Om Mani Padme Hum

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"Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible."
—The Fourteenth Dalai Lama

“Rachel, do you have any ibuprofen?” asked Michelle, knowing full well I always do.

On reflex, I reached into the front pocket of my backpack and removed a bottle of pills to help alleviate Michelle’s headache. She got them quite frequently. I was eager to help her, especially after learning she was struggling. Once, back in the States, I stopped into the restroom during our field preparation class and heard someone vomiting over the toilet. Not having the strongest of stomachs myself, I noted the blue Converse sneakers under the stall and then decided to check out a bathroom on a different floor. When I returned to class, I sat next to Michelle, noticing that she had those same blue sneakers. I didn’t say anything. Maybe it was the flu, and she was just embarrassed. I remained in denial until our first week in India when she willingly told me all about her eating disorder herself.
“Thanks,” she said, her bright emerald eyes flashing as she popped the pills and took a large gulp from the orange Fanta bottle in front of her. “Did I tell you what Lily’s host sister said to me yesterday? About being fat from eating too much ice cream?”

This was not an unusual conversation to have over lunch with Michelle in McLeod Ganj, India. Michelle was what you might call the typical beautiful girl who could never see herself that way. She had long, black hair, falling in natural spiral ringlets to her elbows, high cheek bones, a tiny waistline, and eyebrows you would see on the cover of a makeup magazine. Though she always deflected compliments, I still tried to present them. As the new field facilitator over a group of ten students who had never left the North American continent, I was eager to do the best that I could—like making sure no one died. Michelle had already put in a special request, only half joking, that I make sure she didn’t get too close to jumping off of any cliffs.

But McLeod Ganj was a cliff—a town spread across the ridges of the Himalayas. Not for the first time, I felt irritated that there was not a better screening process for this kind of issue before being accepted to the program, especially considering what culture shock can do to people. I was not equipped for this. But I kept going to lunch with Michelle. Kept giving her hugs. Kept telling her she was not fat. Kept telling her she was doing a great job on her research project, even though she wasn’t.

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The whole reason I got into traveling was because I was once a sixteen-year-old who fancied she could “save the world.” Of course,
I wanted to start in Africa. Africa, the impoverished country—not the continent consisting of many countries of varying financial stabilities that I finally learned about years later after some education on international development. But before that, I used to Google various two-week volunteer programs and count how many years I would have to work at the local Wendy's at minimum wage before I could afford any of them. I wanted so badly to help in a big way; I just didn’t know how.

And then life happened, and three years later I was led to a field study program in Ghana through my university. In the interviewing process, I became a little dismayed to learn that the program was not a humanitarian mission or anything close to it. But I kept working at a research project and at my own naiveté. One of the defining principles of the program was avoiding “Mother Teresa Syndrome,” otherwise known as “trying to save the world.” Instead, this was ninety days meant for cultural immersion and learning, not fixing or curing a community that wasn’t interested in my undergraduate “expertise.” Preparing for Ghana, I became aware of the great development crisis: that most international development projects fail. The difficulties (if not impossibilities) associated with foreigners making any kind of positive difference are slim when “true development” aims to get these countries to empower themselves instead of establishing more dependencies. I did my best to swallow this dose of reality, though I had hoped I could make an important difference by simply digging a well.

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Rueckert 169
Coming to India was also not a humanitarian mission, though it was nothing like Ghana either. It wasn’t even apples and oranges; it was apples and screwdrivers. McLeod Ganj was the retreat spot for Indians, tourists, and even for the colonizing British who came years earlier, calling these parts “the hills.” Back home, the Field Study office called McLeod “Tibet Land.” I think it was summed up quite nicely by Lily on our first day.

“This isn’t really India.”

With tourist shops lining the streets, guest houses on every corner, and watered-down, two-day courses on Buddhism, Lily had a point. This was a much different world than what I experienced in Delhi and other parts of the “real” India.

To me, the challenges of McLeod Ganj were completely different, and (dare I say it?), less apparent than in Ghana. I guess I couldn’t expect my group to understand that, but this realization did not stop me from snapping at Michelle one afternoon at the hustling main square, while a few of us were scoping out some local restaurants to grab a bite to eat.

