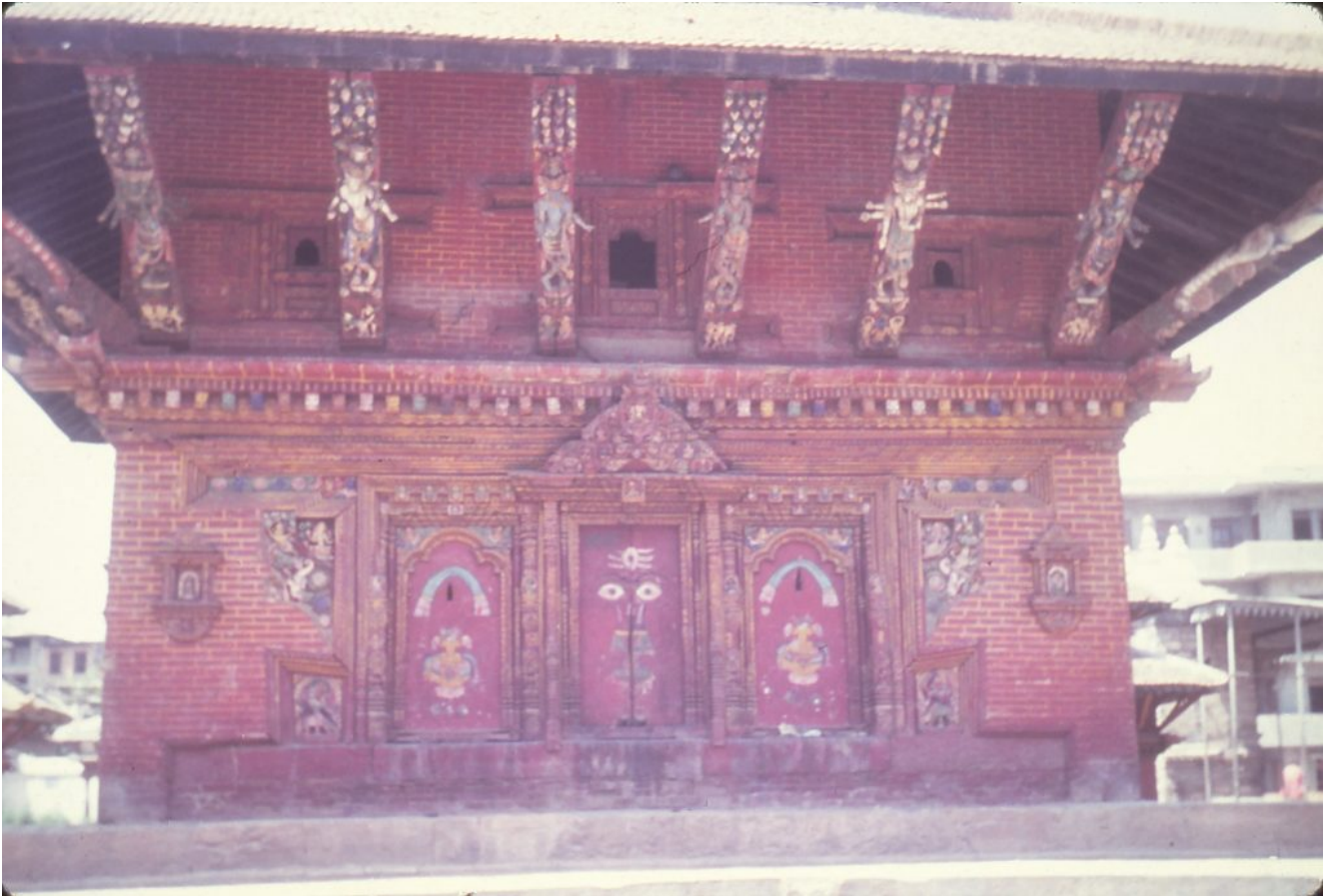


Next Stop – Nepal

Our Zen meditation group left Bodh Gaya on the 25th of March, 1971 headed for Nepal. It turned out to be a full two day ordeal. The first day, we woke at 3 a.m. and piled on two horse carts to travel from Bodh Gaya to Gaya. We caught a train at 5 a.m. for Patna. We arrived in Patna at 8 a.m. just in time to catch horse cart to the ferry to cross the Ganges at 8:30 a.m. On the other side, there was about a mile walk to the train station. The train left there at 11 a.m.. At that time, there was still a section of the route that was narrow gauge. We switched to the narrow gauge at 5 p.m. and arrived in Raxaul at 8 p.m. Whew!

The second travel day, we got bicycle rickshaw to the Nepal border. Some of our group were able to get bus and some trucks at the border, but we were too late. We began to despair at noon when a taxi stopped and offered to take the remaining five of us the 84 miles to Kathmandu for about \$3 apiece. The drive was spectacular, leaving the low-lying plain of the Indian subcontinent, then climbing steadily to an 8,000 feet elevation before descending into the Kathmandu valley at 4,600 feet, We arrived at nightfall and were reunited as a group. An exhausting two days!

