

A VISIT TO KALIMPONG, INDIA

by Julie Price



On a clear day, after the rains have dissolved the dust in the air, make your way to the Zong Dog Palri Fo-Brang Gampa (aka Durpin Gampa), a Nyingpa monastery on the spine of a ridge in Kalimpong. From the top floor, in mid afternoon there is a spectacular 360 degree view of the Himalayas with layers of mountains, each one a little less blue than the one before. In the distance, white-tipped peaks kiss the clouds. On one side, the Tibetan Khangchenddzonga range, on another, the mountains of Bhutan. Around the corner is Nepal and finally the mountains

become hills and then the flats of Bangladesh close to where the River Ganges meets the Bay of Bengal.

If you happen to time it right, you'll soon hear the sounds of chanting on the lips of the wind, a sign to retrace your steps to the first floor where the Tibetan monks have gathered for their afternoon chant. They sit side by side in two rows facing each other, cross-legged on cushions in front of a low table upon which lay their books. The scriptures are written painstakingly by hand on paper made from the insect repelling Daphne bark. They are wide and short and not bound, but stack one on top of the other. Slabs of wood comprise the top and bottom covers.



Chanting is a time to practice meditation because of the focus it requires. Voices are high and low and swing from one to the other in the most imperceptible way. One note hangs while monks take a breath, sounds swelling into delicious tones. The chants are memorized by some, while others flip pages to the proper place. Several long trumpet-like horns reach over the tables and rest on the floor, while short horns are blown and set down on the table. Impressively painted drums are beaten with a curved stick by the monks positioned at the end of the row. Of course,

being in India, no temple is complete without the blowing of conch shells.

At times the chants are all voice, then the drum, horns and conches start up, suddenly competing with a clanging cymbal and then it stops again while the voices continue. The most surprising is when all voices stop for a split second and every

monk in unison snaps a finger. As all the sounds intermingle, visitors sit on the floor against walls covered top to bottom in colourful murals. All thoughts cease, all questions, answers or commentary drops away. It is a beautiful cessation of anything other than the crescendo of voice and a vibration humming somewhere in the chest.



Slowly and mindfully, the monks lay a piece of silk on their table. Still chanting they place all their pages in a stack with the wood on the top and bottom. Then as if they were wrapping the most precious gift with wrapping paper, they meticulously wrap their scriptures, removing every fold and wrinkle, and tie it closed with a string. When all have finished, the chant diminishes, fades, and the monks stand up and file out in silence. That is when the visitors realize the creators of that beautiful scene are young boys.

Being an SC member has given me a wonderful window into the lives of Buddhist women all over the world and I love the idea of connecting us through our stories and experiences. Kalimpong, nestled between Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan has strong Tibetan Buddhist roots.