“I’m going to starve here,” she said.

I felt like slapping her. “Michelle, there are a hundred restaurants in this town How could you possibly starve?” I didn’t tell her that she has no idea what starving means. That she has never actually seen it before, and that starving people do not throw up their food.

For a long time I felt bad for snapping at Michelle. Later that week, my host sister quoted the Dalai Lama, who said “love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.” I may have apologized to Michelle, but I don’t remember.
You can’t go a single day in McLeod Ganj without hearing the word “compassion,” or at least the sung Tibetan mantra version of it, om mani padme hum. Buddhist monks record these chanted prayers—a single phrase, worked into a harmony of deep, soothing tones—and the recordings play, over and over, day after day, along the busiest streets in town. Here, om mani padme hum is the literal background music to life. Tibetans believe the Dalai Lama is the reincarnation of the bodhisattva deity of compassion itself. He preaches that “true happiness comes from a sense of inner peace and contentment,” and that this can only be “achieved through cultivation of altruism, of love, of compassion” and “the elimination of anger, selfness and greed.”¹ This was taught to every Buddhist, young child, geshe monk, and Western tourist. It seemed to define the religion.

I was in McLeod Ganj for the most auspicious day of the year, believed to be the day of Buddha’s birthday, enlightenment, and his first teaching. On the Tibetan calendar, which I will not pretend to understand, it falls on the thirteenth day of the fourth month. On our western calendar this year, it was June 15th. For this holiday, karma was believed to be multiplied by one million—for good or for bad. One kora, or lap circumambulating the Dalai Lama’s temple, turned into one million walks around the local temple. Killing a spider who might have been your mother in another life was also multiplied by one million actions against a better reincarnation. The event brought a large crowd of Tibetans and, not surprisingly, Indian beggars to the temple, who rally around this holiday.

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¹ Rueckert 171
One of my host sisters started her *kora* walk around the temple at midnight. The other woke up at 2:00 am to begin. I didn’t get up until 8:00 am.

I normally did my kora at night when the heat was subsiding for the day—to clear my head, get some exercise, or talk with friends—but I figured I would check it out earlier and observe the festivities surrounding the temple.

I was shocked by what I saw.

What was usually a peaceful jaunt was turned into a narrow path through a sea of beggars. *Thousands* of them. Old men in orange loincloths, young girls with babies on their hips, kids pushing to the front, putting out their palms shouting, “money, money, money!” in the only English they knew as I, the stereotypical rich westerner, approached them. I felt suffocated and overwhelmed, but something more than that didn’t sit well with me. It was so much different from what I saw in Ghana, and I couldn’t place my apathy towards these people. The begging was more of a convention than a display of genuine need. A monetary game of exchange. A rupee for a chance at nirvana. The beggars were even giving out change for larger bills.

The Tibetans walked and walked all day long, some doing prostrations the entire way. Some walked ten laps, twenty laps, depositing little silver coins collected throughout the year along the way. I only completed one lap—feeling less concerned about the state of my *karma* than the risk of revealing my irritation—and it didn’t even occur to me to bring money.

Later that night, I talked with Tenzin, my host sister. I wondered if she felt frustrated that she was being taken advantage of, or if she
noticed that most of those beggars were not really beggars at all, but normal people dressed up like trick-or-treaters on Halloween. She looked at me in that sweet “if only you understood” look she used to give me, and explained that she was fully aware that most of the crowd members were functioning members of society. “But it is not our job to decide,” she said. “And we get the blessings anyway.”

I still couldn’t get over the principle of it though. I noticed it every day, and it was hard to restrain my judgments. I had watched as a pack of barefooted local women carried borrowed babies through the streets, getting tourists to buy them powdered milk for the child in their arms, then go to the next store over and sell it back. They made much more money that way. Powdered milk cost almost twenty times the typical donation to a beggar.

I hadn’t always thought this way. I would always give my change to the man downtown outside the metro station when others would argue it was perpetuating a problem. But Ghana forced me to re-evaluate my personal policy—I had no idea how to give to each of the hundreds of beggars that approached me each week, so I didn’t.