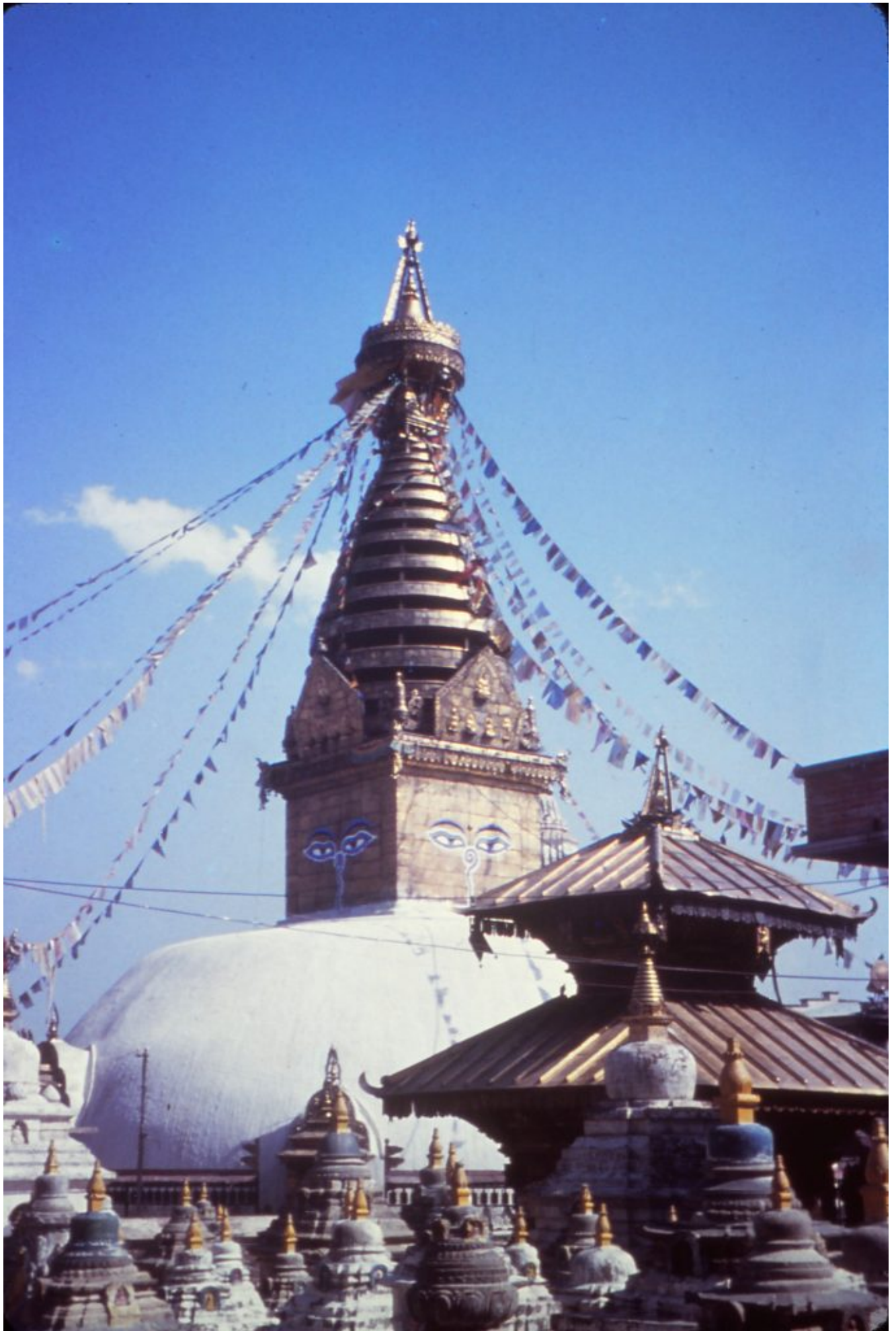


Kathmandu was an amazing city 50 years ago. There were and are a host of Hindu temples like the Jagannath Temple in Durbar Square (above), most of them with their own fantastically painted and adorned resident sadhus (holy men). Yet, it was also one of the most “Western” cities that I had experienced in the East. There were a great number of Westerners, both hippies and straight. Many restaurants served typical Indian and Nepali dishes. Others catered to Westerners, serving steak (Buffalo) and French Fries, pork chops, and pasteurized milk.

A favorite with many of us was an establishment named Vishnu’s Pie ‘n’ Chai Palace on Pig Street, where we could get a slice of a great variety of pies along with a cup of chai (tea). Walking down the main tourist street (nicknamed Freak Street at the time), music of the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and other rock bands came blaring out of tea shops, along with the ubiquitous smell of cheap, legal hashish. In

