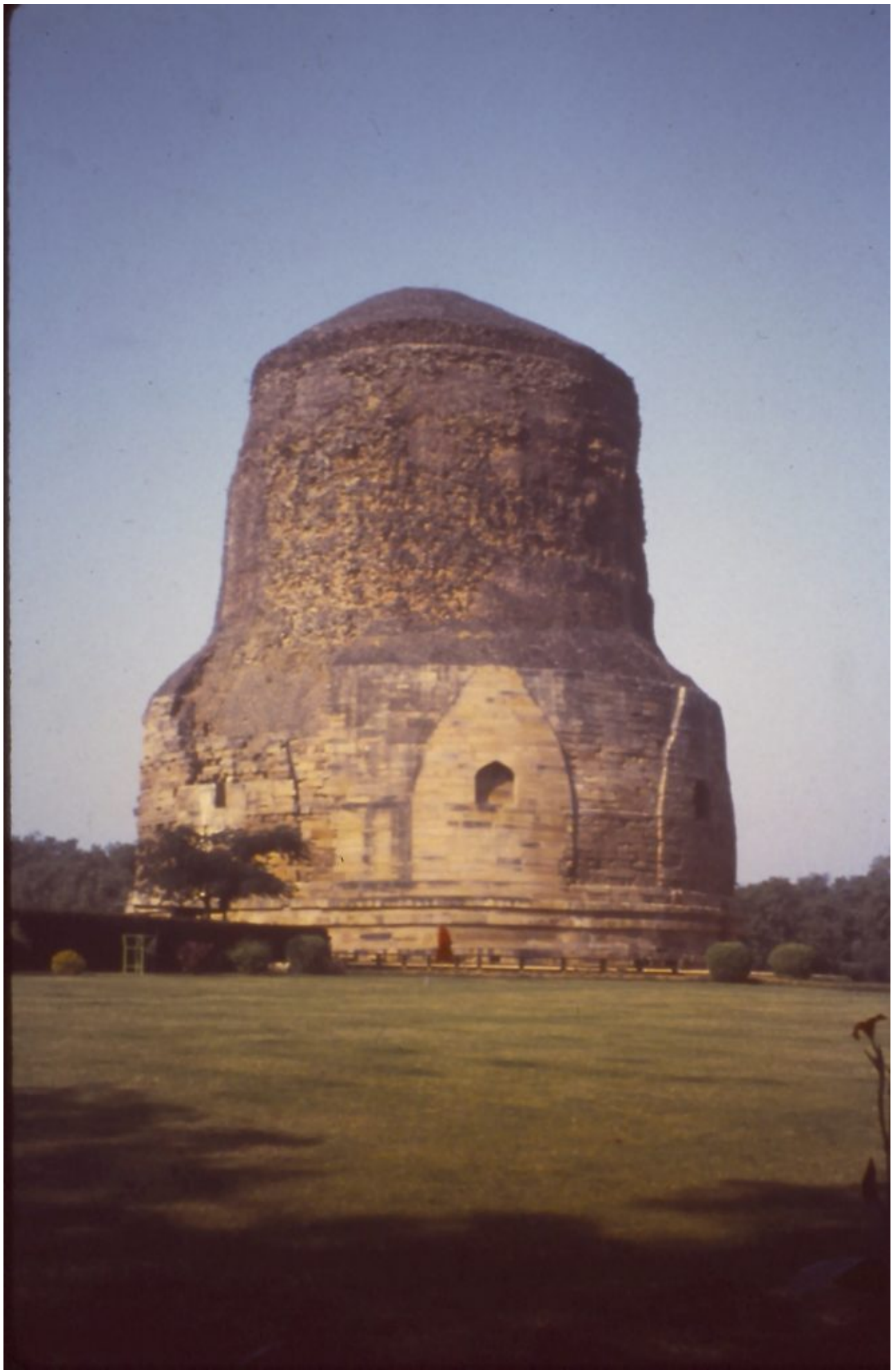


# Sarnath and Christmas

At this point in my travels, I was becoming disillusioned with what I observed of how the Hindu worldview worked out in everyday life. In an earlier post, I mentioned the cows that wandered about everywhere in the cities of India. Cows are regarded as sacred by most Hindus. In fact, I observed that cows were often treated better than humans. The idea that all life is sacred sounds exalted and noble. The reality is that if *all* life is sacred, then there is nothing really special about *human* life.