This personal policy I adopted in Ghana was entrenched in India. Instead of giving change, I decided to give my donations to successful foundations and inspired church organizations that knew how to distribute the money better than I ever could at random. Mahatma Gandhi once said that he refuses “to insult the naked by giving them clothes they do not need instead of giving them work which they sorely need.”\(^2\) Cold as it felt at times to avoid the beggar’s eyes in Ghana, I thought this approach the more
charitable, but maybe just the more feasible, thing to do when I encountered beggars in India.

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"Have you tried tough love with her?" Jen asked.

Jen was the field studies coordinator who had come to India for a week to check in on the program and the students. And me. But the first two items of business took a bit longer than expected; thus, we had this conversation in a taxi on the thirty minute ride to the Kunga Airport so she could catch her flight.

I rested my head on the window frame, trying to subdue my gag reflex from the motion sickness while flying down the Himalayan switchbacks; I must have made some gesture that indicated I had no idea what she meant by “tough love” with Michelle. She gave me a pensive look and waited for me to respond.

“But she hates India,” I tried to explain, my voice rising with frustration. “That is all she ever talks about.” I had hoped Jen would see this on her visit and encourage her to fly home early.

“Michelle has an addiction,” Jen said, then went on about how her own sister struggles with paranoia disorder and other mental ailments, but how she admires her every day for dealing with it. She wanted me to admire Michelle. Even I wanted me to admire Michelle. I might have felt satisfied to just have neutral feelings toward Michelle; but the uncomfortable truth was that I could not stand her most days and that I was in desperate need of advice. In my head, I was failing as a field facilitator. And a student. I could barely even manage being friendly. Jen, such a strong person, such a great leader, was just the person I needed advice from; a sane,
familiar face from the university, reminding me that I was up to something worthwhile when I took up this job as a facilitator, and that someone once thought I was capable of doing it when they hired me for it six months earlier.

But advice did not lead to affirmation of my own project and leadership efforts. Unfortunately, our discussion about Michelle took up the entire journey, giving me less than five minutes to address my own project concerns and personal struggles before Jen was checking into the airport and I was heading back up the mountain alone feeling all shades of sorry for myself. Except this time I was leaning out the taxi window, barfing.

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"Today I would like to talk about charity," said Maddie, another student in my group who was in charge of our makeshift Sunday school for the week. Our last Sunday in McLeod Ganj. She passed out a few pages of typed-up paper. This was a first for our usually informal meeting held on the rusting benches off the kora trail, a secluded area surrounded by thick trees behind the Dalai Lama’s temple. Maddie seemed nervous for some reason, shifting her weight, hugging one arm close against her stomach. Her hands were shaking. But Maddie was never anxious or uncomfortable talking for long and longer amounts of time. Besides, it wasn’t as if we hadn’t spent the last three months getting to know each other.

"For those of you who brought your scriptures, turn to Mosiah chapter 4," she said, fumbling through her lesson materials.³ We did.

Rueckert 175
She gave an opening spiel on the importance of charity, to which we all nodded in unspoken agreement, and then she decided to pick a point of focus—the beggars.

“Starting with verse 16, it says: ‘And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor; ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish...’”

I saw where this was going.

“...Perhaps thou shalt say: The man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore I will stay my hand, and will not give unto him of my food, nor impart unto him my substance that he may not suffer, for his punishments are just—”

Did anyone else notice that this was being directed at me? Was I being paranoid? I looked around. Everyone avoided eye contact. I felt the muscles in my forehead tighten and my throat swell, my heartbeat getting faster and my breath growing louder. I wished then that Maddie, and the rest of the group, knew a little more about me, or at least a little more about what I saw in Ghana. One person in particular in Ghana. Her name (the great irony of it) was Charity.

She was one of my students at the secondary school where I volunteered. Secondary schools in Ghana were not subsidized by the Ghanaian government, ensuring that only kids with money could attend. But the year I was there, Charity’s parents had gotten a divorce—a serious taboo for the local culture. Divorce procedures were rare and unregulated by the government, leaving Charity’s
mother broke and unable to pay her daughter’s school fees for the year.

