

9 Days in Tibet

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by *Derek Conte, DC*



“Two months after my mother, Sarah, passed away in Dec. 2009, I saw an invitation in *The Chiropractic Journal* to join a mission trip to the mysterious and far away land of Tibet. A photo showed a small temple on a hill and two monks, robed in red, nearby.

In the background rose the massive, snow-covered slabs of the Himalayas. I was entranced. I never had any desire before to visit such a place, but somehow I was strongly called to go.

I had moved mom in to live with me the previous year after I took the x-ray that revealed her cancer in what turned out to be the last year of her life. Back in the late 1960s, I remember her reading to my sister and me from the books of Lobsang Rampa, a Tibetan Lama, which told of his world and religion. Perhaps it was this connection that I was feeling when I thought about taking this journey, or maybe some need to break free from my own world and routine, but I knew it was time to look outward again.

The chiropractic mission was attached to a group called “Sacred Journeys,” which offers guided tours to Tibet and other sacred places. So, I left on August 1st with just a backpack that held only a minimum of gear plus a vial of my mother’s ashes. I kept my mind and heart free from expectations. Our mission team had five members: a doctor of Chinese medicine (Kip Clauss), a clinical psychologist (Michael Katz), two chiropractors (myself and Tamara Petersen) and a laywoman (Amparo Far) from Spain who is a practicing Buddhist.

Upon arriving in the capital, Lhasa, I noticed a striking quiet and stillness. The air was fresh and sweet. There was a heady, dreamy feeling as we carried our bags to the waiting caravan. The overall environment in Tibet is extreme with rocky, dry and unforgiving ground that prevents growing anything other than barley or rice near the river banks. It was cool in the day and cold at night. The sun is so strong that covering the head and arms was crucial during hikes.

To get to the hinterlands we visited, we would drive off-road as high as our trucks could take us and then hike for two or three hours more, as high as 16,000 ft., up to a village, nunnery or monastery nestled in the mountainside.

The thin air took its toll on all during these hikes. On our first day of hiking, after hours of walking up toward the sacred caves in Samye (one of Tibet's spiritual centers), I began to falter and lagged behind the group despite working to push myself through the pain. I had to stop on the steep slopes every few steps to pant for breath. My legs were dead. I felt at the breaking point, physically and mentally. Eventually, I noticed I was alone and found myself wondering if I would die up there. Would that be so bad, I wondered, in a place like this? I stopped, gathered myself, and began to notice the majesty of the space and quiet around me. A great sense of well-being swept through me. I knew my mother would have loved this place and I used this moment to pray for her and spread some of her ashes on a cluster of beautiful wildflowers and in a stream I discovered nearby.

Our first stop after these mountain hikes would be an eating-place, usually a moderately sized room seating 15-20 people where we would have dinner. This was conducive to mission work because people were relaxed. At dinner this same evening, Michael Katz noticed a local who was favoring his neck. We had our Tibetan guide, Tsering, speak to the entire room and say that there were doctors present who would help them if they wanted. The man was reluctant, but at the urging of his wife the brave soul came forward. After a brief translated history was taken, the people gasped as the adjustment was done and the patient laughed and smiled as he moved his neck freely and without pain. And in that moment, the mission began. Everyone started lining up to tell us of their ailments.



Word traveled quickly through the village, bringing even more people. A tremendous energy was in the air as Kip Clauss grabbed the video camera and translated for Tamara and me as we interviewed the patients. The languages bouncing back and forth, the tension of the evaluations, the physical surprise of the adjustments, and the joy of the results combined to make an indelible memory. One teenage boy had hip and groin pain, bladder control problems and testicular pain with

an elevated testicle. We adjusted the mid-lumbers and stretched the psoas muscle and cleared the genitofemoral nerve for him.

This scene was typical of how the mission work would unfold. From modest beginnings grew intense and exciting moments of healing, joy and communion. The effect of pure chiropractic, in its elemental form, was profound.

Another day, at an outdoor eating-place, I offered to help a woman who was rubbing her hurting foot. As I was working with her, a crowd gathered around and a five-hour adjusting session ensued, during which I adjusted dozens of monks and villagers alike. We saw many problems, like chronically dislocated joints, tooth decay, old severed tendon injuries, thrombophlebitis, suspected organic problems and much more, which would have befitted from earlier chiropractic or medical intervention. But we advised the people accordingly and did our best to help everyone with the only tools we had: our hands.



Tibetans are beautiful people with deeply lined faces etched by a hard life, and skin made reddish-brown by the unfiltered sun. They smile easily when engaged and believe it rude to complain, even when hurt or sick. Most have never seen a doctor, dentist or hospital, much less a chiropractor. In a place like this, a single, well-placed chiropractic adjustment can change a life. One villager I helped was stooped over from a motorcycle accident 10 days earlier, his face badly bruised,

and within a few minutes he was upright and smiling with his family. He can earn a living again.

For me, this feeling of usefulness and being needed was very rewarding. I now know that wherever I am, I have the capacity to bring a 'chiropractic mission' with me and that is a very formidable idea. Ironically, though I was giving something to the people, I felt like I was the greatest recipient; not only from the work we did, but in the way I received so many blessings to my soul just by being among the Tibetan people. There were several powerful moments on this journey for me, spiritually, when what I witnessed brought me to tears, like hearing the nuns chant and sing in a temple, meeting a holy woman whose radiant energy penetrated me and when in the marketplace on my last day in Tibet, a child broke away from her mother's hand just to run up before me and declare, "Welcome to Tibet!" It was like being hit with a hammer. I only wish she could have said that to my mother, too.

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