

Ben Viatte

..to india
on foot

14'000 km for peace



walking as a meditation



*Dedicated to you, oh capable being,
gifted with two legs, many more muscles, a
natural ability to roam the world, open
eyes that see the distance, an open mind
that sees the truth, and a spirit whose
scope exceeds the boundaries of space and
time.*

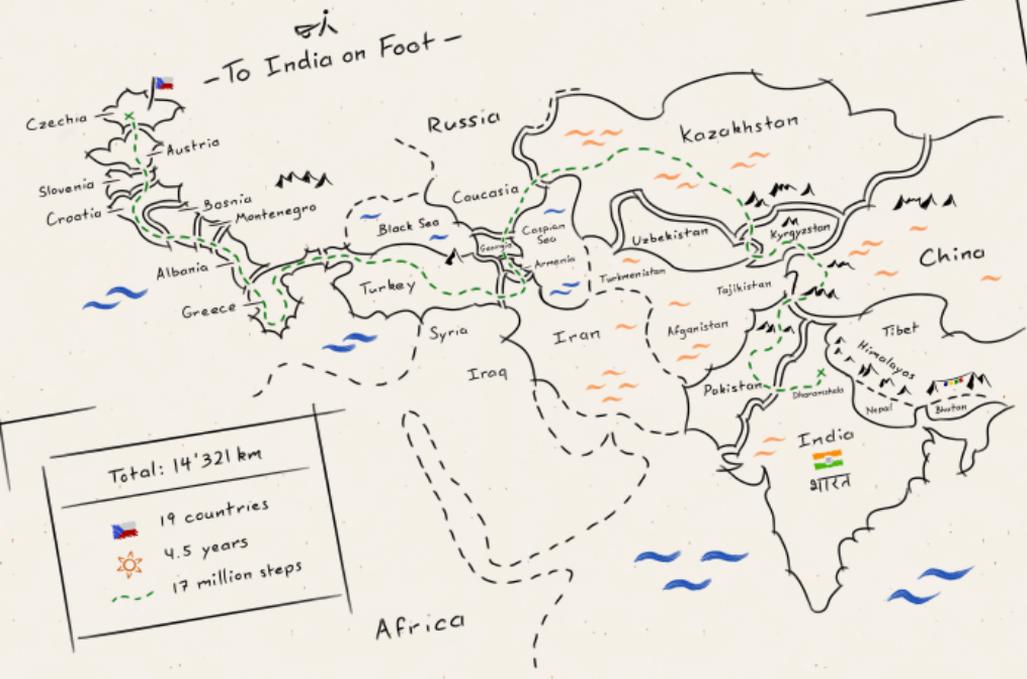


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- What crossed your mind? -

The sight of me briskly striding in the middle of nowhere with such an unusual homemade carriage sparked many people's curiosity. Aside from "Is that your real hair", which unfortunately won't make the topic of this book, what I'm asked most often is "What in the world crossed your mind to undertake such a weird and unrealistic journey on foot?"

If they're spiritually inclined - which I think you are because you're reading this book in the first place - the best answer I can give is *meditation*. Walking *is* meditation: you can't walk in a hurry... not when you have thousands of kilometers ahead of you. Those with no time would have taken a plane, or a TV set with Discovery Channel.

But this was my discovery channel: when you walk, step by step, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day... your mind is pulled out of its old habit pattern of fantasizing on the goal, the destination, and instead, settles into the bliss of the path, the bliss of now. Walking is so blissful that I don't know how to finish this sentence.

But a more elaborate answer to that question would be a very good way to introduce this book, as it also points to a central concept in Buddhist and eastern thinking that we always forget in the West...

It all comes from the mind.

Mind is everything! We always think physical actions are the most important thing, verbal actions are secondary, and thoughts don't change much because no one can see them. But every action is born from an intention in the first place! The mind is incredibly central. We are minds before anything.

Likewise the first and biggest step of this journey was a mental one...

I was living a postcardly life in snow-capped Switzerland. My family loved me and I loved them, we had all the material and emotional conditions for a happy existence. Our own home was a family-run Yoga center... what kind of prayers had I done in my past life to be born like this?

I was definitely happy. However, somewhere within, there remained a speck of unsettled dust, a fragment of unease... a longing for something that would drive me out of my comfort zone and into the abyss of the unknown... I wanted truth, not convenience.

One night this unease came to light in a dream that struck at the core of my being. I was trying to sleep outside in the snow, huddled under a homemade tarp-shelter that just about failed at anything I had designed it to do. I was shivering away - must be my karma for shunning comfort -

but out of that unpleasant state something intriguing unfolded. Half-asleep, half-awake, I came face to face with this darkness I had inside... the ego. Or we could call it fear of death, which is the same thing: this "self", the part of us that wants to stay fixed forever and can't stand the idea of impermanence. I had always had this ego, but this time I saw it face to face...

All the discomfort turned into a dark vortex into which I fell, landing on a stone floor. As I raised my head, I noticed, not far ahead, a barefoot monk in burgundy robes, sitting in utter peace. He stood up without a word, and made his way eastwards.

Next morning my mind was set: I too stood up without a word and started building the cart that would carry my carefully chosen belongings to the far-east, all the way to India. It took me a month to build, alongside the tedious process of getting rid of anything that I couldn't fit on top

of it. I said goodbye to my room and all the knick-knack I had owned in our Yoga center. Anything "mine" was given to friends, to charity, or if all else failed, fare-welled in the recycle bin with due funeral rites.

There's also a detail I tend to overlook when telling the story briefly, but hey, this is the real book, so you'll have to hear it: I didn't dare to start the journey on foot. I was scared I'd go crazy. Wouldn't you? I wanted to walk, I really did... but finally the wimp in me took over: I reluctantly took my bicycle and convinced myself that it would be a better idea for the time being. I *had* successfully built a hand-pulled cart that carried all my stuff, but I ended up rigging it at the back of my bicycle with a homemade tow-hitch, which - you'd never believe - included two chrome disks removed from a computer hard drive, lubed up with hinge oil, and held together with a bolt-and-nut to make a swivel.

I left in February riding through the Switzerland snow, giving me time to cross Europe before next winter would kick in. Saying goodbye was heaps of fun mixed with waves of unease. I was visited by all kinds of friends and offered Indian chai to remind me of the ridiculously distant destination I had set myself... I was showered in donations and gifts, always bite-sized, as people knew that the minimal nature of my trip would keep me from accepting anything bigger.

And that's how, like a reckless child I set off into the unknown... Fortunately, it didn't take too long for the unknown to present me with a thoughtful friends-forever gift: a broken hitch. You know that hard-drive lubed up with hinge-oil I spoke about earlier? Well, as I was riding my bike on a bumpy cobblestone road at the border between Switzerland and Germany, the homemade contraption holding my bike to my cart actually snapped in two. Ok... so the world was giving me the choice between my cart and my bike... Hallelujah!

My Czech uncle Jarda was crossing Europe and happened to be driving by, at that exact same place and time, in his hippie micro-bus from another era. You don't have to believe me: if you think this is all fake you can ditch the book altogether and I'd understand. But if you do stick with the story, you'll find out it comes with so much weirdness that I had no choice but to make it into a book. That's what happens when you throw yourself into the unknown...

So he stopped his vehicle and beamed upon me with Gandalfly wisdom. "Greetings, traveller." I'm not sure if those were his exact words but it was long ago and I'm doing my best, so please forgive me. "Here you are, stranded between your bicycle and your cart, which have been parted like the waters before Moses, and unless you conjure powers of equally Biblical proportions, there's no way you can take both along with you. Even if you were to keep the cart alone, you'd have to remove the broken

hitch and give it handles so you can properly pull it along on foot..."

He was smart and to the point. "You'd have to ditch the bike on the spot too, as well as all the stuff in the panniers... And that's why I'm here: I can carry your cart in my microbus all the way to Czech Republic - where you're headed anyway - and you can keep on traveling by bicycle, minimally equipped. I will leave the cart at your grandmother's house, where you can use your granddad's workshop to add a handle, make any adjustments necessary, and at last commence your rightful journey on foot."

Thank you Master Jarda! I followed his advice and did the remaining 500 km by bicycle to my grandma's house in Czech Republic, where, by then, he had faithfully deposited the cart. Now the boring cycling vacation could turn into a real story.

Forget the bike, this journey was meant to be on foot.

- Part 1 -
Crossing Europe





- Chapter 0 -

I didn't know it was farewell

March 2016

My grandmother's house in Czech Republic was a small paradise in its own right. For a front-yard, a garden of roses, apple trees, blueberries blackberries strawberries raspberries and otherberries I don't know even the names of... and for a backyard, woodlands so deep I could go running naked and swim in the lake without having to awkwardly explain the situation to anyone.

My grandmother herself was so fond of my company that she would often ask "Why do you have to go anywhere? What is that far away land you're preparing for... India? How far is that? Will I even ever see you again after such a crazy quest?"

It turns out she was right: these were my last days by her side. But she was so healthy, so happy, harvesting crates upon crates of fruits and vegetables, enough to give family and friends and neighbors, riding her bicycle to town, cooking for everyone, tending pathways of green grass and picture-perfect flowers... At the time, I was positive I would see her again. So I would answer "your love for me is absolutely wonderful and I love you too, but I can't stay here forever... I have to evolve, I have to grow, I have to live the life that the inner me is calling me to."

I used my days wisely, finding a balance between quality time spent with grandma, cutting and shaping aluminum rods to upgrade my cart, preparing my nomadic belongings for the unknowable survival story that lay ahead of me, and of course running naked in the woods.

I ended up giving the cart an asymmetrical design: one hand for direction and one for

thrust, that I would only need during uphill. As odd as it seems, it did the job perfectly and I came to really love it.

An old friend of mine Eva Lustigova had also sent a camera team to film the preparation, thinking this journey would make a unique story to capture, and would one day be the topic of a documentary.

During my last days, I had a good look online to see if anyone else had attempted or completed a similar journey to India, and I didn't find much at all. We know Alexander the Great did it, though he probably had a horse, and a battalion too... Marco Polo did it, and that too more peacefully... And in the more recent days I found out about the Kunst brothers, who had undertaken an unbroken walk through Europe and Asia in the 70s, in which India was on the way through circumstances. One of them got shot in Afghanistan, and the other succeeded.

So my conclusion was clear: I had every reason to document this journey as closely as I could, and I could foretell it was going to be life-changing...

I bought a notebook the size of a wallet and made it a practice to write as small as my bodily faculties would allow me to. The reason was obvious: the smaller I could write, the less weight I'd have to lug around the planet and every gram made a big difference. I ended up even cutting my toothbrush in two to make the load that teeny bit lighter.

Final result: my cart alone, handmade from aluminum, plywood, stainless steel, and held together with nuts and bolts, weighed 20 kg already... When it was packed, it reached a total of 80 kg, or 175 pounds. More than my own body weight... and people laugh at me for cutting my toothbrush in two! If I wasn't so stubbornly minimalist, I would have had 160 kg to haul around instead of 80. That's because

everything else I owned had also been reduced by half in any way it could. These small changes made the world of a difference... or at least half of the world, the one I would be crossing on foot.

My cart's content was a mix between minimal survival gear like a tent, clothing, alcohol stove, toolbox for cart-repairs and maintenance, a tiny first-aid kit... and items which we could consider useless, but which had spiritual significance: three hard drives, two cameras, two tripods, a laptop, a phone, a power bank, a solar panel, and all the cables and cases and chargers that you can imagine go with each of these things...

I'm sure you're thinking "how can this guy be calling all that electronic nonsense *spiritual*?", and you're right! But the difference is, these items were not for my own consumption: they were tools to document the trip in terms of photos and videos, which I thought was my karmic duty back to the world. This loving and

caring and wondrous world, which by some unthinkable alignment of conditions was giving me the freedom to undertake such a marvelous journey. The least I could do was share.

And remember that those 80 kg's were the sum total of everything I happened to own on this Earth. If you were to personally gather every object you own in your life, including furniture, vehicles, and real-estate... and put it all together on one really big scale, how much do you think it would weigh?

It sounds like a dumb question, but the answer effectively points at the sum total of our material attachment in the world: what we consider "mine", what we worry about losing... the more we own, the more we tie ourselves up. Who needs a slave master, we do it all by ourselves already! But on the plus side, no need for an Abraham Lincoln to abolish slavery either, because we have all we need to untie the chains. In fact, untying them takes less effort than it did

to tie them up in the first place. That's what I found out on day one.

So back to the topic: writing about the pilgrimage seemed like an absolute must, and I internally made a promise that I'd like to share with you:

If the world actually allows me to make such a journey til the end, if it grants me the fathomless good fortune of coming out successfully from such an unpredictable feat, I vow to spend the rest of my days in pure gratitude and recognition, giving back and giving back as much as I can, dedicating my life and existence to the peace and the welfare of all.

In the Tibetan tradition, we start each meditation session by *setting motivation*: reminding ourselves why we are doing this in the first place. So this 14'000-km meditation session awaiting me now had its motivation: may it be of benefit to you, to me, to the world.

I also did my best at keeping this narrative in the raw original format, leaving the day numbers and distances in the same way as I was documenting them in my hand-written manuscript. I haven't included every detail of the manuscript - it would have bored you to death - but instead did my best at seeping out the pointless rambling and keeping the essence of the lessons I had learnt.

I hope you like my work.

- Chapter 1 -

Barefoot and naive

April 29th 2016

Day 1 - 26 km

Grandma was obviously sad to see me off. It's always harder for those who stay than those who go, right? That's why being nomadic feels so good, and to be fair I had no clue what it must have felt like on her end... We had been remarkably close ever since I was zero years old, and this was indeed our final parting. It almost looked like she knew...

I didn't know a thing actually, and that's what made me so light that I felt like thin air. We hugged goodbye and off I was, carried by the wind. Barefoot, yet not touching the ground... gliding with so much ease that I had the thought

"I could do this forever. This is all I need. This is true happiness." All the possessions in my life were effectively contained in this hand-pulled bundle behind me... I had never been this free.

After a bit of forest scenery I crossed Dolní Bělá, a village I had known since childhood... and to my shock, music started booming out from the rusty lamp-post speakers mounted by the Russians decades ago - which somehow still work today - and I laughed out loud as it looked like the world was exuberantly celebrating my departure. But no one cared, really.

Next, a truck slowed down as the driver noticed my unusual appearance, and he asked through the window "Where are you headed with all that?" "India" I answered, hoping it was true. He laughed out loud and drove away. He was right, it seemed so unrealistic, so surreal. Merely thinking of the road ahead would make my mind explode... so I didn't.

Another village I knew, another foresty scene, an abandoned plane-yard, singing away and enjoying my day, and those 80 kg's felt absolutely weightless as I strolled along with nothing on my shoulders and a pleasantly balanced cart. But a hard fact started troubling me: the asphalt road against my bare feet's skin. It ended up hurting at every step, but it turned out my first day's walk had a very convenient destination: my aunt Vlasta's house in the city of Pilsen.

I reached her home in utter joy. Family, what a beautiful thing... let's enjoy it before I disappear into desert! Vlasta's pastries were equally delighting as she happened to own a whole bakery, and I was spoiled in all kinds of delicacies as well as caring love from all the folks there.

The next day was spent sitting on my thumbs, watching the worn-out skin on my feet, and deciding I was going to pull out the pair of

backup sandals from my bag and use them from now on. In any case, I was happy I gave my bare feet a chance! I've always been a barefoot-lover and it's our natural state, but I realized that on this journey, the distances were just too taxing. I chose to initiate a second experiment though, which would be my attempt at answering another persistent question in my life: how far across the world could I make it in 13-dollar sandals? All those self-righteous hikers who tell me I need "real" walking shoes... but didn't the Romans cross all of Europe in sandals? Anyway, I would be the happy one to find out.

On top of all their generosity, Vlasta's son Honzik, in love with cycling, gifted me bicycle grips to mount on the handlebars of my cart and make things more comfortable than ever before. I was grateful beyond words and well set for the next part of my trip. Or so I thought...

- Chapter 2 -
Broken already?

May 2016

Day 3 - 70th km

The next morning Vlasta saw me off with a hug, a tear in her eye, and a bag of her best breads along with all kinds of other home-made goodies. This time, no more trial run or easy destination with family waiting for me: my day's plan was to walk as far as I could and to sleep wherever that would have me end up.

It took a good part of the day just to make it out of the city of Pilsen, and after a daily distance of 44 km - more than those Romans - I left the road and dove into the woods to set up camp. My night was minimal and pleasant as I delighted in aloneness.

As morning came and I pulled my cart out of the forest, something really odd struck me... how can my left wheel look like it's sideways? After closer inspection I realized the main axle - made of bare aluminum, how ingenious of me - had cracked. By some miracle the wheel still clung on with dignity, but at a weird angle that made me wonder how far I could push my luck or pull my side-winding cart... Who was going to save me this time, I don't know!

I struggled on for a bit before stopping at the first sign of human presence, which looked like a farm. As I reached the main gate, I realized the farmer was also a blacksmith, and had all the tools necessary to save my trip. He crafted a custom iron rod to replace my broken aluminum one and didn't want a penny for the job.

And I thought I had left my family yesterday! But here I was face to face with someone I had barely met, yet treated with so much generosity that I could have sworn we were kin: the truth

hit me that there was no reason to worry about anything, because my family was much bigger than I thought. In fact, it included all of humanity.

My cart carried on without a hitch and once again I slept well in nature, but life loves throwing new things at me every day - to keep me from getting bored, of course - so the very next morning I fell acutely ill. In the afternoon I threw up all the contents of my stomach, and whatever was still left in my gut came out as diarrhea... near dusk, the sky darkened, it threatened to rain, and my body was still trying to throw up in vain. Setting up my tent took so much effort that I nearly fainted in the process. Once I could finally lie down, I refrained from ingesting anything at all - even water - and got a bit of sleep while rain stormed outside.

Day 6 - 169 km

Being sick on the road is an exercise in meditation: the kind where you are told "just observe the pain". Letting it come, letting it be, and letting it go... instead of adding mental suffering on top of the physical one.

The Buddha called this *Adhiṭṭhāna* - strong determination. What determination? *No matter what kind of physical pain I go through, I will not let it trigger the mental reactions of anger and aversion.* The pain is enough already, why make it worse?

With this approach, not only do we avoid the mental pain, but even the physical pain is transcended at some point. Actually, any kind of illness can be dealt with in this way - whether we're a nomadic hermit or a professional couch potato. But, homelessly and on the road, I have to admit it takes on a new dimension.

In a modern lifestyle, when we're sick we can stay in bed with all the comfort, water, and food we need until we get better. In my tent, if I'm sick and choose to stay in "bed", the first problem will be a very obvious one: no more water. No food either and no one to take care of me. The only option is Adhiṭṭhāna: let the pain be, keep my mind cool, find the energy within to fold my tent and keep walking like any other day.

So that morning I did, even though it was raining and cold. I kept walking - on an empty stomach from yesterday's throwing up - until I found a small shop with grape juice. It appealed to me, and I spent all day sipping on it and walking slowly in the rain. In the end it was meditative and even fun. I still managed to somehow fit 30 km in my day, and my stomach was healthily recovering. I set up my tent early and this time had a pleasant night.

The next day, for once, was normal! What an oddity! Sunny, pleasant, back on track and successful, with another night in the woods just how I liked them.

Day 8 - 217 km

One normal day was as much as I deserved, and the next, once again, had me doubting if I would make it at all. An increasingly sharp pain had developed deep in my right knee, and even with my best friend Adhiṭṭhāna - *just observe* - I could hardly take another step. Not from excessive walking, but from insufficient quality of how I walked.

"What is this guy rambling about with *walking quality*?" I hear you ask. "We've known how to walk since we were two!" Well... it all depends on what we mean by walking. If it means getting from our front door to the village bakery, then apparently we all know how to walk. But if our

walking was really flawless, if our every step was in balance, in harmony, in line with the world, how come walking starts to hurt after 10, 50, or 100 km? Mostly because we stopped learning how to walk hardly a year after we started, went on pretending it was an acquired skill, and never even bothered to get the degree!

If this all sounds like a joke, I should add that there *is* such a thing as a degree, as I had come to know with Taichi-Master Huang Hua eight years earlier in China. He had taught me how to walk.

We would spend our entire days doing simple movements like walking around a room or even standing still, but striving at doing them with mental and bodily perfection. Taichi entirely changed my life: when we learn to stand, sit, walk, and make every move with harmony and alignment, our existence takes on a new quality, and we realize that the simple fact of being can feel so good.

Where does that alignment come from? Awareness. When we bring awareness to the body, without further instruction it aligns all by itself in absolute perfection. It sounds so easy, right? And it is. All it takes is awareness.

And yet, we still have all these bodily problems simply because we keep forgetting about awareness. We're hardly ever aware for a few seconds at a time before our mind starts jumping into the past or the future, forgetting all about the body. So maintaining awareness takes practice, and this practice is what we call *meditation*. That's why I call this trip a walking meditation, and that's its first and foremost purpose. Walking until I perfect my walking, walking until I perfect my mind.

So back to the pain in my right knee: wonderful! I'm not alone! That pain was no one else than my Taichi teacher Master Huang! "Hey man, you're walking without awareness."

Walking *with* awareness never leads to pain. Pain always comes when you walk distractedly, hurriedly, worriedly, clumsily. So thanks to the pain, I took a break, settled my mind in the now and strived to correct my walking. It worked, the pain left, and I felt like I was walking on butter.

Later in the day as I was crossing the city of České Budějovice - doesn't matter if you can't pronounce it - the words of my grandmother echoed in my mind... *"When you reach Budějovice, remember what I tell you: there's a village a bit south named Včelný. It means "Bee Hives", that's what they used to live off. We have family there, their last name is "Háková", but we lost contact decades ago. I don't have a single phone number or any kind of address... please go to that village for me and see what happens."*

I scrutinized my paper map, found "Včelný" in tiny print, and a few hours later I reached the place. It had one or two small shops, so I walked in and asked in my slightly broken Czech "Sorry,

I'm not from here, but I think I have family living in this village. Do you know anyone who goes by the last name of "Háková"?

The shopkeeper was surprised. "Yeah I think I do, they probably live somewhere on this road, when you leave the shop and turn right..." So I walked up the road and found a mailbox with some writing that could suggest I was at the right place.

"Ahoj, je tam někdo?" *Hi, Is there anyone here?* I called out as I didn't find a doorbell. After some time, a woman in her 70s came out skeptically. "Yes, what exactly do you need?" "My name is Ben, and you don't know me, but... my grandmother's last name is Jaklova and I believe we might be from the same family line."

Her face changed in a blink. "Marta Jaklova? Are you her grandson? And I thought you were a homeless bum looking for shelter! Come right in, take off your shoes, I'll wash your feet, they look all dry and terrible, and you must be hungry, I'll

cook for you and wash your clothes too, and give you a room to stay in as long as you want. What brings you here so unexpectedly?"

Her name was Anička, she was my great-aunt, and we immediately called Grandma to celebrate the success. From then on, contact from both branches of the family was finally re-established. What I failed to remind Anička, however, was that despite being from the same family line, I was indeed a homeless bum looking for shelter!



A gleaming new cart and happy faces

The incident was fortunate for yet another reason, which once again saved my journey, like hanging from a thread: the steel rod crafted by the blacksmith was doing the job fine, but it was ordinary iron, not stainless steel... I could see the rust slowly creeping in already, simply from walking in wet grass. I didn't know how long it would last, but most definitely not another 13'800 km.

I showed it to the family, and Anička's son Jirka seemed to have been sent from the beyond to solve my case "I can do something about that. I'm the manager in a stainless steel factory. We can bring your cart there and we'll fashion a new frame, stainless this time, and professionally welded, not screwed with nuts and bolts."

I was speechless, what were the odds! We eagerly got to it and the whole process took two days, as we ended up making a new system that attached to the outside of the wheels so that the

axle would be secured from both ends and would never break again. He didn't want nor accept a penny for the job...

And that's how Grandma's mysterious instructions led to the most fortunate reunion - one to which I owe the accomplishment of the journey itself.

- Chapter 3 -

First border crossing: Austria

May 2016

Day 11 - 248 km

Handling the cart felt like driving a new car: the build was sturdier and I could feel it. I had more confidence than ever before and embraced my new lifestyle with joy: all day, my only real objective was to walk. And at night, to sleep so that I could walk the next day. I also had daily homework in my tent: writing the journal that I'm sharing with you, and meditating to give my mind the space and time to digest the day's abundance.

A few days went by and I found myself at my first border crossing, face to face with Austria, a

country I had never seen before. I could hardly believe I was already in a new country with another language: German, which, lucky me, had no noticeable difference from the German I had sketchily learnt at school in Switzerland. So I didn't have to struggle much for everyday things and the people were festive, kind and courteous.

As dusk started settling on the first day in Austria, a weird idea took me: *it's getting dark and I can't find anywhere proper to pitch my tent... why don't I just walk all night? For fun?*

On a whim, I decided to actually walk until morning. I let darkness descend and just kept on going with my headlamp. It was happening well until it started raining at 1 am... The rain and the wind together with pitch darkness and no signs of shelter made for moments of bitter frustration, but I somehow made it through in sleep-walking zombie-mode... When sunlight started filling the sky in early morning, my heart danced. My first nightwalk! I was so stoked that

I kept on walking all day too, keeping a close eye on my odometer to see just how long I could walk without sleep.

This oddly-named *odometer* was my best friend, well, my only friend by now... It was an ordinary bicycle distance-counter that I had wired to the right wheel of my cart so it would calculate the exact distance I had completed daily, as well as the total distance of my trip. It was an essential companion because I relied on paper map, compass, and ruler instead of GPS like most people, and knowing the exact distance walked from the previous town allowed me to calculate where I was on my map, how much longer before the next town where I could hopefully find food, the next river where I could hopefully bathe, the next forest where I could hopefully camp, the next junction where I could hopefully take the correct turn, and the next border-crossing where I could hopefully, well... cross.

All smartphones nowadays have GPS, but if I really relied on that kind of technology to give me direction, I'd be helpless as soon as my phone would run out of power - which is just a matter of time when you live in the wild with no power outlets. So I had enough paper maps in my bag for the next ten countries, and when I would get near the end of my collection, I would order new ones wherever I happened to be. I also made it a daily practice to trace my road by hand, accurately marking every night I spent and the day number. This gave me an organic overview of what kind of distance I would do on average, as well as a fun historical record that I could go back to any time if I wanted to recount the story with the amount of detail that I'm including in this book.

So there I was, still walking after a sleepless night and looking at my distance-counter every now and again. 60 km, 70, 80... it didn't make much sense to sleep during the day, and as much

of a zombie as I was, I chose to walk until the 100th km.

100 km - 62 miles - without sleep... by far a record in my life, and yet not the slightest trace of leg pain! I had finally found the secret recipe, which I'll share with you... Every 5 km, so basically once every hour, I would stop for a minute or two to do a short stretching routine which I had adapted specifically for long-distance walking. Ankles, knees, hips, lower back... One or two minutes was all it took to bring my body back to perfect comfort and alignment, and to keep walking in the bliss of physical ease.

Another golden rule was, the walking itself should be done in a Taichi manner, relaxed at every step, and unhurried. Hurriedness has nothing to do with speed: it's a state of mind. When you sink into the now instead of worrying about the destination, your body relaxes, and you become *unhurried*. You can be as fast as you

want, you can even run, but you remain loose and unhurried. It's like the difference between jogging in the park on Sunday and running to catch the bus next morning: the former is full of joy... the latter, full of pain.

So these two rules, coupled together, gave me the formula for unending mileage without the slightest bodily pain.

Day 15 - 378 km

The next day was different. Walking distance: 0. It was pouring rain all day and I chose to stay in my tent to meditate, organize my things, do some writing, and make a video on my laptop for my mom's birthday which would include some of the first scenes of my walking life.

Wait, what kind of hobo in the woods has a laptop? Where does the power come from?

Homeless tip #1: charging devices

Whenever I would walk into a restaurant, somebody's home, or any type of building for any type of reason, I would inconspicuously look around for power outlets. If I noticed one, I would connect a single cable that would then go into my bag, split up and charge all my devices: power banks, cameras, computer, phone, headlamps. While my things were charging I would go about having my meal, or my tea, or my night's rest or anything else I was invited to.

If it sounds like I'm selfishly mooching energy, it helps to note that I would hardly get a charging point once every few days, sometimes up to a week: I had to use my devices very sparingly, and my lifestyle used only a fraction of the electricity any ordinary citizen would.

The next day was peaceful and sunny, strolling alongside a new companion and guide that I could faithfully follow from now on: the Danube river. After another night in my tent by the river and one more day's walk, I received my first spontaneous invitation: a smiling Austrian woman named Sabine who casually came up to me and asked "Do you need a place to sleep tonight?"

Intriguingly, in the West hospitality tends to be sparser than in poorer parts of the world... and yet here I was, being treated like a guest of honor, and being given the house's only bed even though there were three people living there.

"I have no bed in my own home, I always sleep on the floor, it's an absolute joy and I love it! Please don't sacrifice the only one you have, please sleep on it yourself", I tried to argue, but she was adamant in giving me the best experience possible, which in her eyes meant a western bed. The funniest shift took place in my

mind about the nature of happiness: the most selfless thing I could do was to accept the bed rather than argue against it, even though that meant Sabine would be sleeping on the couch and I would be sleeping on a western mattress whereas I strongly preferred the floor!

The Buddha prescribed a list of perfections, or *paramis*, to practice on our path to freedom and happiness, and the very first one he advocated was generosity. It is said that giving is one of the highest causes of happiness, much more so than receiving. The receiver is in for some temporary benefit, whereas the giver receives something much more substantial: a step towards enlightenment itself.

In this case giving away her bed was making Sabine so happy that accepting her offer was the best thing I could do for everyone! Funnily enough, I was practicing generosity myself: sacrificing my yogic habit of sleeping on the

floor I love, and accepting a gift because it completed Sabine's karma of generosity.

**Homeless tip #2: how (and why) to
sleep on the floor**

This simple rule has changed my life, making me healthier, lighter, more flexible and free in so many ways: forget about beds. If you own a house, without a doubt ditch the bed and your room will be twice the size. If you're traveling, ditch the restrictive habit of always looking for one, and take joy in lying down anywhere at all.

If you sleep on the floor you will become a Yogi. The ground is the original surface, the one aligned with how humanity's been living for 99% of its existence, and the best for your back. Mattress vendors and bed bugs will ardently disagree, seeing their job at stake! But behold, you can sleep for free, and when you start

sleeping on a hard surface, it takes just one or two nights of getting used to... and then you wake up feeling sublime, with a body loose and aligned. The Kung Fu masters of old would say: sleeping on hardness makes you soft and supple. Sleeping on softness makes you hard and brittle.

Let's settle for a middle path, though, before you go exchanging your mattress for a rock: say, a yoga mat or anything with a similar thickness that can be rolled up and stacked away, yet provides enough insulation to keep you warm. Because yes, unless you're Wim Hof, warmth is needed for survival. Softness isn't.

And please allow me to bother you with one last line on bedding, this time from the Buddha himself: the eighth precept he gave his monks was to "refrain from high or luxurious beds". This is open to interpretation of course, but it sounds like he was friends with the Kung Fu guys.

Next morning Sabine was not at all moody from having slept on the couch but beamed with glee, and she gathered everything she could in her minimal house to set up a breakfast-set. Ever since the event, I've been doing my best at accepting everything and anything that I am given out of goodwill. And I would accept whole-heartedly, with all the joy that they deserved from their selfless act.

We parted with a selfie-session and exchange of kind words, after which I set out to cross Vienna, my first capital city: it took 37 km and all day of walking, until I found a bit of nature on the other side where I could set up camp. Most people calculate the time until they reach the next city, but I'm calculating how long until I get out of it, so that I can sleep elsewhere than on a sidewalk!

A few more walking days went by before receiving a similar invite, this time by an elderly woman named Ania. It was so unexpected: she simply came up to me on the roadside and said "Come sleep in my place tonight!" I accepted straight away and was welcomed in like an old family member. I was treated to everything I could hope for, and next morning she even suggested that I stay another day, or as many as I wanted.

I answered that the nature of my journey bade me to keep on moving... I kept walking for the next few days, Austria's unending hospitality leaving a deep impression in my heart. People would walk up to my tent in the evening, but instead of telling me I wasn't allowed to camp they would bring bags of food and make sure I had everything I needed.

- Chapter 4 -

Descending from the Alps

May 2016

Day 22 - 615 km

Another week of walking had me cross the Austrian Alps, which lived up to every detail they promise in those vintage postcards, and I reached the plains of Slovenia: my second border crossing and nearly the smallest country on my journey. I can't say much about it except for the fact it's so small that if you're on a tight 9-to-5 job but still secretly tempted to walk across a country, all you need is three days!

The Slovenian police, however, had nothing more exciting to get their hands on than this homeless wanderer crossing a field. I got three passport checks in three days' time, along with

dull questions like "What are you doing?" to which I would give dull answers like "As you can see, I'm not doing much." Unimpressed, they would end up leaving me alone.

I reached the Croatian border with a wondrous feeling of astonishment. *I can't believe I'm literally crossing countries on foot...* Hospitality remained the rule of thumb, and the very first Croatian shop I came across gave me food for free, after which even a local sim card was offered to me so that I could use my phone in case of need.

Near the end of my first day's walk in Croatia, a sun-tanned farmer invited me to his home. I accepted as usual, but I then came to realize he was heading there with his tractor and intending to carry me along. I reluctantly accepted, thinking "Let's go with the flow, it must not be far away, and in the morning I can tackle the same road once again on foot."

I thought we were going to his home but he brought me to a barn-like cafe in the countryside, and one thing led to the next before I was dropped in the middle of an unknown city that he must have somehow judged was a step forward for me. He was full of goodwill, but the language barrier was huge and none of what he said came across clearly. *Croatian* is a slavic language of which I could guess bits and pieces thanks to my Czech background, but that was far from enough to make out what in the world he was thinking of.

That evening, I felt deeply lost and ended up sleeping under a bridge, where I was haunted by disturbing dreams of being thrown into a dark nameless cemented city without up or down or left or right... My dream was so close to the confused reality I was actually living that I can't even recall which part was dream and which part was real.

As the morning sun dazzled my weary eyes, I realized that the only way out of this misfortune was to walk back to starting point, however far that would be. By asking locals for directions and scrutinizing my map, I ended up walking 21 km back to the exact point where he had picked me up with his tractor the previous day. That may sound like a lot, but that distance was infinitesimal compared to turning the whole trip into a lie: this was a journey meant to be on foot. Finally, my conscience was cleaned, my mistake rectified, and I had a migraine from the heat of walking in the sun all day. It didn't matter, I saw it as part of the process. It felt great to be back on track, and I vowed never to let my cart leave the ground again, unless we were both abducted by extraterrestrials or something...

Day 31 - 873 km

The migraine worsened day by day until I found myself hardly doing any distance at all. People's kindness was unending and I was given food and water on a daily basis without even asking... however, it was still up to me to manage my nights' survival in the forest and assume my recovery alone.

On the fourth day of struggling with illness I came across a small cafe where I was warmly invited by a woman named Carolina. As I walked in, I noticed portraits of Buddha on the walls... What was *he* doing here? But this wasn't mere decoration, as I found out during a long talk with Carolina about her faith in Buddhism and the astonished looks from her conservative Christian neighbors when they came to know about it.

I was in fact invited by the Buddha himself, and this time, on top of being a *physician of the soul*

as he is commonly described, he was also the doctor for my physical ailments: after one night spent in this haven of kindness, I had finally recovered.