Charity never told me—not until I started noticing that she skipped every meal and had bruises and stick welts covering her skinny arms. But one day it all came together—Charity wasn’t skipping meals, she was not allowed to eat. She was beaten every day until her fees were paid, and we all knew that was never going to happen.

Yet her lack of food and money did not stop her from giving to me. One day she chased me down the red dirt road on my way home from school. She grabbed my hand and dropped a packet of crumpled biscuits in a well-worn wrapper into my palm. She wouldn’t take it back.

I could never bring myself to eat the biscuits. I felt sick every time I looked at them. I could think of nothing else. But the program had warned me not to meddle in the affairs of this village, not to assert my own judgments and try to help, not to create dependencies which would cause the program to shut down and prevent future students from coming.

“...And if ye judge the man who putteth up his petition to you for your substance. ...and condemn him, how much more just will be your condemnation. ...”

I took it to God.

What else could I do? One night I could not sleep so I grabbed my scriptures and flashlight, pulled back the blue mosquito net surrounding my cot, snuck out the creaking door, and headed into the open cement compound beneath the cool night air, unmediated by my conflicting expectations and desires. I found this verse in

Rueckert 177
In the Moroni chapter 7: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, if ye have not charity, ye are nothing, for charity never faileth. Wherefore, cleave unto charity, which is the greatest of all... and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love...” I knew then that I had my answer.

I told my program facilitator, my Ghanaian host mom, and the secondary school headmaster that this was something I wanted to do. They did not stop me, and agreed that it was a personal choice. What is two hundred dollars when I could send my friend to school? It would be completely anonymous, or so I thought.

“Now this is the part I want you all to pay attention to,” said Maddie. “I say unto the poor, ye who have not and yet have sufficient, that ye remain from day to day; I mean all you who deny the beggar, because ye have not; I would that ye say in your hearts that: I give not because I have not, but if I had I would give... Now, if ye say this in your hearts ye remain guiltless, otherwise ye are condemned...”

I ate the biscuits.

I couldn’t believe I did it. I was stopped in England on my way home from Ghana and got hungry on a bus somewhere between Salisbury and London, so I ate them. I stuffed the wrapper in the back seat pocket and left it there. I can’t explain why I did it—I had anticipated keeping it as a kind of memorial to her. But those biscuits were my constant reminder that doing good does not always come in a nice, neat package—that some lessons are too heavy to take home.
Despite my request for anonymity, word broke out—first through the faculty, then to the students—that it was me who paid the school fees, and as much as I resented the rich-white-person-stereotype, I did my fair part in fueling it by paying the two hundred dollars. I have no way to measure how much damage my simple act of charity had on the future of the community. Yet Charity was only one of hundreds of students who would not have their fees met for the year, and I would not be around the next term or the next to see that she could continue school. And what of the students who never got to secondary school? Who never got to school at all because they were working on the cocoa farms or hawking baskets of fruit and matchboxes on their heads at the market?

“Remember,” Maddie continued. “That it is not our place to judge. Even though we are poor college students, we come from a rich country and have been blessed in ways these people will never understand. We should do our part, or at least say within our hearts that we would give if we could.”

And at that moment, I judged her, just like she was judging me. I stared at my feet and tightened my grip on my scriptures. I couldn’t look at her.

Maddie then issued a challenge—for all of us, like her, to give our unwanted stuff to the poor people before leaving, probably not realizing that the university program we were on specifically discouraged us from doing that. She closed her thoughts, took a seat on the bench, and we jumped into the closing hymn. There was no way to have a discussion about the issue she had raised. No way to speak up or justify my behavior. No way to talk about Charity. I was swallowed up by my thoughts, so conflicted and angry and
chastened. I wanted to scream at her—I wanted to convince her that this was a personal decision, and that my personal decision was better than hers. Was I really so evil? Is this cynicism where all of my studies on international development have brought me? Did she really think me so heartless? And why, if I was so certain that my policy was best, was I so uneasy by having it called into question?

Because I wasn't certain. And I am still not certain.