the midst of all the hedonism being catered to on Freak Street, I heard Mike Jagger's voice shouting, "No Satisfaction!" Ironic?!?

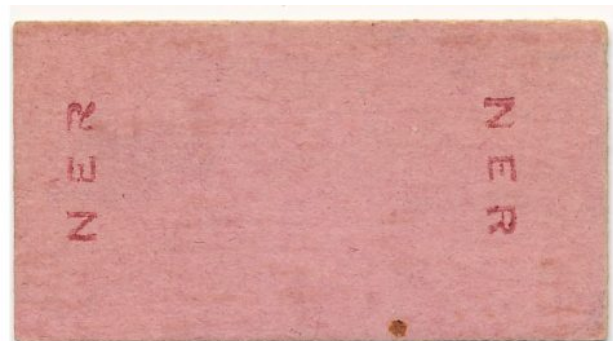
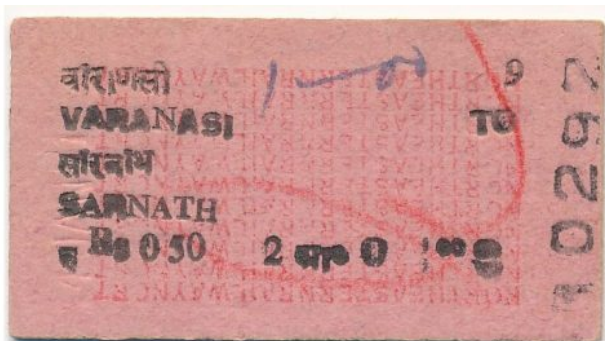
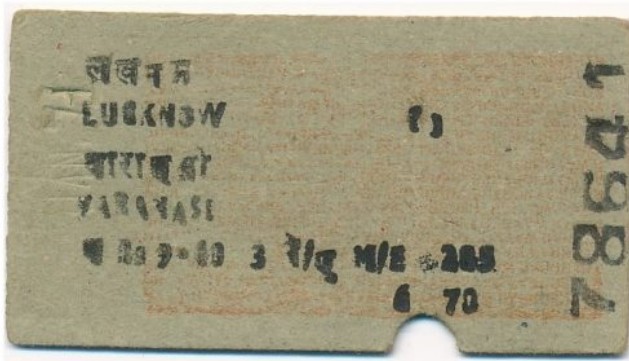
There were (and are) also many Buddhist temples and shrines, of particular interest to our little group of Zen Buddhists. The most famous of these is Swayambhunath, an ancient temple complex on a hill to the west of Kathmandu, which sported hundreds of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags. It is also known as the Monkey Temple because of the hundreds of monkeys that inhabit the site and are considered holy to Hindus and Tibetan Buddhists. The monkeys had the run of the temple complex, especially at night.