Carolina's hospitality included all the food, warm drinks, and rest I could possibly need in order to get better, and she even packed some rice with vegetables the next morning to make sure I wouldn't go hungry on the road. My footpath continued with joy to the Croatian capital *Zagreb*, where I spent one night in a hostel. This was day 38 since I had started the walking trip, and, astonishingly, the first time I was actually paying for lodging. I smiled at the facts... what a low-cost travel plan! And what a good-willed world that allows me to live such a beautiful story straight from the generosity of people's hearts.

Homeless tip #3:
the home-made alcohol stove

I made best use of my time in Zagreb to gather hardware for my ongoing homemade-stove experiment. The result was astonishing: a stove safer, more lightweight, and more compact than any of those gas-based camping stoves on the market, and a total cost of just a few dollars... Best of all, the fuel for refills was nothing more than plain disinfectant that you could find in any random town around the world.

My stove was made of three parts: a wide flat metal bowl, an empty lip-balm-style tin, and a small barbecue grill to sit on top, all elements visible in the included photo. You fill the tiny tin with alcohol, you light it, and you get a flame strong enough to boil soup for one person in around five minutes. I named him Calcifer and

he was my faithful companion for my countless nights alone.

Depending on the shape and size of the base-bowl, you might want to make holes inside it to allow more oxygen to reach the flame... but in this case I didn't even need to. Also remember it will get hot, so please don't put it down straight on your tent floor: use something heatproof as support - I had a thin plywood board that also served as my table and desk. This stove is amazingly safe too because it sits flat on the



Meet my fiery friend and cook, Calcifer

ground - it can't get tipped over and burn your tent down like all the other stoves.

For now, it sounds too good to be true, right? There are drawbacks: it's less powerful than a gas-based stove, and if you're in a windy environment, you'd need something to block the wind. Thirdly, you can't adjust the flame size with a simple knob: instead, you choose the appropriate diameter of your tin can, and you stick to that.

In my case, for cooking solo inside my tent it was nothing short of magical, and it's come to make hundreds of meals for me in all kinds of conditions. I am in love with it and have never considered any other cook than Calcifer.

I kept on walking for a few days through mountain and forest scenery until I reached Bosnia. My road was only briefly going through a corner of this mid-sized country - just a few

days' walk - before entering Croatia again, but I felt the difference: the moment I crossed the border, I heard the first Muslim call-to-prayer in my trip. Europe has its share of Muslim populations, but rare are the places where their presence is significant enough to hear daily calls-to-prayer from minaret loudspeakers... In Bosnia it was omnipresent, and I felt like I was in another continent already.

In no time I was back in Croatia, on a path that led straight into the Velebit Mountain Range, part of the Croatian Alps. Its natural beauty was breathtaking and the road entirely deserted too, as a result of a devastating war with Bosnia two decades ago that had left entire towns abandoned and in ruins. I spent 36 hours without any form of civilization, and no source of food or water either... When I started worrying about what I was going to drink, a group of Polish cyclists pedaled by. "You're obviously slower than us" they said after briefly introducing themselves, "so have some water!"

They handed me several bottles and I was grateful beyond words.

The same ghost-town scenario and food scarcity kept on going for a couple days, before I reached the city of Knin, with supermarkets at every street corner and so much variety that I was overwhelmed. And to make up for the blandness of my past days' diet, Alexa, the owner of a roadside ice-cream parlor, gave me an all-I-could-eat wildcard to his entire assortment!

The next day went so smoothly that I started noticing a new and exotic feeling inside me: boredom. What a funny thing! I seized the chance to observe what it meant to be bored, where this feeling was coming from, and why it was even bothering me... and the world, as if listening to my mind, responded quickly with something to send my boredom running for the hills: a mine field!

The sun was just about to set and the only thing on my mind was to find a place to camp before it

got dark. That's when I came across an intriguing array of signs with skull-heads, posted amongst the trees left and right of the road: "No trespassing - high risk of mines".

Great! All traces of boredom were out the window and instead I found my heart-rate increasing and my mind racing to find a solution to this captivating post-war scenario... I found none.

After setting up camp in slow motion and taking a possibly final shower with my homemade water-bottle contraption, I stood under the moon and for some reason felt amazing. I went



How to set up camp in a minefield... Google it?

to bed with the amusing thought that "if I did happen to set up my tent over a mine... all it would take is for me to turn in bed and I would explode out of my sleep!"

Day 52 - 1'406 km

Day number 52 came and didn't start by anybody blowing up. I took the road singing away and kept tramping southwards. It took two days of walk until I noticed it in the distance... a vast blue horizon of emptiness... the Mediterranean Sea. My next days were spent celebrating this new element as I walked along the coast and dove in the water every time I felt hot... which was always, as I was stepping into summer and southern Europe had nothing to do with Switzerland.

The next few days were a pleasant stride with solid daily distances, until I reached Ploče, an endearing coastal city adorned with lush

mountains and vast freshwater lakes. After one night spent sleeping alongside one of the lakes, I received a call from Aditya, an old-time Indian friend, saying he was in Croatia and meaning to cross Ploče in three days. So out of friendship I chose to take a break, for the first time since the beginning of the trip, and to wait for Aditya to spend one afternoon together.

The last morning by the lakeside had me wake up with a shock: as I opened my eyes I found myself staring straight into those of a snake. Right in my tent, enjoying the comfort of modern living... my tent being sealed from all sides, this meant it had made its way in last evening and my entire night had been spent with a slithering roommate! It didn't mean the slightest harm though, and wished me good morning with a flick of its tongue.

- Chapter 5 -

Down the Mediterranean Coast

June 2016

Day 64 - 1'695 km

The heat was getting harder to deal with during the day as well as the night, and I would explore ways to camp without my tent to enjoy increased airflow, but still use the mosquito net as best as I could to ward off hordes of flying critters. It worked somewhat, but once in a while I would spend an hour dislodging a colony of ants that had decided to relocate their premises right into my food bag while I slept.

I reached Montenegro greeted by laughing border guards, vivid flowers, and smiles everywhere. I had hardly ever heard of this

country before but it was an experience on par with paradise. Imposing mountains with the steepest walls I had ever seen, interspersed with pristine sand beaches and iconic stone forts.

To bring a bit of balance to my euphoria, the next experience was a dip into hell. A visit to an underworld named *Vrmac Tunnel*. It was 1.6 km long... Doesn't sound like much, right? I didn't think so either until I realized in which conditions I would be doing it. The tunnel had no ventilation whatsoever. Drivers sealed in their cars would hardly notice, as the whole thing would only last a few minutes for them. But I noticed.

I started the walk valiantly determined, but I soon came to breathe so much carbon monoxide that I wondered how many more steps I could take before fainting... in which case I would simply fall on the floor from CO poisoning and never wake up. The tunnel did have a sidewalk, full of potholes too, and at times it got so

narrow that I had to bring my cart onto the road and run from traffic in the dark. Halfway, my mind started floating away in hazy dreams, seeing trees in my visions... would I ever breathe air again, or see another tree in my life? I missed nature and realized that I'd been taking air for granted all this time... this precious fundamental source of energy that's usually available in such divine abundance that we don't even notice.

It took a whole thirty minutes until, to my suffocated surprise, I started making out a hue of light in the distance. The other side was almost within eyeshot... Forget the walk, this calls for a run! After a few minutes of running my lungs out, I saw the sky and breathed like I had never breathed before.

After my oxygen-high died down, I spent a few more days walking from sunrise to sunset before I made a most unique encounter: for the first time, I met someone... like me. Was that another

walker? Someone who refuses transport and walks by choice rather than necessity? Almost all of us have two feet and the capacity to walk across a country, and yet nobody does it. Meeting a walker is so rare that this was the only time it happened in my whole four-year trip.

Her name was Sonia and she had walked 1'800 km in two-and-a-half months. I looked at my own calendar, then my distance-counter... "Hey check it out, I also just walked 1'800 km in two-and-a-half months!"

The difference between us, however, was that she carried such a big bag on her shoulders that it looked like her gear was outweighing her body. But somehow, during our whole fifteen-minute conversation about the sacred alignment of the world, she didn't even bother to lay down her bag.

So she looked ok with her load, but I have to admit that after our encounter, I felt even more

blessed to have this faithful two-wheeled assistant carrying the totality of my life... I could stroll across countries like it was a walk in the park. I do love my cart.

**Homeless tip #4:
the hermit cart**

What a good time to introduce the building process of the beloved cart that carried my things across half of the world, and could carry yours too if you were equally irrational!

Back in Switzerland, it had taken me roughly twenty hours of work and nothing more than everyday tools you would find in your basement: a hand-saw for metal, an electric drill, a screw driver, a monkey wrench, and... that's about it! Oh, a ruler and a pencil!

Even the design had no plan whatsoever, other than to make the whole thing feel like a hermit



cart. The only demanding part was the stainless steel frame welded by my uncle a month later because my axle was breaking, but hey, that was my fault! *You should have made the axle out of stainless steel, not upcycled aluminum!* I'd grumbled to my careless self when it had originally broken.

Apart from stainless steel at that crucial area, all the rest *was* simple aluminum and plywood, held together by your old-fashion nuts and bolts. Having a cart that was homemade rather than bought from some factory added a practical and spiritual dimension to the whole thing: this cart was my child, I knew what it was made of, and I knew how to fix it, upgrade it, or find parts in case anything went wrong.

Besides, I've never seen a factory sell a cart like this even if I wanted to - there's just no demand for this kind of nonsense! But at least - since you're reading these lines now - there must be some kind of demand for hearing about it!

The day after my encounter with Sonia, I reached the border crossing to the next novelty in my life: Albania. It was unlike anything I had ever seen in Europe, and more reminiscent of the freedom and organic disorder you would find in the Wild East.

Slums, barefoot children, roadside garbage heaps, farmers on horse-carts, skins tanned by the sun, unrestrained generosity, and playful enthusiasm at meeting a foreigner made it feel like I was in India already.

People's offerings involved so many fruits - mostly melons as they were in season - that I would eat that alone for days and end up with quite a messed up stomach! The sickness was only at a physical level though, and deep down I felt the exact opposite: a heart warm from the kindness of beings.

My next days in this exotic land included a copious lunch offered by an Albanian chief of police and all kinds of invitations to be sheltered for the nights. I have to admit that much of the time I would politely refuse, saying that I wasn't done with my daily distance... but that was only half the truth. The whole story is that I can't describe the joy of sleeping alone in my tent, surrounded by nature, no one to talk to, only me and my mind and the quiet, simple world around... *that* was my real home.

One of these mornings spent camping in a field, the landlord noticed me from afar and came up to me. I was a bit worried about what he would think of my tent in his field, but instead, he gave me a hug, offered me a cigarette - which I accepted as an act of pure love even without smoking it - and he asked if I needed a shower. You could smell I did, so he let me use the shower-place in his home before seeing me off with a gleam in his eye.

Life was bright and beautiful in every way... so bright, in fact, that a new guest came knocking at my door: the searing heat. Starting from 11 am already, doing my usual distance in the direct sun was becoming an ordeal... Whereas the locals in these countries would lie in the shade during the hottest hours of the day and work late in the evening instead, I couldn't change my own schedule, simply because I couldn't walk at night.

Or could I? What if I flipped my life around? Walk through the nights and sleep through the days... It was so tempting that I chose to rewire my internal clock starting that very afternoon. I took a few hours' nap under a tree and woke up with the setting sun. Then I took the road, pretending it was morning.

The hardest thing about walking at night is usually the darkness - you can't see much and the traffic can't see you - but this time, as soon as the sun had set the full moon started peeking

out from behind the mountains. The landscape was aglow with mystical white moonlight and no human presence at all. This road didn't exist on my map either and I was starting to wonder if it was anything more than a creation of my consciousness... *All appearances are your own mind*, would say the Tibetan master Tokme Zangpo, and I was starting to feel it.

After a moonlit picnic-lunch at 2 am sitting on a large rock, things started becoming more psychedelic. My lack of sleep was affecting the already-surreal environment... the sky started changing colors, the mountains twinkling, and the road swaying under my feet...

The next sunrise brought life to my face and a newfound hope of staying awake. I was still in another realm, pleasantly dreamy and far from conventional, and I kept walking until I came across a turquoise river with smooth sand banks and not a soul in sight... It was 1:30 pm,

whatever that meant, and I chose to spend my "night" in this little chunk of paradise.

At 6:30 pm I woke up and did my morning routine, before hitting the road at 9. Being under the open sky for so long was teaching me wonders about its alignments: when the moon is full, it always rises at the exact same time as the sun sets. How convenient for me! But as the days go by it starts waning, and rises 50 minutes later every night... Figuring this out allowed me to plan my nightwalks accordingly, and I knew that as the nights went by I could rely on it less and less: not only would it shine less bright but it would also start rising later in the night.

However, my second nightwalk happened just as magically. The inner peace and pristine stillness from such a spacious experience is hard to describe... I kept walking through the morning and most of the next day. After nineteen hours of walking, I crashed in a park and slept from 4 pm to 6 am almost uninterruptedly!

- Chapter 6 -
Greece and freedom

July 2016

Day 86 - 2'339 km

The next day was a return to conventional reality from my semi-sleepless nightlife rhythm. Not that I was tired of walking through the nights, but the moon I usually relied on was waning... and I was nearing the border with Greece too, which I wanted to reach during the day so that the crossing would be open. I wasn't sure what would be my next move to cope with the heat though...

Entering Greece was a return to western civilization, prices, and orderliness. I kind of missed the chaos, but Greece had its own culture of freedom: I came to realize quite fast that I

could sleep absolutely anywhere, day or night - from gas stations to roadside ledges to public gardens to tourist beaches - without the slightest glance from the police, landlords, or anyone at all really. The Greeks do it: they take their camper-van to the beach and live there all year long, no taxes, no rent, and no one to bother them. I praise the Greek government for such an easy-going attitude!

Geographically I was still along the coast, but the landscape involved climbing up and down majestic mountains which made me think of Lord of the Rings. The Greek mindset was more reserved than in Albania but they had their own quiet and compassionate form of hospitality which wouldn't stop endearing me. One morning, after grudgingly sharing my blood with a horde of fleas over breakfast, a lovely old man came and asked if he could offer me coffee. Greece loves coffee, and I embrace whatever I'm given except for meat, so I said *sure!*

A few minutes later, he came back with two cups of coffee. I was mentally preparing for conversation with the few new words of Greek I knew... He laid both cups on the bench, and left the scene saying "Enjoy your coffees!"

Day 93 - 2'495 km

The heat was my only real discomfort and I was constantly experimenting with different ways to deal with it. Sleeping in the tent made the air too stuffy so I started using the mosquito net alone to catch as much breeze as I could, but often bugs would find their way in and feast on my blood, or else make an anthill out of my food bag... As for daytime, I would sometimes make use of the Greek sleep-anywhere green-card and lie on the floor at random wherever I could find shade during the hottest hours.

I was covering a good distance every day and my distance-counter had just reached 2'500 km. "A

quarter of the trip to India!" I uttered to myself in disbelief. I was wrong, of course, optimistically thinking the total length would only be 10'000 km...

My delight at having done such a distance entirely on foot was short-lived: the very next day, I was put into a situation where I had no choice.... It was a tunnel going under a chunk of sea - must be a Greek idea - and it was much more modern than the one where I almost passed out in Montenegro. This one had proper ventilation and a wide sidewalk which made for a heavenly stroll... Tunnels are fantastic places in which to fool around with our voice, but as I was yodeling away halfway through, a police car stopped.

"This is tunnel security. We saw you on camera. Walking is banned. We will pick you up for the remainder of the way."

I did my best, but arguing had no effect on them whatsoever, and I was devastated. They took my

cart off the ground and hauled it at the back of the pickup truck. Then they had me sit in the car. I stared at the numbers on the tunnel walls as the car started moving, thinking "How many meters are they going to drive me? And how in the world am I gonna make up for *this*?" I had so vehemently vowed to never let my cart leave the ground again, unless I was abducted by extraterrestrials... but who would have expected my abductors to be subnauticals instead!

So 950 meters later, after two minutes of driving, they reached the end of the tunnel and dropped me off. I felt confused and disoriented... I had lost my umbilical connection to the ground and I had no idea where I was.

There was no way to turn back either like I had done with the tractor incident in Croatia... And though the event was disturbing and I never really got over it, I also came to see it as the first real lesson on detachment: as a matter of fact, my strongest clinging in the world was

neither to food, water, nor comfort, but to the dream of walking every step of the way to India. A dream which shattered today, as I had irreversibly left the ground, even for as little as 950 meters...

But if I consider this journey anything near spiritual, then the real practice is not a physical one but a mental one: unconditionally embracing the world and everything it throws my way. So in order to cope with that kind of situation, I rephrased my original vow to: "*May I do everything in my power to make every step of the way on foot.*" Also, to make up for the distance I lost, I chose to walk back and forth for one kilometer, thinking that "At least I've done the same number of steps as if I had actually walked through the tunnel".

I could then keep walking with confidence, knowing that if a future situation was really beyond my control, I would accept it and still do my best to minimize the distance forced on

transport. After all, 950 meters out of the 2'500 km done so far meant less than one tenth of a percent... I couldn't complain, and the world had been pretty good to me! Not *pretty good* but *overwhelmingly good*, so divinely gracious that I don't know what I could have possibly done in my past lives to deserve this kind of karma.

Nevertheless my face was gloomy after my broken dream, and the owner of a small roadside restaurant seemed to notice. He called me in and I was treated to all the food I could ask for, more to pack for the road, and motherly kindness from the restaurant family.

The next day I met a young man named Alex who worked as a swimming instructor in a luxury beach resort. He invited me to spend the night in their camp, and next morning I shared my Taichi routine with him while he offered me breakfast at the resort's fancy buffet. We left each other full of appreciation and good vibes.

The coastal road was a scenic marvel between limestone landscapes and a pristine clear blue sea... but the heat was still challenging and I decided to tackle a physical hardship with a spiritual approach. Until now, it may sound like I'm so obsessed with survival techniques and long-distance walking that the spiritual aspect of the journey may be but a side-product, but my priorities are the other way around: the number-one purpose, the only real goal, the fuel that keeps me going and the light that shines the way, is nothing else than Dharma.

Dharma talk #1: What is Dharma?

Dharma means path. Dharma means love.
Dharma means peace. Dharma means wisdom.

To be less enigmatic we could call it "the spiritual path leading to love, peace, wisdom, and true happiness".

What is this path? Does it have a roadmap? Where does it start? What should we actually *do*?

The path can be summed up in one concept that seems to agree with all the religions and spiritual traditions of the world: meditation. Some call it prayer, some call it contemplation, or even awareness, but it all refers to withdrawing from the material-first state of mind that tries to get things done, and diving inwards to discover a more subtle realm of reality.

The roadmap is the invaluable teachings given by different spiritual teachers around the world, including Buddha and Christ and Muhammad and Shiva and Lao Zi and countless others who have taught the path to peace and happiness.

Where it starts is here and now. As you're reading these lines. Let's do it: start by making yourself comfortable but aligned, straightening your back and relaxing your body. Your legs and hands can be in any position you choose, as long as your back is straight. And when you get to the little Tibetan *Om* at the end of this paragraph, I invite you to stop for a minute - just a minute, that's all - and to gently bring your awareness to your breath. As it naturally comes in, as it naturally comes out. Don't control it or make it deeper: do your best just to observe it, as it is. You can choose any point from which to observe, but for now let's choose the entrance of the nostrils, where you can feel the touch of the breath. Your eyes can be closed or very slightly open if you wish. Put down the book or device and do it now.



How do you feel? If you feel more peaceful than you did a minute ago, than you know what Dharma is, better than any definition. You now know what it is *experientially*.

If during that minute your mind wandered away, that's fine. In fact you should rejoice that you saw it! The point of meditation is to see whatever your mind is doing, even *wandering away*. And you'll notice that at the very moment you see your mind wandering away, it comes back without you having to do anything!

This technique is called *Anapana* and was taught by the Buddha as a universal basis for the rest of the path. With a calm mind - and yes, with time it will get calmer and calmer - we have the means to overcome every mental negativity and to reach states beyond anything that the usual distracted mind can even imagine. It is said that the Buddha himself was doing Anapana that famous night where he reached full enlightenment sitting under a tree.

Whenever you see this little *Om* later in the book, it will again be an invitation to come to the stillness of meditation and reflect on what has been said.

Now that we've introduced Dharma, I can get back to the story our friend, heat. Heat is also Dharma. Heat, like Buddha or Jesus Christ, is a Dharma teacher: it teaches us how to be aware and redefine our minds in order to be free from suffering.

During the walking trip I would usually be focused on one spiritual book or another, which would guide my heart in the same way as my compass was guiding my feet. In this instance I was reading *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep* by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, and I was doing my best to apply its teachings in my daily life:

Every one of us can train our minds to choose, to have control, over what happens in our dreams. And by dreams, I don't just mean when you're lying in bed: I mean everything, including waking life, which is simply another form of dream in the dimension we call 'reality'.

"Cool, let's try it out!" I thought naively. "This heat is becoming unbearable... Let's have cold instead!" It worked, and I was perfectly cool.

Day 99 - 2'644 km

After an early start, I found a cafe to charge my devices and do some online research about where I would be spending the following months. I didn't want to cross Greece in a rush and I had a longing to do volunteering work somewhere. My heart's calling was a refugee camp in the coming city of *Patras*, where they tentatively hosted Syrians who had escaped their homeland now war-torn by ISIS - the so-called

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. These Syrian refugees had risked their lives to reach the Greek shores on home-made boats, and starting here from scratch was yet another gloomy challenge...

But I then came to know that this one camp had burned to the ground. So upon further research I found a very different project called *Sunshine House* - a Buddhism, Yoga, and Thai Massage center in eastern Greece - in which I could definitely offer my services and benefit from the teachings. It was a month's walk away and I decided it would be my next destination.

The next few days were marked by the locals' unending hospitality. On one instance, a man named Dimitri noticed me from his car as he was driving by... without even stopping to find out what I was up to, he decided to keep driving to the nearest supermarket, come back, and hand me a bag full of food. A day or two later I accidentally threw something away that I

shouldn't have, and as I was diving into the garbage bin to retrieve it, a woman came from the nearby hospital and also give me a bag full of food. That was the kind of misunderstanding I didn't mind!

The coming night was more touching still: my youngest-ever donor was a fourteen year old girl named Helena who couldn't invite me into her home because of her parents, but still decided to take me under her wing for the night: she made sure I found a comfortable place to camp and she would go back and forth between her home and mine, bringing food, water, and whatever else I would ask for.

Next morning she woke up at 6 am to see me off with a minuscule hand-carved christian cross and a very sweet message asking me not to forget her. I didn't, and I most surely won't. Hopefully she'll come to read these lines one day...

Day 108 - 2'876 km

This time my generous host was mother nature: fig season in Greece was so abundant that I could just reach my arms out and feast all day on these sweet purple delights. It was the end of the coastal road that I had been treading for a month by now, and my path veered left from the sea into the mountains.

I marveled at the new landscape of sandstone mountains, Greek monuments, ancient stone structures, ski resorts, and the same endlessly pleasing profusion of figs. The people's gifts and invitations kept coming on a daily basis and I was dwelling in heaven, until the road went back down into the hot summer plains. Strangely, my good fortune seemed to have gone downhill too, along with my state of mind. Hot sticky weather, no more fig trees, no invitations, struggles with mosquitoes and hardly any sleep at night...

It didn't take long until I felt like a walking zombie and I had lost all traces of my usually gleaming positivity. Existing seemed like a struggle in itself. Heat, lack of sleep, accumulated mental negativity towards dogs, ants, mosquitoes, and rude drivers... Just about everything that surrounded me started to bring me down and sucked out the energy that I desperately needed to undertake such an impossibly long road.

But, after being more and more fed up with nearly everything, my frustration went a step further and I got fed up with being fed up. "I've had enough of this... wake up, Ben! Don't you remember the book? All these phenomena are like dreams! If you're the chooser of your world, why would you make yourself suffer in the first place?"

Dharma talk #2:

Metta - meditation on loving-kindness

I'm very eager to share this technique with you as it changed my life when I discovered it in China a number of years ago. Let's start with the premise: *if you love everyone, what problems can you have?*

Boundless love leads to boundless happiness. And this technique describes how to get there. As you read this paragraph, already establish a suitable sitting position with a straight yet relaxed back.

Now start by spending a few moments relaxing your body, from head to foot, part by part. Anything you do not strictly need in order to stay upright has no reason to be tense: relax it.

Now bring your awareness to your breath. Naturally, as it comes in, as it goes out. It will be our basis for the rest of meditation.

Now bring to mind the last time that you did a selfless act: any act aimed at helping somebody else. It can be as simple as holding a door open or giving a compliment.

As you reflect on that act, let's bring to mind that with everything we do in our lives, we're simply doing our best to find happiness and avoid suffering. Furthermore, it's almost impossible to be of benefit to anyone else if we can't find peace within ourselves, so we'll make a few positive intentions, repeating them in our minds.

May I be happy.

May I be peaceful.

May I be free.

Free from worry.

Free from anger.

Free from hate.

Free from ego.

May I be full of love, towards myself, and towards all those around me.

This is the first step and it isn't selfish: it's absolutely necessary, for everyone's wellbeing. Now let's move on to the second person: the loved one. Any person, or any being, towards whom we already have positive feelings, someone we trust, a friend, or someone we look up to. Choose someone now.

To thank this person for everything they have brought to our lives, we're going to wish them the same simple intentions.

May you be happy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be free.

Free from worry.

Free from anger.

Free from hate.

Free from ego.

May you be full of love, towards yourself and towards all those around you.

We can now move to the third person: the neutral one. It can be anyone we encounter in our lives towards whom we don't have strong feelings one way or the other. A neighbor that we don't really talk to, a shopkeeper we see once in a while, a dog we notice on our way to work...

Reflecting on the fact that this person or being, just like the two others, is simply doing their best to find happiness and avoid suffering, we're going to wish them the same simple intentions.

May you be happy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be free.

Free from worry.

Free from anger.

Free from hate.

Free from ego.

May you be full of love, towards yourself and towards all those around you.

Now for the final person, the hardest and possibly the most important one: the conflictual person, the difficult person, or sometimes even the enemy.

It doesn't have to be an "enemy", it can be anyone at all towards whom you feel the slightest trace of negativity. Anyone you have a hard time understanding. A person you know or don't know personally, a political figure, an

animal, anyone at all you aren't completely on good terms with.

This might well be the most important one because it is this person, or being, who holds the key to our liberation. And this all may sound like a painstakingly selfless or altruistic act, but it's actually the best thing we can do for our own happiness too: until we forgive them, we will never be truly at ease within ourselves. Additionally, such people are often the ones most in need of emotional support, which is why they are harming others in the first place.

May you be happy.

May you be peaceful.

May you be free.

Free from worry.

Free from anger.

Free from hate.

Free from ego.

May you be full of love, towards yourself and towards all those around you.

I forgive you for any wrongdoings you may have done and understand they are simply mistakes on your search for happiness.

If that was a hard pill to swallow, congratulate yourself for having the courage to undergo it in the first place. And if you couldn't find it in you to forgive, it doesn't matter. The seed has been sown.

We will conclude the meditation by focusing on the heart center, in the middle of the chest, and from that point outwards let our love and goodwill expand to pervade our entire body. *May I be happy, may I be well. May every cell in my body be at ease.*

Let's allow our aura of goodwill to expand further and include the beings in our immediate

surroundings. *May they be happy. May they be peaceful. May they be free.*

And let's go even further to include the beings in the area around us... the region... the country... the continent... the planet... every planet... the universe.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free.



I thought of sharing this technique at this point in the story because that's exactly what I decided to do internally, while walking, to see if that would somehow bring me out of this negative chain of events. *In the name of the welfare of all beings, may I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be free... free from worry, free*

from anger, free from hate, free from ego... may I be full of love, towards myself and towards all those around me...

Hardly had I moved on to the second person that the world started flipping around. It finally gave me a roadside fig tree, full of juicy fruits, that I could enjoy in the shade of the branches...

A bit further down the road, Bill the fancy-fruit-shop owner had me choose any fruits I wanted and bagged them for my road. I also encountered a new and refreshing experience: roadside water sprinklers make the best mid-day showers - if you're willing to put aside your ego and pass for a penniless hobo in public! And the coming night's camp was so nice that I had my first real sleep in three days. The sudden turn of events left me more than ever convinced in the magical powers of *metta*: wishing others well makes miracles.

The next day featured an equally delighting story, where I happened to come across a family

stuck with a motor failure in the middle of nowhere. They needed water as cooling liquid for their broken down engine... I told them all I had was drinking water, but they said I needed it more than they did.

So I walked away, feeling a bit dismayed. Then I came to realize that whatever material offerings I failed to give them, I could make up for in terms of wisdom. Living a minimal life of walking on the road, I'd learnt to make best use of whatever came my way... in this case, a roadside dumpster! I got my hands dirty and started gathering the water from all the nearly-empty bottles people had thrown away. After five minutes, I had almost a liter and made my way back to the family with a gleaming face. It was exactly what they needed, they got their engine running, and they gifted me bread, cookies, and juice.

Day 115 - 3'040 km

The next day was equally memorable as it marked my arrival into Athens, the biggest city so far. It took more than a day's walk to get from its outskirts to the city center, which meant spending one night somewhere random in a suburban environment. I usually choose peaceful valleys or hilltops or riversides to set up camp, but this time I had no choice except for an abandoned rail yard... and I loved it! The trains were so far from operational that the place wouldn't attract another human soul in a hundred years. I was entirely left at peace, I could wash naked, and I slept like a baby. A homeless baby on a plastic tarp!

Athens marked a break from my homelessness as I had several friends there eager to invite me. The first was a Greek-French family I had met a month earlier on the road. They had told me about their home in Athens and they said I was most welcome. So, address in hand, I ended up

at their doorstep and I was instantly part of their family. Playing music with the kids, going to the beach, teaching Kung Fu to 13-year-old Dimitri who had a past-life connection with China, and sleeping on the terrace under the stars.... I couldn't help it, even when I was given a roof to sleep under, I would end up sleeping on top of it! The sky was just too beautiful to be replaced by a ceiling.

For the first time in a month, I was taking a break: a day where I would go to bed at the same place as I had woken up. Other than that, my walking had been continuous, seven days a week, no weekends or half-days or lazy morning. And for a good reason too: I just utterly loved it. I couldn't think of anything else more fulfilling to do with my day, really, and even stopping for a break was a bit of a challenge!

But here I was, ready for a change: my next two weeks in Athens would be sedentary, accepting and embracing the peculiarity of being normal.

After farewells to the family I took the road again but only to cross Athens and make it to another friend's house, *Athena*, such a longtime friend that she used to be my own Dad's babysitter aeons ago.

She was delighted to see me, and believe it or not we had pizza! She shared stories of her personal experiences in 1970's India with S.N. Goenka, as he gave his first Vipassana retreats. What a blessing to have first-hand recollections of such a renowned spiritual figure, whose teachings have now given rise to hundreds of centers in the world and become so widespread that when people say *Vipassana*, they usually mean Goenka's retreats.

Vipassana, however, is the name of the technique discovered by the Buddha himself, and Goenka was simply a preserver in this lineage that started 2'500 years ago and was passed down from generation to generation ever since.

So for ten days we talked about meditation, did Taichi together on the terrace, went to the farmers market, broke walnuts and cooked Greek food. It turned out to be a welcome break from my walking routine and allowed me to slow down the pace of my mind.

Day 131 - 3'117 km

I was pulling my cart on my way out the door when I bumped into a woman who had come for a meditative therapy at Athena's place. After a few minutes of conversation, she said the first part of the therapy was complete: seeing how happy I was with so little possessions had uplifted her already.

I hit the road and realized that today was rehabilitation: thirteen days of sedentary life and I could feel it in my legs! Being back on the road again felt grand though, like taking a deep breath of fresh air. The air of freedom. I was

once again enchanted by the unexplainable hospitality of strangers from every scope of life: in this case a supermarket cashier with a heart big enough to tell me "have anything you want in the store, it's on me!"

A few more days went by of meditative walking and countless food offerings, until I reached what would be my home, workplace, and loving community for the next four or five months: Sunshine House.

I entered another world: a haven of Indian spirituality in the middle of a Greek Orthodox village. Their root teachings belong to the Thai Massage tradition. But Thailand being an eminently Buddhist country, I came to know the entire practice was an offshoot of Buddha's own teachings, notably the concept of *metta*, or unconditional love, that we saw previously. *Thai Massage* is a way to give someone all our good intentions, dedicating our energies into aligning their bodies and spirits, and can be simply seen

as a physical expression of metta: the mind that says *may you be happy*.

This was like a Buddhist initiation, and on top of the 6 am prayers chanted together in the Buddha's own language *Pali*, the teachings, vibes, people, gardens, mantras, musical events, and organic food feasts made this place nothing short of paradise. As my family hadn't seen me in quite a while, it naturally ensued that I would invite them here: this was the first time I had somewhat of a home, and what a home it was!

So my mother came to attend a Thai Massage course with Pau Castellsagué, who had become my teacher in Buddhism, Thai Massage, music, and life. My little brother came along to help out too, then came my Dad as a volunteer and my older brother for a visit in between courses. That made my whole immediate family, and we spent invaluable moments together as it was our last chance to meet before I would disappear into the East.

Day 266 - 3'214 km

Sunshine House had been so loving, pleasant, and meaningful that I caught myself with the thought "Why don't I just stay in paradise instead of tackling another god-knows-how-many-thousand kilometers until India?" But my sense of purpose was too strong, and I had set my intention so clearly that there was no other option to consider: *I'm on a trip to India on foot.*

My cart felt brand new once again, with side racks and a bicycle-handbrake that I had added at Sunshine House with the help of their tools and the wonderful kids Keidi and Klaidi. It was now equipped with a white flag too, which the village tailor had sewn together for me as a gift. This small weightless symbol of peace would make a huge difference both for me and for all those I would encounter in the ten countries left to be crossed.... It also gave a clear answer for the countless times people asked me "Why are you walking?"

If I didn't want to start a symposium on *Dharma* and *meditation* and *the meaning of life* - which I couldn't do in my meager Greek anyway - I would keep the answer simple: *for peace*.

Of course I'm walking for peace. Not some kind of activist "fight for world peace" state of mind, but peace here and now, that expands from my heart outwards to include the entire universe. The Indian sage Maharishi Patanjali, credited as *the father of Yoga* and similar to the Buddha in



My only weapon, the white flag

countless ways, stated this as the very first *Yama*, or spiritual observance, that one should follow on the path:

*"Truly embody non-violence, and you will
see an end to all hostility around"*

Ahimsā pratiṣṭhāyām tat sannidhau vaira tyāgaḥ, if any of you care for Sanskrit. World peace starts with oneself: in my case, my little white flag that would flip around the behavior of border guards and come to possibly make the difference between life and death in the war zones awaiting me. But that's for another chapter.

Back to my two happy feet, my sandals were brand new too as this was the first time I had changed them since the beginning of the trip. That meant 3'117 km on trekking sandals that had cost me 13 dollars in Decathlon. I'm not sponsored at all but I do owe them a word of

praise, as this was pretty much the best anyone could do in terms of transportation costs!

The next days went by with a mix of heart-warming kindness and sickening cold. Let's start with the kindness: for the first time in my life, I met a Sikh man. Sikhism is a religion that was awaiting me in my destination India... yet I had only ever read about it in books, with all the awe in the world at sentences like "The highest religion is to rise to universal brotherhood; to consider all creatures your equals."

I had fallen in love with Sikhism way before meeting this man - an Indian shop owner in a small Greek village - yet he convinced me even more, by his humble presence and boundless generosity. Upon hardly meeting me he told me to take anything I wanted from his shop for free. Of course, I shared with him my keen interest in Sikhism and enthusiasm for reaching the land where it had been born... I'm pretty sure this encounter had made our day for both of us.