The meeting closed, and Maddie stood up. “If anyone wants any extra copies of the lesson, just let me know.” She walked off with half of the group of students, not knowing that her voice (loud, even by American standards) could carry farther than she might have thought.

“Did Rachel say goodbye?” I heard one student ask Maddie in the distance.

“No,” Maddie laughed. “But that is okay, because...” She trailed off as they turned the corner.

Because what? Because her sermon spoke the truth? Because at least she got to say her two bits? Because I would be held accountable and damned for my actions? Because I now know I need to start thinking about charity? Because I realize now that my feelings on the subject are more ambivalent and fragile than I thought?

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Ninety days came and went both fast and slow, and the time came to leave McLeod Ganj. After a short bus ride (in the Indian perspective) to Pathankot, we took a train to Delhi. Our last train as a group in India.
It was a sleeper train, and I took the top bunk. I hobbled up the ladder and sprawled out on the red canvas seat, pulling my scarf over my face to escape the current group dynamics. I tried to sleep, letting the rocking of the train lull me to a dream world where I could forget the most recent pains of my reality: the tension between me and Maddie sitting below (whose views on charity apparently extended to condemning my haggling) and the mixed feelings I was having leaving India. I closed my eyes and tried to shut the world out.

But sleep would not come. Not then or for the rest of the eight hours, because Michelle was feeling extra chatty. I tried to ignore her whining the way I had the entire summer, but I couldn’t. I lay there, pretending to be asleep, listening to her conversation. First about hating Indian men but secretly relishing the attention, then about her fading testimony in God, then about going back to her jerk ex-boyfriend, and then—

“Lily,” Michelle said, addressing another member of our group. “Remember Rinzen and how he has those scars all over his body from being tortured in that Chinese prison?”

I knew Rinzen. I had seen his outward scars, lingering evidence of his solitary confinement and torture for ten long years. I had talked with him in his broken English and noted the permanent sadness in his eyes having lost his family, his religion, and his country for simply trying to raise money to rebuild his monastery destroyed by the Chinese. My interest was piqued.

“Yes,” Lily said.

“Well, I was thinking. I have my own scars. They are just on the inside, so no one knows.”
I tore the scarf from my face, fuming with anger for how Michelle could trivialize Rinzen’s pain, and somehow my own, but no words came out.

“Oh, Rachel! You are awake,” said Michelle. “Do you have any ibuprofen?”

I knew exactly where my waning supply of pain killers was, as did she—sitting in the front pocket of my backpack at the edge of my bunk. But I was not moved by her weaknesses anymore. My pools of compassion had dried up. I felt that Maddie’s misjudgments of me had finally come true.

“No. No, I don’t.”

This was a Rachel I had never met before.

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India introduced me to a demented portrait that I painted of myself that I was not able to tuck away—a coldhearted, apathetic, victim-Rachel, drained of empathy to the extent that I could not recognize myself anymore. I was possessed and haunted by charity.

It took months for me to begin coming to terms with the ambiguous idea of compassion and charity, and I can’t help but admire the strangeness of it all—that I went to McLeod Ganj to learn about the Tibetan way of compassion, only to learn how expendable mine was—that I had left the comfort of my paradigm only to have a simple truth like charity complicated.

I think I now understand what Jen meant by “tough love.” Tough love was writing this essay—calling Michelle out on her attention deficit and not actually wanting to get better, just as Maddie had called me out on my own half-embraced position on charity.
But side by side, I came to view these contradictions as complimentary. The self-empowerment that international development encourages is probably the best tactic to help a country, and a person like Michelle, recover from internal ailments and suffering; true healing must be accepted internally for real change to take root.

But every once in a while, I get an image of a dust-covered beggar—maybe an emerald-eyed young girl with long black hair—displaying mangled limbs, shaking a tin can in my face, saying, “money, madam?”

And I avoid eye contact. And swallow. And keep walking. And dig around in my pockets for a missing biscuit wrapper, telling myself that I am doing the right thing. And then I second guess myself all over again, silently chanting my imperfect om mani padme hum.

Notes


4. See Moroni: 7 (The Book of Mormon).