I also saw the outworking of the caste system, which was officially abolished in 1950 but which did (and still does) exercise great power in India. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy, who fall outside the four main categories of Brahmins (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and merchants) and the Shudras (laborers), are considered “untouchables” or Dalits. This whole system of caste is tied to Hinduism and the concept of karma and reincarnation. That view says that, when I die, if I have lived a virtuous life, I will be reborn into better life circumstances. If I have led a bad life, then I will be reborn into worse life circumstances. The inescapable conclusion is that those of lower caste deserve to be there because of evil done in a previous life.



Even though Buddhism holds to the same philosophy of karma and reincarnation, it didn't seem to me at the time to have the same disastrous social consequences. As a result I channeled my hunger for truth toward Buddhism for the remainder of my time in India. The first deliberate step in that direction was traveling from Benares to Sarnath, about seven miles distant. This village is sacred to Buddhists because it is where Gautama Buddha supposedly preached his first sermon. It was a peaceful village with a large Buddhist monument or stupa, which dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century and sits atop an older structure built by King Asoka in 249 BC. If you look closely at my photo, you can see a red robed Tibetan Buddhist monk walking around the stupa.

There was a *dharamshala* (a rest house for spiritual pilgrims) in Sarnath, where those who stay pay what they can afford. I was able to stay for a few days and planned to return for a longer stay in the New Year (1971). While in Sarnath, I met an Indian doctor who was an instructor in preventive medicine, running free clinics in neighboring villages. He was reading "Politics of Ecstasy" (by Timothy Leary) and had turned on once to LSD.

I was reading voraciously and widely at the time. While there I read Aldous Huxley's *Island* and *Beyond the Tenth* by a man born Cyril Henry Hoskin who claimed that his body hosted the spirit of a Tibetan lama by the name of T. Lobsang Rampa. I was also starting to build a small library of some of the Buddhist classics, such as the *Diamond Sutra* and *The Dhammapada*, which gave me a solid foundation for understanding classical Buddhist thought.

The Stringhams had invited me to spend time with them at

Christmas, so I headed back to Lucknow a couple days before Christmas. I truly enjoyed being with a family for Christmas and relished the church services with many of the traditional Christmas carols. Even though I was becoming more drawn to Buddhism, I still considered myself a Christian and believed there was a legitimate way to blend an Eastern worldview with the Christian faith. Would a true synthesis really be possible?

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## Next Stop – Benares

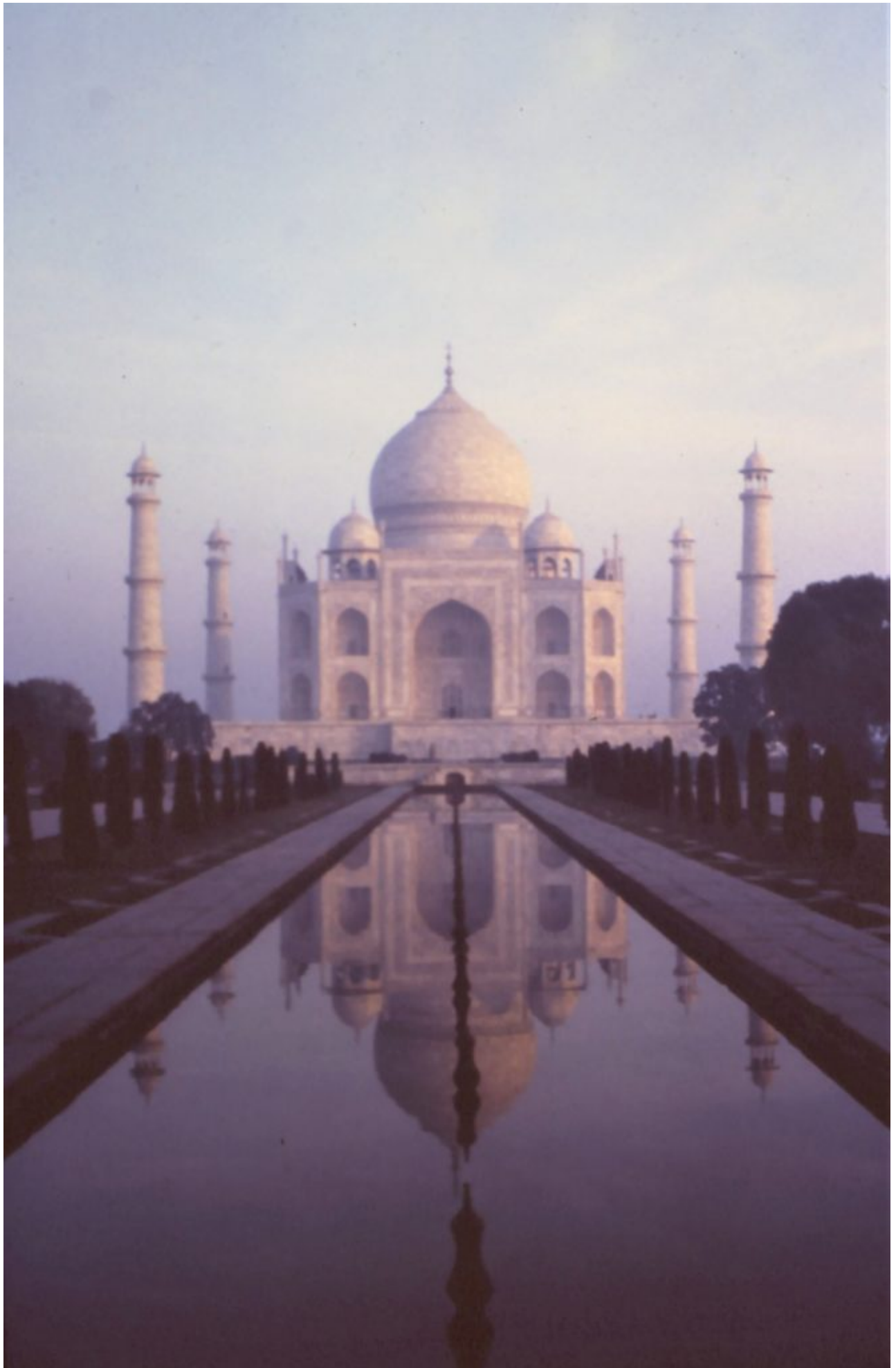
At the beginning of December, I fled the cold in Darjeeling and headed back to my home away from home with Jim and Charlotte Stringham in Lucknow. They continued to show me unconditional love and to make me feel welcome. Whenever they went to service or prayer meetings, I tagged along. Here's what I wrote back to my parents about my experience of Christianity in India.

