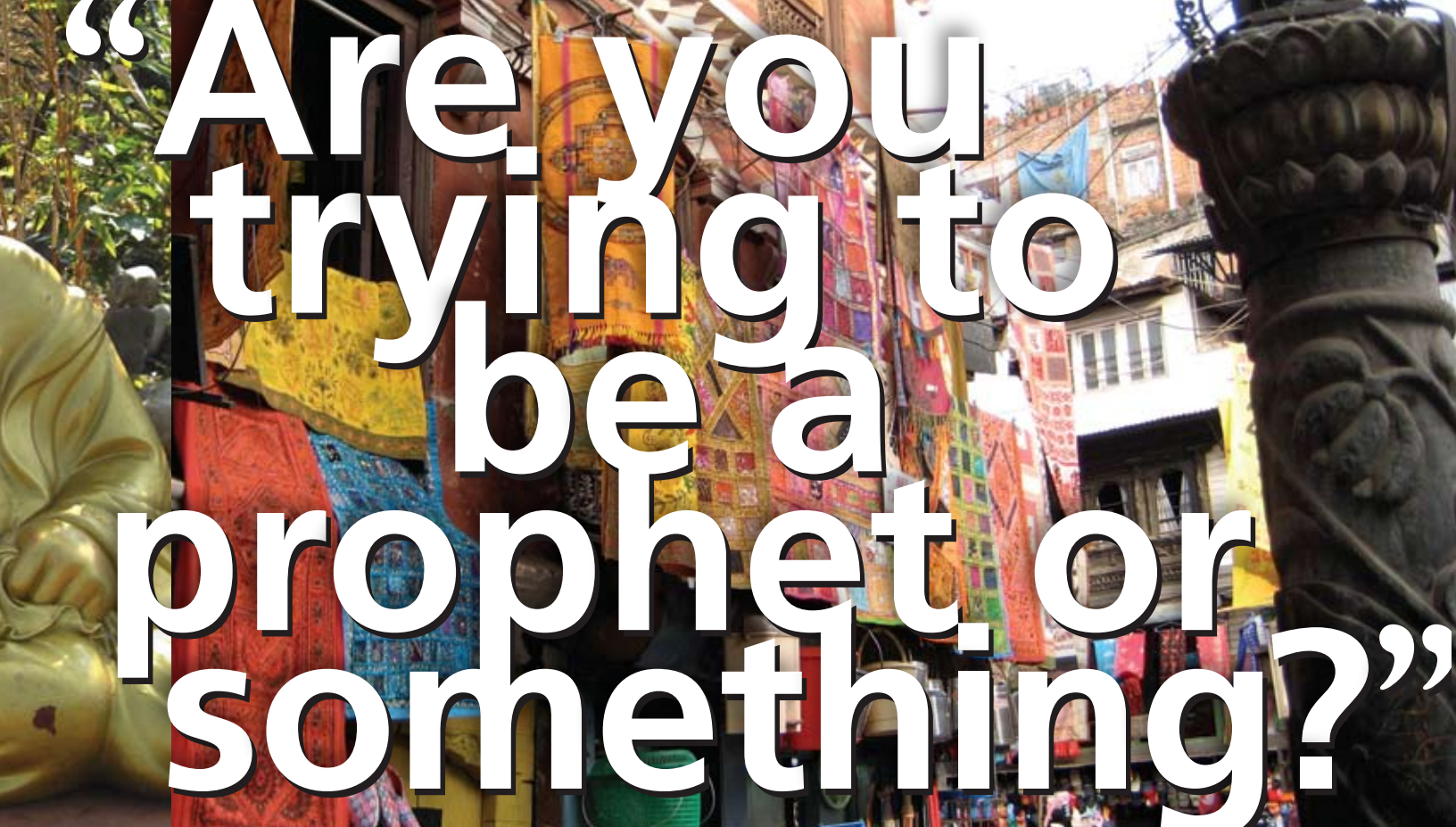




THIS PAGE: clockwise from left: (1) Fernando Álvarez-Lara, S.J. in front of the "Wheel of Life" wall painting at the Kopan Monastery on the northern outskirts of Kathmandu (JW); (2) Smiling Buddha in the garden of Kopan Monastery, wearing traditional Buddhist silk blessing "kata" (AP); (3) Khenpo Jampa Donden with students Amy Peterson, Anthony Borrow, S.J. and translator in classroom of the Ka-Nying Shedrup Ling Monastery in Kathmandu (JW); OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: (4) Street scene in Durbar Square bazaar near Kathmandu's Old Royal Palace (JW)



# “Are you trying to be a prophet or something?”

*Matt Petrich (M.Div. 2010)*

**NOT MANY THINGS SPARK SUCH INTERESTING CONVERSATION** as when you tell someone you study theology. People always want to know what a layperson will do with such a degree. This is why I was not surprised in the least when a conversation with a man at the Oakland bus stop outside my house focused on the life of a theology student.