Other bright encounters marked me, like a Syrian refugee camp offering me food despite their unfortunate political situation... But even with the people's unending warmth, winter was kicking in and I was starting to struggle with the cold. It was getting worse by the night... 7°C, 4°C... and I wasn't getting any better equipped. My sleeping bag was so minimal, in fact, that you could fit it into a coat pocket if you insisted! I would spend my nights shivering away and hardly getting any sleep, watching my clock every hour and counting down how long until the sun would come - if it came at all instead of another cloudy sky and pouring rain.

But once again, as if listening to my pleas the world came to my rescue, in the form of a Greek family inviting me to their home and asking me what I needed. I answered without hesitation "Just now I'm fine, but... I do get really cold at night..."

In no time they brought out a glamorous white fluffy duvet with fancy frills, way too dignified for the bare-bones nature of my hobo lifestyle, but I didn't mind at all: it looked wonderfully warm. I hugged it hello and hugged them goodbye, walking away like Charlie Brown with his blanket.

And it did the job: I slept like a kitten, or maybe a snow-leopard, as it actually started snowing the very next day. I was so snug. This was happiness. And that first snowy night, a car stopped beside my tent, urging me to open the door, only to offer me hot tea and a bag of food.

Day 270 - 3'289 km

It was time to turn the tables and go from a life of charity and minimal camping gear to one of a digital nomad in a posh hotel. Not that I needed a hotel, but that a friend of mine in Switzerland needed help on the website I had created long

ago. The alignment was perfect: I was out of the countryside and crossing a city named Thiva. I didn't spend too much time searching, and chose one of the first hotels that came my way. Finding a warm place with electricity meant I could get the work done, and that would pay for the room as well.

I made best use of the hot water - a luxury for me - and indoor heating to clean my muddy clothes and dry my damp equipment. I recharged all my devices, got the web design work done, and filled up on warmth after that week in freezing weather.

After two nights in fancy-land, I was good to go. This small episode - which would come to repeat a number of times during the trip - answers one of the question people often have: "How do you sustain yourself? You still spend money, right?"

As you can see, my expenses were low: transport was free other than the cost of shoes, and lodging was as cheap as 100\$ for two-years' rent

- the price of my tent. But of course I would still buy food and various items when I had to, and the money for that would come from small jobs I would do here or there, which included web design. I hadn't thought it would work out, but here I was both a digital nomad and homeless hobo at the same time!

I took the road in sub-zero weather, got kicked out of the highway by local authorities as I was trying to make my way out of the city, and resorted to muddy countryside fields that were a chore to cross... but I had all the warmth I needed in my heart.

A day later I met an adorable woman named Asimina who had a high-ranked job in managing a steel factory and yet envied the down-to-earthness of my minimal life. She said she wished she could break free from society's clutches, and amusingly, walk with me to India... But in the meantime she offered to help in any way possible, which included generous food

donations and cleaning my clothing with the facilities at her factory.

The next experience awaiting me was Thermopiles, a region famous for its natural hot springs, but I didn't know a thing about it until I saw a river which seemed to be steaming vapor into the sky... in the middle of winter? I rubbed my eyes, approached the water, and tested it to find out it was unimaginably warm. I set up my tent on the spot and started the next day with a hot bath at 4 am under the stars, amidst an



The steaming rivers of Thermopiles

otherwise totally frozen landscape. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

As I kept walking eastwards I joined the coast once again, and this time I could appropriate entire beach resorts, as this was February and not a soul would come swimming or sun-tanning in these temperatures. Public outdoor showers, spacious hardwood patios, and beautiful mediterranean beaches were my home from now on, and my nights were idyllic.

The real beauty of my trip on foot, however, lied in the fact that I had so much time to myself, walking alone, with nothing to think of and nothing to do other than put one foot after the other like a long ritual, that I could fully dedicate myself to meditation, and the results were astonishing. Vipassana took a whole new dimension while walking, and when I put my mind to it I would feel like a ball of consciousness floating through a celestial world. All pains and discomforts would dissolve, my

body would find flawless alignment and every step would become perfection itself. That's what gave the real meaning to traveling on foot.

Dharma talk #3: Vipassana

The meditation technique named *Vipassana* was briefly mentioned earlier in this book, but it took special significance in my trip as I tried it for the first time while walking.

Vipassana means *insight meditation*, and quite literally involves bringing our sight inwards: observing what's happening in our own body, in our own mind, rather than constantly being drawn to external phenomena as we're habituated to. We've seen *Anapana* earlier in this book - observing the breath - and *Vipassana* usually comes as second step after the mind has been calmed down. They both work hand-in-hand.

A common way to practice it - and the one chosen by S.N. Goenka in his Vipassana retreats - is to move our awareness through our body from head to foot, with the very simple instruction of *just observe*. Whatever we feel at that time and place in your body... hot, cold, pleasant, painful, internal, external, subtle, coarse, whatever it may be... we make it a point to *just observe*. Calm and relaxed, yet aware and attentive.

And instead of trying to remove a negative feeling or add a pleasant one, we embrace whatever happens to be, and from that approach comes a state of joy and contentment deeper than any of the pleasant feelings we were previously chasing after or the unpleasant ones we were used to driving away. Forgive me, but... wanna try?



Day 286 - 3'660 km

My day started with cold wind and rain whipping my face as I struggled to fold my tent, trying with all four limbs to keep the different parts from flying away. Amidst the turmoil, I was visited by an old acquaintance who I hadn't seen in a long time, but who would still barge in without knocking: anger. Anger makes no sense, it pretends to help but only harms. Long ago I've recognized its futility already, its inability to help in any situation. And yet, being merely an average meditator, a seeker on the path of Dharma, moments would come where it would find a way to sneak into my mind before I'd come to my senses and find a way to overcome

it... The tool to overcome it, however, we already know: Vipassana.

If we look inwards and observe the anger objectively, rather than focusing on the object of our anger which would only multiply it, it starts dissolving instantly. Its muddled incoherence cannot stand the light of our awareness. If we are so agitated that we can't even find the composure to observe it - which is often the case at the beginning - then it greatly helps to start with Anapana, simply observing the breath, until the storm has somewhat calmed down and we find ourselves grounded enough to probe the situation more deeply.

After folding my things, returning to my breath, and taking the road, my inner world calmed down, but the entire day was spent in wet and muddy conditions and I started falling sick. As much as I dreamt of my upcoming night's sleep, evening fell and I had no viable solution to camp or stay anywhere.

So I decided that *if everything comes from the mind and I choose my own world, I'm going to conjure all the strength from every cell of my body, walk all night, and reach the next city 55 km away.* It sounded dumb, but it worked. I walked almost uninterruptedly from 4 pm to 5 am, at which point the astounding city of Larissa greeted me with a glint of sun. This time, no hallucinations from skipping a night, and to my bewilderment I was cured from my illness too.

After strolling through Larissa I was rewarded with a cozy and decently-priced room where I could spend the next night and clean all my belongings. I even got some web design work done to pay for the room!

The following days passed joyfully, cruising along at foot's pace through all kinds of landscapes, until at some point I started experiencing what everyone warns me about in terms of intensive walking - a growing pain deep in my knee. And I thought I had the whole

perfect-walking-body-alignment thing down! But no, I could still improve, and a pain in my knee meant I was walking wrong in *some* way, or else overwalking. It was worrying of course: to complete this mission, I needed both of my knees.

So I slowed my pace down but didn't want to entirely stop walking either. I came to develop a limp and spent two days walking asymmetrically, but with as much awareness as I could. I thought about the future of my journey, and with a chuckle realized that if I wanted to get famous, "The man who limped across the world" would be a pretty good starting point!

But the world didn't let me limp across it and the next morning was so rainy that I decided to give my knee a break and spend the day at home - if you could call this 6-by-4-foot tent a home - and watch the pouring rain turn into pools of mud all around my fortunate island of dryness.

That day also marked a new chapter in my mind - I folded away my greek vocab book and started learning Turkish. The snail's pace of my trip gave me enough time to learn most languages to a decent level as I was crossing countries, and I'd come to realize that *language* was the one decisive factor making the difference between a local and a tourist.

A whole new continent was ahead of me and the end of Greece was actually getting near... Europe had almost been too easy and I was ready for the Wild East.

Day 296 - 3'821 km

After 36 hours in my tent and a return to the road with minute attention to every step, my knee was improving and I rejoiced at the prospect of the incredible journey lying ahead. I crossed Thessaloniki, a fun and modern coastal city which marked the point where my path

turned ninety-degrees-left, and I was finally walking eastwards - straight towards India. The turn felt holy.

Slowly nearing the border with Turkey came with many interesting encounters, including a Turkish journalist who had fled her country or else she would have been jailed. I now saw how leaving safe-and-cozy Europe also meant leaving the comfort of political stability, democratic governments, freedom of speech, and peace between countries. I knew Turkey had its share of political and military conflicts, and in a way it made things more captivating still - walking through the world meant seeing everything, the peace and the war, the easy and the hard, the well-off and the suffering. I was discovering the world as-it-was rather than following the usual habit of looking for pleasant places and avoiding miserable ones.

As the environment became more militarized, I had heart-warming encounters with soldiers who

were just as human and compassionate as anyone else. *All are my friends, none my enemies*, I thought to myself, and it worked. This would be my mantra throughout the middle-east.

Likewise, every last encounter in Greece was harmonious and sweet. On one instance, out of nowhere, an eleven-year-old village boy named Dimitri ran up to me and started walking by my side.

"Where are you going?" he would ask.

"To Turkey!"

"But... why are you going to Turkey? Why do you need to go to Turkey? Anyway Turkey's not that way! You should turn right instead."

"Really?"

"Positive!"

So I turned and we kept on walking and talking for a bit. "Here, turn right again!" he added. Surprised, I turned right again... Only to realize we ended up exactly where we had started! He genuinely didn't want me to go and I was overwhelmed with affection. So was he, and he

held his head in his hands when he realized I had actually found the right way.

I was also warmly invited one night by hosts unlike any so far: a hippie community living a squatted-paradise in an abandoned house beside hot springs, with neither money, jobs, nor rules, but 24/7 running hot water! Another day went by and I encountered a being from another realm: as I was filling up on water from the fountain of an orthodox church, a fairy with a radiant aura appeared behind me, with pink clothes and a black corset, and wordlessly handed me juice and chocolate. Even after I addressed her she didn't say a word, but answered with a mysterious smile and disappeared behind the church. *Everything is born from the mind*, I reminded myself.

Day 316 - 4'236 km

I hadn't reached the border, but borders are made by governments whereas cultures are made by people: I was hearing Turkish at every street corner, skin tones were darker, toilets were squat-style, shops were tiny, dimly lit and completely crammed... and it took an hour to cross one tiny village because everyone was inviting me for this or that or just to make friends! Joy and hospitality pervaded the air as I enjoyed every last step in what was officially Europe.

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.”

If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

- Dalai Lama

- Part II -
The Middle-East





- Chapter 7 -

Brotherhood... and bullets

March 2017

Military activity increased as the border loomed into view, and I could feel that western-minded folks were uneasy about their eastern-minded counterparts. "When I first saw you, I thought you were from ISIS!" a rather conservative Greek shop owner had half-jokingly commented. He still ended up offering me drinks and a guitar song, so I might have changed his mind about odd-looking homeless travelers! In the end, I realized, locals actually have more reason to be scared of me than me scared of them. Strangely comforting...

Evening was settling over the plain so I set up camp just 2 km from the border, doing my best to hide from the watchtowers so I wouldn't be confused with a refugee running in the other

direction. Obviously not the best place to set up camp, but I trusted my karma and it worked.

Next morning I walked alongside a line of waiting trucks so long that they were spending entire nights in their vehicles... Lucky me for being on foot and bypassing all of that! As a European, getting stamped out was easy, but when I reached no-man's land and the final bridge separating Greece from Turkey, I was halted by two gunmen. They were friendly, to be honest, but their orders were clear. "You can't cross this bridge walking. Boss' orders. The bridge is loaded with dynamite and a system that would automatically trigger it should anyone cross on foot."

That sounded over-the-top, but I wasn't in a position to test the bridge's ability to self-destruct, nor would the soldiers let me. So I was told to turn back and find a solution that would involve lifting my cart onto a truck just for the length of the bridge.

I've never been this homeless, I thought to myself as I spent hours stranded in no-man's land, struggling to make my weird problem understood in my barely-existent Turkish. Unlike nowhere-man however, I made many friends in the whole process, and finally someone chose to help me haul my 80 kg companion into the box compartment of his cargo truck, closed the latch, and slowly drove over the lengthy bridge. I must have been the first refugee in history to hide in a truck headed in the other direction!

That little bit of friction at no-man's land was coupled with a feeling of dismay at having - however short the distance - been forced once again off the ground by authorities... at least I had done my best. The Turkish side of the border was a very different story though: instead of police cars and military patrols, I was greeted by roaming sheep, stray donkeys, and a 'Welcome to Turkey' sign so laid-back it was falling apart! It felt like I hadn't changed countries but planets,

and the mere thought that I had actually walked all this way had me completely dazzled.

At the very first town of *Ipsala* I was surrounded by curious Turks fascinated by my strange story, then treated to countless Turkish teas, traditional sweets, coffee, invitations for the night and a marriage proposal. I got away with saying that while I usually accept just about anything I am offered, it was a bit early to get married and I had another ten countries ahead of me... she didn't take it personally.

I happily accepted the invitation for the night though, made by youngsters my own age, and they enthusiastically welcomed me into their mosque at prayer time. Surprisingly, friendly physical contact was commonplace, and regardless of gender they would hold hands, hug each other, say *I love you*, and display so much brotherly and sisterly affection that I wondered where all our thoughts about conservative Islam had come from. They later guided me to their

home where we had heart-warming Turkish food, and once again I was given the only bed while they slept on the couch.

Day 326 - 4'386 km

The happy youngsters saw me off with sandwiches for the road, my clothing washed and dried, and so much positivity that I felt like I could walk for weeks on that fuel tank of good vibes. The next days were infused with kindness too, and crossing my first Turkish city *Keşan* included six invitations for tea, many more smiles, unending food offerings, and an invitation for the night which I declined as I hadn't completed my daily distance yet.

Sleeping was easy too and I could simply pitch my tent wherever I fancied without the slightest disturbance from anyone. When my path joined the coastal road by the Sea of Marmara, however, the vast cliffy environment made for

terrifyingly stormy nights where I would stay awake to brace my tent from the inside in hope that it wouldn't collapse... and barren walking days where the gusts were so violent they would toss me around, throw grit into my face, and even make sizable rocks fall from the cliffs above. At times it felt a bit like dying.

When adverse circumstances hit you on the road, with no shelter, no emergency exit and no other option than to push on through, the final refuge becomes one's own faith. One's patience, one's Dharma, one's inner stronghold. Not only is this inner refuge the one that will always be with you, but it's also the only one we actually have any power over. External circumstances cannot be mastered or predicted. Our mental reaction to them can.

This episode made me realize that no external hardship could possibly shake my resolve or cast doubt upon my path. On a similar note I realized today was March 26th... my homeless

anniversary! Exactly one year since I had left my cozy everyday Switzerland home, and yet... I didn't miss comfort or predictability in the least! Nor was I sick of the road or the sleepless nights or the storms that whipped me in the face. One year had passed and life was just as fascinating as on day one.

Day 340 - 4'691 km

The Turkish population is 94% Muslim. Mosques, precepts, calls to prayer, kneeling five times a day to contemplate *Allah*, following fasting days, and the universal greeting of *assalam alaikum* - meaning "peace be upon you" - are woven into the fabric of everyday life.

In contrast, you might think I'm Buddhist because I'm headed to India. You wouldn't exactly be wrong, but... if I'm a follower of Buddha, does that make me *Buddhist*? Was the Buddha himself *Buddhist*? That term itself didn't

exist during his lifetime, neither in his language nor in any language... So do we even know what we're talking about?

If I'm a follower of *Buddha* then I'm a follower of *Dharma* - that path to peace. This path has no copyright, nor did the Buddha ever pretend it did: *Buddha* simply means "enlightened one". The person we historically refer to was actually named *Siddhartha Gautama*. And he was unwavering in his assertion that there had been countless Buddhas before him, and there would be countless ones to come.

If so, why couldn't one of them have been named *Muhammad*? I'm not saying it's true, I'm just saying that *it takes a Buddha to recognize a Buddha*. So we have to leave it open. And if Muhammed's teachings seem to differ from Siddhartha Gautama's, it helps to remember that all the Buddhas taught differently - they adapted what they said to their day and age, to the unique situation of their audience. Otherwise,

our famous *Siddhartha* would have simply written a *Buddhism for Dummies* and we'd all be enlightened by now. But no - we all have a unique mental disposition and a unique path to follow.

That's great news too, because that means everything can be taken, and *must* be taken, onto the path. Doing my best to discover, appreciate, and understand the Islamic ways was just as much part of the path as my own daily practice of meditation. And I found no distinct line between what some call *prayer* and others call *meditation*... So every *call to prayer* - that beautiful chanting that depicts words of the Koran five times a day in every Muslim country - was for me a call to meditation. Like the locals, I would stop whatever I was doing in this endlessly busy world of activity, and take a minute to *be*. To listen. To appreciate the wordless peace of just being aware.

"When you pray, what are you saying to God?" someone once asked Mother Teresa.

"I don't say anything... I just listen." she answered.

"So what does God say in return?"

"He doesn't say anything. He just listens."



As I was standing there one day on the roadside during a call to prayer, eyes closed and mind in stillness, a local woman noticed me and waited for me to finish before greeting me. She expressed her greatest respect for my dedication and told me to have anything I wanted in the neighboring restaurant. Silence can connect people more deeply than words, I realized in awe...

The next thing awaiting me, however, was as far from my personal haven of peace as one could possibly imagine - the entrance into Istanbul, the largest city of my journey to India. Just making my way in was a herculean adventure... Miles away from the historic center you see on postcards, the road leading through the suburbs counted, at times, no less than twelve lanes for traffic - and often without even a sidewalk for me.

I breathed so much exhaust smoke that I didn't know if I would faint first or get hit by a car, and at times the traffic was so jammed that even on foot I was stuck. I would try to make my way from lane to lane around the cars, and hope the drivers would acknowledge my presence despite the fact I was probably the oddest vehicle they had ever seen on this road.

My day ended before I was even close to the center... Camping in an urban environment is never an easy task, but finally I found a patch of

untended grass in the property of a car scrapyard. I was left in peace, I had somewhat of a view on the unending cityscape, and I actually enjoyed my night!

Much of the next day once again involved squeezing between densely packed traffic, trying not to get squished and doing my best not to breathe, but as I neared the historical center the environment became more relaxed. A boy from *Kurdistan* - a disputed land near Iraq that I would soon get to know very closely - chose to walk along my side without any explanation. His name was Yashu Baba but that's just about all I



The Istanbul you don't see on postcards

could figure out, as he spoke neither English, Turkish nor any other language than his local Kurdish tongue. He was friendly, but after a whole afternoon spent by my side I had to find a way to tell him: I would have a hard enough time hosting myself for the night and I wasn't in a position to find lodging for him... So I found a cafe owned by a man from *Van* - a city in Turkish Kurdistan which I would be crossing soon - and asked the boss if he could explain the situation to the boy in his own language. He did and we peacefully parted, not without a hint of sadness.

I kept walking into the evening and finally reached the historical center *Sultanahmet*, where I booked a hostel not just for myself but for my mom and brother, who were coming from Switzerland soon to see for themselves what I was up to here!

Day 344 - 4'730 km

Picking up my mom and brother Jonas from the airport involved more than five hours of waiting, during which I had a great time welcoming everyone else into Turkey and helping them with taxis, translation, internet, and directions. When you travel on foot, wherever you are you remain a local: you know the place as much as anyone.

Finally our paths joined and we had the time of our lives in Istanbul, playing music in the streets, meditating in mosques, trying every sweet and local tea, discovering instruments and getting lost. We spent about one week together, before my mom took a flight home and my brother stayed. He was going to join me, not for playing together anymore but for getting a feel of my journey on foot. That too during the unpredictably demanding task of leaving Istanbul...

The most exciting part was the border crossing - not to a new country but this time a new continent. The bridge above the *Bosphorus Strait* marks the geographical separation between Europe and Asia, and the mere idea I had reached the threshold to a new continent gave me goosebumps. Partway across the bridge, however, we were stopped by Turkish police and told it was illegal to cross on foot. I had no idea if the reason was political or safety-related or something else, but no amount of arguing would change their minds... they forced us on a local bus for the remainder of the bridge. *Doesn't matter*, I sighed, before deciding to follow the same principal I had been stubbornly applying every time I was forced on transport so far: after being dropped off, I walked fifteen minutes around the block and ended up at starting point, so that at least the altogether walking distance would be respected. My brother agreed to walk this useless loop with me and I admired his patience!

But our patience was tested to a whole new degree when night started falling, and the environment was still as urbanized as ever. This time, no patch of abandoned grass or car scrapyard or slightest sign of any suitable place to set the tent. As the hours went by and evening fell, I hesitantly asked Jonas...

"I know this sounds pretty extreme for our first day of walking, but... sometimes it happens, in situations like these, that I end up walking all night... if it was the case, would you mind?"

"I wouldn't mind, I signed up for this!" he lightheartedly answered.

And so it was. At 9 pm, we found an attractive mosque, but no way in, and the *Imam* - a mosque's representative - seemed to be in deep sleep somewhere within. So we kept walking and searching our minds for any creative way to spend the night. Maybe this abandoned brick structure, in ruins and full of trash? It looked so dodgy I'd rather walk all night... At 11 pm we

caught ourselves eying an unusually spacious roadside dog-house.

"Would there be space in there for both of us?"

"Maybe... but... what if this doghouse has an owner?"

"Ok, forget it."

12 am - lost on a massive confusing highway intersection with no one around to ask for directions.

2 am - invited for a meal by a roadside restaurant owner who never seemed to sleep.

3 am - delighted at the fact we could walk in the dead middle of otherwise hectic 6-lane roads, completely deserted at this time of the night... the world is ours!

5 am - the world isn't ours anymore. Even our minds are slipping away as our bodies shuffle along like the walking dead while we dream about the end of the night's dark hours....

6 am - the first rays of sun bring some life back to our sunken eyes, and Jonas takes a 20-minute power nap on a bench while I sluggishly go through the morning yoga routine I'm used to doing every day to keep my body in shape for the walk.

Turkish halva, ice-cream, rice pudding, fruits, and just about anything sweet we could lay our hands on would help us forget how sleep deprived we were, and we went on to have a slightly dreamlike and very enjoyable day. Finally, in late afternoon, after 63 km with hardly any interruptions, we had successfully made our way out of Istanbul and found a patch of nature near a mosque where we could set the tent. Needless to say we slept like logs!

Day 351 - 4'825 km

In stark contrast to yesterday's cemented city environment, we spent the next day crossing an

enchanted national park where locals lived the free life like us, sleeping outside and delighting in Turkey's natural beauty. Our night was equally enchanting, and after walking with me for most of the next day it was time for my brother to make his own way home. We parted with gratitude, knowing these memories together would last a lifetime, and he left on foot for the Marmara coast from where he would then depart by boat.

The end of sharing, the end of company, and the return to a road that would be solitary for years.



A walk across the world or a stroll in the park?

This is my choice, I knew deep down as I kept walking through an increasingly dark, rainy, and flat environment. I camped in a storm and used whatever battery life I had on my devices to calculate how I would walk the 2'000 km left to cross Turkey. I had two months of visa left, which meant 1'000 km per month, and I couldn't afford to waste a single day. The time constraints were as daunting as they were thrilling.

The next day I joined a highway which was part of the D_100 national road. It might bemuse you that I'm even paying attention to the name of my road, but his one would become a long-term friend: after studying my map, I realized I'd be spending an entire month without leaving it's homely asphalt. No need to ask for directions, or even pull out my map anymore. No need to talk to anyone, attend anything, plan anything or do anything else than just walk.

Both for safety reasons and to make things even more boring, I would walk on the left side of the road. That meant I could see the traffic coming instead of getting hit in the back and dying... convenient for me. And it also meant that if people driving by would have liked to spark up a conversation with this zany homeless traveller, by the time their car would come to a complete stop they'd be so far behind that they'd usually give up.

I even put on earplugs to damp out the unending highway noise, and there I was... at the pinnacle of boringness. Just me and my footsteps and my heartbeat and my bubble of peace. It was absolute bliss. *That's why I'm walking!* I delighted. *For nothing!* This *nothing* so precious that no money can buy it. And when nothing happens, the mind calms down... Anger, greed, and ego, the three roots of all suffering they say, start to dissolve...

Who would have thought, that all you needed was nothing?

Day 357 - 5'017 km

No matter how much I praised this nothing, it was bound to be interrupted once in a while, notably when evening would fall and bodily needs would come poking at my bubble of ecstasy. That's what, in indian traditions, they call *Samsara*: the fact that unless you're a really advanced meditator or an accomplished being, this human body is demanding by nature and can't go on for very long without needing a hundred things, from sleep to food to water to bathroom to shelter to warmth to cleanliness... Is it possible to own a body and fulfill all of these things without ever leaving the bliss of nothing? I'd say that's the whole point of the spiritual path, but I'm obviously not there yet.

So once in a while I would get heavy rain and wonder where in the world I would spend the night, but before much wondering the world would always send me *some* solution, from an abandoned home without a soul to a non-abandoned one full of friendly faces, to a simple field by the highway.

Following my new best friend *D_100* didn't mean that the landscape would stay flat forever though, and one day the road started climbing up into the Pontic Mountain Range. The climb was stormy and spectacular... As evening drew in the rain only got heavier, and my surroundings became too wet and muddy to even consider pitching the tent anywhere. The temperature was near freezing point, it would soon be pitch dark and I started seriously worrying about what I would do.

Where you can't find an outer refuge, you find an inner one... The Tao Te Ching! This 81-verse booklet had been with me day and night ever

since it had flipped my life around six years earlier in China. Let's see if this time, it could flip my night around... I struggled to unfold the book in the rain and read the lines out loud against the storm.

*"In pursuit of knowledge,
every day something is added.*

*In the pursuit of peace,
every day something is dropped.*

*Letting go and letting go,
until you reach non-doing."*

- Tao Te Ching, 48

It wasn't about me *doing* anything, I realized. It was about letting it happen! "In the name of love, the world, and all the beautiful people in

it, in the name of this journey and all the benefit I can bring to others, may I... be granted a place to sleep tonight!"

A minute hadn't gone by and the most unlikely thing materialized in the distance: a large steel shipping container, the kind they would use on cargo ships, awkwardly sat in the middle of a meadow as if it had fallen from the sky. I was on a mountain, leagues away from the nearest sea or industrial zone, and this bewildering metal structure seemed to have been gifted by the gods.



I couldn't believe the snow in the morning

I was even more baffled when I realized that it was both completely empty and perfectly suitable for me to settle down in. I couldn't possibly express my gratitude... I went to bed cradled by the cozy conditions and the wondrous thought that we can change the world by our intentions alone.



The magic didn't stop there, however, and next morning I had to rub my eyes to believe what I saw: the wet and muddy world I had left behind last night was now a snow-clad fairyland. I'm glad I didn't try to sleep outside! Contemplating the landscape made me shiver, both from the cold breeze and the daunting thought that daily survival would take a whole new dimension in this new environment.

The snow was surprisingly deep for just one night's fall and I struggled to get the cart back

onto the road. I courageously walked on in ever-slushy conditions, and must have looked frozen enough to be invited in a hospital for breakfast by a local paramedics crew. The place was toasty and warm... I removed my wet clothing and relaxed with homemade Turkish comfort food as the crew proudly showed me all their high-tech life-saving equipment.

When I took the road again, the sun was out, and by evening enough snow had melted that camping wasn't such a complicated task anymore. The next day I was called to a police station - not for questions or passport checks but once again for food! Day by day it was starting to look like all the Turkish public services had one priority: to feed homeless travelers like me!

My following nights went from a crummy 8-dollar hotel room majestically perched on a snowy mountain, to a grove full of roaming cows and bulls who would personally welcome me into their domain, to deserty slopes where I

would find scorpions in my tent and shoes. The environment was becoming increasingly middle-eastern: dry, sandy, rocky, and uninhabited. The change was captivating... the decrease in vegetation made for wide-open rolling hills, and daily afternoon storms of hail, heavy rain and extreme winds. Having no shelter, I would just brace up and walk through it all, thinking *I'm not dead yet!*

Fair enough, none of it killed me, but the change of environment came alongside a change in local politics that made me realize I should be worrying more about bullets than hail...

My next invitation was made by lovely courteous warm-hearted man named Jihad. Minutes after guiding me to his house, he withdrew a jet-black AK-47 and proudly held it up. "I'm armed, so you don't need to worry: I'm on your side!"

Comforting, to say the least! Somehow I still spent the night there, because, well, I guess I wouldn't want to offend him in the first place.

The next day, as I crossed the village center I noticed an automatic-rifle shop casually sitting amongst the vegetable venders and the kitchenware stalls.

Over time, exchanges with locals gave me a clearer picture of the situation: day by day I was nearing *Kurdistan*, a region that spans parts of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Iraq, despite the war-ridden image held by people who have never been there, was actually the only country to recognize the Kurd people and let them have their own government, schools, and assigned territory. The current Turkish government, however, regarded Kurds as a threat - a minority to be assimilated into Turkish ethnicity rather than recognized as a distinct culture. When you see someone as a threat, you make them become one, and currently Kurdistan and Turkey were nothing less than at war.

My attitude through all of this, and my means of survival, would be clear as the sky, and could be

summed up in a short stanza by 13th-century Tibetan master Tokme Zangpo.

*“If you do not subdue your inner enemy, hatred,
Defeating external foes will only make them grow.
Therefore, with the armies of love and compassion,
Tame your own mind - this is the practice of
Bodhisattvas”*

- The 37 Bodhisattva Practices, 20

You might be wondering what a *Bodhisattva* even is. Simply put, it's someone who dedicates their life to the welfare of all beings... and that including themselves. Our own welfare is inseparable from the welfare of others, and to me it was clear without a doubt that even in a war zone, both the best weapon and the best

way to stay safe would be the practice of kindness.

So I brandished my respectful attitude in every encounter, with the Kurds as well as the Turkish government. Likewise, both parties regularly expressed reverence towards my white flag and my efforts for peace... everyone wants peace, even men in arms! Whoever's wearing arms is simply acting under the assumption that winning the fight will lead to peace. But they still just want peace.

Day 377 - 5'631 km

As I stood in contemplative silence during a call to prayer, a government car stopped and four soldiers came out shouldering rifles. They walked up to me but I started talking first.

"Hi guys, it's the call to prayer, so let me meditate."

"Oh, ok, sorry..." They shyly answered, and stood themselves in contemplation until the prayer came to an end. The following exchange between us was caring and respectful... Peace is really an effective weapon.

A few days later I witnessed something even more touching after an army car stopped by the road. Two soldiers came out, handed me a rose, and poured out their hearts to me. "We stand for peace, just like you! It is our very job: we wear this clothing and we drive this vehicle to keep people safe, to maintain peace. Can we ask you one favor? Can you document this conversation

between us so that the whole world knows that we stand for peace?"

I was deeply moved and confirmed them that yes, without a doubt I would document their kindness. In writing these lines here, my promise is fulfilled.

Aside from interesting encounters with armed forces, the walking life I loved kept unfolding with as much magic as it ever had... more magic even, as the landscape was turning into something so open, vast, and uninhabited that I had never experienced this much raw nature. Entire days would go by without the slightest shop or opportunity to buy food, but local shepherds and village dwellers would shine with generosity and always keep me fed. My camping nights in the middle of this barren nature were mystical, and it felt like the western world I had left behind was nothing more than a distant dream already...

Day 387 - 5'962 km

The solemn time had come to part from my old friend... I had been with D_100 for thirty-five days and nights by now, and the joy it had brought me was one-of-a-kind: being able to walk this many days without needing to think about anything at all was truly a meditation retreat, and finally taking a right turn away from its homely peace would be the beginning of a new type of adventure... Broken mountain roads, muddy forested trails off any map, brown bears and war zones.

Unbearably violent winds and heavy rains marked the beginning of my rocky uphill trail, and after a few days of wilderness, the first human settlement I encountered involved getting led into an imposing military base and being interrogated for more than one hour. After I had finally gained their trust, they admitted that they were actively looking for *terrorists* and told me to be careful myself.

I've seen enough politics in my life to notice the similarity with Star Wars. *The Dark Side of the Force* is intrinsically evil, dresses in black, looks frightening, and has no other option than to be eliminated. *The Light Side of the Force* dresses in white, is always right, and is on a holy mission for good, even if "good" involves killing. But wait... isn't *killing* what the *bad guys* do, which is why they're bad in the first place? Never mind, news channels don't expect you to think that far.

No one in the world has ever said "I'm a terrorist". This term only comes out of the mouths of those who proclaim to be the good guys. But if a terrorist is defined as *someone who kills innocent people*, then the world's biggest terrorists are its very leaders who invented this term in the first place, right? They bomb entire countries in its name...

I'm not saying this in hope that some leader somewhere reads me and changes their political

regime. We are the presidents of our lives: by looking closely we come to realize our own enemies are no different than us. If we want a better life, we must change ourselves, not them. Violence can never be extinguished by greater violence, any more than fire can be extinguished by greater fire. Fire is extinguished by water, duh. And violence is extinguished by non-violence, kindness, understanding.

“Though one may conquer a thousand times a thousand men in battle, he who conquers himself is the greatest of victors”

- Dhammapada, 8:103

Of course I didn't make this speech to the military official interrogating me or else I would have had to rename my book "To Turkish Prison on Foot". Instead of preaching peace, I practiced peace. Finally the mood lightened enough that

they even ended up offering me tea and a box of dates. They also warned about brown bears, which I hadn't yet encountered but *had* noticed the fresh paw marks of on my muddy trail. Honestly I was more excited to have problems with a 300-kg teddy bear than with an armed human nutcase, but unfortunately that's one request the world never listened to!



A young Turkish man named Curdtepe asked me a question after hearing where I was from.

"Can I go to Switzerland? Let's swap!" This was a common comment to which I gave a common answer...

"You know, in Switzerland, we have employment, we have money... but people aren't that happy."

"No, you don't get what I mean. In Switzerland, you have peace. Here, we have war. It sucks."

I didn't feel so smart anymore and realized I had no idea what I was talking about. He was right: I couldn't even imagine what life must be like for them. For me, this was just a visit. For them it was all they'd ever had.

The environment was breathtaking though, and villagers' lives looked like a folktale... Nomadic shepherds would live self-sustainably with their families in goat-hair cloth tents, in which they would regularly invite me for a meal or for the night. Even when camping independently I would often find myself surrounded by hundreds of sheep, and one night I was visited at 3 am by a teenage shepherd, soaked to the bone and begging for shelter from the ongoing storm. For both of us to fit in this tent, alongside all my belongings, seemed impossible, but I just couldn't say no... So I let him come in and he huddled in a ball while I awkwardly sat sideways for the rest of the night. I couldn't complain though, as this was absolutely nothing compared to all the hospitality I had been given

since the beginning of the trip. It would take a lifetime to repay the kindness I had received so far...

More kindness ensued when I met a soldier named Jemal, whose intimidatingly armed appearance was completely eclipsed by his brotherly love. Ever since the first encounter, I felt so good with him, and upon the second he invited me into his base for tea, saying I was welcome to spend the night if I needed to. I left him with the feeling I must have encountered a saint.