“One of the facets of India that has amazed me most is Christianity. One expects to meet Christians in a ‘Christian’ country, such as America proports to be. The Christians one meets in India don’t *seem* astonishing because they stand out in relief against people of other religions. They *are* astonishing because they are seriously trying to live the life that Christ lived—something I have witnessed little of in America.”

I continued to write (remember that I’m still an unbeliever):

“The most important thing that is required is for everyone, YES!, ME TOO, to realize that they are not serious enough about being Christians. They need to surrender their lives completely to God—this is the only thing that really is effective. Otherwise, we are leading lives of rebellion and are no use to God besides which our rebellion keeps us from receiving God’s gifts, which He wants to give to us.”

After a few days, I climbed aboard my usual III<sup>rd</sup> class sleeper to New Delhi to check in at the embassy and collect any mail being held for me. I made a quick side trip to Agra to see the Taj Mahal and Red Fort. Unlike some tourist attractions, there was nothing disappointing about the Taj Mahal. It is a gorgeous edifice with perfect proportions, a true labor of love. The carving of the marble and the inlays of semi-precious stones are breathtaking. I stayed in one of the least savory hotels I visited while in India. I can testify that it had a truly “gray atmosphere” and that there were “flash latrins”.



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From Agra, I moved on to Varanasi (Benares). Even as an unbeliever, I felt that there was something spiritually dark about Varanasi. As one person put it "half the people are stoned and the other half are waiting to die." To friends, I wrote, "A person is supposed to gain the equivalent of 'grace' by dying and having his/her body burned and ashes scattered in the most sacred of all Indian rivers—the Ganges. It's a sobering thing to watch a body burn on a funeral pyre—really brings home the futility of most ventures on earth."





I wrote my parents, "Took a nice boat ride along the Ganges and saw the people bathing and performing their religious duties. Spent quite a bit of time at the burning ghats. Males are brought in white shrouds, females in red. The ghats run around the clock. Some of the bodies are wrapped with garlands of flowers, which passing cows casually nibble off."

Until the early 1800s, widows were burned alive (often unwillingly) on their husbands funeral pyres, a practice called sati, which was supposedly supported by the Hindu scriptures. The great Indian missionary, William Carey, took a lead role in convincing the British authorities to finally outlaw the practice in 1829. Carey and some notable Indian scholars of the Sanskrit language argued convincingly that there was no support for this horrific practice in the Hindu sacred writings.



I will save the account of my visit to the nearby village of Sarnath for a later post.