I was standing beside my huge suitcase packed with the essentials for my January trip to Nepal, and during the long wait for the bus he finally asked me where I was going. “Nepal. It’s in South Asia, north of India,” I explained, seeing the baffled look on his face. “Are you trying to be a prophet or something?” the man blurted out. “No...” I laughed nervously.

I was simply heading out on a trip to Nepal to study Tibetan Buddhism and to engage in some inter-religious dialogue. I chuckled at this idea that I could just choose to be the next Samuel or Jeremiah. I was almost embarrassed by the luxury of the experience, and didn’t want to boast about its importance, whatever that might be. The conversation continued with me trying to explain why in the world I was going to Nepal to study theology. Finally, my bus arrived and I headed off to the airport to meet the group of 9 students, one faculty and one staff member that made up the JSTB Nepal Immersion group. Little did I know at the time, but those words of the unassuming man from the bus stop would stick with me throughout the trip.

The Nepal Immersion trip grew out of an initial interest by both Thomas Cattoi, assistant professor of Christology and Cultures at JSTB, and Rob McChesney

SJ, coordinator of cross-cultural initiatives. Their determination to explore the world of Tibetan Buddhism eventually led to the choice of Nepal as the immersion’s destination. Nepal is a small, mountainous country bordered to the south by India, and to the north, beyond Tibet and the imposing Himalayas, by China. Nepal has been an important buffer country for years between its two giant neighbors. Perhaps the geography explains the survival of Nepal’s Hindu monarchy for over 200 years. It was only in May of 2008 that the Hindu Republic was replaced by a democracy now controlled by the Maoist party.

An extremely poor country, Nepal and its culture still reflect the feudal society that has yet to completely vanish from the countryside. During our time in the country we lived alongside the Nepali people as they suffered long hours of electrical load shedding. Power was turned on just twice a day for four-hour periods in different parts of the city. We lived alongside those in Kathmandu who had to endure an 18-day garbage strike, because the dump remained closed and garbage in the streets. One cannot help but see the broken Christ amidst the children poking through the trash for something to eat, as the country continues to exist on the world’s margins, deeply troubled and largely forgotten.

Amid what appears to casual outsiders like desperate conditions lives a fascinating culture that supports two very vibrant religions. Buddhists and Hindus live side by side, and at times it is hard to tell the religions apart.

Nepali people themselves don't always distinguish between the two. Hindu gods or shrines can serve as sites for "puja" (acts of devotional honor or worship) as well as Buddhist sites. To the untrained observer, the devotional rituals resemble each other.

Living in a Tibetan Buddhist section of the capital called Boudhanath for those three weeks, bells woke us at 5am, and by 6am one of the largest "stupas" (temples) in the world was alive with pilgrims walking clockwise around it. It was always a glorious feeling to join in rotation, keeping the honored stupa on our right, as monks and laypeople alike chanted their mantras while fingering their prayer beads.

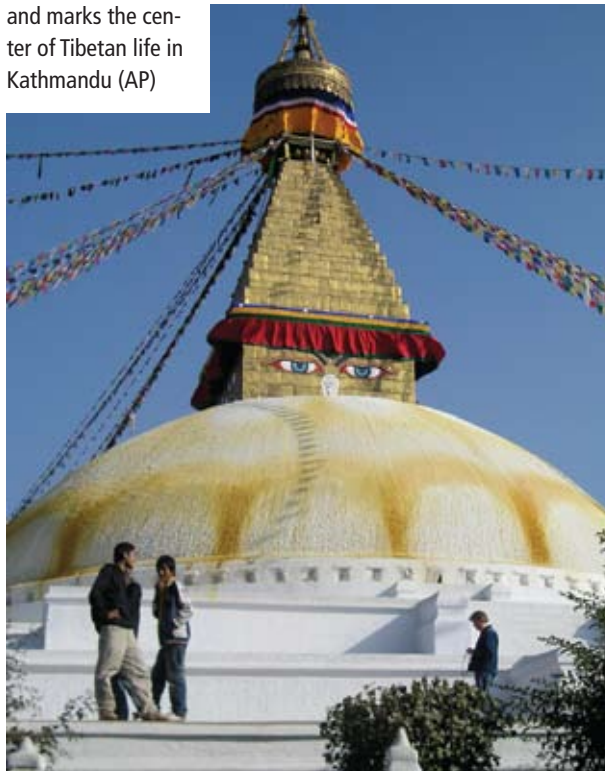
The common ritual has the pilgrim walking around the stupa three times. Some pilgrims spin the numerous prayer wheels as prayer flags flap in the breeze. Spinning the prayer wheels has the same effect as saying a prayer hundreds of times, and every time a prayer flag flaps with the wind, the prayer or mantra written on it is blown by the wind to spread compassion to all beings. This was the setting in which we encountered Buddhism, amid the rich rituals of prayer and pilgrimage so important to the Buddhist religion.