Day 395 - 6'211 km

Today's encounter was less saintly, and involved someone I would never have imagined would be causing one of the most difficult times in my life. His name was Tezja and he was a young boy in his teens who took a friendly demeanor, walking alongside me for some of my road. He

started with casual talk, but his topics revolved more and more around money, until after 5 km together he asked me if I could help him out financially. Once again, with the thought that I could never repay the kindness I had received, I chose to hand him a bill. But it turned out this was merely a ruse to identify where my wallet was located, and next thing I knew he was coming up from behind me brandishing a large stone like a caveman.

It was hard to believe his naiveness, and I grabbed the stone from out of his hands to throw it back into nature. From that point on it was hard to stay friends, but he kept walking by me side, trying to find less primitive ways to get to my money. Finally, when I rose my voice and told him to leave me alone, he said "Fine. I'll go away. And I'll come back with my friends. They have arms, and we'll shoot you."

I didn't know what to think, but I rejoiced he had left me alone! The Tibetan master

Dromtönpa had his own way of taking things: "Ok, this guy insulted me, but hey, he could've beat me!" or "Ok, this guy beat me, but hey, he could've killed me!"

I was personally still at the "he could kill me" part, and I had no way to verify whether or not his threat was true. But by now I knew just how commonplace firearms were around here, so I kept walking until the first human dwelling. I halted there there, asking if I could rest for some time. It was early afternoon, and I decided I would sleep until nightfall, at which point I could complete my daily distance in the dark. It seemed like an appropriate way to avoid the danger, and it didn't bother me to walk at night instead.

This was the month of Ramadan, where Muslims observe strict fasting during the day and break it with an abundant communal meal in the evening, so after sunset the family invited me to their feast and I felt like my luck wasn't so bad

after all! But when I took the road again in the dark, I was in for an event so cinematic that even a teenage caveman with a large rock would pale in comparison.

The nature of my walking journey made my daily life far-removed from cellular connectivity, but once in a while conditions would align that I could call my family. During dinner, the wonderful folks had let me charge my phone, and somehow there was enough connectivity here in the wilderness to call my mom... So I gave her an update, reassuring her that I was alright even amidst the conflictual zone I was crossing.

The call didn't last very long, however, before I heard a sound I recognized from the movies: the metallic clack of a rifle being cocked somewhere surprisingly near me. "Hahaha" I laughed to myself "like in those cowboy films, someone hears a gun cocking behind his back and next thing you know, he's dead!"

I was in the dark in the middle of nowhere... this was too improbable to be even taken seriously. So I just kept waddling on, until this time came the gunshot, just behind me to my right. I left my cart, dashed off the road and jumped behind a rock. "Sorry Mom, I think someone's shooting at me... gotta go. Bye!"

Crouching behind the rock with my heart thumping like crazy, I realized that trying to run would be the most suicidal thing I could do. "All are my friends, none my enemies... All are my friends, none my enemies..." This was my mantra as I stood up from behind the rock, holding my hands in the air. Again, this posture came from the movies, but I think that's what you're supposed to do if you don't want to die.

A bright light shone in my face and I was told to approach. I clumsily made my way over, tripping in the dark towards wherever those people appeared to be, and the greatest relief in my life came when I noticed their uniforms: they were

from the army. They weren't the caveman's friends. I relaxed. A bit.

"Who are you, and what in the world are you doing here in the dark?! Do you know we have orders to shoot at anything that moves at this time of the night?!"

"Uhh, I got lost. I mean, I don't know where I am. I'm just walking... uhh, you know my cart, over there? There's a white flag there... I'm walking for peace."

"Sit down, we'll make arrangements to solve the situation."

After half an hour in their small hill-mounted army hut, they told me they had made arrangements with the next military post, and I was to keep walking until I would reach it. "Ok" I thought, "Whatever. As long as I don't get shot at..." So I kept walking as quietly as I could, this time with a tad less enthusiasm... until it happened again. A gunshot out of nowhere. This was starting to be a bit much, and I was on the

verge of breaking down. A blinding searchlight shone in my face, and I heard all kinds of chaotic orders being shouted at me in Turkish. "STOP THERE! Don't move! Move away from your cart! I said stop! Don't move!"

I did my best to comply to their fumbled orders, knowing that a wrong move would cost me my life. They started searching my cart, the light still shining in my eyes, and more shouting came before they opened fire again, several shots cracking through the air. Those shots weren't directed at me anymore, but made the whole scene even more bewildering.

They finally brought me to their post and started shouting "Who were these guys with you?!"

"I don't know, what guys, what do you mean, I'm alone, I'm walking alone, I swear! What guys?"

"There were three guys walking behind you. After our first gunshot, you raised your hands immediately... but they started running for the

woods. So we opened fire on them. I don't think we struck them, but we're on it."

I'm glad they gave me a chair because I was falling apart. *What in the world is going on... and how to get out of this nightmare... Could these "three guys" actually be this other dude's friends? Or just random crooks coming after me?*

As if reading my mind, the officer told me "Don't worry, you're safe. You're with us. Have tea. Have a cigarette." My mind was blank, frozen in trauma. They ended up driving me to the nearest base, where I met the commanding officer at 3 am. He took off his military jacket, playfully put it around my shoulders, and took a selfie with his phone. "Can I post this on facebook? Your mom could see it!"

I was still completely overwhelmed, but I found it in me to speak somewhat normally. "Oh, about my mom... can I call her? It's been hours since the first gunshot and she probably thinks I'm dead."

He let me use his phone to call, and I found out that neither she nor anyone at home had caught a minute of sleep. Knowing I might well have been between life and death, they were in as much shock as I was, and had spent the night trying everything they could to contact the Turkish authorities responsible for the zone I was in.

I ended up being given a very posh officer's suite with plush couches, a stone fireplace and a private bathroom. I barely saw any of it though



In the base commander's suite after a war-torn night

and just dropped dead on the couch. *All are my friends, none my enemies. All are my friends, none my enemies.* It had been a rough night, but the mantra had worked. Even military violence could be ended by kindness and tolerance.



After a short night's sleep I had breakfast at the military base with dozens of soldiers - a pretty cool experience if you ask me - and then I took the road with lingering trauma from last night. Although I hadn't been shot, I was left with inner wounds that I knew were going to take a lot of meditation to heal.

The coming days were mostly peaceful, except for gunshots in the distance on a near-daily basis - after which I would always check with locals to know if they were real or if I was just turning insane! And to avoid getting shot at night, I chose to sleep in mosques for the time

being instead of my beloved wilderness. It had its own beauty, and I discovered Islam like never before. *A mosque is home*, I came to realize. A house of God, a shelter for wanderers, a safe haven for everyone, whether they're muslim or not. Every mosque has a place to wash oneself and go to the bathroom. Every mosque has shelter from the rain and the wind. Every mosque is a place open for all, as long as you approach by respecting their tradition. And every mosque has an Imam, a spiritual leader, who will feed you, host you, and guarantee your safety for the night.

Yes, every mosque was my home... but even more comforting was the fact that every village, however remote, had its own mosque, and that too identifiable from far away with its protruding minaret. I came to cherish the mere sight of them, like recognizing your house after a long journey. Sometimes I would camp in the mosque grounds too - at my request - so that I could have both the privacy of my beloved tent

and the safety of this holy environment. I came to have so many experiences with mosques and their Imams that I knew I had family wherever I went.

Day 403 - 6'460 km

Another threat for my money, another attack... But this time so unprofessional it was almost funny. It started with two shepherds around my age who left their herd behind to come walk by my side.

"You got a cigarette?" they started.

"Sorry, I don't smoke."

"You got money for cigarettes?"

"Sorry, that's not what I do."

"Ok, you'll regret it boy! We'll call the cops on you. We'll call the army! You'll see!"

"Hahaha! Go ahead. The army's on my side."

Their egos must have been scathed and they immediately raised their shepherd sticks to try

and beat me. It was two against one and I wasn't going to win by myself. So I followed my instinct and scrambled off the roadside to end up in the middle of the road. It was a four-lane road where people would drive quite fast. If they wanted to fight, this is where It was going to happen.

I felt that getting others involved would put chances on my side, and it did: the first car that appeared had to come to a sudden halt to avoid running me over. By then, the driver had understood what was happening, and as soon as he opened the door the young shepherds started running away.

"Do you want to step inside the car?" he kindly offered. "I can drive you further on so you can be safe from those crazy people..."

"Thank you so much, but I'm on a mission on foot, and these guys ran away so fast I don't think they'll be coming back anytime soon!"

This time no mantra had saved me, but simply my unwavering faith in the compassionate nature of humans and their willingness to help. "What do you mean, *compassionate nature*? What about those guys who tried to beat you?" I can hear you say.

Well let's look at the bigger picture. This was the second time in the entire trip that someone had tried to harm me. The first time was this dude with a rock, and the third time would be... nil. Sorry to disappoint, but that's it: there will be no more death threats. And even those few who did try to harm me were obviously victims themselves of a violent past involving conflicts and threats and betrayals and war. If they hadn't been brought up with violence in the first place they would have no reason to perpetuate it. You must be fed up with my spiritual babbling, so let's do some math! Out of the thousands of human encounters I had during the trip, only two in the whole story tried to harm me, which makes:

$$\frac{2}{1'000} = 0.002 = 0.2 \%$$

As you can see, even if we pretend I only met 1'000 people - I had actually met many times more - than that makes only one fifth of a percent of ill-will. Almost impossible to believe but true, and that too across the breadth of entire continents' cultures and religions and lifestyles and financial levels. That's how predominant compassion is in the hearts of the people of the world, and that's why I can make this statement without a doubt: compassion is our intrinsic nature.



"Do you like the PKK?" casually asked a small roadside shop owner. The *PKK* is the name of the main militarized party that the Turkish government is currently trying to eradicate, and they designate it as "a terrorist organization". To

avoid taking any kind of political stance, I simply replied "I don't know anyone from the PKK..."

"Yes you do!", he answered with a big smile. "Me!"

There was nothing wrong with him. He was as jolly as anyone. So much for *The Dark Side of the Force!*

My following days were bright and my trauma behind me as I merrily waddled along the scenic coast of *Lake Van*, the largest lake in Turkey, a turquoise jewel of unspeakable beauty perched at an astonishing 1'640 meters high. It took a whole week to cross its breadth before I triumphantly reached the city of *Van*: my last stop in Turkey, just a few days away from the border with Iran. I had made it, both in terms of visa timing and in terms of, well, staying alive. The feeling of relief was indescribable.

Day 405 - 6'515 km

After entering the city of Van I made my way to the only hostel in all of Eastern Turkey, called *Van's Backpackers Hostel*. I knew about it because it was somewhat famous for being so secluded: this was still a war zone, and not too many foreigners were keen on spending their holidays amidst background gunshots rather than the picturesque mosques of Istanbul. Likewise, not many hostel managers were there to cater for them.

When I reached the place, my stay took a very different shape from what usually happens at a hostel: they said I could stay there as long as I wanted to, working by their side in management, bedding, cleaning, and artwork. As you know, my visa was limited and I had just crossed Turkey without losing a day, but with their help I would be eligible for a Turkish ID and residency. The whole experience sounded really special, would allow me to spend the

hottest months up here in the mountains instead of scorching in the deserts of Iran, would give me time to comfortably apply for my next visa, and would let me live like a local in this one-of-a-kind environment... I happily accepted.

The three next months were unique, learning enough Turkish to answer customers' phonecalls, opening the place to drunk people in the middle of the night, going for heavenly swims in the lake, waking up to machine guns rattling in the streets after dark, and preparing for the next leg of my journey which was even more



Skirting the scenic coasts of Lake Van

intimidating... crossing Iran, and then... Afghanistan?

That was the original plan, but I wondered about my family. I had put them through so much angst already, and this kind of scenario was bound to repeat if I endeavored to cross Taliban-torn-ISIS-ridden Afghanistan. Personally, I still trusted karma... but whether I made it alive or not, I would be putting my folks through an amount of stress greater than anything so far, and that didn't feel right.

I decided to add a whole year to my journey and take a much longer way around: instead of crossing Iran lengthwise, I would cross just the north-western corner and then head up into Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, China... Politically, it was the only other option.

From one day to the next I discarded my *Farsi* conversation book - the language predominant in Iran and much of Afghanistan - and started learning Russian. I bought the ugliest rusty-

brown spray paint I could find and made all of my belongings - cart, wheels, bags - look like it was a hundred years old. Most of us like to shine, we like to look good, to proudly showcase our new bag or new shirt or new phone or new car... in my case, anything that looked good could cost me my life: the difference between getting attacked for my belongings or being left alone as a dusty penniless vagabond.

In three months I made unforgettable connections with the hostel folks, and even in this environment distant from any kind of Buddhism or Indian spirituality, they knew about meditation and were keen on learning Yoga from me. We got along so well that when I announced it was time to leave, they answered "Before you leave, we have an offer: we take care of getting a huge Buddha statue in the middle of the common room, and in exchange you stay with us as permanent staff. Deal?"

It was so hilarious and touching that it almost worked... But then I thought about Bodhgaya - the site where the Buddha himself reached enlightenment, where a statue the size of a building has been erected. *I have bigger statues ahead of me! This journey is not complete!*

Seizing my cart by its handles felt like seizing freedom itself. I was reconnected with my old superpower, long lost in the clutches of sedentary life... I was complete. This cart was part of me. This nomadism was my life. The whole team saw me off with photos and smiles, and after months of sharing and caring and closeness I set foot into oblivion... This was who I truly was: nobody.

Day 516 - 6'573 km

I woke up in the beautiful gardens of *Van University*, where I had been cordially invited last night by the staff after my first day's walk,

along with dinner and tea. *Even when I'm nobody*, I realized, *I have friends everywhere*. Then I took the road, once again alongside my old friend *Lake Van*. A man came up to me out of nowhere.

"What's your name?"

"Bünyamin" I answered. This was simply the Turkish pronunciation of my full name *Benjamin*, which has middle-eastern roots to begin with.

"What? Are you a Muslim?"

When Mahatma Gandhi was asked the same question, he would answer *I am a Muslim, and a Christian, and a Hindu, and a Buddhist, and a Jew*. I really liked that. "To be honest, I belong to every religion" I answered, "and I learn from -"

"No, I mean, are you a Muslim?"

"I would say so. Because I believe that -"

"This man is on an epic adventure!!!" he boomed after raising his phone's camera to my face. "His name is Muhammed and he is a Muslim! I kid you not! Muhammed's doing thousands of

kilometers around the world and he is a Muslim!"

I left him to it and took the road, while he kept on boasting all kinds of made-up facts about me on camera. Kind of nice for my first local interview!



A *mosque* is defined as a place for prayer and introspection: it has no fixed appearance. It can be anything from a picturesque thousand-year-old stone edifice to a quiet, clean, carpeted room at a gas station. I was invited at the latter to spend the night, still alongside Lake Van, and had a deeply replenishing rest. At morning-time however, our conversation during breakfast took an alarming tone.

"Where are you headed after this?" The owner Ibrahim casually asked.

"Muradiye, Dogubeyadzi, and Bazargan border crossing into Iran."

"What? Please don't... the road between Muradiye and Dogubeyadzi is an active war zone. Even local transport is taking the long way around, adding hundreds of kilometers to their route... Nobody wants to get blown up."

"What about the *Kapıköy* border crossing down south?"

"That's... slightly better."

"Thank you, you might have saved my life."

I obviously heeded his advice, but that meant I had to retrace my steps and go straight back to *Van*, before making a turn onto another road. It would make a total of three days of walking for absolutely nothing. Or was it really nothing?

My initial state of mind was notably gloomy and disheartened as I grudgingly started walking the same road in the opposite direction. Crossing the world on foot is slow enough to begin with, and now I'm going back and forth too! But

walking - even in the opposite direction - is a therapy unto itself, an introspection, a meditation. As my mind settled down, breath by breath, step by step, I remembered the story of Tibet's most famous yogi *Milarepa* when he first met his master *Marpa*.

Dharma talk #4: The toil of Milarepa

Instead of accepting Milarepa as his disciple and giving him Dharma instructions, Marpa put him through a bewildering amount of verbal abuse and physical toil.

"You are hardworking, so build a circular stone tower on the eastern crest for me to present to my son Darma Dodé. When you are finished, I will grant you the oral instructions."

Milarepa bravely took on the task, but halfway through, Marpa told him "I didn't consider

things earlier. Tear down this tower to its foundations and carry the earth and stones back to the places you found them." Increasingly depressed, he obeyed and tore down the tower, before Marpa instructed him once again "Now build a semicircular tower on the western crest." Once again he obeyed, working until exhaustion, until Marpa told him to tear it down again. After years of toil and no less than four towers, the last one nine stories high and Milarepa so hopeless he was ready to commit suicide, Marpa's attitude completely flipped. "Today, you will be the guest of honor in our initiation ceremony. I have only tormented you in order to purify your negative deeds. Had your work on the tower been in my own interest, I would have directed you more gently. Although I may have let loose a flood of heated and misguided words, they were not like those of a worldly person. They were intended to wear down your self-importance and lead you to the path of enlightenment."

I reached Van before reaching enlightenment, but the whole episode of walking with no result had a very real result: heightening my awareness, making me focus even more on the way, the inner path, and less on the outer destination. Another result was having all the roadside villagers think I was utterly crazy as they saw me walk back on the same road days later. I didn't mind, and they might have been right.

Upon reaching Van once again I turned left, as instructed, but my excitement at finally tackling a new road was coupled with a very troubling man whose face was covered by a black mask and seemed to be stalking me. There was no form of civilization ahead, so I wondered where this guy could possibly be headed, and I stopped at the last human dwelling before the great unknown - a small roadside mosque - to take refuge. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed, to

my dismay, that he stopped as well, casually leaning against a wall. Who knows for sure, but this was increasingly scary, and if I couldn't get rid of him, then my best bet was to bore him to submission. I stayed at the mosque for almost an hour, meditating and praying to Allah that when I would come back out, this guy would be gone.

It worked, I was protected, and I took the road with glee. Lake Van had been quite elevated already, but here I was climbing even higher until I reached a cold desert with nothing in sight except for rocks and grit, whipped into my



No other choice here but to look like a bedouin

face by violent gusts of wind. To shield myself I wore every piece of clothing I owned and covered my face, making me look just as threatening as that masked spiderman who seemed to have been following me earlier!

I was quick to run out of food, and had no money to buy any in the odd shop of a remote desert village, so I ate a box of Turkish sweets that someone must have thrown out of their car earlier on. *Better than nothing*, I thought... but it ended up much worse than nothing, as those sweets came with the uninvited guest of not-so-sweet parasites.

Next came my birthday, and obviously nobody knew, but *I* knew, and even though I was clutching my stomach in pain from the ongoing parasites, I still loved my life, this was what I wanted to do, this was the dream come true. And I treated myself to manifesting an ATM in the last possible village before Iran, so I finally had money, and I found a warm cozy room

where I could lie down to more comfortably clutch my stomach in pain. To my disbelief, I even found a frozen cheesecake in a small shop, which I enjoyed all by myself before clutching my stomach in even more pain. It was unforgettable, which is exactly how birthdays are meant to be.



After even more climbing on an increasingly desolate road, the Iranian border finally came into sight, and my first human encounter illustrated what Ibrahim meant when he said it was "slightly better". It was 6 pm, a bit past closing time, and I was greeted with five soldiers pointing their kalashnikovs in my face and screaming erratic orders at me.

I had seen so much of this already that I chose not to worry about the guns or the cries. I raised my hands and kept my cool. "How do we know

you don't have a bomb in there?!" they yelled. I answered dully "Uhh, well... I dunno... you can check if you want..."

They searched my bags at length while I stood there waiting for them to calm down. After some time they lowered their rifles and told me the facts: "You're at the wrong place at the wrong time and you don't have many options. If you keep on walking towards the border, you get shot. If you turn back, you get shot. Night is falling too and it gets bitterly cold, so the best thing we can suggest is to pitch your tent on the road, exactly where you're standing."

Ok, well, at least I had a plan for the night... "Oh, one last thing" they added. "If you need to poop or pee, be creative, but don't go anywhere. Personally it's the end of our shifts, but the snipers in the watchtowers monitor all night and you're no exception: if they see anyone roaming left and right, they shoot. By the way, we're going home. Good luck!"

- Chapter 8 -

Iran and hospitality

October 2017

Somehow I slept ok, and succeeded in not stepping outside at all until 8:30 am, when I heard the voice from yesterday's officer calling from outside. "Benjamin, it is time!" I hastily unzipped the tent door and discovered a gleaming face, overjoyed by the fact I had indeed spent the night as instructed and posed no threat to anyone. *I brought a hint of warmth in an otherwise cold and frightened world*, I thought to myself.

The sun was out too and this was the end of the climb, as the border-crossing itself was placed on the mountain pass. I happily waddled onwards to the checkpoint, a place so chaotic and densely packed that it was hard to believe we were still in the middle of a high-altitude

desert. My cart got stuck in the crowd and I was instructed to leave it behind in order to reach this counter here and that room there and get all kinds of stamps done... Homeless-looking children were climbing all over my things which I couldn't do anything about but pray...

When I finally made it through, my first steps in Iran were fascinating... *This is the serious Middle-East*, I thought to myself, as captivating as it was daunting... No rifles in my face this time, however, and coming down from the mountain pass plunged me into a heavenly micro-climate of exotic greenery, pleasant warmth, and stillness. Instead of soldiers, jolly lumberjacks would invite me for tea and do everything they could to make me feel at home.

I hardly understood a thing as they spoke neither Turkish nor English, and I personally only knew a few words of the Iranian language *Farsi*... and yet there was no language barrier

between us. Instead of conversation, we would sit together and smile.

The next day, I chose to embrace my inability to speak by actually taking a vow of silence, as I do once in a while to calm my mind. I answered people's queries in sign language alone, no one knew what I was doing or where I was from, and even then, without the slightest suspicion I was invited for food, drinks, baby-holding and photo-shoots.

This intentional speechlessness brought my mind to such a clear and sharpened state of appreciation that the environment around me seemed to glow, from the deep-red-rock cliffs to the majestic Qotur river to the age-old stonewalled villages. I felt like a bottle of happiness, and my vow of silence meant it wouldn't spill out but only grow and grow, wordlessly shining in every direction.

Day 527 - 6'817 km

If all was mere wordless bliss, then I wouldn't be evolving, right? So out of compassion, the world keeps throwing a challenge once in a while... Iran was surprisingly void of weapons, and I was encountering nothing but peace. The military conflict, this time, was internal... The parasites that had come to visit me ten days ago had only temporarily subsided and were now coming back in full force. I could hardly eat anything without doubling over in pain afterward... As I reached the outskirts of Khoy - the only city I would be crossing in Iran - I decided I would do whatever it took to come out of this ordeal.

Khoy had nothing to do with what we think of as a "city", and your best bet to buy anything would be to get lost amongst the archaic stalls in the bustling central bazar: I went to the closest thing I could find to a modern pharmacy and asked if they could prescribe anything. They did, which I took, but I knew such a tenacious

affliction would need more than that, and I chose to stop eating anything sweet altogether: that's what parasites feed on.

That included just about any processed food out there - you always find sugar in the fine-print - and even fruits. Instead, I had to feed on raw garlic, raw cabbage, pepper seeds and vinegar. What a feast! For now, I took this as a golden opportunity to simplify my life, decrease my attachment to food, and learn to appreciate cabbage like nobody else. The whole thing felt spiritual, and my stomach condition was slowly improving.

A few days of walking through mystically quiet semi-desert landscapes led me to *Araz River*, which marked the border with Azerbaijan. This small mysterious country was one I wouldn't be setting foot into - mostly for visa reasons - and instead I'd be walking alongside it for a few days before reaching its neighbor Armenia. I was thrilled to see water and I couldn't wait to wash

in the river tonight... but my excitement was short lived: after an elated hour's walk in this scenic cliff-lined landscape, two soldiers with kalashnikovs stopped their bike.

"We have been instructed to prevent you from walking this road. Pedestrians are forbidden by border patrol."

"Come on guys... this is a holy mission, and I'm walking for peace, look at my flag... I'm not here to make trouble, just to peacefully walk on through... can you call your manager or something?"

I secretly hoped their superior would be one of the officers I made friends with in the military checkpoint earlier that day, and maybe he was. After a short phonecall, they changed their tone.

"Ok, you can walk. An exception has been made for you."

"Amazing! I have one question: can I camp?"

"No way."

"So... can I walk at night?"

"Absolutely not. Border patrol would shoot you."

Here goes again, I thought to myself with as much light-heartedness as I could conjure. Then they added "Just walk until the next village and sleep there! It's only ten to fifteen minutes by car..." I'm so used to making plans on foot that I was quick to do the maths. Ten minutes' drive at 60 km/h means two hour's walk at 5 km/h, my average speed. And to know how much time I actually had before sunset, I used a fun trick which I'll share with you.

**Homeless tip #5:
calculating sunset**

The sunset is important. As you know, walking by night at the wrong place can mean getting shot. Even when I wasn't in a military zone, calculating how long I had before sunset was

part of my daily life: if I failed to set up camp before it got dark, I would often have no other choice than to walk until morning.

So here's a little trick: extend your arm straight out towards the sun, and then turn your fingers slightly inwards and see how many finger-tips you can count between the sun and the horizon. Multiply that by ten and you get a pretty good approximation of how many minutes you have left until sunset. If all four fingers isn't enough, you can use the other hand too, which makes up to eight fingers to count with. For example, if you counted all eight finger widths, that would make eighty minutes left before it gets dark. Voila!

I extended my arm and counted only three fingers' width between the sun and the horizon, which meant, unfortunately, only thirty minutes of sunlight left.

"There's no way I can reach the next village before dark" I told them.

"Yes you can, you still have one and a half hours!" said one of the soldiers, looking at his watch.

"You don't look at your watch to know the sunset, you look at the sun" I teasingly added, before realizing that arguing any further would lead to nothing. "Anyway, you're right, I will make it in time."

To my relief, they drove off and left me alone. Well, *relief* is a bit of an understatement, considering I had thirty minutes left before starring as the main character in a watchtower snipers' shooting game. "Dear cherished world" I prayed, "in the name of all the people who love me and all the people I love, may I... I don't know what, but... may something come my way before it gets dark..."

Thirty minutes later, just when the sun had set, I noticed a small concrete underpass running

beneath the road I was on. I swiftly made my way in, hoping no one would see me, and the concealed space was just big enough to pitch my tent.

I had the quietest night in my life, nobody saw me, and I took the road next morning with a big smile, ready for another day of adventures. Gunshots regularly echoed in the distance, but I was told they were just Azerbaijani border guards practicing their aim on makeshift targets. I thanked the world for not being one of them... and the next evening was much more relaxed too as I was invited to camp inside someone's private garden.

Before long, my meet-cute with Iran had come to an end... My time in *the land of hospitality*, however short, had been so blessed that I shunned western TV for painting it as a war zone. I would be missing this land and keeping everyone in it deep in my heart.

- Chapter 9 -

Post-Soviet Armenia

October 2017

I crossed the border alongside *Roman*, a Polish hitchhiker who had seen me on the road from far away and decided to join my walk for most of the day. The border crossing was fun and spacious, the Armenian side so old-school it seemed that nothing had budged since the Russians left in 1991.

The same was true for the rest of the country: the USSR, or *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* - which we can just shorten to the *Russian Communists* - took over Armenia in the 1920's. Alongside which they captured so much of the world that my next two years' walk would be spent crossing their lands alone... In 1991, seventy-one years later, what had become the worlds largest political regime came to an

abrupt and unexpected collapse, leaving many countries amazed and relieved to be freed from their totalitarian occupants.

Armenia, however, was left a bit dumbfounded: even twenty-five years later - when I was crossing the country myself - most of the Russian infrastructure was still there but abandoned and falling apart: ghost towns, ghost factories, ghost mines, cars from the fifties, peeling paint, crumbling walls, and rusty gas pipes made the entire country feel like a movie my grandparents would make me watch.

To me, it made the perfect mix between charming, exotic, and eery: I loved the vibe immediately. To add to the solemnness, no one would talk to me unless I approached them first - completely the opposite of Iran, where half of the cars would stop for baby-holding and selfies. No one in Armenia seemed to care what I was doing, and I too stopped caring about anything. It felt great.

I enjoyed the luxury of climbing up and down Armenia's crazy mountains in complete silence. Including food and water, my cart now weighed 90 kg - significantly more than I did - and dragging it up the slopes gave me the just about the speed of a 90-year-old man. You'd think all this would drain my patience, but to my surprise it strengthened it.

Instead of grumbling about how heavy my load was and wondering how many hours - or days - were left until the top of the next mountain pass, I found a much speedier way: I would stop thinking about the top at all, forget the future, settle my mind into the step I was taking, the breath I was breathing... and by some magic trick I would reach the top at perplexing speeds. Not in hours, not in minutes, but... instantly. If this doesn't sound scientific, didn't Einstein show us that time and space were both relative? As soon as I would really settle my mind in the present, time itself would cease to exist,

likewise space, and what happened from then on would feel otherworldly.

This new approach propelled me through the country with enigmatic energy, but even then, environmental challenges would confront me on a daily basis. Except for cosmic bliss, my Armenian experience was also endowed with extreme high-altitude winds thrashing my tent so violently that the pegs would fly out of the ground and I would have to brace it with my hands until morning... late-afternoon mountain passes so inhospitable that I had no other option for the night than to pray for refuge... and warm-hearted people answering my prayers as if sent by the Gods.

In one instance I was climbing up a pass with precarious timing: evening was looming and I was vastly under-equipped to be spending a november night outside at 2000 meters. I chose to put all my hopes in a lodge or shelter that I would find in the upcoming village, according to

rumors. When I finally reached the village however, I found no trace of such a place... as soon as the sun set, temperatures dropped at a drastic rate and I was left walking out of the village hopelessly, into the freezing barren mountain landscape.

To my surprise, a call came from behind after I had passed the last house in the settlement. "Wait!! Don't camp out there! You'll die! Camp in my orchard!" *Better than nothing*, I thought, but when I followed him to his orchard he also added "You're not gonna camp here at all. You're going to sleep in my house with a stove, warm blankets, dinner and breakfast."

My host Aymen was a school teacher, and it was through our discussions that I came to realize most Armenian's didn't wildly celebrate the end of the USSR. They even kind of missed it. "I'm a public school teacher and I make only 38'000 *Armenian Dram* a month - roughly 100 US dollars. Times are bad. To be honest it was

better under the Soviet regime - we all had jobs, and we were paid well."

Still, he and his wife exhibited the same easy-going nonchalance I saw in all the Armenians I met, and staying with them was as comforting as my cherished family in Czech Republic. They hadn't just saved my night from the cold: they had also warmed the depths of my heart.

Day 558 - 7'415 km

Reaching the idyllic lake-side town of *Sevan* marked a memorable change in my journey and its long spell of frozen nights: there would be no more. Not once again would I be cold at night: a sleeping bag designed for twenty-four degrees below zero, so advanced that I wasn't allowed to even know the price tag, was delivered to me by none other than my mom. She had come by plane - followed by various rickety local forms of

transport - to join me for a month and walk by my side through Armenia and Georgia.

On top of stomach parasites and frozen cheesecake, this made a late yet welcomingly unfrozen addition to my list of birthday gifts! And in the snowy lands to come, it would change my life, if not save it altogether.

We spent a few days talking about sleeping bags, celebrating Sevan, speaking sloppy Russian and eating steamed buckwheat, until it was time to disappear into the unknown. Her first day walking was served with a roadworthy dose of adventure: getting bitten by a dog, nearly suffocating in a two-kilometer non-ventilated tunnel and having to turn back halfway, taking the long way around through an ancient deserted Armenian village in ruins, crossing a high-altitude mountain pass, and finally camping in sub-zero temperatures.

After a few days' walk together in enchanting landscapes, a brand new and greatly puzzling

challenge came her way, drastically changing our journey together: *plantar fasciitis*, a condition which none of us knew about at the time, in which the plantar fascia - or connective tissues at the sole of the feet - would start painfully swelling from overwalking.

Her walking speed diminished day by day from the ever-increasing pain. At some point she could hardly take a step, and we realized it would get worse if we didn't put her on some form of transport soon. But far from giving up,



Insanity is even better when it's shared

we decided that audacious-walking-mom would become audacious-hitchhiking-mom: she would walk daily for only as long as she deemed fit, and then stand by the road with her thumb out asking for rides from whoever would happen to be passing by.

Hitchhiking involves putting all your trust into someone you've never met before, on no other basis than the fact that... compassion is our intrinsic nature. Remember? This makes it a practice of pure Dharma, just as much as donation or prayer or meditation on universal love. And it worked: funky vehicles from the 50's would pick her up and the funky people inside would want nothing else than her own well-being.

Somehow, she would calculate stops that would allow me to do the same distance on foot throughout the day, and we'd still manage to meet up every night. But this time, she was so much faster than me that she had all the time in

the world to do what moms do: she would scout around, talk to people, and unfailingly find a solution for the night. Inside or outside or free or paid, we would always have a peaceful place to sleep and I didn't need to worry about that part of the equation anymore!

- Chapter 10 -

Georgia

November 2017

We waved our small, beloved, old-fashioned Armenia goodbye as we merrily strode through the easiest border crossing we had ever seen. Unlike Armenia, Georgia was so forward-thinking that they had ditched their Soviet past without a second thought, and their dearest dream was now to be accepted in the European Union. All this showed in how they greeted us native Europeans, and a single cost-free stamp in our passports could last us an entire year in their country.

Their economy was thriving too and we could immediately tell we had entered a land of freedom, abundance, and enjoyment. Whereas in Armenia, my only encounter with the police was to take a selfie and say that I looked like Jesus,

in Georgia there simply were none. Sweet-wine and melted cheese made most of their diet and I felt like I was in a surprisingly affordable yet even nicer version of Switzerland.

After just a few more days at our habitual pace - walking together for half of the day and then seeing mom off as she would hitch a ride - we reached Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia which didn't feel like a capital at all. The picturesque, centrally located *Freedom Square* was only twenty minutes on foot from the edge of the city, where you could climb a mountain and trek in raw nature for days on end.

Our last days together with mom, however, didn't involve trekking too far as her feet's condition had worsened to the point she would crawl on all fours to get from the bed to the bathroom. We stayed in the homely locally-owned *Squirrel Hostel*, one amongst a hundred in this city abound with free-spirited community-loving travelers, and a few days later

the time finally came for mom to take her scheduled flight home.

Our time together had been delightfully unpredictable and mom had successfully taken a dip into her son's eccentric lifestyle, with all the beauty and adventure that it deserved. We hugged each other goodbye with warm remembrance at the craziness of all we had been through.

Day 690 - 7'689 km

Tbilisi had become a true home to me and I felt like a local in every way... except for the fact I spoke Russian to everyone, which was appreciated by the elders but would offend a youngster every once in a while. The new generation had boldly decided to ditch everything related to the USSR and speak pure Georgian instead.

Four months spent in this playful city had me teaching English at a local school for 1.6 dollars an hour - my lowest salary ever - playing didgeridoo in the underground for fun and making three times that amount, completing overdue web design projects for friends in Switzerland...

You may be wondering how could all this have taken me four months, but the real reason was seasonal: the next leg of my trip involved crossing mountains in Russia - which would be under heavy snow in winter - and the deserts of Kazakhstan, which have been recorded to drop all the way to negative-fifty degrees Celsius. Needless to say it was easier to spend the coldest months of the year in Squirrel Hostel, with its bulletproof heating systems built by the Russians decades ago, and wait until March to freeze my toes away.

