

SEARCHING FOR THE ANSWER
PHOTO BY ROLF PESSEL

The country where I was born is called Zanskar, Ladakh, in the Himalayas. It is remote and isolated from the modern world. Modernity and technology were totally unfamiliar to the people of Zanskar. When the first truck entered the region, the people mistook it for a bison and even put water and grass on the road when it was coming from far away. Then they hid because they were afraid of the beast. The driver used the water to cool the engine and then left the place. Afterwards the people gathered and kept telling each other that the bison drank the water but left the grass. The first helicopter flying over the region was mistaken for a big bird, and everyone guarded their own animals, afraid they would be taken away by the bird. I remember vividly chasing any kind of vehicle that came along the road.

In this remote Himalayan region, my mom gave birth to me along with six other children, I being the third. The minutes after my birth, my mom and all other family members were happy. In particular, my two elder sisters had wished for a long time that mom would give birth to a brother, so their wishes came true. But the happiness and joy did not last long, for everyone was shocked when they found that I did not open my eyes for an entire week. Everyone thought I was a blind baby and would be an extra burden on them, taking care of me, and for myself I would have a difficult life ahead. Later their happiness resumed when I finally opened my eyes. My mom asked a meditation master, who lived his whole life in a cave on a remote mountain so he could meditate, to name me. The master named me Sonam Dawa. Sonam means "merit," and Dawa means "moon." When a child is born in the Himalayas, the parents usually ask a great master for a name for the child. The name consists of two parts: first, the master gives you his own name; second, he chooses a name for you. For example, the

master who named me was called Sonam Dorjee, so he gave me his own name, Sonam.

A few years after I started to talk, I caused everybody more shock and surprise, because I had been born into this tiny Himalayan region for the second time. My present village is three miles from the village of my past life. I could not understand anything, being a three-year-old child, but I had talked a lot about my small meditation shrine where I lived alone to meditate throughout my past life. I even talked about the names of everyone in my family in my past life. Surprisingly, I had been a monk and owned a private small shrine called "Heaven House," alone on a hill just above the village. After the monk died, the family locked the shrine and left it empty. But they had been checking, caring and making sure that everything was safe. The monk was also cremated on the hill just outside his shrine. My parents remind me that I always insisted to them that I wanted to go to my shrine to pray, meditate and perform rituals. I can still recall how one day I packed a small bag and walked out of our house and told my mom I was leaving to go to my shrine to pray. Unfortunately, a stray dog behind our house frightened me from walking further, so I returned home again.

Life went on until I reached an age around 10 and I was listening to people and my family members about my past life. Who was I and what was I doing? For me it was difficult to understand the concept of life and death. Most puzzling was how it happened. First, you are alive, and then you are no longer as you were before. And then you are reborn again? How could anyone verify and prove that presently I am a child, once a monk, and when death occurred the entire body was cremated and turned completely to ashes? How can I be that monk? On the other hand, if there isn't any connection between me and that monk, and the child of three or four years old had never

been to that place before, how could he tell and recognize everything perfectly without mistake? Many of these questions came, one after another, to my mind, and I was filled with thirst for an answer to this entire question.

At the age of 10, I was working in the fields with my mom. It was summer, everywhere was green, and the area was full of the sweet scent of flowers. Suddenly, this verdant land was brightened by the red robes of passing monks. As they went by, they greeted us in the local language, and I was struck by their clean, honest appearance. They seemed so pure, sincere and so very gentle. I asked my mom about them, and she told me they were from our village but studying ancient Indian philosophy in south India thousands of miles away. Their appearance influenced me greatly, and I had a desire to follow their example to find the answer to my question of rebirth. I decided to follow them to south India to study the epistemology of life in ancient Indian thought.

Gathering provisions and money for travel, I finally started the journey with 600 rupees to cover my expenses. The place I was going to study was called Gomang, a monastic university where the ancient Indian writings are studied. The journey by truck, bus, car and train would take eight days and nights to reach the place where I was hoping to find the answer to my question. On our journey, many stupid and funny things happened.

On the second day of the journey, we rested in a big city where there were a lot of shops and many different things were sold in the market and along the road. With curiosity, another boy and I went to the market to look at things we had never seen before. Among the businessmen, we found a man selling a doll on the roadside. I shouted to the other boy, "Hey, look there's a doll!" When I saw the doll, I remembered a story about a doll [continued on page 118]



VIEW OF ZANSKAR
FROM MOUNTAINTOP