We stayed in a Monastery Guest House for most of the immersion experience, but we spent most of our time with representatives of the Center for Buddhist Studies (CBS) operating out of the Ka-Nying Shedrup Ling Monastery. The Monastery houses almost 300 Tibetan Buddhist monks, many of them as young as six or seven years of age.

Through meetings with the head lama, Choki Nyima Rinpoche, a young scholar, Khenpo Jampa Donden, and CBS faculty and staff we were able to piece together a basic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. Perhaps the most significant moments in our learning came amidst an inability to understand. One morning our group was meeting with the Khenpo. Becoming a Khenpo involves nine long years of study and meditation as well as a grueling comprehensive exam at the end. Sitting in his presence, one could feel wisdom and holiness emanating forth.

After a short talk on Buddhist meditation practices, the conversation turned. The Khenpo began to welcome our questions. Soon the conversation in the classroom was buzzing, as we exchanged Christian and Buddhist understandings of just war, compassion, and meditation. The Khenpo kept any possible tension to a minimum

Boudhanath stupa is the largest in Nepal, and marks the center of Tibetan life in Kathmandu (AP)



Sunrise viewed from Asura Cave Retreat Center in Pharping, Nepal, site of immersion group's Buddhist retreat (MM)



East greets West, as head lama Choki Nyima Rinpoche of the Ka-Nying Monastery greets one of the frequent western visitors (JW)

with his easy personality and thoughtful words. He wanted to know about our idea of heaven, and we were able to ask his thoughts on reincarnation. The Khenpo surprised us all when he wondered if the belief in reincarnation makes the devout Buddhist lazy in this life. Would we allow our religion to be so open to questioning as he was?

Soon we were talking about Buddhist and Christian understandings of God. How alike or unlike God is the “dharmakaya” (ultimate reality or a sort of emptiness of this conventional world)? Students in our group took turns trying to describe our Trinitarian notion of God through a translator, but to no avail. “In Tibetan”, concluded the translator, “there is no word for trinity.”

The inter-religious dialogue we experienced throughout our trip spurred more questions than answers. Though many questions remain, nevertheless we grew in our ability to put a face on a previously academic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. Who can forget the cheery-faced lama, Rinpoche, who greeted each one of us with a head butt and referred to our group of eleven as the “Twelve Apostles”? Who could forget our “twelfth apostle” and remarkable guide,

Greg Sharkey, a New England Province Jesuit who has lived and worked in Nepal for decades and whose local friendships and language skills consistently opened doors for us? Who can forget the Tibetan woman and her child at the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center, who had fled Tibet because of Chinese political hostility towards her husband, who had endured a grueling 18-day walk through the Himalayas and whose hope was to get to Dharamshala, India for an audience with the Dalai Lama? And who can forget the hospitality of so many strangers as we were accepted into homes and offered tea all over the Kathmandu Valley?

The man at the bus stop was right. We are prophets now. We have seen how fruitful the Buddhist and Hindu religions are for so many. We have seen the devotion and love that is poured into their rituals, the compassion and wisdom which is the fruit of their teachings and practice. Rinpoche told us that the world needed a new “understanding, respect, and trust” of world religions in order for true happiness to be found. Those in the Nepal Immersion group were graced with this wisdom, and it is our challenge to incorporate this experience into our classes and ministries at JSTB and thereafter. ■

**Photographs by Matthew Motyka, S.J. (MM), Amy Peterson (AP) and Jeanne Weir (JW).**

Sporting Hindu “tika” mark, Amy Peterson examines fresh produce in Pharping market (JW)



Participants in the Nepal Immersion: back row from left – Professor Thomas Cattoi, Rob McChesney, S.J., Matthew Motyka, S.J., Matt Petrich; Nico Kim, S.J.; middle row from left – Karen Yavorsky, Fernando Álvarez- Lara, S.J., Jeanne Weir, Amy Peterson; kneeling from left – Anthony Borrow, S.J. Brent Anderson.