It also gave me plenty of time to break my head over the Russian visa, which involved fake hotel

bookings for every day of the month, fake itineraries, fake certificates, made-up-stories, fake bank balance sheets, and unfortunately, real travel insurance which drove the price even higher. It ended up costing more than 100 USD and three visits to the Russian embassy, but I didn't mind: all I cared was that I got it. If Russia hadn't let me into their country, my only other route to India would have been through Afghanistan...

Paperwork in hand and February behind me, I left the hostel family with hugs and kisses and laughs and cheers. Tbilisi being such a bite-sized city, it didn't take long before I was back to freezing my toes in the wild the way I deserved. My first nights out were wet, rainy, cold, and muddy, but that quickly changed as I started making my way up the Greater Caucasus - the mountain range dividing Georgia from Russia - and ended up knee-deep in snow instead. As usual, all I had was sandals.

I was armed with a new superpower, however: on top of the arctic sleeping bag previously gifted by my mom, I was now equipped with mysterious snow-proof socks made from alien technology. Courtesy of my brother Jonas who knew it would save my feet: after discovering them himself, he had one pair sent via post and it had reached me in Tbilisi.

**Homeless tip #6:
snow and sandals**

I'm not sponsored by the Romans. But I can't stop praising how far sandals have brought me along the way... Unlike hiking boots, you can fix them with needle and thread in case they break. Unlike hiking boots, you can cross a knee-deep stream without a care. Unlike hiking boots, they're so light and compact that I could afford to have a spare with me the whole way: I would wear out one pair during the span of thousands

of kilometers, and when the sole would get so thin that my heel would touch the ground, I could just change shoes on the spot and keep on walking without a worry, until the next city on my route where I would find a new backup.

And with a bit of cleverness you can even adapt them to snow. Upon buying the sandals, you would make sure that they can adapt to one or two foot sizes above yours. Then, you would use that extra space to wrap your feet in waterproof socks, inside which you could insert as many more layers of ordinary woolen socks as you wanted to. This multi-layered approach doesn't just mean you can use the same shoes all year long, but also that you can strip everything apart for drying at night: if your conventional hiking boots get wet from melted snow and you proceed to sleep in sub-zero temperatures, in the morning you're going to have two daunting blocks of ice as shoes. But with layered sandals, you would separate all the layers, place them around your feet in your sleeping bag, and by

morning they would be dry and warm enough to put back on with a smile.

As for finding the waterproof socks themselves, you do have to plan a bit. In cold Muslim countries like Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan you would readily find warm leather socks called *khuffs* that do the job, but being vegetarian I was happy to have a more animal-friendly solution that involved something along the lines of goretex. For information, the ones my brother had given me were branded *Sealskinz*. I can't say I crossed the arctics, but I did tread a good chunk of the world in nothing else than sandals, and this layered technique was such a lifesaver that I couldn't help but share it with you. Sorry.

As I kept climbing, the world became increasingly snowy but my feet were warm, and the air was so still... a stillness almost ghastly, as I knew that the silent beauty of the snow-clad

world around me would turn into the perilous feat of finding a way to sleep in it. I had never set up camp in such deep snow or high elevation before, and I didn't even know how I would drive my stakes into the ground... but my worries were stopped in their tracks by the oddity of what I saw ahead. *Is that a... a ski resort?*

Expensive cars loaded with snowboards, fancy cafes, Switzerland hotels and imposing chairlift installations came to dominate the scenery, and it bemused me how a luxury vacation to some was a trial in survival to others. *Without all these conveniences these people wouldn't survive a single night up here, I chuckled to myself, and here they are renting skis and taking selfies and drinking hot chocolate!*

And here *I* was walking out of the resort and into the glacial reality ahead as the sun started setting. The road itself was mostly cleared, but a single step taken away from it would have me

falling into snow that went as deep as my thighs. There was no way I could camp in the middle of the road either, and my heart's pace increased as the land darkened and I realized I didn't even have a plan A.

By scouting left and right, with the last hue of light I found an area where the snow was less deep... it was at the edge of a cliff - not exactly comforting either - but at least the winds had blown much of the snow away. It looked like a perfect place to commit suicide, but it was better than nothing and I thanked the world.



Camping at the edge of an icy cliff... a good idea?

I spent twenty minutes flattening the snow, which even then remained worryingly sloped, and I flimsily inserted my stakes into the ice below, far away from any kind of real ground. The flattened snow providing no friction whatsoever, I knew that if my stakes didn't hold until morning, my tent might well just slip down the cliff with me inside it. I barely slept at night, too busy praying for it not to include a snowstorm, and hoping I'd be waking up to sunlight in the morning rather than my own ski ride down the mountain at 1 am.

Day 696 - 7'833 km

Sunlight was a lot to hope for and I woke up under yet more falling snow, yet my gratitude was immeasurable... The winds hadn't picked up overnight and I was alive.

Even the simplest tasks like washing or going to the bathroom become heroic quests in a world

where all you see is snow. Last night, to "shower" I had used lumps of snow that I would scratch against my frozen naked body. It stung but it worked: after all, it's water, right? And in this kind of trip, cleanliness too was a matter of survival: not a single night in my journey had I gone to bed without cleaning, and no matter how filthy was my day's clothing I would always have a clean dedicated set for the night. Oil, sweat, and grime that gets lodged into our clothing strip it of its insulating qualities, and if I wanted to make it through these snowy mountains I needed all the insulation I could get.

The side-effect was that settling into my tent at night felt like curling into a bird's nest... It was so cozy, warm, and clean that I cherished it over anyone's home. Good thing too, as I had no choice!

I had no choice either but to freeze my hands off trying to fold my snow-covered tent, after which

I took the icy road with a placid mind. I had barely started walking when a snowstorm erupted, which I greeted with a nod and a *thank you for not coming last night!* The violent wind and snow lasted for hours and I could hardly keep my eyes open, but to my relief the road was going downwards and I knew the highest pass was behind me.

After a few more hours I noticed the first tree poking out from the snow and I burst into celebration. Never had I been this happy to see a tree! Before long the world came back to normal, still freezing and snowy but also sunlit and alive, and within a few days I was face to face with the border of a country whose legislation alone was more daunting than the highest of my mountain passes.

- Chapter 11 -

Russia

March 2018

The barren high-altitude border crossing was astonishing, and the Russian formalities even more so. I knew what I was in for: long ago I had been led to believe that this no-man's-land couldn't be crossed on foot. But I also vowed I would do anything in order to be granted an exception.

First came the Georgians. That was easy. "Hahaha!" They started. "What you're doing is cool and all, but you can't enter no-man's-land on foot. You need a car."

"I don't have a car."

"Find a car."

I half-heartedly looked around, unwilling to admit my defeat. But then they casually added

"What's that flag for, by the way?"

"It stands for peace"

They smiled and left me alone to go talk to the other officers. Within a minute they waved to me playfully "Go on, cross the border will ya, and leave us alone!" I merrily skipped ahead and walked through a long and scenic no-man's-land before being stopped by a much less smiling face. It was obvious I had reached the Russian authorities.

"How did you get here?" the soldier yelled. "You can't be on foot!"

"Well... I am."

"But... you can't!"

"Well... I am."

When our highly constructive dialogue had played itself out, he started scratching his head in search of a new approach.

"Ok, stand by the road and go no further."

He proceeded to stop a clueless cargo truck and ordered the driver to haul me into the back for

whatever distance was left. As little as thirty seconds later, I was asked to step out again, but this time my cart stayed inside while it drove away, leaving me biting my nails. All my life's belongings in the hands of a random truck driver I had barely even met...

To make things even more reassuring, I was led to an interrogation room and plagued with so many questions that it came to be the longest interview of my life. After "list all the countries you've ever been to", "how and why and when exactly are you going to which places in Russia?", "what language do you speak with your mom" and a hundred other things about my personal life, the officer seemed bored by his own questions and started fumbling with his phone.

I had given them so many lies that it must have exhausted weeks of my good karma, but if I had told them I would be sleeping in the bush and walking around pennilessly through Chechnya

and Dagestan - both of which were conflict zones with ongoing shootings between ISIS and the army - they would have sent me straight back to Georgia.

The situation somewhat lightened when he raised his head and said "Please excuse me, I'm sending fake messages to all my friends. I'm saying my girlfriend is pregnant. Hahaha! Tomorrow is April Fools'!" After which they started jokingly calling each other *KGB* - the communist party's totalitarian police - which was strikingly close to what all this looked like. Four hours had gone by and I didn't know if I should laugh at their sarcasm or worry even more.

In the meantime, however, my cart had been miraculously returned to me - courtesy of the truck driver whose compassion was so great that instead of driving away with 80 kg of free equipment, he went through the hassle of unmounting my cart from his truck and

instructing the men to deliver it back to me. I was in awe!

Finally the authorities let me go and I celebrated my first steps on russian soil. The party in my mind was short-lived, however: I had been detained for so long that night was falling, and at a mere ten-minutes' walk from the border I would really have to camp like a spy. Aside from the usual risk of getting shot, if the so-called *KGB* found me out here tonight, they would know I had been lying the whole time and I'm pretty sure it would be the end of my stay in Russia.

Day 701 - 7'889 km

I folded camp before sunrise in hope that the patrolling police vehicles wouldn't see me, and left the place with a thumping heart. It worked, nobody stopped me, and I avidly marched on into this new and intimidating land.

The locals' behavior completely differed from yesterday's border guards and I felt delightfully welcome. It seems they had never seen a foreigner on this road before, and people's generosity was beyond measure. Food, drinks, and money were handed to me on a daily basis from random passers-by for no apparent reason. So much was handed to me, in fact, that I was receiving more money than anything I was spending. Could bumming around Russia replace my job?

I was limited though, by the obvious constraint of my one-month visa, during which I would have to do a whole 1'000 km. It was possible, but left no room for anything unplanned. Getting sick, a wrong turn, a closed road, needing a fix on my cart, or any other mishap would set me up for failure. I planned my route with a calculator and prayers.

I would be crossing the state of Chechnya followed by Dagestan, both notorious for

ongoing armed conflicts, and both radically different from the overblown russian stereotype of tall fair-skinned Christians with a taste for vodka. Here the people were Muslim, and their complexion ranged from heavily bearded middle-eastern faces, to hairless chins with asian eyes reminiscent of China. This intriguing variety made me realize that I was ethnically at the border between the East and the West... and also that I had no idea what Russia actually was.

A sense of military tension hung in the air, and on my third day I was stopped by an imposing black off-road car full of mysterious bearded men wearing prayer caps, bulletproof vests, all-black clothing and kalashnikovs.

"Alhamdulillah! What about you? Who are you and what's your religion?" I was clearly out of secular-minded Georgia, but I still decided to play the honesty card. "I am a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Hindu, and a Taoist."

As dodgy as it seemed to be making eccentric religious statements over a bunch of kalashnikovs, they seemed to like the answer and waved me goodbye. After the second such incident in the same day however, I witnessed a growing sense of unease... not that I lacked trust in those bearded men who were kind and understanding and full of love towards me, but that they might have been closely patrolling these streets for a reason.

Nothing actually happened, however, and the next incident with the police was radically different. "Good afternoon. Please put your cart aside from the road and onto that ledge."

"Uh, ok, but.. why, may I ask? Did I do anything wrong?"

"Because I'm inviting you to the restaurant, *bratan!*"

Bratan is the russian word for "bro" and it alone could summarize every discussion I've had in

Russia. Everything was *bro*, everything was chill and carefree yet homely and warm.

I was stopped so often for selfies and offerings and a repetition of all the exact same questions that it would exasperate me and I could hardly do my daily distance. But it never took too much time for me to realize I was completely beside the point: if my goal had been distance, I wouldn't be walking in the first place. My real goal is to be a messenger of love!

"Where are you from?" "Switzerland..." "Where are you going?" "India..." "Why are you on foot?" "Because... I'm on foot..." "You need a ride?" "No, thanks..." "Aren't you tired?" "No, I like walking..."

That was the perpetual loop, but one time things changed. "I mean, aren't you tired..." he proceeded, "of all of us asking the same questions all day?"

"YES!!!! That's exactly why I'm tired! Finally,

someone who understands me! I love you bratan!"

Day 710 - 8'145 km

The next state of *Dagestan* had me worrying a bit as I had been told it was a known magnet for bombings and shootings... But starting from the border crossing, all I saw was love. Instead of asking me for my documents, the officer in charge told me "I know you and what you're up to... But I wasn't expecting you so early! Care for a free meal?"

I was so exhausted from the constant winds in the endless steppes that going anywhere within four walls was a relief. He served me tea alongside a Russian dish made of fried potatoes and onions in the border-crossing's headquarters. Finally he saw me off with a warm smile, and all my worries about this new province were dispelled.

My first morning in Dagestan included a meal, coffee, cake, a warm shower, and money... so much money I didn't know what I did to deserve it. People would say "Here's for your next cup of tea!" and they'd hand me a stack of bills that could pay all the cups of tea I could drink until Kazakhstan!

Dharma talk #5:

The six perfections

By now you probably think I'm greedy and selfish, accepting so much money from innocent strangers... But not once have I asked for money. Likewise, not once have I refused it.

Many Buddhist traditions put great emphasis on *the six perfections*, which are said to summarize the entire path to enlightenment: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyous effort, meditation, and wisdom. There's a certain

chronology to all that, and the first one being *generosity* means that's the easiest starting point on the path. It's something we can - and do - practice in our everyday lives already. *Giving* brings about even more joy than receiving, and western psychology agrees: Dunn, Aknin, and Norton measured that participants who were given money to spend on gifts for their friends showed consistently higher levels of joy than those who were given money to spend on themselves.

Buddhist psychology goes further by saying that generosity disrupts the very foundations of our ego: this illusory sense of separateness between us and the world that is said to be the root of every form of suffering. So that's how powerful generosity is... And fortunately for those of us who aren't rich, it doesn't mean giving things to people all day. Giving help, giving one's time, one's attention, is considered even higher and is within everyone's means.

Of course, intention is primordial, and if someone was to hand me money or food or water just because I was begging for it and they wanted to get rid of me, there would be no benefit for either of us. That's why I never ask: whatever is given to me comes from their pure goodwill. And that's why I don't feel bad about receiving either: I know that the greatest benefactor is them.

The fun went on as I crossed a police checkpoint at the entrance of sub-district Kochubey. Once again, not a single passport check, and this time only one question: "Do you see that restaurant across the road? Have anything you like! It's on us!"

On my way out of the restaurant, to my disbelief the military speakers blared out in Russian: "Good luck Benjamin!" *What?* I had never even told them my name... So this so-called *KGB* did

seem to know everything about me, but for the opposite reason: to help me instead of control me!

In our encounter they had also warned that after the next village of *Artezian*, I would be in for 130 km with nothing at all except for sand dunes and barren plains. That meant at least four days of walking without a shop, a house, or any way to get water. Given the choice between accumulating a stupendous amount of supplies and naively trusting the world, I chose the latter. Whatever happens to me is my own karma.

As foretold, the moment I exited the village the scenery turned into emptiness, void of anything but a flat horizon in all directions, a few shrubs and dandelions cheering me on, an endlessly straight road that disappeared into the distance, and a *very occasional* car bravely driving through this nowhere-land.

The fear of the unknown took me as I realized I would be seeing nothing for days... it felt like being thrown into outer space. But as I slowly eased into this new environment, I realized people were as generous as they were rare: whoever *did* happen to be driving by would see me from miles away and do anything within their power to help, which included food, water, friendship, and... don't tell anyone... red wine.

After a few days walking alone I came across a sign that said "Astrakhan: 250 km. Turn left." That was exactly where I was headed, but... 250? This sign had been temporarily added by road workers, and I was later told that the main road had been closed due to construction purposes. Remember my tight visa situation that gave no space for mishaps or long-cuts or closed roads? Well there I had it... a closed road.

There was no way I could take the long way around and still reach Kazakhstan before my visa ran out. So upon further discussion with the

workers, they said that it was up to me and that no one would stop me if I chose to take the closed road. I just needed to know, that... obviously, as it was closed, there would be no human settlements or even traffic. I should expect nothing more than sand, dirt, broken roads, and wolves.

"Deal!" I answered. "As long as you let me through!" Not only were they letting me past the roadblock but they also invited me to spend a night in their worker's lodge, where everyone seemed even more insane than I was. Maybe a by-product of isolation? Anyway I kind of enjoyed it and I was served my last meal before eternity.

Day 716 - 8'345 km

I had managed to stock up on food and fill my water tank at the last human settlement, but what lay ahead was so unpredictable that my

only reliable sustenance was faith. Even my shelter was compromised as my tent's poles were bent from a previous sandstorm, and I didn't know how much longer it would last in this barren windy environment that was slowly turning into a dune desert.

Before long the asphalt road completely disappeared under the sand and every step became a chore as I dragged my overweight cart through this soft, exhausting, and exotic new element. The child in me delighted though. "I'm walking through a dune desert! I'm Tintin! I'm



I would never have made it without the locals' guidance

Marco Polo! This is it! What I've wanted the whole time!"

Unfortunately, if I spent too long jumping up and down the dunes and singing out, I would hardly get out of here alive, so I limited my exuberance and focused on the road. *Road* is obviously an overstatement, as all I could see was sand, but at least I had a good sense of direction guided by previous work-vehicles' tire tracks. And once or twice in a day, I would actually see one too.

"Please excuse our daughter, she's very excited to see you!" said the parents of a little girl after she ran out of the car to hug me. "We were driving on our way to the worksite and she urged us to stop the car, saying she had seen you on Dagestani TV!"

This kind of incident was so sweet that it could fuel my entire day in positivity, and so helpful that it assured my very survival in terms of water. Later in the day I met a second soul, a

lone shepherd whose demeanor was less enthusiastic.

"Do you have a gun?" he started by asking me.

"Uh, no. Why would I have a gun?"

"Wolves. They kill my sheep. I have a gun."

"They go for small sheep, but would they really go for bigger prey like humans? Should I be concerned?"

"*Da, Kaneshna!* Yes, of course."

I walked on with a sense of unease and picked up a rusty iron rod that I found lying on the path. Was there any point in doing this? I didn't know and it felt so weird, but his alarming attitude had gotten the best of me.



As prescribed by the Indian sage Patanjali, the best defense is no defense, and after three days roaming tirelessly in endless-sand-land, I never

encountered a wolf. My nights were scary at times, as I could hear them howl in the distance and I barely dared to breathe... but nothing happened. The iron bar was pointless and I threw it out.

My biggest fear - of getting stuck and running out of water - hadn't come true either, and finally the dune party only lasted three days. I was doing distances of 45 to 50 km daily - that too at dirt-and-sand's pace - yet I didn't feel exhausted. That's how much energy I found when I put my mind single-pointedly on one task, free from socializing, selfies, restaurants, village-centers and food shops. Far from draining me, the inability to buy supplies actually brought about greater energy. It felt like living on air.

Ironically, my arrival back into society was more exhausting than all my time spent in the desert. I was refused the night at three dormitories in a row for no apparent reason... until the thought

struck me that the Muslims states of Chechnya and Dagestan were gone and this was Christian-land again. I could feel the racism: after all, fluffy-haired, bearded, and covered in sand, I probably looked like Prophet Mohammed after he crossed the Arabian Desert, and conservative Christians didn't like it. Doesn't matter. I swallowed my pride and ended up camping in a dirty suburban patch of grass. The sand dunes and wolves had actually been more hospitable, I realized with a grin, and I would be missing them.

Day 727 - 8'624 km

Another week had gone by and the environment was changing at the arcade's pace of Mario World. Mere weeks ago I had been stuck in the snow mountains, then came wolf desert, and now it was swampy marshlands covered in reeds with rusty floating bridges made from oil barrels. Who put all that there, don't ask me!

The thought bemused me that I still had no idea what Russia was... and yet... this was it. I only had one spare day on my visa, and the Kazakh border was in front of my eyes. The timing was flawless, aligned by the Gods - or the KGB, who knows - and because evening was setting I set up camp right before the border. I know everyone tells me not to camp near borders or I'd get shot just for going to the bathroom, but I couldn't help it... it happened every time! I still had a peaceful night protected by a gang of shrubs, and I fell sleep lost in the dreams of how crazy an experience this month in Russia had been.

- Part III -
The boundless 'stans





- Chapter 12 -

Kazakhstan: entering the mind

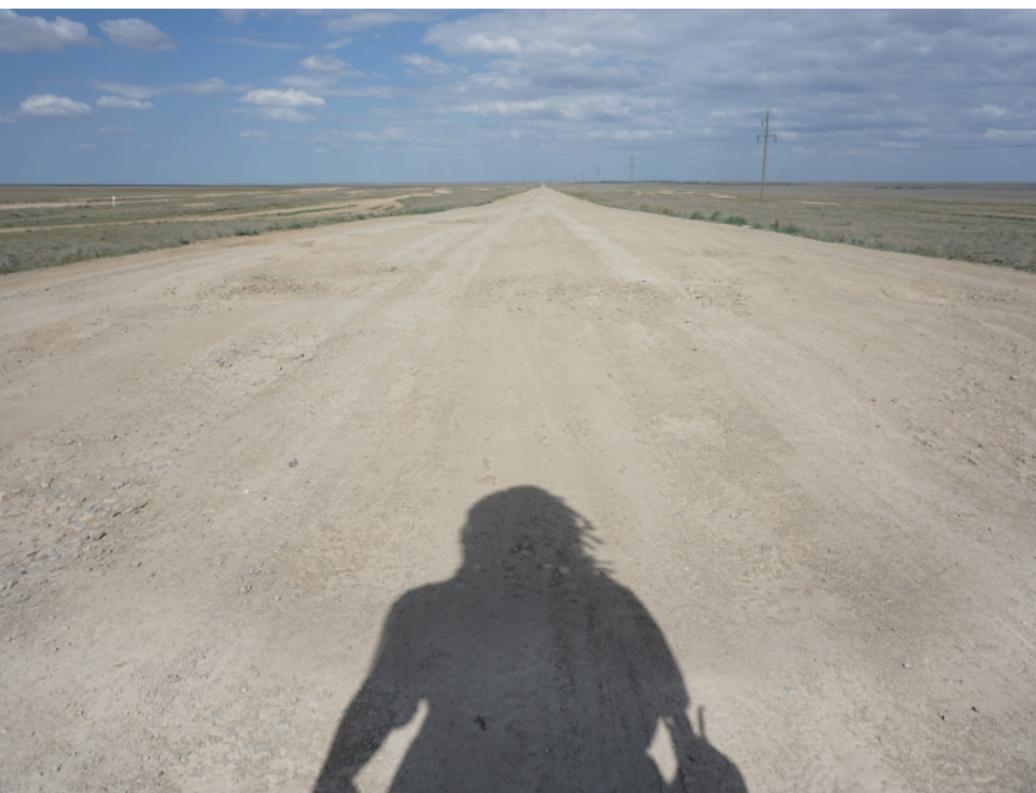
April 2018

The next change in environments was yet another oddity... As soon as I set foot in this mysterious *Kazakhstan* that nobody seems to really know anything about, there were no more marshlands. No more sand dunes. No more mountains. No more trees. No uphill, downhill, rain, or snow... in fact, nothing at all, really. Just a big, vast, immeasurable stretch of emptiness that went on for thousands of kilometers and actually covered a good chunk of the Earth's surface. I was at the doorstep of the *Eurasian Steppes* - the biggest flatlands in the world.

Every traveller goes *somewhere* for *something*, right? But this nowhere... it's so valuable, so

hard to find... it was the most precious part of my whole journey, and the reason I was doing it on foot to begin with. You see, transport always brings us from point A to point B to point C. We spend all our time at points and never get a chance to even taste pointlessness.

And that's why nobody seems to know anything about Kazakhstan... nobody goes there because



Nothingland... what I had always dreamed of!

there's nothing to see! But what people fail to see, is that nothing is the most fascinating thing of all. And nothing was exactly what I had come for: I couldn't wait to lose my mind in this unending vastness.

The change from Russia was quite drastic: the asphalt road immediately turned into an uneven mess of dust and rocks that threatened to break my cart at every bump. The few homes I came across were made of sun-dried adobe or mudbrick and the land around me was so meager that it could hardly support any more vegetation



The secluded adobe homes of the Kazakh plains

than small dry shrubs and sandy patches of grass.

Such a featureless landscape made for relentless winds too, and as evening fell I struggled against sand and grit violently blowing into my face... but amidst the greatest scarcity comes the greatest kindness, and before I could worry too long about how I would spend the night in these harsh conditions, a boy named Rasul - who might have been ten years old - seemed to materialize out of nowhere. "It's dark and windy! Come to my home!"

Since when does a ten-year-old boy have the kindness and confidence to invite a random guy like me for the night? And where is his home anyway, I can't see anything! But of course I accepted, and he brought me to a small earth-colored house blended into the landscape. They had no running water but lived by a river - a blessing in such a dry land - and their home didn't include a single bed. Instead, they all

slept in the same room on a carpeted floor, which I joined with glee, perfectly in my element.

However little they had, they would put all their attention into serving me the very best they could, and even the youngest son, merely five years old, would prepare small portions of bread with jam to hand them to me. These children growing up in the middle of nowhere seemed to be raised with ethics far beyond what any urban environment could offer, and I marveled at their maturity.

Dharma talk #6: ethics

Ethics is considered the second amongst the six perfection and is often misunderstood: people think it means following rules and limitations. Buddhist teachings do include precepts which are aimed at not harming oneself and others,

most notably to refrain from killing, stealing, sexually harming others, lying, and intoxicants. But if we were to blindly follow those rules and then have a green light to behave in any other reckless way we want, we would be completely beside the point.

Ethics is dead-simple, even simpler than five rules: do your best not to harm anyone, and do your best to help. That includes yourself.

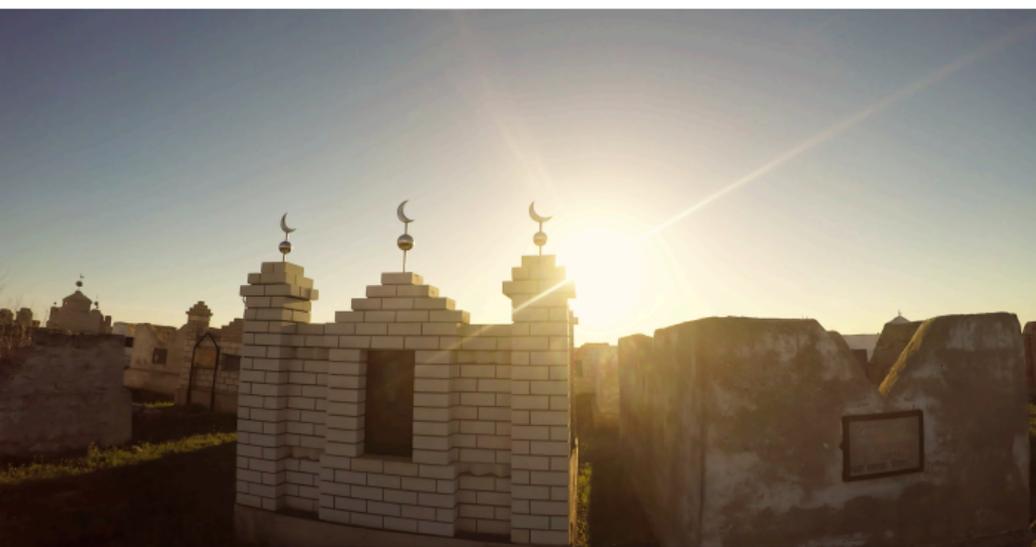
I woke up with even more blessings from everyone and left the place thinking this family seemed to have perfected ethics... they alone could be a model for my life.

In the next days I realized villages were so remote that what used to be an exception was now the norm: it would usually take three or four days to reach the next village, and in between I would have nothing but rocks, camels, and... graveyards!

The roaming camels became my best friends and completely made up for the lack of entertainment in these deserted plains. They would stare at me as if asking for food, but when I approached they would try to eat my hair instead! I never really understood what was going on in their minds and I loved it: I hoped I would spend long enough amidst this social withdrawal to reach equal levels of aloofness.

And who would have thought, that even more exciting than the camels were the graveyards. In these desolate lands of unfathomable vastness, you never know when you're going to need one... and here they were so conveniently spaced that I would encounter one almost every day. The best part was that they didn't include a single human presence - living, that is - and I didn't have to get socially involved any further than greeting the inhabitants of the tombs and asking if I could also spend the night.

My strange fetish for graveyards, however, wasn't about talking to the dead but about staying alive. The tombstones were built like miniature houses: too small for me to fit inside - and already inhabited anyway - but absolutely perfect for sheltering me from the sandstorms and duststorms which could have torn my tent apart had I slept in the open. It's still a mystery to me how this Kazakh Muslim tradition came to be, of creating beautiful little villages for the dead in the middle of absolute nowhere... and this mystery made my visits even more compelling.



Villages for the dead... where I was always welcome

I ended up spending more nights in these graveyards than I could count, and I slept amazingly too. I would also get visits once in a while from the living: wild horses seemed to like the dead villages as much as I did, and would happily clutter up between the tombstones to get a break from the wind. They'd also seize the chance to try sparking up conversation with me in my tent. I guess they were being polite and inquiring about my species: living, dead, ghost, human, other? And they too would always show the best ethics. They would huddle around my tent at night: we all needed shelter from the wind and being close together helped! But they



Wild horses made for the sweetest company

would also pay utmost attention not to walk over my home or trip over any of my tent lines.

They were the most peaceful beings I had ever met, contented by a simple quiet life of non-harming, consuming nothing but dry grass for food and whatever water they could find out here... and they never tried to eat my hair either.

Day 734 - 8'931 km

After taking a bath in a muddy oasis alongside wild horses and camels - once again perfectly fitting in with the crowd - a large black car stopped to remind me that I was human... and crazy.

The driver came up to me and said "You are crazy. You, are crazy."

"Hmmm..." I failed to answer.

"Believe me man, you, are crazy!" he repeated.

"Aha..."

Next thing he did was remove a 100 US-dollar bill from his pocket, hand it to me, and drive away without a word. I think he was right, if he existed at all. I must be crazy.



I kept on walking through the day, looking at the map and counting in my head. Counting what? There's something I haven't told you yet, and I hope you don't let me down for this... you might be bitterly disappointed. Until now, all the country's visa durations had magically aligned to let me cross it on foot and in time. Turkey gave me three months to cross over and I needed three, Iran gave me one, and I needed one... Armenia gave me two, which was perfect, Russia gave me one, which I just managed on time... but Kazakhstan, the ninth largest country in the world, a land which would take more than 3'000 km to cross, refused to give me anything more than a month.

That meant that if I wanted to cross the whole thing on foot, I could, but not without a caveat: I would have to interrupt my walk every month, leave my cart and belongings somewhere safe, go to another country, renew the visa, come back, and keep walking. On top of that, because of yet more visa politics, that *other country* had to be extremely far away or flown into. Yes, Russia was near, but it wouldn't let me in without a new Russian visa, which I didn't have. Uzbekistan was near, but at that time also required a complicated visa process which I would have to do in the Kazakh capital *Astana* thousands of kilometers away... Georgia, which I just crossed, was also nearby, but once again I couldn't go overland because Russia was in the way, so I would have to fly from *Astana* anyway... China was out of the question as the visa was even harder, and Kyrgyzstan... possible, but once again aeons away.

So whatever I chose, it would involve doing thousands of kilometers in transport in one

direction or another just to get a stamp. It sounds ridiculous, and it is ridiculous... that's politics. Since day-one I knew Kazakhstan was probably not going to give me more than a month and I would be having this issue at some point... but it didn't bother me all that much: yes, the path would be interrupted, but also the path would be resumed at exactly the same place, and the step-by-step continuity would be maintained. Even with visa runs every months, I would still have seen, and walked, every step of the way.

Of course it's not as romantic, and my love story with the camels would be facing interruptions, but I couldn't complain either. The world *was* allowing me to do this, to walk every single step of the breadth of Kazakhstan, and to bathe in the mud and to sleep in the graveyards... I couldn't complain at all!

So what I was counting in my head as I stared at my map were the days I had left on my current

visa, and how long it would take to walk to the next town equipped with a train station. The roads being so broken as you know already, the only way to do reliable distances in Kazakhstan is with the train networks built by the USSR decades ago, or otherwise by flight. So I would be taking a train from the next town of Kandyagash until the capital of Astana, and proceed to another country from there.

But the railway-town of Kandyagash was too far away to comfortably reach on foot before my visa would run out, so that same afternoon I decided I would ramp up my distance by walking all night. It went quite well and I managed to walk straight until 4 am, when I started hallucinating and had no idea where I was anymore. I would hear the sound of a wave rolling in and start delighting at my vacation by the beach... until I would realized that I was actually on a road in the middle of the desert, and that this "wave rolling in" was an old truck that almost hit me. Stay awake, Ben!

This kind of sleep-walking delirium went on for a few hours but I managed to survive until sunrise, where the warm light brought life back to my body and I could keep walking through the next day. It made a total number of 108 km - a sacred number in India - and the most I've ever walked without sleep. I turned up like a zombie at a hostel in the coming town, and I was refused entry because I was dirtier than a stray dog. I hadn't had a real shower in ten days and the owner didn't dare to even come near me, but eventually my status rose from stray dog to charity case and I was given the night for free. *My ego might mind, but I don't!*

Day 743 - 9'215 km

The road was in such a bad state that even the untouched landscape made for a smoother ride, and I would see traffic driving in the distance through this infinite flatland instead of following the road. It looked fun for them and it

meant I wouldn't get run over by anyone, but getting run over was the least of my worries as I was hardly seeing two or three cars in my whole day anyway. Much more worrying, was that without a single source of food or water, my very existence depended on the generosity of whoever happened to be driving by. With this new situation, that meant... nobody.

As this disturbing thought revolved in my mind, I noticed a man far in the distance, not on any road but in the middle of nowhere, walking slowly, carrying nothing at all. How did he even get there and where is he going, I wondered?

After ten minutes he somehow ended up face to face with me. He was dusty, shabbily dressed, looked homeless and didn't even speak Russian, which was the *lingua franca* in Kazakhstan. He only uttered one word, in Kazakh, which I happened to understand as it sounded like Turkish.

"Su!"

Nooooo!!!! I thought to myself, trying to hide my despair. *Su* means water... Water was the most precious thing I had on me, I didn't have much left, and with this new road situation I didn't have a clue whether I would find some anywhere or drop dead first. However, I had to comply... Dharma gave me no choice but to hand him water.

He drank to his fill, showed appreciation, and headed onwards. *Ok... let's hope I find water soon, and nobody else who asks for it, please please please...*

Thirty minutes later I noticed two cars driving through the flatlands. They came to a halt in the distance, the doors opened, and a whole family stepped out carrying jugs of water in their hands. With big smiles they walked all the way to me and offered it. There was so much water that it didn't fit in my containers! I insisted that they keep some for themselves too, as a simple

engine failure could spell death out here even for them.

I walked on completely mesmerized by the wonders of karma works, and I reawakened to the magic of the world...

Day 749 - 9'500 km

Only 81 km were separating me from the much-awaited railway-town of Kandyagash, and to make it on time I walked another sleepless night. The night was fun, but this time what exhausted me the most were people: by some Kazakh news channel, I had apparently become famous and people were recognizing me in the middle of the night, stopping me for selfies.

When I finally arrived in Kandyagash, I was swamped by a crowd of selfies and questions from which I had to forcefully break free in order to reach the train station. I was exhausted but fulfilled: this was the right time to take a

break. I had just lost a toenail from overwalking, my feet were cracked in all directions and one of my cart's wheels had a loose bearing that needed replacement. And this wasn't going to be a simple visa-run either, I came to realize after reflecting on a conversation I had had with a local cafe owner a few days ago.

"How cold does it get in Switzerland?" he had asked me.

"Minus 20..."

"That's nothing! Here, it goes to minus 40! And how hot does it get there?"