While in Nepal, I was able to fulfill a lifelong dream by trekking in the foothills of the Himalaya mountain range. Fortunately, my British friend Richard, with whom I'd been meditating, also had a desire to do the same. We set out on the 31st of March 50 years ago on a trek into the mountains northeast of Kathmandu. That trek deserves a post all of its own.

A Momentous Decision

After a quick excursion to Delhi to check for mail and to Lucknow to spend a couple days at my home way from home (the Stringhams), I headed back to Bodh Gaya. I once again "enjoyed" my 3rd class Indian Railways accommodations. I have a powerful image in my mind from this time, which highlights the vast distinctions in Indian society that existed 50 years ago (and still exist today). I arrived at the station early one morning to catch a train. The train platform was covered with poorer people sleeping on their blankets. A wealthy Indian lady arrived dressed in a gorgeous sari with accents of gold thread woven into the pattern. She gingerly made her way through the mass of humanity on the platform and into her first class carriage.



I got back quickly into the daily routine that I've described in an earlier post. There was some excitement during the month of March. The advent of the full moon on March 11 was celebrated by oboes and 10 foot trumpets from the roof of the Tibetan temple. The following day, the Hindus celebrated Holi. It's the festival of colors, in which colored water is squirted on passersby, something none of us escaped entirely.

Something more profound was going on in my mind and heart. As much as I wanted to find an honest way of holding to both the Christian faith and the Eastern religious worldview, I was finding it more difficult. Two experiences led me to make a far-reaching decision to at least postpone my Eastern search in order to more fully investigate the form of Christianity that I had witnessed in Christians in India and was reading about in the Schaeffers' books.

One incident is permanently seared on my mind. One evening,

our little group of Zen Buddhists had gone over to the Mahabodhi temple to meditate under the Bo tree (the ancestor of the tree under which Gautama Buddha gained Enlightenment). I still have two leaves from that tree. We had an especially long time of meditation seated in a circle. One of our group, a big dude, Danny, had played football in high school and college. As a result he had very bad knees, which made it difficult for him to sit cross-legged for long periods of time.

At one point in the meditation, Danny shifted his position ever so slightly to try to relieve the increasing pain. Zengo noticed and commanded, "Stop moving!" Another 10 or 15 minutes went by slowly. Once again Danny moved slightly. This time, Zengo shouted, "Stop moving! The pain is all in your mind!" I can still recreate the scene in my mind. A Tibetan Buddhist monk in his maroon robe is crossing behind our meditation circle. Then Danny falls over backwards from the pain that was all in his mind, his legs still crossed.



The second incident was, in retrospect, of even greater significance. I've mentioned before that each member of our group had a daily interview with Zengo, during which we could ask any question we wished to ask. One day I asked Zengo, "What do you think of Jesus Christ." Zengo took a moment to formulate an answer, then replied, "I think he was very

enlightened man.” Either that same day or the next, I was reading in the Bible I carried with me and “chanced” to read in John 14:6 this outrageous statement by Jesus. “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Here was this highly enlightened man claiming to be the only way to God.