"Hardly ever above thirty degrees celsius..."

"Haha! Here it gets to forty-five!"

He wasn't just boasting either: we know the capital *Astana* to be one of the coldest cities of the world, where a bone-chilling negative fifty-five degrees Celsius has already been recorded. As for southern Kazakhstan, there have been recordings of up to 49 degrees Celsius in summer. The south was exactly where I was

headed, and summer was just around the corner... such extreme temperatures coupled with my nomadic lifestyle stripped of any reliable water source would mean near-certain death.

That's why, if only to stay alive, this wasn't going to be a mere visa run. This was going to last three months: I would be spending the hottest months of the year anywhere else than in the scorching desert and then resume my walk with a new visa in hand and survivable temperatures.

Day 840 - still 9'500 km

Dad and I were both taken aback by the sacred silence and eye-opening spaciousness of this secluded desert-side town, but we did reach Kandyagash train station with different minds: he was excited to see my cart, see my equipment, see the road, see the unusual

environment I had come to consider my home... As for me, my heart was racing at what I would be finding in the train station's lockers.

Exactly three months ago, I had left my most precious belongings here - my cart and all the survival gear that went with it. Basically my whole life. I had found no other option than to leave it in the train station's locker room meant for short-term luggage relief.

"How many hours do you want to leave your things here for?"

"Uh... three... months?"

After giving me a funny face and fumbling on her calculator how many hours she could count in three months, she gave me a bill equivalent to 150 USD. That was a whopping amount for Kazakhstan, and the same as three months of local rent! But the value of my belongings was so much more that I had to agree.

After a 24-hour train ride all the way to the capital Astana, I then took a flight above China, to Korea. Korea sounds far-removed, but it's one of the rare Asian countries with visa-free entry, has a strong Buddhist culture, and represented my only chance to do a Vipassana retreat in my whole four-year journey. This meant a lot for me, and I would work as an English teacher to pay for the exuberant transport fees involved in all these visa politics.

After completing Vipassana but failing to find work as an English teacher in Korea, I moved to Almaty, a city right at the border between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan where I immediately found a job in a private school. I spent almost two months teaching there, and that's when my Dad chose to fly in from Switzerland and discover some of the Wild East for himself. My brother and his loved one came too - for a shorter time however - and finally it was just Dad and I in the middle of this sandy town of

Kandyagash which had probably never seen a foreigner before.

And back to my long-awaited locker... of course I was nervous. In three months out here, anything could have happened... The woman could have kept the 150 USD for herself, sold off my belongings, quit her job and I would have known nothing about it. Or this small train station could have closed altogether and become a relic in the dust like much of what we see in the Kazakh plains...

But none of that happened. Somehow, the same woman was there and led me to my things, which were caked in dust but otherwise unaltered. Undusting my cart felt magical and was like unraveling my life story, which this time was being shared with Dad... We spent one night together in the station dormitory, which gave me time to change the ball-bearing on my cart, oil it up, pump the tires, and make final adjustments for the road. Repacking my things was truly a

cleansing experience, and I finally felt home again.



Our first day on the road was divinely peaceful, the sky clear, the air sweet, and despite the extensive walking that was inevitable here, Dad showed not a sign of complaint but only appreciation. This many hours walking together made for all kinds of fun father-and-son exchanges, of which one became a crucial discovery. To better deal with the heat, he was carrying around a small water-spray that he could use on his face every once in a while, but by accident when our hands were dirty we realized it could be used as a replacement for a water-tap! The water being dispersed in such a way, it took hardly a few drops to wash our hands, and we saw how this technique could be used to wash fruits, dishes, or just about anything we wanted... It was by far the most

efficient way to use water in this environment where every drop was like gold, and from then on this kind of small spray bottle has been an omnipresent part of my setup.

At evening we had the good fortune to find a small grove of trees - not an everyday sight in these endless plains - and set our respective tents together. He had come equipped with his own gear, and though he obviously had less than me, he was carrying it on his back instead of wheels and I admired his perseverance.



Camping with trees, a rare luxury around here

For food and water, as usual we had no other source than our own karma and the mysterious workings of the world. On the second day we seemed to notice a village in the distance, and judging by the map it would be the only form of civilization all day. So we left the road and made our way there hoping we'd find some kind of shop, and there were none. Instead, we met an Imam in front of the mosque. "You're just on time! We're celebrating Eid al-Adha and having a ceremonial feast in the mosque! Come in!"



Is that a village and are we going to find food?

Once again the alignment was on the order of magic and we both left the place in awe. We also got the chance to refill on water, but it was far from anything we know in the West: it came straight from the ground, had a slightly opaque color and an unusual mineral taste. "Hmm, earthy water" said my dad, "The locals drink it... so why don't we!"



"Oops... I broke my nail clipper" I muttered as I was trying to tear away a dead toe-nail. "It'll take forever before I find one in this outback! Oh well..."

"Just take mine" said Dad. "I won't be needing it anymore, as I can just buy one when I'm back in the city."

This was parting day and we took our time. We were sitting in a random plain with our tents still set, having a never-ending breakfast and

talking about life. Finally we folded camp, he walked with me a bit more just to enjoy the flow, and our ways parted... He only had a few hours left to hitchhike back and get his flight out.

Within a few minutes of walking away he became a mere dot in the infinite vastness... There was almost no traffic out here but I trusted he would get his ride back, as we were both riding the waves of heavenly alignment. Our time together had been short but emblematic and left memories for life.

Day 849 - 9'786 km

I reached the city of Shalkar after five days without a single village, shop, or water source. I overcompensated by eating mountains of ice-cream and filling my bags with anything I could find in the shops, preparing for the next leg of my trip which would be even worse: judging by

the satellite photos, I had a whole week ahead of me without anything but desert. Even the road seemed to disappear into the dunes, and different maps disagreed about its exact location. Locals told me that people regularly got lost there and died, as there was no phone connectivity or way to get help.

I started with high hopes and an enthusiastic heart, but before long the road became so rocky and broken - on top of my cart overweight with food and water - that every step was like moving a mountain. The physical strain, added to the mental distress of knowing I was in for another 200 km of this, made me feel like I had descended into hell... and according to locals' warnings I might be staying there for good, too.

Finally came a point where the road disappeared into high sand dunes and I got stuck altogether. There was no way I could go any further, and giving up was a tremendous relief. I turned back and chose to take another road that would go all

the way around the dune-desert, accepting the fact I would have to somehow make up for all this lost distance.

As you know, I was on another one-month visa, and that's the time I had to do 1'000 km to the next railway town - if everything had gone as planned, which it didn't. And taking this new road around did avoid the dunes, but also meant ten whole days ahead of me without a single village, and I knew I'd be spending sleepless nights in order to make it on time. At least it was the end of hell!

Already physically and mentally exhausted from the previous experience, the following nightwalk was delirious and psychedelic. Until midnight I was ok, but as my attention declined I started seeing unexplainable shadows zipping all around me, followed by hordes of snakes slithering at my feet. Real snakes were common in Kazakhstan and I was supposed to be watching out for them already, especially at night... That

was going to be hard now that they were in my sleep-walking dreams!

Next came a herd of sleeping camels that didn't exist, police checkpoints in the middle of the road that would disappear as soon as I approached them, a cablecar in the sky, and a humanoid robot standing by the road for no reason... It was getting quite bad until the rising sun came to save my sanity.

I was relieved by the sunlight but the next day came with just about every negativity I could name: despair at the broken road, frustration at how slow I was in the rocks despite my greatest efforts, anger at the relentless headwind bringing dust in my face, sadness, hate... All the conditions teamed up were like a pressure cooker and I couldn't take it anymore. I was officially beyond capacity.

Dharma talk #7: patience

*“Bodhisattvas who wish for a wealth of virtue
See harmful conditions as a precious treasure
Therefore, without aversion towards anyone or
anything*

*Cultivate patience - this is the practice of
Bodhisattvas”*

- The 37 Bodhisattva practices, 27

Nobody else than ourselves can choose what happens to our minds. No matter what the external world throws our way, the outside is just the excuse - the inside is the reason. So why are harmful conditions a precious treasure?

Granted, if we face them with unawareness, than they appear to harm us and we fall down into an unending spiral of external and internal negativity. If we face them with awareness, however, they become the very tool to free us from that same negativity. The whole chain of events dissolves before our eyes, and no external force can come to harm us anymore because we have not changed the external situation, we have changed the internal chain.

That's why patience is stated as the third perfection, and that's why harmful people and situations are seen as the most precious teachers - they show us the way to liberation.

As I was being assailed by all the external hardship in the world, I saw that the solution was an internal one: we must cut the misery at its root, no other time than now. No "better future" to look up to while cursing the present.

No matter how tough the current situation is, we can make it heaven or we can make it hell.

After that internal breakthrough I spent entire days in unending joy. It didn't change that I was alone, I'd break out in fits of laughter. I'd smile at the empty world. I'd have so much fun with nothing at all, just walking in the void with no expectations. Every day aligned by itself and every night was peaceful.

Eventually my distance-counter reached 10'000 km, yet another reason to celebrate, and once again I was alone in the world with nobody to join my party except for the sunset and deserted plains. I loved it.

Day 855 - 10'048 km

I came across a dusty broken truck by the side of the road with a missing wheel. It looked abandoned, but as I walked by, a man came out.

"Assalam alaikum! What brings you here, friend?"

"I'm walking to India. What about you? You look stuck... are you getting help?"

"Help is on its way, but things are slow around here. No phone network, nothing around... I've been stuck for three days."

"Three days, serious? Do you have water?"

"Yes I do! Please have some!"

"No, I meant, do you have some for yourself? I wanted to offer you some..."

"I do! In fact I have more than just water! My truck is full of melons! Have one on me!"

**Homeless tip #7:
Walking 50 km in a day**

Visa circumstances were so tight and the road so deserted that this became my daily routine.

3:50 am - Wake up.

4:00 am - Meditation to set my mind for the day.

4:30 am - Yoga and taichi to set my body for the day.

4:50 am - Have breakfast, and pack a meal for the road. In my case, usually oats or instant noodles in cold water. By daytime, they'd have turned "instant".

5:50 am - Clean my tent, fold camp, and load my cart

6:45 am - Walk for 16.6 km (50 divided by 3)

10:15 am - Stop for stretches, sit in the dust and eat cold instant noodles

10:45 am - Walk another 16.6 km

2:15 pm - Stop for stretches, sit in the dust and eat crackers with water

2:45 pm - Walk the last 16.6 km

6:15 pm - Set up camp, do kung fu for evening entertainment

7:15 pm - Do tent yoga, do meditation, eat something minimal, write this journal, and mark my progress on the map

9:00 pm - Do my final meditation, go to bed,

and set my alarm for 3:50 am so that the whole thing could repeat in a loop like Groundhog Day.

Day 862 - 10'330 km

Some things still escaped from the infinite loop, and today it was my first encounter with the Kazakh police.

"Where do you sleep at night?"

"Well, uh... if there's a hostel or a house or something, I sleep there..." An awkward silence ensued. It was obvious there wasn't a single human construction in a hundred kilometers. "But there's nothing here, so I just sleep... you know... outside anywhere."

"You have a tent?"

"Yeah."

"Very good! Here's 500 Tenge!" He handed me the money before beaming "I saw you in prayer yesterday at sunrise!"

I realized he must have seen me do my morning Taichi, as there's no way to do anything private in these infinitely open spaces, and I was extremely touched that he recognized it as a form of prayer, which it was.



My feet were busy all day but I had so much time on my hands that this spaciousness was the perfect chance to start learning my next language. My Russian was good enough to get



I love my garden

around and I could obviously still improve, but the most important linguistic asset left on my journey was Hindi. My usual way to learn a language before I would set foot in that particular country was with an audio-based method named *Pimsleur*. It suited my walking trip so well that it looked like these tapes had been engineered for me. Ten hours a day spent walking meant my body was busy but my mind was free. While much of that time was spent in meditation, appreciating the silence, some of it was also dedicated to languages: I would connect an earpiece to my phone and spend at least an hour every day listening to dialogues and explanations of whatever language I was learning.

Downloading the language programs was another question though, and even in the rare instances I had internet access - when crossing a city for example - I had failed at getting my hands on the Hindi version of *Pimsleur* without a 200 USD paywall. That was a huge amount of

money for my minimal lifestyle, but learning Hindi was so important for me that I set forth the prayer: *If 200 USD comes into my life in any way or form in the near future, I will dedicate it to purchasing this language method, which will allow me to communicate with others and ultimately be of greater benefit to the world.*

Funnily enough, within three days, an anonymous donation was made through my website of exactly 200 USD.

Day 866 - 10'481 km

After one month of struggling, wishful thinking, hope and despair, sleepless nights, calculating distances, taking impossible roads, having to turn back, going through hell and going through heaven, I made it to the railway town of Zhusaly at the exact date needed for my next visa run. A deep feeling of accomplishment pervaded my body, but it didn't feel like "I made it". We had

made it together, the world and I, my loyal companion who always gave me new teachings and never let me down.

After so much walking I was getting nearer Kyrgyzstan, and this next visa run would be prompt: I boarded an imposing russian train from the 50's made of steel, brass, and wood, and after thirty hours I reached Almaty, Kazakhstan. From there I could hop in and out of Kyrgyzstan in order to renew my visa, and take an equally old and imposing train back to starting point.

This time my cart had been safely kept in a small hotel near Zhusaly train station where I had spent one night before leaving. Little did I know that upon my return, not only had they chosen not to charge anything for keeping my cart, but they also gave me my money back for the first night and told me to stay for free as long as I wanted, food included! They were so generous I was embarrassed...

On my way out of the village a young boy slowly walked up to me with a face in awe. "Wow... *Inostranets...*" This was the Russian word for foreigner and it looked like he had never seen one before. He came closer and touched my skin to see if it was real. "Wow..." Then he fiddled with my hair. "Wow..." Finally he came even closer and sniffed it. "Wow..."

Day 885 - 10'796 km

For my birthday, I was utterly alone, as usual, so I decided to treat myself to the one thing I loved the most in the world... walking! I walked from dawn to dusk. Again. I'm sure that sounds boring, but I wasn't bored at all: every step was a celebration!

Something did fall outside the norm however, and I had to rub my eyes as it grew in the distance. *Was that a m... a mountain...?* After measuring on my map, I realized what lay far

ahead was not just a mountain, but the beginning of the king of all mountain ranges... Tian Shan, that I would be climbing until I reached the Himalayas. I was nearing the junction between the world's biggest flatlands and its highest peaks... I knew I would be missing the barren plains and graveyards and camels and camel milk and camel cheese, and I vowed to savor every moment left of my favorite flat nothingness.

I crossed the beautiful city of Turkestan, and after another week's walk entered Shymkent with the worst weather I'd ever encountered. A heavy evening duststorm was followed by violent rain, which clumped the particles together and resulted in cold mud falling from the sky. Within minutes I was so wet, disgusting, and miserable that I couldn't even think of how I would spend the night, and the land was even further darkened by the thick black clouds. An Uzbek man driving by happened to notice me, however, and decided to lead me to his home in order to

save my night. A clean bathroom with hot water allowed me to wash all my belongings from the mud, after which I was treated to a homemade feast and warm blankets for the night. I felt like I owed him my life...

After *Shymkent* the climb really started: the landscape became endearingly snowy and the air bitterly cold. The temperatures had dropped so much that anything damp I would hang on my cart wouldn't dry but freeze before my eyes, and all my electronics stopped working except for my headlamp and my faithful distance-counter.

Finally I crossed *Taraz*, my last city in Kazakhstan with welcomingly mild temperatures: I stayed in a hostel there and made heart-warming friends who appreciated my journey so much that I was offered food, stay, and even money for the road. Then, I spent a few more days struggling with the freezing temperatures and training my consciousness to

see both heat and cold as a mere creation of the mind... and that was it for Kazakhstan.



The beginning of my climb to the Himalayas

- Chapter 13 -

Kyrgyzstan, nomad's paradise

November 2018

My day started covered in snow as I struggled to fold my tent, hands numb from the cold... I was frozen before even taking my first step on the road. I knew this daily endeavor wouldn't last much longer, however, as not only the Kyrgyz border lay straight ahead me, but its capital Bishkek - which I would spending the entire winter in - was mere days away.

The customs offices were pleasantly warm and never had I been so happy to spend time answering bland repetitive questions from the police! The Kyrgyz were extremely friendly though and I felt most welcome in the land of nomads, as I was one of them. The very Kyrgyz flag illustrates the circular crown at the top of a

yurt - these nomadic dwellings designed to be folded up and carried on horseback, allowing to change locations according to the seasons. In most countries, nomadism and propertylessness is strongly discouraged or downright banned by the government, but here it was a national pride.

The visa rules reflected this freedom, as citizens from just about any country in the world could spend an eternity here, with the only constraint of a short visa run to neighboring Kazakhstan once every two months.

My first destination in this new land was *Kara Balta*, a cemented post-USSR town where I stayed in a large gray building so run-down that it seemed it hadn't been altered - or even swept clean - since the Russians had left in 1991. I absolutely loved it, and it was so cheap that I almost considered settling there for the winter.

Yes, once again, I was in a country previously occupied by the USSR, but unlike Georgia or

much of Europe, they didn't shun their former occupiers at all. The Russian language was universal - convenient for me as I could stay in my comfort zone - nobody had the slightest grudge against Russia, and even statues of Lenin were still standing. These guys were so easy-going that it was admirable.

I reached the capital *Bishkek* after just two more days of walk, and I knew this was going to be my home for the greater part of a year. Summer was right behind me, and the next leg of my trip would involve crossing the high Himalayas - a whole new type of adventure which could be done in no other season than next summer. That meant I would be waiting here for a whole eight months.

My stay had nothing to do with waiting however: this experience as a local in a such a removed city was an integral part of my journey and as precious as the walk itself. I discovered every market, every paper store, every post

office, every park, every government building, and every mosque in town... I stayed in the same small humble room for so long that even when the hostel went out of business and the owner changed, I didn't. The whole place, originally named *Freedom Hostel*, was bought back by a Pakistani landlord and quickly filled with students in medicine from Pakistan and India. I was delighted, as that meant I could go beyond my audio tapes and practice Hindi with my neighbors already.

My mom once again chose to pay me a visit, but this time with a group of eighteen yogis from Switzerland and France to do a *Tummo* retreat in the Kyrgyz mountains in winter. *Tummo* is an ancient technique born in the Himalayas that aims for mastery of the body and mind in order to overcome external hardship like extreme cold. The retreat involved doing plenty of yoga and meditation before crossing the snow in our swimming suits and bathing in near-zero degree water for as long as twenty minutes. I loved the

experience and it reminded me of the mind-training I had undergone in order to cross the harsh environments that led me here.

Diving in frozen water was so addictive, in fact, that upon my return to Bishkek I made it a daily habit to run through the snowy city in my swimsuit and reach this or that frozen river or lake. I would then break the ice, if I had to, and plunge myself in, holding a waterproof watch and counting the minutes as I sang my heart away. I forever pay homage to Guru Phillippe Djoharikian who brought this odd practice into my life.

My stay in Bishkek was characterized by yet another deeply memorable experience: the two worst visas of my trip. China and Pakistan both strictly required me to apply for their visas "from my home country", which would mean going all the way back to the starting point of the whole walking trip! So I gave my passport to my mom as she was visiting me in Kyrgyzstan,

and she brought it back to Europe in order to apply for both of my visas from there, pretending I was around but currently sick.

Authorization letters, false hotel bookings, fake signatures, fake plane ticket verifications, addresses, phone numbers, employment certificates, bank statements, and fake itinerary plans that my mom had to memorize in case she was questioned by the Chinese authorities at the embassy... it took as much lying and paperwork as one could possibly imagine having to throw at a visa. If the Chinese authorities found out I was intending to cross the politically sensitive region of Xinjiang, they would never have given me my visa. But any Chinese visa being valid for any border crossing, the loophole was to pretend I was doing something completely different, some touristy trip in central China... and once the visa would be in hand I'd still enter from the sensitive area which had nothing to do with my pretended plans.

Finally my mom successfully received both visas from both respective embassies and the plan seemed brilliantly schemed, but when she shipped the passport back to me in Kyrgyzstan something went terribly wrong... it never arrived. No amount of tracking numbers or phone calls would give us the slightest idea about what had happened to the passport, and after another month of waiting I realized I had no other option than to fly back myself, both for a new passport to replace the lost one, and for both new visas inside it.

Having to fly to starting point for purely political reasons after spending three years to walk here could have made me enraged at the world and curse whatever shipping company chose to lose my passport. But it didn't. Because these three years had taught me one thing: tolerance.

So I just flew back, knowing I had done my very best, and whatever was beyond my control was beyond my control.

Day 1'135 - 11'650 km

It might sound like this is the end of the book but don't get my tolerance wrong: I'm still walking to India!

Riding a flying seat through the sky all the way back to Europe was like an acid trip gone sideways. After having travelled at foot's pace for that long, I was so connected to the magnetic fields, the seasons, and the elements that undoing in eight hours what I had covered in three years made my internal compass break. Every reference point disappeared, and although I managed to relax and somehow enjoy being lost, I never really came back to myself before the plane brought me back - one month later with all my paperwork in hand - to what I had

forcibly left behind. Kyrgyzstan. My path on foot. My cart. The nomadic life that I had come to cherish more than anything in the world.

This hadn't been a trip home but a round trip away from home, and it shone today with more clarity than ever: my real home was the road. Upon my return I was invited by my friend Jildiz to stay for free in a yet-to-be hostel, and to sleep in "any room that I wanted, even the sauna." Weird as I was, I chose the sauna: I spent two wonderful last weeks there finalizing my departure, and I was off.

Walking again after a whole eight months of being lazy took some rehab. Walking correctly is a skill, an art, and unlike riding a bicycle - which is easy - walking *can* be forgotten. It took a few days of adjusting my alignment for my steps to become effortless and smooth again, and not to give rise to any form of aches or pains.

I was at the start of a steady climb that would bring me - over the course of several months - to disconcertingly high Himalayan passes, and it started with a jagged landscape of cliffs rising from the red rock around me. The valley had



When sheep go to heaven, they go to Kyrgyzstan

been carved by torrential rivers which made for amazing places to bathe in at the end of my days, and I hardly came across anyone but occasional passing cars and nomadic shepherds dwelling in yurts scattered across the distance.

The climb continued above 3'000 meters and turned into a fairyland of grass so green and hills so rolling that it looked like I had made it up the stairway to heaven. As for the people, like in Kazakhstan and all the other 'stans as far as I knew, their faith was mainly Muslim, but here there was also a notable trace of *Tengri* deep in their hearts - an ancient shamanism characterized by ancestor worship and praise for nature, which had pervaded Kyrgyzstan before the arrival of the Muslims.

The locals were spontaneously loving and would offer anything they had in order to make sure I was ok. Walking through the grass with my cart, I once encountered a group of locals sitting in a circle on the ground, just about to have their

lunch. Upon noticing me they immediately beckoned me to come, and one man handed me the bowl of noodle soup he was about to have himself. I greatly rejoiced in being handed such a hearty warm delight... but it looked like the man who handed me the bowl had none for himself. "Is there more remaining for you? I asked him before starting my food." "Yes, of course, don't worry and have your meal."

Upon eating the soup and discreetly eyeing the scene around me, I realized the cauldron was empty - this man had given up his lunch just so that I could have mine. I felt a mix of guilt and unspeakable admiration towards his selflessness...

While noodle soup and *grechka* - plain steamed buckwheat - were common foods up here, their favorite staple, the country's signature, and the most locally produced source of nutrition was something unlike anything we really know. We could name it *horse beer*, as it consists of horse

milk that has naturally fermented over time to reach a degree of alcohol reminiscent of beer. "Kumis", as called by the locals, was not a means for intoxication or entertainment; it was a survival food. Horses, wild or tamed, were omnipresent in these high grasslands and their



I wouldn't mind living here... is that yurt for sale?

milk was one of the only locally available forms of nutrition. But you can't drink it fresh all year, as the season where mares give milk only goes from May to September. So for the rest of the year, the milk would be stored in large leather bags and would naturally start to ferment as time went by. It's not that anyone added alcohol in there to get drunk, it's just a process that happened by itself whether we wanted it or not. As the winter months went by, the alcohol content would keep rising until reaching several times that of beer, and end up with such an acrid taste that most westerners couldn't stand it.

Muslim or Tengri, precepts or no precepts, old or young made no difference: everyone drank it because that's what you got up here! It made for hilarious scenes of tipsy children telling me they'd just had their third bowl of kumis and they could hardly stand, and it was offered to me as well every time I was invited into a nomadic family's yurt. You might be wondering whether or not growing up like this is good for

you: I don't know the clinical details but I'm pretty sure a lifestyle at 3'200 meters, breathing the cleanest air in the world and living a life more natural than anything we can imagine, is better for your health than a cemented western city life full of traffic and chemicals.

For me this land was nothing short of paradise, and I knew that if anything went wrong with India for any reason in the future, I could just settle here and roll around in the green grass like a happy horse for the rest of my days.

Day 1'159 - 11'809 km

As much as I dreamt to be a horse in the grass, for now I was a human with a passport, and the Chinese visa was strictly date-specific. After tenaciously struggling to cross Ashu Pass at 3'400 meters, getting stuck in the rocks, and having to turn back the next day, the whole plan was once again compromised: my foot was

starting to develop the same thing my mom had suffered from in Armenia years ago... our old friend Plantar Fasciitis!

At least thanks to my mom's detailed experience, I recognized it as soon as it arose and I took stringent preventive measures: relax. You're not a wild horse yet!

I eased out my pace, breathed more air, stopped counting distance and instead walked for the sole pleasure of walking, bathing in the wonder of the heavens around me. Then I heard tiny steps tip tapping behind. A little girl and a kitten caught up with me smiling, the scene so adorable I could hardly look.

Before a word of introduction, she held the kitty out. "Here, have this kitten for your road!"

"Oh, that's so sweet of you... but.. uh... I'm a traveller, it would be hard to accept a kitten!"

"So at least come on over to our yurt for food!"

She lived with her parents, uncles and aunts, yet she was the one to serve me potatoes, cream, and flatbread she had made herself. She was also the one continuously filling my cup with *kumis*. "I won't let you go until you finish this whole bottle and you're fat from all the food!" she said heartily. I couldn't believe her maturity, her care, and her kindness out of nowhere... I think we might have been lovers in a past life.



Who needs possessions when you can just hug a kitten?

The next days were spent walking in an increasingly deserted mountain setting: during the day I would hardly meet anyone, at night I would be alone in the world... or so I thought. One night on a lofty peak I was showering with my bottle and enjoying the starry sky... until the stars made way for something oddly different. A cloud of light appeared in the distance - too bright to be a plane or a satellite, most definitely not the moon, and so unusual I couldn't compare it to anything I had ever seen. In the course of a few minutes it grew larger and larger, until it formed a spiral that started filling the sky. I didn't dare to even blink, let alone put my clothes on or fumble in the dark to find a camera... After ten minutes it had filled the entire sky, behind which you could barely notice the stars anymore. And then it started fading until the entire apparition was gone. It seemed like an entity from a world we don't know... Aliens? Spirits? Deities? A mental phenomena? Had anyone else seen it, I could have confirmed,

but there wasn't a human soul around for miles...

Day 1'182 - 12'072 km

Remember how I had to plan according to the seasons and make sure I would be crossing the highest passes in the middle of summer? Well, there's one part of this plan that I hadn't expected, and that was the temporary descent back into the plains. Naive me thought I would be climbing up the whole time and only coming down the mountain in a few months, and I hadn't examined the elevation profile closely enough to realize I would be crossing zones that would reach forty-three degrees Celsius in this month of July!

The climb down was spectacular, and the world changed from snowy peaks and luscious meadows to red-rock cliffs and unbearable heat. Even the wind felt like someone had turned a

hairdryer to my face, and walking at daytime felt like dying, so I decided to flip my schedule again and walk at night instead. My first daytime "night" was beside a shaded river and I had adequate conditions to get a few hours of sleep, after which I praised the world in recognition and hit the road at sunset. The first hours were pleasant, but it quickly turned into an exhausting sleep-walk where I had to struggle just to keep my eyes open and avoid getting hit by a truck.

At 5 am I was such a mess that my mind couldn't hold a thought process and my body could hardly stand. I sat on a cement block by the roadside and passed out, until I was woken 45 minutes later by the sound of an early-morning truck zipping by. The glow of light in the sky brought me back to life, and I kept walking until 11 am, where I decided I would find some shade to spend my next "night".

Finding shade was not a simple task however, and it took three hours before I came across an adequate place to rest. The same rhythm followed, of walking deliriously the next night and nearly getting hit by traffic at 2 am - obviously, as they too were sleeping at the wheel - and then I had to splash water on my face to realize I was at the border of a new country.



From a breezy heaven down into a hot hell

- Chapter 14 -

A walking-dead in Uzbekistan

August 2019

This was a bit unexpected, but two interesting phenomena conveniently coincided: the road I was on happened to be passing through a bite-sized chunk of Uzbekistan, and the political situation had radically changed a few months ago. A country which used to be very complicated to get into was now completely visa free. I didn't know why, but I liked it!

My dip into Uzbekistan would only last a few days before the road was to join Kyrgyzstan again, and I didn't mind at all setting foot in a new country for free. The border crossing was a funny mess that looked like it had been built overnight, and you could immediately feel the

meager living conditions... yet their kindness and generosity was outstanding.

"Welcome to Uzbekistan! Do you have any money?"

This felt like a scam. "Yeah, I guess, a bit..."

"No, I mean, Uzbek money!"

"Uh, no, not yet actually, but I'm ok, thank you..."

"Well here's your first bill as a welcome gift! Have a wonderful stay!"

I could hardly believe it... and even less, that within the first hour this scenario repeated itself more times than I could count. Yet more money, food, drinks, invitations to homes, and even a hotel. I declined the offer for lodging, however, as my day was not yet complete, and I kept walking until my counter showed 47 km and I was baking in the early afternoon sun. Finding shade, once again, was a herculean task, and finally I managed to located a few small trees under which I started laying my sheet. To my

dismay, however, a sun-tanned farmer showed up to talk to me.

"Are you alright? Can I help you in any way?"

"Well, I've had a total of five hours' sleep in the last three days, so all I need is sleep. Can I sleep in the shade of this tree?"

"You can try, but my cows are thinking the same! Within an hour this place is going to be so full you might get trampled over... come to my home instead!"

I folded my things, followed him, and slept on a wooden floor in the shade. *Slept* is an overstatement, as I was so dirty, sweaty, sticky, hot and under-ventilated that I spent more time suffering than anything else, and when flies started dancing on my bare stomach I decided this wasn't going to work out and I might as well just take the road.

I packed my bags like a living-dead and my host Rustan offered me some melon. "Look at you! You gotta eat something before you hit the

road!" I tried to smile back, shoveled some melon into my mouth, and took the road at sunset. After a bit of droopy walking I came across a muddy river and went ecstatic. I didn't care what was in the water other than water, as long there's *some* water content! *Water is my savior!!* I jumped in with all my clothes on and came out dripping all over the place, feeling like a newborn.

This splash of enthusiasm along with the coolness from my wet clothing propelled me all the way through the night and into the morning. The next day I merrily crossed my first-and-only Uzbek city *Andijan*, I managed to sleep in a park from 6 pm to midnight, and finally kept walking until I joined my lover Kyrgyzstan once again.

Day 1'188 - 12'312 km

I had long heard about the southern Kyrgyz city of *Osh* and I knew that Aika, a close friend I had

made in Bishkek, had even run a hostel there at some point. I made my way into the city wishfully dreaming that after four days of near-sleepless walking I could finally settle down and rest for at least 24 hours...

My dream came true: I found the location, the hostel was running, Aika was thrilled to see me, and I passed out on a bed until my sleep cycle went back to normal. I couldn't spend too long enjoying the place, however, as my Chinese visa was still ticking, and after two nights there I took the road again: an uphill out of the scorching plains and back into the lofty mountain ranges. This time I was leaving the heat for good!

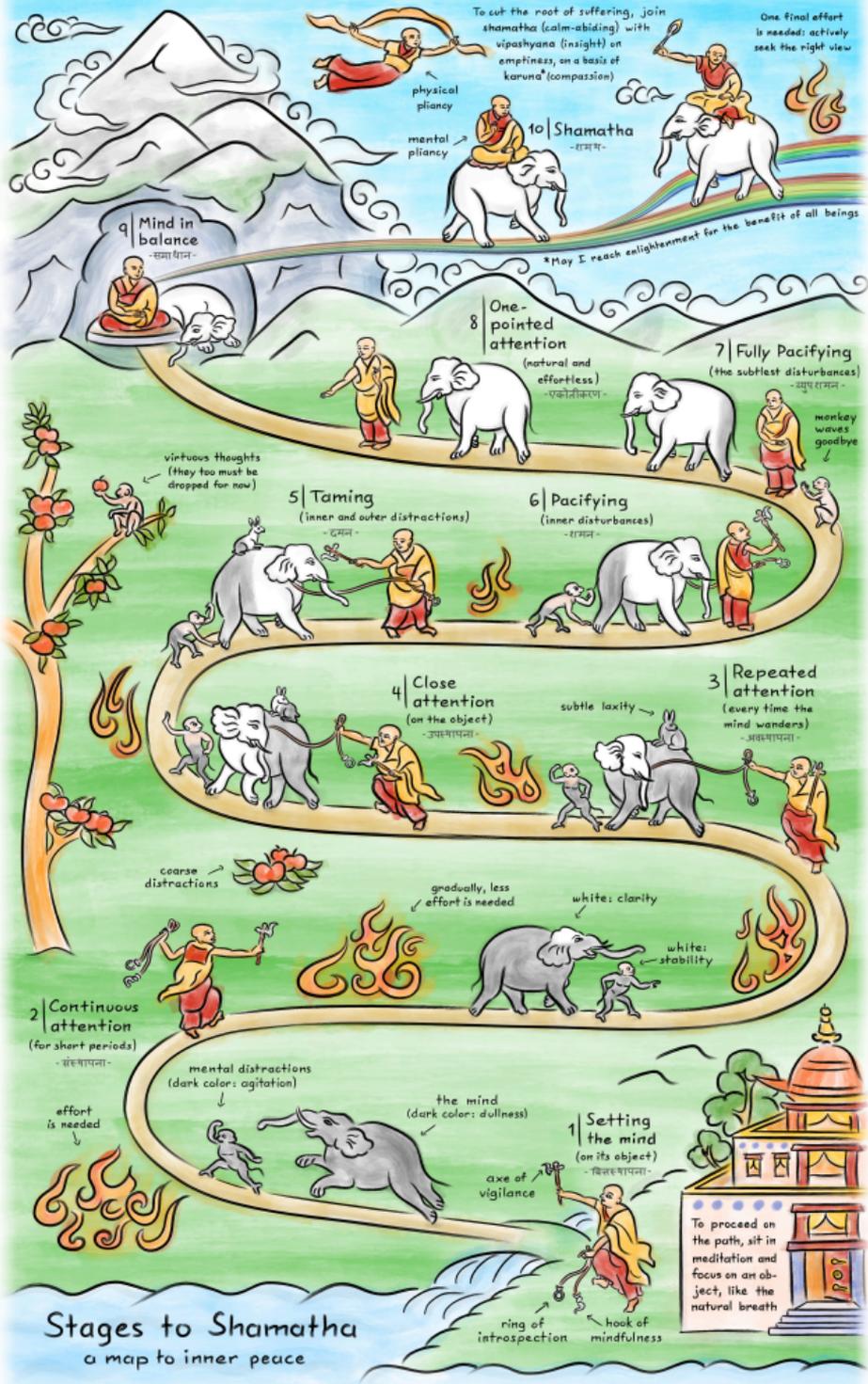
Within two days I was at 2'400 meters and once again surrounded with all my favorite things in the world, from horses to yurts to lively rivers to green-grass rolling hills to creamy white mountain peaks. Even climbing the most daunting mountain pass so far - Taldyk Pass at

3'600 meters - turned out to be child's play. What fueled me was neither food nor sunlight nor *kumis*, but one very simple inner resource that we can always tap into, and that overcomes every hardship.

Dharma talk #8: enthusiasm

The Sanskrit term *vīrya*, said to be the fourth perfection, has been translated in various ways. Some say enthusiasm, some say joyous effort, and some save their breath and solemnly stare at the ground, saying *effort*.

Sure, effort alone can make us succeed in all kinds of worldly things, from winning a race to cracking a test to getting a degree. But if we undertake our path of Dharma without smiling, without appreciation, without happiness, than what we're going to get is exactly what we asked for: suffering! Frustration. Pain. Stagnation.



Stages to Shamatha
a map to inner peace

As phrased by my dear teacher Thai forest monk Ajahn Chan, "Suffering is not the way to nirvana... happiness is the way to nirvana!" Likewise, renowned spiritual guide B. Alan Wallace recalls how he once spent six months meditating with so much effort that he got stuck.

While we're here, I'd like to share with you a little illustration called "Stages to Shamatha". It depicts in pictures the path of meditation and makes Dharma a lot more entertaining. This might look like a lot of irrelevant information to take in, but doesn't this winding path up a mountain bear a striking resemblance with Kyrgyzstan? Anyway, my point for now is, see the fire, which represents effort? Notice how it gets smaller and smaller, until it becomes altogether absent?

That's what it means to practice enthusiasm and not just effort, and that's what makes it a perfection and not just a sport. That's what had

happened after jumping into the muddy river the other day. That's also what got me and my 80-kg cart through the great heights with so much ease: enthusiasm has the power to overcome the highest mountain passes, both in the world and in your own mind.

Day 1'201 - 12'502 km

Sary-Tash, the coldest village in Kyrgyzstan, revealed a climate so mind-boggling that it was snowing even in the middle of summer... it was also my last stop in this country that had become a true mother to me... and my last chance to access the internet before the great firewall of China.

Communication in China would be so strictly restricted - even more so in the controversial region of Xinjiang - that the only way I could maintain contact with my family would be to bypass their surveillance with VPNs that had to

be set up beforehand and well concealed within my devices so that nobody would ever find out.

And that too was but a grain of sand in all the preparations required to cross one of the most policed and censored areas of the world. But for now, I was in Sary-Tash enjoying the stupefying climate and wondering how the locals survived a single winter here. I spent a few days making last preparations in a small guesthouse before hitting the road that would lead me through a



Village *Sary-Tash* in the middle of summer

high-altitude plateau straight to the Chinese border.

The road was so high above the tree line that nothing would get in the way of the freezing winds, and I walked 48 km without even a chance to stop for my own food. But the infinite vastness of mother nature fed me in its own way... it cleansed my mind and lightened my body, lulling me into a meditative state where all my thoughts would dissolve into space.

By the end of the first day the never-ending wind turned into gusts so violent I could barely stand, and thick dark clouds started sweeping in with claps of thunder. *May the clouds around me not turn into rain*, I prayed with folded hands. *On top of such crazy wind and cold and high altitude, if these clouds burst into rain I think I would die...*

My prayer was answered and no rain fell at all: instead, it snowed. Oh well, at least it's fluffy

and white. I just hope my tent won't collapse overnight...



After another day's walk, this time more sunny and less extreme, enjoying the stunning scenery of red rock, green grass, and snowy hills, I finally made it to the other side of the world.

- Chapter 15 -

China

August 2019

The few next paragraphs might not be the most pleasant thing to hear, but I have to share it with you... it was the very reality I was setting foot into. After the genocide of Tibet and its endless atrocities, the same government officials decided to implement their oppressive measures in Xinjiang, the province I was about to cross.

Chen Quanguo, the local leader of the Chinese communist party in charge of Tibet, had recently been relocated to Xinjiang province in order to carry out a similarly "successful" cultural and religious annihilation. For now, all I knew was what I found online, and I was just about to see with my own eyes what it would look like in real life.

What is this *Xinjiang* anyway? First of all, for the convenience of readers it's pronounced "Shin-Jiang". Most of it is a high-altitude desert like Tibet; in fact it shares the same plateau and shows many other similarities. It's also the westernmost province in China, and along with Tibet, the one whose cultural background differs the most from that of central China. Rather than Buddhist like the Tibetans, however, the people were Muslim like the Kyrgyz, but that didn't change anything in the eyes of the government: Mao Zedong had stated that "religion is poison", and accordingly all traces of it had to be eradicated.

Though Mao died a long time ago, this current *Mr. Chen Quanguo* was faithfully replicating his agenda today in all the same dictatorial ways. Religion in Xinjiang was downright banned, and even if people complied, the government's ongoing operation was to eradicate the ethnic group, named the *Uyghurs*, altogether: their culture, their language, and even their DNA. As

degenerate as this may seem, the government was actually conducting forced sterilization surgery on the local population all the while bringing in millions of Han Chinese from central China to keep tipping the scale until the local population would be effectively be reduced to zero. Like in Tibet, the local language was strictly banned in schools and people were only allowed to speak central Chinese.

And the surveillance system was so stringent that locals couldn't take a single step in any city or town without the cameras tracking their moves. If surveillance caught anyone behaving religiously or not inline with communist thought, they would be locked up in concentration camps similar to what Stalin had implemented during the Second World War, and today the numbers exceeded one million already.

If you're wondering what we mean by "behaving religiously", a pretty good indicator was the fact that carrying a mere picture of the Dalai Lama -

even on your phone - was highly illegal. My strenuous pre-China preparations involved concealing all my SD cards, wiping out most of my phone's content and putting the rest in hidden folders so that I wouldn't get caught with anything they didn't like.

I'm sorry for having to put you through this, and this all sounds so dark that I would have every reason to hate them before taking a single step there... But here comes the light side! Mao Zedong got the two last words in his statement right. Two out of three... getting somewhere! But his animosity prevented him from seeing that the real cause of suffering was hatred itself.

Hatred is poison. Anger is poison. They pretend to defend us, but all they do is destroy. And if hatred is what killed, discriminated, and abused millions of Uyghurs and Tibetans in the first place, what would it help to add even more hatred on top? Like mentioned earlier, if we try

to extinguish fire with greater fire, we achieve nothing and just end up roasted.

*“Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world.
By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is
an eternal law.”*

- Dhammapada, 1:5

Those were the Buddha's words 2'500 years ago, and today they were needed more than ever: I would be fighting this war without a trace of hatred and nothing but love. I could already tell that I would be given hell by the authorities just for trying to walk, so I came prepared: I armed myself with a vow that I took in the morning before stepping into Xinjiang.

"No matter what happens with the Chinese authorities and no matter what they put me through, I vow not to express the slightest

negativity towards them and to only wish them well, that too during my entire stay in China."



Stepping out of Kyrgyzstan brought a tear to my eye and I hugged my new motherland goodbye before making my way towards the Chinese authorities. On top of my vow of non-hatred, I was armed with one more weapon: I had lived in China ten years ago to learn Taichi, Qi-gong and the Tao, and in the process I had learnt Chinese to a decent level. That also meant that no matter what madness the government was currently engaged in, I was forever indebted towards this sacred land for having cradled my very first steps on the path of Dharma.

Possibly thanks to greeting them in Chinese to begin with, I was given much less hassle at the border than I had heard from other foreigners, whose phones had been not only deep-scanned

by the police but forcibly loaded with government spyware. The border guards still made me stand in a 3D human scanner so advanced that it would have detected something concealed in my stomach... then they took fingerprints, asked me a number of questions in a friendly manner, and let me go. Part of me couldn't believe it had been so easy... but I didn't walk long before reaching a saddening sign posted by the government.

"This is a government notice for all foreigners traveling on any form of independent transport, including motorbikes or bicycles or walkers. As the road ahead is long and full of twists and turns, it is forbidden to travel independently and you are kindly requested to take the provided government vehicle for a reasonable fee."

Chinese communists, the world's greatest masterminds of manipulation... and here finding no better excuse than "the road is full of twists and turns?" I would have laughed if it didn't

mean that my trip on foot would be severely truncated for the first time. No amount of arguing with the authorities would make them comply, and I was forced on a government car for no less than 135 km. My walking dreams crumbled as I saw the landscape roll by from the car window... but I had my vow. No aversion. No anger. No hate. No negativity.

Finally they dropped me off at the camera-covered town of *Wuqia*, and I was "free". I couldn't help but notice that no matter which road I took or which sidewalk I walked on, there would always be a streetlight-mounted camera observing me from somewhere. The police was dressed as civilians too, and out of the corner of my eye I saw this one car that seemed to always be within my field of view. It felt like a tragic comedy: when I would be walking it would drive slowly, and when I stopped to drink water or stretch my legs it would stop as well, pretending to mind its own business.

At some point Uyghur school children ran up to me with gleaming faces and told me they had never met a foreigner before. Amongst them a young girl named Emily was especially inviting, thrilled to be able to practice her English. "Come with me, I'll show you around town, I'll help you out with language, we'll have a great time together!"

I was touched at heart and we spent wonderful moments simply walking around, until we noticed a growing group of people in our surrounding, walking or standing awkwardly just like that car that had been following me earlier on.

"You know what, come to my house!" exclaimed Emily. "My parents would love you! We'll make you dinner and you can spend the night!" I was so delighted by her offer and immediately said yes, but within seconds the weird guys around us interfered.

"Sorry, that's not gonna happen. Westerners can't be invited to people's homes. Westerners go to hotels made for westerners. We'll guide you there so you don't get lost."

Then they added to Emily that she should go home, because she's a middle school student and middle school students should go home. Her last words to me were heartbreaking. "I want to be like you. I want to travel, to discover... It's my dream! But... there's so much police... I don't like them. I'm scared..."

We were still surrounded by policemen dressed as civilians, but none of them spoke Emily's level of English and she had said it in such a low voice that it went unnoticed. The police brought me to an "authorized" hotel with passport scans, cameras at every corner, x-rays, medieval police weapons in case something went wrong, and surveillance guys sitting around all night. The room price was exorbitant too: obviously, I was

the one paying for all the cops and cameras spying on me!

As I gloomily sat on the bed, the absurd government notice talking about "a long road with twists and turns" lingered in my mind... the reason was so obvious. They didn't want foreigners like me to ever talk to an Uyghur, let alone spend time in their homes and come to know details about how oppressed their lives actually are. Because unlike the imprisoned locals, foreigners like me will get out, and can spread the real news to the world - not the fabricated Chinese-government versions of the truth. Which is exactly what I was doing through this journal, and I would get away with it.



I left the hotel the next day with exciting plans of walking the 85 km between Wuqia and the coming city of Kashgar, but on my way out of

town an elegant woman wearing a tight black dress and high-heels "happened" to be standing by the road. "Passport" she said with a straight face.

I was taken aback, but I knew that every second "civilian" was actually a dressed up cop, so I complied and showed her my passport. "You know," she continued, "you're not gonna walk to Kashgar. You're gonna take a government approved car."

"Nonsense! The border guards told me just yesterday that starting from Wuqia, I was free!"

"I repeat: you can't walk, it's 100 km away. We're doing this for your own good. Once you're in the city, you can walk there."

I removed my distance-counter from the cart and held it up to her. "I just walked 12'607 km and you're telling me I can't walk 100 km *for my own good*? You must be kidding."

"Fine, do what you like, and watch us deport you!"

I didn't stand much chance putting the world's most stubborn and ruthless government on my back, so with the longest face in the world, I complied and walked to the vehicle they instructed me. Once again I had to pay a ridiculous amount, and once again saw my dreams shatter away...

Day 1'208 - 12'607 km

In case you're wondering what happens to my distance-counter when I'm forced on transport, the answer is: nothing. It's tied to the wheel of my cart, and as a result, it only records the distance I have actually walked. You might also be wondering what all this forced transport was doing to my "walking" journey, and so was I. But in my continuous efforts to make this journey as *walking* as it possibly could be, I was keeping a close count of every kilometer where I had been forced on transport. For now, it made a total of 1.5% of the whole journey. Seeing that this

number was so low compared to the length of the entire trip helped me in keeping my spirits high when the authorities would force me to have it their way.

So here I was in the city of Kashgar, and I managed to find a hostel that not only allowed foreigners, but also left their government-enforced x-ray scanner and medieval police weapons sitting in the dust. They would casually let the guests come in and out as they pleased... It was such a welcome break from all the surveillance that I stayed a number of days there and enjoyed it! But I did wonder how long this free-spirited hostel would last before they would be closed down for *failure to enforce government security measures*.

After two consecutively failed attempts to walk, I was now even more determined to do whatever it possibly took to make it out of Kashgar on foot. From now on, I would pretend I didn't speak Chinese. The suggestion was recently

given to me by a foreigner living in China, and it put two cards on my side: first of all, I could secretly know everything they were saying without them realizing it, and second, when an argument would break out, they would have to adapt with whatever English they could manage, and not the other way around. This gave me an upper hand. If they happened not to speak English at all - which was the majority of them - it was even better: *oh, you don't speak English? Good luck questioning me sir! Anyway, have a nice day!*

Somehow this goofy approach worked well until I made it to the final police checkpoint at the outskirts of Kashgar. This woman knew English, and she wasn't letting go.

"Why are you on foot?"

"Uh, I happen to be walking to the next village, where a friend will pick me with transport... that's all..."

"How do you know this man? Is he foreign or

Chinese? Do you have his name and phone number? Who is driving the car? What kind of car is it? Do you have the exact time and location of the pickup? Can you show me on a map?"

I answered lie upon lie, which I hate to do, but it was the last resort I could find to deal with an administration whose very foundation was built upon lies. The most recurring one, and the basis of their entire policy, was "We are only doing this for your own good! We are here to help!" That's what they would tell me in every conversation with me, and that's what Mao Zedong told the Dalai lama 65 years ago - before bombing him.

At least I saw through it all, and I didn't hold the slightest grudge against this poor police woman, herself obviously in the clutches of totalitarian lies. But I still had to get away from her, and after I made up even more stories she somehow let me go. I walked on with a sense of

relief, but I knew that the hurdle race had only started, and surveillance hung in the air...

Next hurdle: a soldier came up to me asking "Nǐ yǒu xiàngjī ma?" *Damn... he's asking for my camera... he must have seen me filming that government stuff ten minutes ago... He'll check the files and I'll be in trouble..... but wait, I don't speak Chinese!*

"Yes of course, here!" I answered in English, handing him my passport. He awkwardly fumbled with it, too embarrassed to admit he didn't know a single word of English, and he had no choice but to see me walk off as I wished him well with yet more words that he didn't understand.

I then walked along the highway for a few hours, noticing how even in the middle of nowhere, I would cross an array of cameras aligned above the road once every ten minutes. For some reason nobody stopped me until evening started setting, and I did my best to

disappear from the road while remaining in the cameras' blind spots. It seemed to have worked, and I started setting camp, but soon afterwards I heard a car stop, footsteps approaching, and a hauntingly familiar female voice.

"So we meet again! What happened to your friend who was supposed to pick you up?"

It was the very officer to whom I had spun a castle of lies earlier today. I was so devastated I could hardly open my mouth. "Uh, I dunno..."



Even on the highway, you're always being watched

uhh... he didn't come..."

"Anyway, you're not allowed to camp here. This is for your own good."

Please find another excuse than 'this is for your own good!' I thought, but that's not what I said.

"Ok, so I can't camp here... no problem, I'll just walk all night! I'm used to it!"

"Oh, actually you're not allowed to do that either."

"So no staying here, and no walking, so what, I just disappear?"

"We'll bring you to the nearest town and you can walk from there."

They drove me on for ten minutes and dropped me off completely clueless in a pitch-black middle-of-nowhere. It made no sense at all until I realized they didn't care about anything else than getting me off their hands, so they had driven me to the edge of some other authority's assigned district. I tried to set up camp once again, and this time got caught by that other district's police! I had to fold camp one more

time and they started interrogating me in the dark with their flashlights in my face. I couldn't take it anymore. I stopped pretending to be a naive English-speaking tourist, and burst out in Chinese:

"You, sir, are going to sleep tonight, in your home! Am I right?"

"Uhh...."

"And you too" I exclaimed to the other man "will also get the chance to sleep tonight, right? In a home, with a roof, and a bed?"

"Uhh..."

"And where am *I* going to sleep? Nowhere! I can't sleep at all! And why is that? It's thanks to you! Thank you for being such loving and caring human beings! And for welcoming me into China! Good night and leave me alone!"

I scrambled off into the darkness, and they were so taken aback they didn't follow me. I kept on walking aimlessly for some time, and then

blindly set up my tent where I happened to be standing.

Day 1'220 - 12'686 km

I woke up to horses and yurts in an unbelievable valley that looked like Kyrgyzstan, and I wasn't sure if this was a dream until I noticed the cameras above the nearby road. *Now I remember... I'm in China!* The feeling of knowing that nobody was following, however, gave me wings, and the rest of my day was magical.



The beauty of Xinjiang would surprise me every day

Maybe it was a bug in their system, but for some reason I managed to set up camp without getting arrested, and that too in an enchanted riverside setting of deep red earth and luscious green plants, so mystical that it was worth every previous ordeal with the police.

Little did I know that this was only the beginning of a breathtaking evolution in landscape that would lead me from Mars to the Moon. With a peculiar addition that you don't find on any of those planets... *camels*? What in the world are camels doing 3'300 meters high? I



You know, the high-himalayan camel? Me neither!

hadn't seen a single one since the Kazakh plains, and the encounter delighted me beyond anything I had seen in China.

You might be wondering what happened to the cops, and so was I! Maybe it was too remote here to keep such a stringent surveillance system in place, or maybe I had exhausted my karma of struggling with the police... for now. But the next night it went on again. Knowing that they could still catch me, at 7 pm I hid in a concrete underpass beneath the road. It seemed like the perfect plan, I felt unfindable, and I delighted at my new underground home with a view on the mountain... but after twenty minutes, I jumped up in surprise as a policeman dropped down from the road above, followed by six others like Russian dolls. *Ugh, there goes my night...*

They greeted me and started checking my belongings. Upon finding my camera, they asked me "How do you turn it on?" After thinking fast, I lied "It's out of batteries, sorry." Despite having

ruined my hopes of sleeping tonight, they were polite and courteous. For once, nobody told me "this is for your own good", and they also admired the 12'000 kilometers displayed on my distance-counter. They wouldn't let me sleep here however, and instead guided me on foot to the nearest police station - which is never very far away. After x-raying my belongings, the same old story started again.

"We can't let you walk. We're going to drive you to the following town, 40 km away."

"Please... please let me walk. If sleeping outside is the problem, no worries, I won't sleep at all then! Will you let me go if I walk all night?"

"Uhh... if you walk all night and don't sleep... then ok. Have a nice walk!"

I couldn't believe my ears. I left them with a racing heart, thinking this sounded too good to be true. Apart from the preposterous fact that sleeping was a crime, at least walking wasn't,

and I carried on as fast as I could in case they would change their mind and come behind me.

Every time a car drove past, I took note in my mind of the color and license plate, and paid attention to see if the same car would show up repetitively. One of them seemed to, and I could tell I was being followed at intervals of fifteen to thirty minutes. At 11:30 pm, when the streets were at their darkest and I saw no cars in sight, I scrambled off the road and started rushing up a hill. A police car appeared in the distance, but I hid behind a rock and it drove on without noticing. If it *had been* looking for me, that gave me about fifteen minutes to set up camp and hide my cart under a tarp, after which I would be pretty well blended with the large rocks around me and much harder to spot. I raced to set up camp as fast as I could, and it worked.

Day 1'222 - 12'760 km

As gloomy as my descriptions of Chinese society might seem - and as true as they were - they were only one part of the equation: the government. The other part was the population, and they were nothing but angels. As I kept walking up this increasingly elevated desert landscape, people driving by would hand me so much food, water, drinks, and money that it was a Chinese puzzle for me to figure out how to fit it all inside my bags. And despite the government's best efforts at eradicating religion from the land, it lived on invincibly, deep inside people's hearts - where no soldiers or weapons could reach. I could see it in their eyes: they were Buddhist, they were Muslim... and they showed it to those who had eyes to see it.

My next camp was underneath the road again, but this time I succeeded, and I slept facing the most otherworldly scene I had ever witnessed: *Lake Bulungkol*, a massive body of turquoise

water in the middle of a land as deserted as the moon... A world of white sand dunes and snowy peaks where wild yaks seemed to be living on nothing, casually bathing in the freezing water.

Just as unreal, was my first encounter the next day as I was skirting the lake. A frail man with long hair was slowly walking by the road carrying two large bags of fruit. *That's an oddly placed fruit vendor!* I thought to myself, before realizing he had come for me: he handed me both of the bags along with a plate of cake, and he disappeared wordlessly. *How did he end up*



I found water on the moon

here, where did he possibly find fruit in this high-altitude desert, and... of all things... cake?

I stopped trying to wrap my mind around it and chose to just sit down and eat the fruit. There was no way I could fit it all on my cart, so I ate as much as I could on the spot and then hung the rest left and right until I looked like a walking fruit vendor myself!

I kept climbing in an increasingly lunar, frozen, and oxygen-deprived environment, and I kept improving my stealth-camping skills to spend the nights without getting caught. The climb came to an end at *Gez Pass*, 4'092 meters, where a dust storm erupted that had me struggling just to keep my eyes open. At this elevation there was no vegetation to hold the dust down, and no obstacles to block the wind either, resulting in the most violent gusts I had ever experienced. Grit was blown into my face, I could hardly see anything, my eyes were red and I struggled to breath.

This went on for some time and it was excruciating, but as evening drew in the winds died down and I could finally relax. The air had a magical stillness to it and I felt so good that I chose to keep walking through the night, under the stars, contemplating the mystical beauty of the world and the peace of being alone...

Until the police decided that it had been enough. Around midnight they stopped their car and told me that walking was forbidden at night. I argued and argued but to no avail, and finally they forced me on to their vehicle and put the cart at the back. I had successfully walked 250 km from Kashgar, and now my mission had failed just 40 km before Tashkurgan, the last town in China. I would have made it overnight had they not stopped me... So after they drove me to Tashkurgan and forced me into a hotel, I chose I would hitchhike during daytime to the exact same point where they had taken me off the road, and walk the last 40 km the way they were meant to be. It worked: a wonderful Chinese

couple agreed to put my cart on their roof and carry me to where I wanted, and I walked the remaining 40 km to Tashkurgan. I felt complete.



I spent a few days in Tashkurgan, which felt a bit too much like an oversized prison to be enjoyable in any way. In whichever direction you'd walk, it was only a matter of time before you reached barbed wires and policemen telling you to turn back. The whole town was walled and there was no way out other than through the dedicated police checkpoints. Exactly like a big prison, actually.

I stayed at a hostel run by the same group as the one in Kashgar - a welcome break from the police-atmosphere, but it was still surveilled in every way by the government. I met a Tibetan man there who was going through unspeakable troubles under the Chinese regime. Our

conversation naturally turned towards the Dalai Lama, but he was quick to hush me.

"Never say his name, it's an illegal topic! There's spies and recording equipment everywhere... If you want to talk about him, name him *HHDL*." I was stunned, and realized that any hardship I was temporarily going through was not a grain of sand compared to what people here were experiencing their whole lives.

At some point I was told a man had come to the hostel "looking for me". I had no idea what this could be about, until I noticed his reminiscent face, his reminiscent long hair, and his reminiscent bags of fruit.

"Hey you're the guy who gave me bags of fruit out of nowhere by the lake one week ago! Where in the world did you find that plate of cake? How did you know I was at this hostel now? And why did you come?"

He answered in a low voice "I want to bring you somewhere, but don't be public about it."

He had chosen the timing to bring me to his home after dark, and when we were indoors he started talking openly. "Here, we can talk about anything we want. Just don't be too loud, because if anyone finds out I'm inviting a foreigner to my home, I'll get caught."

His name was Yu, he was an artist, he felt oppressed and imprisoned, and all he needed was a friend: a fellow human being to whom he could openly share his plight without being surveilled. I realized I had been in Xinjiang for almost a month and I had never seen the inside of a home. I appreciated the risks he was taking to invite me, and the value of being given an uncensored story of what it actually felt like to live here.

Day 1'232 - 12'905 km

Today was my departure from Tashkurgan, and I knew that walking the last segment of the road

to Pakistan was illegal... so I told nobody and just went for it, eyes cast downward. Somehow I made it past the first police checkpoint at the exit of town, but after 12 km I was stopped.

"You can't walk to Pakistan. We're taking you to a government-approved bus."

"Who's paying for it?"

"You are."

"Nope. I don't have any money."

"How can you travel if you don't have any money?"

"You didn't notice I was on foot? Walking is free. You're the ones who want to put me on a bus."

They were obviously inconvenienced, scratching their heads and making phone calls. "You have a bank card, right?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't work."

"We'll bring you to an ATM and find out."

They did, and when they asked for my card I gave them an expired one which was conveniently sitting in my wallet. They tried

making it work for ten minutes after which they gave up.

"Ok, we'll bring you to the bus station and we'll pay for it."

"Whatever."

Thus came to end the bittersweet relation between a boy who dreamed of nothing but freedom and an iron fist who knew no better than to take it away. And yet he made it out intact, unscathed and uncaught, with a heart full of stories, an eye full of wonders, and an SD card abound with controversial footage.

And China's own sages have taught long ago: our greatest harm-doers make our most valued guides. Hence every encounter, disguised as a woe, is really our most precious moment to thrive.

“Those who understand others are intelligent;

Those who understand themselves are enlightened.

Those who overcome others have strength;

Those who overcome themselves are powerful.”

- Tao Te Ching, 33

- Chapter 16 -

Pakistan

September 2019

We all know what it feels like to be observed... But do any of us know what it feels like *not* to be observed? Not really actually, because it's normal! We take it for granted!

The moment I set foot in Pakistan, *I* felt what it meant. "Wow... this sensation... it's beyond anything!!! I can just... do what I want? I can talk to people? No one's tracking me... I can walk in any random direction and not get arrested? This feeling cannot be described... this must be Nirvana! I am freeeeeeeee!"

Everyone stepping out of the bus felt the same, so blissed out we looked drunk, and this intimate shared experience of joy marked my first steps in Pakistan. The Chinese oppression seemed to be another world already, the once

deafening sirens from police patrols now just echoing distantly in my head, the omnipresent cameras watching me from every angle now just flashbacks in my mind... Did this ever happen? It felt like putting down George Orwell's novel *1984*, looking up, and realizing with a sigh of relief that "this was just a story". For me it was, but not for everyone...

The tiny old-fashion Pakistani village of *Sost* was scenically perched 2'800 meters high, and the people were so peaceful and contented that it



The sweet and friendly village of Sost

looked like everyone had just stepped down from that same bus. I spent the night in a homely, down-to-earth and ridiculously cheap hostel whose owner was just as serene and blissed out as everybody else.

My short stay in this village was the appropriate time to radically change my clothing: I had been told by travelers long ago that wearing the local outfit in Pakistan was seen as a distinguished sign of respect, just as worthy as learning the language. In that regard I was lucky as well: Pakistan's *Urdu* was so closely linked to the Hindi I had been learning that both languages could be used interchangeably. In fact, Pakistan and India used to be the same country, before religious tensions broke out in 1947 and made them choose to part ways.

Which leads us to the topic of religious conflict, and why Pakistan is not your typical summer getaway... There *had* been armed conflicts in the past, and there still were. Sunni's who disagreed

with Shia's and Shia's who disagreed with Sunni's, even though they were both branches of Islam... and pockets of ISIS who agreed with neither. There *have* been killings, and if we followed the news alone it would be a good reason not to go there.

Which is exactly why I wanted to see it: if you consider everyone your friend, does everyone consider you *their* friend? Or is there such a thing as someone *intrinsically evil*, like politicians were pretending, so that they had an easy excuse to wipe them out?

If I wanted to befriend everyone, that meant paying as much respect towards their culture as I possibly could, and here that started by adopting their attire. Fortunately it wasn't hard at all, as all the men wore the same thing anyway! It was called *shalwar kamiz*, and to keep the description short it's a bit like *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. I went to the village tailor and didn't have to say much - that's all he made

anyway - with the only variation being different shades of gray or brown. Compare that to spending all day in a shopping mall to find a shirt!

Next morning he was done, and the village was so small that he personally came to my room and handed it to me. The outfit was so spacious and comfortable that it felt like being in my pajamas... It looked that way too! Why had I ever worn anything else? Waking up in the morning and slipping on the same thing every day of the week, plain-colored from head to foot, and not having to give two neurons of thought into how I looked, was such a relief that the habit has stayed with me ever since.

I left the village and spent entire days in paradise, living from the sun and the stars, camping wherever I liked, being greeted with nothing but smiles and offered *chai* everywhere - the same sweet milk tea they drink in India. I

was living the dream... would it ever come to an end?

Upon walking up and down the breathtaking landscape I was stopped at some point for an interview by local journalists. If I've been walking for peace all this time, now was the time to talk for peace! I made my main topic the bitter relation between India and Pakistan which broke my heart. We used to be the same country and today still had everything in common, from language to dhal to chai to clothing to skin tones, and even religion! We are brothers, so why are we fussing and fighting? We should love



A bite out of paradise

each other just like brothers! The journalists greatly appreciated the topic and it aired on TV, leaving me hopeful I had made a positive change...

Not much later an interesting conversation took place as I was invited for food at a small roadside eatery, during which we looked together at my map.

"Here, you will have the first checkpoint" he said, "then a steep uphill up to *Babusar Pass*. After that, back down alongside a really beautiful lake where a bunch of people got killed. Then, the road is steady until Abottabad. That's the city where Osama Bin Laden used to live."

That sounded nice! I couldn't wait to bathe in the lake. I still had to ask, though: "What do you mean by *a bunch of people were killed*?"

"Shias killing Sunnis... In other words, Muslims killing Muslims. Our life story!"

Day 1'239 - 13'021 km

After skirting a scenic blue lake surrounded by colossal rocky cliffs, my road led into a long dark tunnel, once again lacking any form of ventilation. I didn't mind, and chose to experiment with different speeds and breathing techniques to minimize my intake of carbon monoxide... but when I had almost finished crossing, a rusty pickup truck stopped beside me. "Tunnel is dangerous. It is not permission to walk. Sit your bags in the truck."

He drove me through whatever was left and stopped at a police station at the end of the tunnel. Of course I was in dismay at having been picked up once again - however short - but it quickly faded when I realized why they had brought me here in the first place. "We prepared room for you. We hope it is your liking! Please dinner with us. And chai. And breakfast!"

I was given a private room with hotel standards and nobody asked the slightest document from me. I realized in awe that this was exactly the opposite of the Chinese police. These guys here never said "we are here to help": they *actually* were here to help! They were full of love! I fell asleep bathing in gratitude and smiling at life, knowing they were family already.



Over breakfast, I asked out of curiosity "Are there any other foreigners here?"

"Foreigners? This is police station! There is no foreigners! You are only guest!"

I laughed, thinking *the language barrier here is one that I don't mind!*

I left the place with big smiles and hugs from the police - yes, that's what they do here - and at sunset I reached the picturesque village of *Aliabad*. The sun disappeared at 4 pm, strange as

this was still summer, but that's what happens when you're surrounded by 7'000 meter peaks...

The people were Ismaili, a fascinating branch of Islam which advocates peace, tolerance, and respect towards all living beings... even ants. The valley, named *Hunza*, was so enchanting and peaceful that it had been a hippie-hub in the 70s, when the Afghanistan silk road was open to travelers and everyone was on their way to India. I felt so good here that I didn't want to leave either, and instead of staying two days I stayed two months.



I wasn't the only pilgrim around!

Conditions were so basic that for washing and drinking, people would use whatever water was available, sometimes brown in color when river levels were low... Technology was almost entirely absent from their lives and power so unreliable that often we'd get just one or two hours of electricity in a whole day... Economy was so low that a night at a hotel would cost 2 USD, and people's wage equally meager... and yet, people were happy. Exceptionally happy.

One day climbing up the mountains I came across a stone shelter which I thought was either uninhabited or made for sheep... until a man surprised me coming out, and his first word was "chai?"

This was above 3'000 meters and he lived the kind of life you'd only hear about in tales of Himalayan yogis... he had the stillness of a yogi too, and it seemed some of the clairvoyance: when I walked in, accepting his invitation, the

chai was boiling already and the right quantity for both of us...

Another encounter left a life-long impression on me: an Ismaili friend named Karim noticed a trail of ants in front of his door... and instead of trying to get rid of them like most westerners would do, he crouched down and started crumbling a piece of bread. "They look like they have a long road... they must be hungry. Here, take some bread and help me feed them."



A life simpler than anything we can imagine

The whole valley and everyone in it were living examples of how real happiness has nothing to do with external riches, but actually comes from a kind heart and simple contentment with what we already have...

Day 1'299 - 13'050 km

To celebrate my last day in Aliabad, I decided to give myself an unusual challenge: I would cross this small village that had come to be my home, and for just one day accept every single invitation for anything. They were so numerous in my everyday life that I had to put a quota, or else I would be doing nothing else! And that's exactly what happened today: nine invitations for chai, two meals, entire bags of fruits and many more gifts and hugs... The whole village had become family and I would be missing them, but my visa wouldn't last much longer and I had to walk on in order to get it extended in the next city.

After one more week of walking through majestic valleys, camping freely and being invited by everyone, I reached Gilgit, the capital "city" of the northernmost province *Gilgit-Baltistan*. I was expecting something linear and modern, my first steps into westernized Pakistan... but it felt like another village! A big, hectic, and vibrant village with bumpy earth, gravel roads, goats and cows at every street



Gilgit, the capital of the Pakistani Himalayas

corner and all the messy things I've come to love about Pakistan.

I settled in a small guesthouse that told me to "pay whatever you want" and I initiated my visa extension. It took three weeks and multiple visits to a government bureau without a door, where the officer's goat was constantly trying to make its way in... After more chai, cookies, and goat infiltrations than I could count, my documents were in check and I could continue my road.

I knew that shortly after Gilgit I would be reaching *Diamer* and *Kohistan*, regions known for their killings in the not-so-distant past, after which the government had implemented strict security measures to never let a foreigner travel without military escort. There was no knowing what they would do with me, as it might well be the first they'd be confronted with someone this stubbornly determined to cross the country on foot.

After two more days of walking I reached the dreaded checkpoint into Kohistan, praying that they would somehow authorize me to proceed on foot...

"Assalam alaikum." They started. "Where are you headed?"

"To Lahore." It was true, and it was the last city in Pakistan before reaching India. I just avoided talking about India unless specifically asked, as the tensions between both countries were now quite high and I preferred not to venture into this touchy subject.

"To Lahore? That'll take, like, four months!"

"No, just one more month... Do you think I can walk through Kohistan and Chillas, or do I have to be put on military vehicles for security reasons?"

"What security reasons? You are about to walk the friendliest area you've ever seen! As a token of our friendliness, we will provide you with an armed escort, just so you're extra safe. This is *Sir Sajad Khan*. He is a very friendly man and

his grandfather was the king of this entire region! He will walk with you until the next checkpoint, after which someone else will be assigned, and so on."

I could hardly believe it... my own bodyguard? Like a movie star? And that too completely for free, out of sheer kindness from the government to fulfill my ridiculous wish to walk? Had they said this in China it would have been a disaster, as I knew their military's purpose was to control



Sir Sajad Khan, my first escort and a lovable man

me... but here it was the opposite: the army was at *my* services!