Gautama Buddha never declared himself the only way to God or encouraged any kind of veneration from his followers. There’s a famous Zen koan (a paradoxical statement that is supposed to shove the mind toward enlightenment) that goes, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!” The basic idea is that any conception of Buddha outside oneself needs to be put to death before being able to discover the Buddha nature within. Something like that. Whereas Jesus was pointing to Himself, the man standing before His disciples and proclaiming Himself as the only way to God, the only full embodiment of Truth and Life.

This shocking statement, more than any other single factor, led me to a pivotal decision. Our Zen group was about to leave for Nepal to escape the oppressive heat of an Indian summer. I decided to travel with them but then to part ways rather than continue to pursue Zen or any other Eastern practice. Instead, I purposed to travel back overland to Switzerland, to hopefully participate in the life and community of L’Abri. I wanted to fully examine the way of Jesus, knowing that I could always return to the Eastern way if the Jesus way proved to be a dead end.

From the end of March to the end of April, I was going to be once again on the road.

Looking Within

During the month of February 50 years ago, I began to settle into the new way of life at the Ashram. The daily rhythm of work and meditation began to feel more and more natural to me. The temperatures were still moderate with days in the 70s and nights down to the 40s. So there was little difficulty staying awake during the early morning meditation at 4:30. We usually walked once around the Mahabodhi Temple each morning at about 5:30 for a break in meditation. Most mornings we encountered an ancient Tibetan woman walking, chanting, and turning her prayer wheel. There was a prayer written around the circumference of the wheel. Each spin of the wheel supposedly repeated the prayer, thus adding to a person's merit.



To help my parents understand the basis of Zen, I wrote this: "Most people view Zen Buddhism as highly esoteric. The basis, however, is quite simple. Ego is at the root of all evil. As long as I have a preconceived idea of what you are like, I can

never see you as you really are. My love for you will never be free of self-interest. It is the same with anything—if you look at a rose and think “rose,” you start to limit it (sorry, that is a little too subtle). It’s a real difficulty to put words to things I’ve just felt for the first time.”

“Zen Buddhism teaches that people develop myriad preconceived ideas of the world and gradually become blind to things as they really are. So, when we sit for meditation, we try to quiet the mind and rid it of stray thoughts. When you observe this closely, it’s amazing to see what percentage of your thought is useful and what part is serving no purpose whatsoever. The second thrust of Zen is mindfulness. If working in the fields, have your entire attention there. Our meals are passed in silence—just eat, nothing else.”



One day our meditation group took a beautiful field trip to some nearby mountains. We took horse cart about four miles. From this point we crossed the river and had about a two-mile walk along the dikes between rice paddies, wheat fields, and fields of dal (a kind of lentil). The mountain we climbed was serpent-shaped and rose abruptly out of the otherwise flat terrain. Half way up we rested and had lunch near a small Tibetan temple, which was built near a cave where Buddha practiced asceticism before coming to Bodh Gaya. The view from

the top, looking on a cluster of houses, was like that from an airplane.



Although our diet remained largely the same, changing seasons brought some variety. During the month of February, we began to have some nice salads with carrot, banana and papaya. We also had a special breakfast treat from time to time called *sattu*, which is made from a flour ground from toasted corn, wheat and chick peas then served with sugar and hot water. It may not sound that appealing, but it was a great change of pace.

Along with my other reading, I was immersed in a couple books by Francis and Edith Shaeffer that the Stringhams loaned to me. *L'Abri* (the shelter) by Edith spoke about how the couple founded a Christian community in the Swiss Alps to which

hundreds of people (both Christians and seekers) come from all over the world to study and be part of a community seeking to live out their faith. *The God Who Is There* by Francis interacts with the main philosophical currents of Western thought from a Christian perspective. I was intrigued by what I was reading.

At the end of February, I took off for New Delhi to check for mail and update my visa then took my favorite overnight 3rd class sleeper to Lucknow to spend a few days with the Stringhams before returning to Bodh Gaya to continue my meditation practice.