Not that I was scared of rebels or that I felt like I needed a gun by my side: all I wanted was to walk, and they were allowing me to, through their unbelievable efforts. My escort was a charismatic grandfatherly man with a beautiful beard and an automatic rifle. I loved him straight away, but worries filled my mind: *I don't walk like anyone else, my walks are so long, ... I often go without food, what would my escort even eat? Would I have enough water for him? And how would his legs keep up with all of this? And what in the world would he do at night?*

But none of that came true. Most of our walk was in peaceful silence, and once in a while he would blurt out something like "Allah is almighty! He created everything! The sun, the mountains, the trees, the people! We must forever be grateful! He is so good! We must love him!"

We reached the next checkpoint after three hours' walk, and my worries about feeding him were dispelled: they were feeding me! And lodging was included too! I was a guest of honor and I had never felt so welcome.... Their lives up here were so secluded that they were delighted to be spending time with somebody new. I pulled out my guitar and asked "Can I sing something in your language?" "Sure, yes please!" I sang a modern Pakistani rap song by *Faris Shafi* that teasingly criticized the government - which was them - and it made them laugh to tears!

Day 1'359 - 13'260 km

The next day I was assigned someone much younger who went by the name of Saheed Rahmat. But unlike the grandpa, after 12 km he got tired of it and decided to hitch rides in his colleague's police car and keep an eye on me once every hour. *Even better!* I thought. And they still took care of me like guardian angels,

bringing me bananas to make sure I wasn't hungry and waiting at a roadside restaurant to offer me food. The next evening in the police post of *Gonar Faram* was just as pleasant, and I was given so much food, attention, and praise that it was embarrassing! This time they let me set up my tent in the inner courtyard and I was pleased to be back in my familiar home.



I woke up to the romantic scene of snow falling on my tent. Unlike other periods in the snow, I wasn't worrying about myself at all, as I knew I would have a sheltered place to sleep every night. I was worrying about them. *What kind of escort will agree to walk a whole day with me through snow and slush while their colleagues are sipping chai around a fireplace?*

The answer was, none of them did! Instead they chose to follow me from the comfort of their

heated car. It was quite a funny scene and their presence put pressure on me to walk without a break, which might be a good thing as the snowfall was getting heavier and heavier. It kept falling continuously for six hours until every inch of my clothing was soaked, but did I have the choice? "At least I'm walking", I thought, "Which is exactly wh..."

"Come, I pick up you!" said a man from his pick-up truck that had nothing to do with my morning's escort.

"No thanks, I'm walking!"

"I'm the superintendent of police in Thore, the next district."

"Oh... bummer... *ahem*. I've been walking the whole day sir, and I only walk..."

"No, it's dangerous and you must come with me!"

I had no choice but to comply and he drove me a whole 37 km to his police station. But *Faqir Mohammed* turned out to be very nice man and he genuinely wanted my good. "A few years ago," he told me, "eleven tourists were killed at

the foot of *Peak Nanga Parbat*. People just like you... that's why we had to beef up security."

I was given a private room with a fireplace, and for entertainment all kinds of stories from Faqir who seemed to be a powerful man with a slightly excessive fondness for weapons. "Don't worry, you are safe here. We have guards on duty all throughout the night. We need them here, because we're sitting on big stocks of weapons and ammo." *Good to know*, I thought. "Last year" he added, "I arrested a total of seventy-five people, just in one year! That's the number of bandits I put to jail, right where they belong! Look, here are their bullets!"

I went to bed snug, warm, and knowing I was surrounded by firearms and explosives.

Day 1'361 - 13'299 km

I woke up with a bolt. "Hey... I can turn back! I *must* turn back! I will plea Faqir Mohammed to

bring me back to where he had picked me up yesterday. I want to right the wrongs, I want to walk this road." I didn't know if it would work, but my promise four years ago had been to do everything in my power to do every step on foot.

I nervously gave him the news over breakfast. His face instantly darkened, but I knew that he still wanted the best for me. He was just sad that picking me up yesterday had obviously not helped me at all. "Ok" he answered. "I will have my men drop you back."

After touching point-zero, I started walking what I had missed out yesterday and entered the town of Chillas - considered one of the most dangerous in Pakistan. It had also been a Buddhist city in the distant past, with thousand-year-old carvings on the rocks, which awed me... In Chillas I found nothing but smiling faces and wide-eyed children... and finally I reached the local police station, where I was intending to

invite myself to spend the night, as I knew there was no point in trying to camp.

After an hour waiting around and talking to a confused guard, chief of police *Behram Sha* finally showed up and happily welcomed me in. We got along well and I smiled at the recurring scenario: instead of having to find a place to camp every night, my only challenge was to make good enough friends with the chief of police so that he would let me walk the next day.

Dipping into their lives was fascinating too, and I'd get inside stories that you would never find by following guidebooks or traveling in conventional ways. Our topics ranged from religion, Swiss economy, Bin Laden, Pakistani firewood, slavery in the US, why my host had two wives, and why he had two different houses for both of his wives. Though I never really got my head around the *two wives* thing, I remained a good listener and finally popped the question nervously.

"By the way, can I... would I be allowed to walk out of Chillas tomorrow? It's only 26 km to the next police station, easy to do in one day, and..."
"Of course! Walking is your mission! I will assign you an escort. But before that... we will have breakfast together!"



I was provided a conveniently lazy police escort who just drove around and checked on me once every hour, and the usual scenario of escorts and police station hospitality went on for another 24 hours. Then I reached the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, yet another at-risk zone and one with a close resemblance to Afghanistan, as they physically bordered each other and both spoke the same language - *Pashto*.

Fortunately, everyone still knew Urdu, and the daily effort of persuading them to let me walk turned into a fantastic exercise in language! This

time, however, it took more convincing than ever and I could tell I was on the brink of exhausting their patience... They chose to drive behind me the whole time at foots pace, which put a lot of pressure on me and I decided to turn to a walking technique called *Afghan Walking*: a more sustained, active and mentally focused version of walking which pushed my speed from 6 to 7.5 km/h. For the yogis reading this, there it's a bit like walking-pranayama, and every step is taking in alignment with conscious breathing. With the car on my heels and the fear that they'd run out of patience and forbid me to walk, I couldn't take a single break, neither for food nor for stretching nor for exchanges with the locals, and it made for a very interesting test in focus and perseverance, much like the long hours of sitting meditation we do in Vipassana.

Next day was different and this time I was given two men on foot: young *Pirzada* with a kalashnikov, and his superior *Fazilmalik* who just came to enjoy the walk and invite me for chais.

We reached a tiny police post with just a few rooms in it, yet I was generously cared for.

"Do you have a wife and children?" I casually asked over dinner.

"Two."

"Only two children?" Pakistani families tended to be bigger than that...

"Two wives."

"Aha..."



My eighth escort, Pirzada and Fazilmalik

We got along cordially, yet I didn't feel the same loving kindness as I had felt in the others... and fair enough, the next day he said he wouldn't let me walk and I would be put on transport. Then he kept asking if I could "send" him a Swiss visa and land him a job in Switzerland's police force. I nodded meaninglessly, as I was in no mood to start explaining how the world outside of Pakistan actually worked.

The coming day was a mix of tireless debates, segments where I was forced on vehicles, and segments where I could walk in bliss. I still made it most of the way on foot until the next police post where I spent the night. Then came another day where I was allowed to walk with escorts behind me, enjoying the raw cliffy surroundings and the giant rocks occasionally falling on the road due to the gusts of wind above.

My luck took a turn, however, when I was nearing *Pattan*. A short chubby man dressed in

black barked at my escort, frantically waving a pistol around "Where is this guy from? What is he doing?"

"Don't worry" they answered. "We're just stopping at the restaurant to have some food."

"Yeah but what is this guy doing?"

Nobody seemed to pay too much attention to his agitation and we sat for food. "Get in the car!" he finally added. "I'm going to Pattan!"

"You're going to Pattan. I'm having my food." I told him, and he fumed away. *I hope this guy isn't too highly placed!* I thought to myself, but it turned out he was in charge of the whole Pattan sub-district. Upon reaching Pattan police station they wouldn't even open the door for me, and answered over the phone "Tell your men to drive you all the way to Besham."

That made another 39 km where I couldn't walk, and then half of the next day was forced on transport too, until the town of Battagram... This was the longest I had been driven in

Pakistan, my spirit was low, I was tired of fighting, and all I dreamt of was being allowed to walk...

But meeting chief of police *Sir Abdul Rauf Esrani* completely flipped my experience around. My dearest hope is that he reads these lines one day, and finds out that his kindness has made it into a published book. If you happen to be reading these lines, Rauf, know that I love you!

I'm going a bit too fast: it started by being welcomed into his office as if it was the reception of a 5-star hotel... An elegant doorman greeted me in, had me sit down, and served me chai and cookies on a fancy platter. Sir Rauf's office was the cleanest, neatest, and most polished place I had ever seen in Pakistan... and despite his high standing, he expressed nothing but warm humbleness and care.

He was a human encyclopedia too, and could answer any question I had about the history of anything. I learnt a great deal about Pakistan's

past and current situation, and he knew more about the swiss administration than I did!

Finally, he requested me "Anything in the world that I and my men can do for you, just tell me."

"Well, to be honest... I'm dreaming of only one thing... and I know it's hard, and maybe even illegal. But... I love walking alone. My previous days have been so complicated, I spend all my energy dealing with escorts and transport and I'm so tired... I know we're still in the restricted area, but I wish I could just walk... alone."

"Noted. In the meantime, will you accept a room from me or would you rather stay at a hotel?"

"Forget the hotel, I wanna stay with you!"

I was led by his assistants to a room with a private bathroom, a view on the valley, a garden, and running hot water for the first time in Pakistan. Within minutes I was brought a platter of fruits *for my enjoyment*, then chai, then dinner, then more chai, all of that served to me

in my own room by waiters who would come in and out and clean up after me.

I snuggled into my cozy bed and realized that what made the magic of being here was not all this material comfort, but the pure love with which it was given, everyone acting selflessly and from the depths of their hearts...

Day 1'368 - 13'438 km

I woke up to an enchanted snowy landscape behind my large glass pane. The assistants brought me breakfast, and as I was pondering how I would go about my day, Rauf told me "It will snow all day. You cannot go in these conditions. Stay here one more day and go tomorrow."

I accepted, and the day was a welcome break from all the adventure, during which I prepared a handwritten gift for Rauf. Next morning I came to find out his every action was at the height of

his words: to my disbelief, not only I was allowed to leave the place on foot, but nobody was following... not in a car, not on foot. It was just me... I was free. Just me, my breath, the pine trees, and the snowy mountain landscape that intriguingly looked like Switzerland. I could stop and stretch, look at the sky, listen to the silence, and contemplate the luxury of being alone...

In early afternoon I reached *Chattar Pass* which marked the end of Battagram territory and of Rauf's magic wand. But was it really? Not only did the next authorities let me walk, but the days that followed were miracle after miracle.

This was still restricted zone and I would always have someone with me, but the relations were funny and endearing. One of my escorts *Mashan Khan* told me "they didn't want to let you walk, so I told them I would take care of it myself and do any distance that it takes!" That too carrying a large bag of fruits so we would always have

enough for the road, and showing me a surprising shortcut that didn't appear on any map: a highway under construction, not yet opened to traffic, on which we were free to roam as if it was ours!

My next assigned companion was 24-year-old *Amir Khan*, who initially looked disheartened from having to walk such mind-numbing distances. "This is still a pretty long road..." he would faintly say by staring at the horizon, even though we had only walked half-an-hour together... But by the end of the day, he was having such a good time that he told me he could walk all night and never wanted it to stop! Looks like I made someone taste the magic of walking!

Next day was Mohammed Fayez, who accompanied me through such a long day of hectic urbanized environments that we reached the next police station way after dark. And when I told him I was so relieved that he could finally

get some rest after everything he had done for me, he casually added "Actually my day isn't over, I'm on night patrol from midnight to 6 am!"

My next wonders were two consecutive police stations that had been built by the British out of stone and wood more than a hundred years ago. When the British were occupying India and Pakistan, they had built government and police buildings across the land, and some of them had remained unchanged until today.

Harrison Fort was one example, built in 1857 and still functioning as a police station now, where it seems nothing had changed except for its officers who were now Pakistani instead of British! This place could have been a museum or a historical site, but instead it was my private lodging for the night, courtesy of the Pakistani government!

The fun went on until I reached the historically Buddhist city of Taxila, which marked the end of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the beginning of

Punjab province: officially, I was free! For some reason though, they didn't give me my freedom back with smiling faces like I had been dreaming of... Instead it seemed like they wanted to keep escorting me! But I knew the law, I knew my rights, and whatever they didn't give me I snatched for myself.

My first steps of freedom had me reflect on all the efforts, time, and money that had been dedicated to my cause... Seventeen days and nights of being the government's guest, during which I hardly managed to spend a single rupee... A total of forty-five escorts dedicated to my safety, comfort, and mission for peace, all one-day-friendships but faces I couldn't forget, because one day in such a trip feels as rich as a lifetime. I can't begin to express my gratitude for all they have done, gifted, and sacrificed for me, and the astonishing tales of what we lived together will linger on inside me as one of the peak experiences of this journey, bringing awe and joy every time I recollect them.



It was the end of the mountains, the beginning of increasingly populated plains, and to my amazement there wasn't much distance left before the Indian border. First came the capital *Islamabad*, where making my visa for India was so easy that it was hard to believe these two countries were in conflict... then I spent a week walking through semi-urbanized environments, once in a while finding a patch of nature to sleep in... and finally, one last sleepless night on a hectic, dusty, and polluted highway, for no other reason than to celebrate my love: walking! I don't care where I am, walking is walking and I'm in love! The end is so near that I'm scared to even think about it... and I'm going to enjoy, cherish, savor, and celebrate every second I have left!

Lahore was utter chaos. The traffic was the worst I had seen in my life with no rules

whatsoever except for "try to stay alive". Road signs and traffic lights meant nothing, and the "sidewalk" was just as jammed with cars and motorcycles as was the road, everyone recklessly trying to find a way out of the huge mess.

As promised to myself, I greatly enjoyed the chaos, and by some oddity I made it alive all the way to the hostel I was looking for, called *Lahore Backpacker's*, reaching the place at 5 pm. *Sleep* was obviously the only thing on my mind as I hadn't rested in 36 hours, but upon reaching the hostel I was given fascinating news: the Sufis of Lahore were holding a sacred gathering tonight, and this would be my only chance to see them. *Sufis* were like the Yogis of Islam and had a lot in common with Indian Gurus, including all kinds of spiritual and physical practices unheard of in conventional Islam. *Sufi dancing*, or *whirling*, was one of them, and the whole tradition attracted me so much that I couldn't turn down the invitation. The gathering happened in a mausoleum - a sacred space

housing the tomb of one of their ancient saints - that looked like it had come straight out of an Arabic tale a thousand years old. Long-haired, free-spirited devotees whirled around for hours on end, faster and faster to the sound of large drums beating ceaselessly. Ecstatic crowds cried out sections of the Koran in one big, unified expression of faith and joy, and I too was invited to whirl with them until total exhaustion.

Day 1'395 - 13'992 km

Lahore was so close to the Indian border that today would be the final crossing... the idea alone sent chills up my spine. I woke up at 4 am to make it through downtown Lahore before the traffic would become anarchic, and crossing the city in the wordless stillness of the night was a heavenly joy... The world at a standstill, as if we had taken a hectic action movie, clicked on pause, and then walked around the scene in wonder. But the beauty of what was coming was

yet on another order: I could simply not believe this was the day I would be reaching my destination.

The sun slowly brought life into the world through its celestial artwork of pink and red, and by then I was already on the final road leading to the border, with no traffic at all: there is simply no human movement between Indians and Pakistanis. Despite sharing a 3'000 km border, I have, to this day, never met an Indian man in Pakistan nor a Pakistani in India. They were simply not allowed to visit each other, period. Both countries were like two brothers who haven't come to see each other in seventy years over an inheritance dispute from their Dad. That's how childish it was, and I deeply wished for it to change one day...

The border crossing, named *Wagah Border*, was still there for political reasons and for rare cases like me: being a foreigner to both countries, I

was in the unique position of being able to cross over from one to the other.

And at one point, way before expecting it, I saw something in the distance, barely perceptible through the haze, but rippling and swaying with its distinct colors... *Is that... Is that the Indian flag?*

I fell into a fit of hysteria so overwhelming that I could hardly stand... had anyone been walking by they would have changed their road to avoid coming anywhere near this lunatic. My entire journey flashed before my eyes... four years of unthinkable efforts and unwavering intention through the world's extremes. Highs and lows, heat and cold, exhaustion and bliss, blessed encounters that saved my life and blind hostility that threatened it...

Yes, it had happened that I was forced on transport, but that turned out to be a tiny fraction of the journey, a total of 3 percent amongst 97 where I had been allowed to walk...

And the steps I *had* taken made 14'000 km through eighteen countries, more than half of the planet's landmass. Too much for me to recall, remember, or even comprehend...

But all I know is that I didn't do it. The world did it for me: from the first to the last day, any accomplishment I've ever made was nothing but a product of people's love. 14'000 is nothing, it's just a countable, a bunch of digits... but people's love... that's immeasurable. That's infinite. The grace of the world is infinite. I can't even thank you, *thank you* is nothing... I don't know what to do. I'm speechless. I'm stupefied.

Time entirely disappeared as the border loomed closer at every step... I noticed the gate in the distance, slowly growing clearer and clearer... until it showed its full splendor, a polished ornamented sliding portal in the midst of such a picturesque crossing that I think it knew it was the last one on my journey. The guard was just

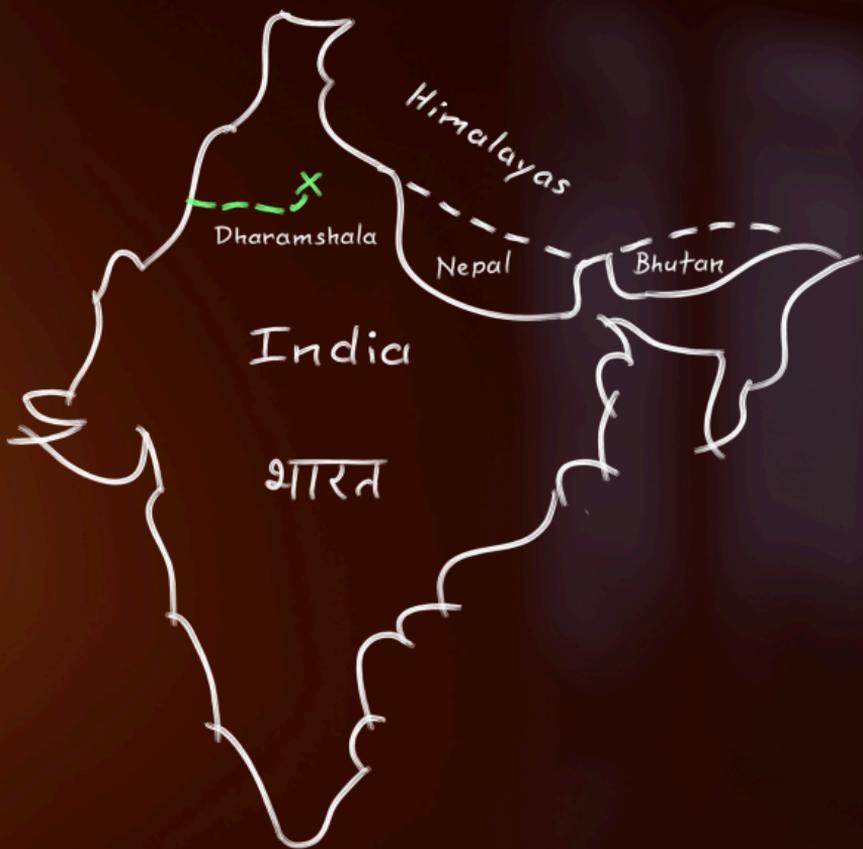
as elegant, and welcomed me in with courtesy and friendly words.

My mind was completely blank as my feet took their first steps on Indian ground, and I dropped face-down on the floor.



Ten steps left to India

- Part IV -
Reaching home





- Chapter 17 -

Indian Punjab

February 2020

The Indian state of Punjab is the cradle of the *Sikhs*, a religion of boundless generosity, open-mindedness, and respect towards every cast, creed, gender, and religion. Their founder, *Guru Nanak*, has spoken words of such depth, beauty, and love towards all beings that when I read them many years ago, at the time still in Switzerland, I considered adopting his religion for good.

Within two days of walking I reached Punjab's capital *Amritsar*, and went straight to the Golden Temple, the Mecca of the Sikhs. A sanctuary of peace and goodwill, with entrances in all four directions to show that all human beings are invited regardless of where they're from or what faith they belong to. And not just

welcome to pay homage, but to eat, wash, sleep, drink, and stay as long as they wanted. All my senses were in heavens: everything was made of white marble and the surfaces so clean that you could eat off them... dreamy music hung in the air, played by live musicians in the very center, who sang verses of the holy sikh scripture, taking shifts so it would go on uninterruptedly day and night... clean filtered water at every corner, always served with a big smile... and the largest community kitchen in the world, feeding more than 50'000 people daily and open 24/7. It already sounds like paradise, but the most astonishing part was that nobody asked for a penny... from the locker services to the chai to the meals to the rooms. How was it all possible?

By devotion alone. Everyone working there was working for God, for *selfless service*, which they saw as the highest value. And whatever expenses they *did* have were covered by a donation box in the center: completely anonymous, completely uncontrived, and coming straight from people's

hearts. This allowed them to both reap the karma of giving and contribute to one of the greatest wonders of the world.

In the west, hardly anyone believes in donation-based anything, and if you told your friends you were going to run a hotel and make it pay-what-you-want, they would laugh at you and say "get real".

But this *was* real: 100'000 people would come in on a daily basis and be catered for in every way, making the temple premises something along the lines of a small city. It all ran on donations alone, and it worked. This marked me so deeply that ever since, I've adopted the same model in my own life: I never ask for money for my services or my books. If someone wants this book, I just hand it to them. If they want a digital version, the PDF is free on my website. From graphic design jobs to Taichi lessons to physical services, I never ask for a penny... but I *do* give everyone the option to donate - just like

the Golden Temple *does* feature a donation box in the center, allowing the whole thing to be possible.

If you go to online shops that feature my physical books, it does come with a fee, as I don't own those bookstores and they don't let me say "just take it for free and donate if you want!" But within my power, I give it for free to anyone who asks, and surprisingly it works! Not only do I receive enough money - from whichever direction - to manage my everyday expenses, but the karma and contentment from practicing generosity exceeds what any amount money can buy. And the benefits will come with me beyond the grave too, whereas money is just left behind... at best, you get a golden tombstone.

Day 1'428 - 14'026 km

I hardly had time to indulge in the Sikh religion before corona virus gripped the world. Wagah

Border, which I had crossed just a month ago - was now permanently shut. The whole world got locked up and so did I. The government orders of "stay at home" obviously didn't work for foreigners, and while most of us had been sent back home on flights before it was too late, a few stubborn ones like me stayed. Not knowing what to do with us, the government locked the three foreigners left in town in a huge building that used to be a hotel. Within another month the two others were gone as well, and it seemed only I remained... Forty rooms on four stories, nobody else than one or two workers, and four cops posted at the entrance to make sure none of us could even reach the sidewalk.

This might sound like indefinite imprisonment, and in a way it was... but every hell can be turned into heaven by the power of how we perceive it. I decided that the entire place would be my monastery... my ridiculously oversized retreat hut. And it didn't even matter how long it would all last or how long I would be

forbidden to walk anywhere, because I had something more important to do than anything in the external world. It was, in fact, *the* most important thing.

Dharma talk #9: meditation

As much as we read books, learn the Dharma, memorize mantras, go to teachings, talk about love and compassion, and preach world peace, something will always be missing unless we go beyond the words, and experience the wordless truth... that's what we call meditation.

Being with others is great, and we can practice generosity, ethics, and patience... but if we really want to help anyone, then it's going to be very hard unless we help ourselves. And helping ourselves doesn't mean eating cake: it means diving inwards with the flashlight of our mindfulness, seeing what's there, and cleaning

out the grime of anger, greed, and ego. Unlike a dirty house, however, all we have to do is bring awareness to the darkness and it starts to dissolve.

This process is done in seclusion, which is why I had such a good time in Kazakhstan and why this current imprisonment in Amritsar was just as golden an opportunity. And this doesn't mean we don't care about people, in fact it can absolutely be fueled by compassion: "If I free myself from my own negativity, imagine how much I can help people free themselves from theirs! May I become as vast as an ocean, able to take all their pains and woes upon me, and in return give them love, care, and guidance..."

To be of real help to anyone, we must practice on ourselves, just like we can never save someone from the water unless we learn how to swim. So in dedication to meditation, which is the fifth perfection, I invite you to spend a minute or two - however short - in simple

awareness, as soon as you reach the Tibetan Om at the end of this paragraph. You will close your eyes or keep them slightly open, straighten your back, loosen your shoulders, bring awareness to your breath, and dive inwards to discover what it is you're experiencing this very moment in body and mind. Just observe.



- Chapter 18 -

The final climb

June 2020

I'm sure you're wondering why I'm still rambling on even though I reached India four months ago. But this wasn't the end yet - I had a specific destination within India. The reason I left picture-perfect Switzerland and trampled across the world was not just to drink Indian chai.

In Switzerland we're specialists at comfort: that part we've nailed. We have technology, entertainment, money, and even perfect cleanliness. And do we have any idea why we're going to work every day and where we are headed? No. Nobody seems to agree or to know, and as death looms closer, we realize that even the world's leading scientists don't have the beginning of a clue what happens to our

consciousness afterwards. Or even what consciousness means to begin with...

That's why I turned to Dharma, and that's why my final destination was *Dharamshala*. This small town, whose name literally means "school of Dharma", is perched in the Indian Himalayas around 200 km from the border with Tibet. It is full of Tibetans, their culture, their language, their Dharma, their wisdom... and yet it has something more, something so valuable that you can't find anywhere in Tibet: freedom.

When, at the age of twenty-four, the Dalai Lama's residence in Tibet was first bombed and his life was in imminent danger, it became obvious that he would be of better use to the world in India rather than dead or imprisoned in China. So he undertook a perilous journey out of Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, and walked 480 km amongst hazardous mountain terrains, and even more hazardous Chinese troops patrolling the lands. Had he been caught, we would never have

heard of him again, but he successfully made it to the Indian border, and Prime Minister Nehru graciously welcomed him in. Nehru agreed to do anything he could to ease the torment of Tibetan refugees and give them areas where they could settle down in India.

The most notable one was Dharamshala, where the Dalai Lama himself settled down along with the Tibetan Government in Exile and thousands of refugees who had also escaped on foot at the risk of their lives. This made Dharamshala a unique hub where Tibetans both lived in large numbers and had the right to freely practice their religion. Countless schools, monasteries, and meditation centers sprang up and the place literally became a school of Dharma.

This, alongside my heartfelt connection with the Dalai Lama - who I felt drawn to in a way I could only explain through past lives - made it obvious since the start that this was my destination within India.

Dharamshala, however, was still a long way off, not in terms of walking distance but in terms of corona virus politics and government hurdles. After two-and-a-half months secluded in my four-story self-monastery, lockdown rules lightened just enough for me to scheme my way out. Not that I had completed meditative enlightenment... but at this point, if the chance to finish my journey presented itself and I didn't take it, I would have been a goon. It was my duty to do whatever it took to go on.

So I told the cops at the entrance that I would shift to a nearby hotel - which had just opened up under the slightly relaxed lockdown rules - and after a bit of nervous explanations they let me go. I was obviously not headed for any hotel but straight for the Indian Himalayas... I left town with a Sikh turban on my head as well as a covered face - common in these corona days where masks were practically mandatory anyway. I also covered my cart in a raggy green tarp so that it would look like something a fruit

vendor would carry. That way nobody could identify me as a foreigner or realize I was running away!

It worked and the next five days happened smoothly, except for one or two instances where local villagers would take me for a Muslim: my face was entirely covered but my eyes could have been Kashmiri, and I was still wearing my *shalwar kamiz* from Pakistan... At some point an old farmer attacked me out of the blue, tried to prevent me from continuing, and called the police. Thankfully he was old and powerless, even more so when the police actually came and started scolding him instead of me! "Old man" they said, "you don't just attack a random traveller... this guy didn't do anything! Leave him alone."

The incident left no repercussions other than the saddening realization that there was considerable racism here towards Muslims - just like I had seen in Pakistan towards Hindus.

Couldn't we all be friends? What if I *had been* a Muslim man crossing India, would I deserve to be attacked? I vowed to make every effort I could, like the Dalai Lama, to fostering religious and racial harmony between the people of the world, and this book is part of that vow. To my relief the police men that scolded the farmer had no interest in verifying my own status, and instead showed great admiration towards my journey.

After waving them goodbye I was left with residual anger towards the farmer, which I wondered how to get rid of. Let's try Goenka's technique! A simple sentence: "Let me see how long it lasts." The anger was there, no doubt. It had been fifteen minutes since the event... Let me see how much longer it lasts. It had a beginning, so it will have an end.

To my great surprise, within three minutes all anger was gone, and even made way for a laugh. "This will make a funny story! And what a good

chance to practice the Dharma!" I realized such a simple technique had immense potential. Who knows, the anger might otherwise have destroyed my peace for hours or even days on end! When I finally set up camp that evening in an enchanting semi-tropical jungle setting, the same police men somehow spotted me and came to visit... but only to make sure I was ok!

"Do you need anything at all?"

"No thanks, I have everything."

"Food? Drinking water?"

"No, I have some!"

"Water to bathe?"

"I have my bottle shower..."

They couldn't believe I was sleeping in the wilderness and didn't want the least bit of help.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"Well, I've spent, like, a thousand nights in the wild, and I haven't had any problems..."

"You had a problem today with that crazy farmer though!"

"Oh, that wasn't a problem, that was nothing at all. I'm still alive, unharmed, and unscathed."

At that point they started thinking I was a saint. "You are a blessed one! In connection with the Gods! What a pure and noble life you lead! Can we come in the morning with our families to serve you chai? They need to meet you. What time will you leave?"

"Like, 5:30..."

"Deal!"

Their love made me smile, but I didn't take their praise personally, nor did I personally harbor the farmer's hate. I know that every word of praise or blame is a reflection of the beholder and what qualities they carry within. So I was happy for the cops that they were so virtuous! And sad for the farmer...

Five days after leaving Amritsar I reached the border with the next and final Indian state *Himachal Pradesh*. Inter-state borders still being closed though, I had no other option than to

wait at the border-town of *Talwara* until the situation would change. This was the month of June, and Punjab being in the plains, it reached scorching temperatures of forty-five degrees Celsius and I was dying from the heat already... the Indian Himalayas were within eyeshot but the authorities wouldn't let me go any closer. You might be wondering why I left the Himalayas in Pakistan just to be climbing them once again here in India, and the reason was purely political: there was only one international border crossing between India and Pakistan, it was *Wagah Border*, and it was in the plains.

So, now stuck at the state border of Himachal Pradesh, I climbed the closest thing I could find to a hill in monotonously flat Punjab, and asked the villagers if I could stay anywhere for an indefinite amount of days. Within no time a man named Rajeev told me with a big smile "Come to my home!"

He lived in a simple but clean and comfortable house at the edge of a small hill along with his wife Mina and his children Gippy and Jashan. I was immensely grateful to be given lodging away from the corona police, and that too in a rural village setting amongst a most loving family. The children became my children, I taught them French and they taught me Hindi, we made cake, we did Kung Fu, we had dinner every night, and I became part of a family like I never had before on this journey.

Day 1'576 - 14'187 km

After a bit more than two months with the loving family, the laws had relaxed just enough to legally allow traveling between states. The required online document however, which they called an e-pass, had been denied to me with no explanation whatsoever. So I still chose to leave, and trust my karma.

I woke up at 3 am, ready for a long and frighteningly unpredictable day, and the whole family rose early enough to see me off. I spent hours struggling to cross forests, fields, gravel roads, and a large knee-deep river that drenched my cart... Then I met a 16-year old village boy who asked me "Where are you from? Did you cross the checkpoints?"

"What checkpoints? You mean... we're in Himachal Pradesh?"

"Yeah we are! Come to my house for tea!"

I was overwhelmed with joy. My last state border crossing! I could now just walk up straight to the Dalai Lama's village... no more struggles with the police... or so I thought.

To minimize chances of having more problems with the authorities, I decided against camping and stayed in a small roadside hotel with lovable staff instead. But next morning, it turned out the police had come to know of my presence and

they led me to their headquarters. Officer Singh's English was surprisingly good.

"Why are you traveling even though it is banned? Don't you know of the pandemic?"

"I know of the pandemic and I know all your rules. India is in stage *Unlock 3* and traveling has been permitted with restrictions, which I am following and I have all the documents with me."

He proceeded to check the stack of paperwork I had come ready with, made phonecalls, left me waiting for one hour, and came back to me again. "Our head of district has not permitted your stay. Either you will be forced on foot or driven back, but in any case, you're going back to Punjab."

I was devastated. Failure to enter now would mean a near-zero chance to enter later, as the pandemic seemed to be worsening more than anything, and on top of the political hurdles already in place I would be added to their

records and possibly blacklisted. At that point Officer Singh left in his car, saying that for now he had other duties to tend to. Part of me wanted to lie down on that cement slab and dwell in my misery... but a jolt of insight came from above and made me sit in meditation instead. And that was the key.

Two hours later Officer Singh came back and I was still sitting there cross-legged. He made me come to an area with two chairs facing each other, like an interrogation...

"Tell me" he started, "when you sit in meditation, what do you think about?" I was taken aback.

"Well... I don't intentionally think about anything. No mantras, no words, no visualization. But if you instruct yourself to "stop thinking", that won't work either and it's not even the point. The point is just to observe the present moment as it is. The easiest way is to observe your breath.

"The breath..." he answered, "so all I have to do is control the breath?"

"Actually, no. Regulating the breath is a technique in its own right, called *Pranayama*. But what I'm doing here is *Anapana*, as taught by the Buddha, which is followed by *Vipassana*. First focusing the mind, then using that newly found focus to deeply observe the body and pierce reality..."

"I will call my superior and see what I can do."

That was a funny interrogation! Officer Singh spent the next fifteen minutes talking to his superior over the phone: I could only hear one side of the conversation, but it was clear that Singh was doing everything in his power to argue in my favor and grant me freedom. When the phonecall was done, he addressed me again.

"You can go."

"What? Like, you mean, I'm free? I can just walk on and... go?"

"Yeah."



I returned to the roadside hotel where my things had stayed, but it turned out I was in for one last hurdle... I informed the staff of my decision to leave on the next day at 4:30 am, and I went to bed early, hoping to get enough rest for the long day ahead. At 10:30 pm, however, hotel staff knocked at my door. "You know how you wanted to leave at 4:30 tomorrow? You will. In a vehicle. The government has arranged a car for you. I know you wanted to walk but... It's not our choice..."

Being forced on transport during the last two days of my four-year walk? *Noooooooo!* I changed my alarm to 2:30 instead hoping to sneak out even earlier than expected. But even then I had no realistic plan to make my way out, as the hotel doors and main portal would be locked at night...

I woke up two minutes before my alarm, at 2:28 am. Truth is, I didn't really sleep at all, too busy trying to conceive every imaginable scenarios for my great escape... I did seven minutes of meditation and beseeched the deities to align things for me. Then, with as much swiftness and stealth as I could, I packed my things and started tiptoeing my way down the stairs in the dark...

The hotel door was locked, but I found a key conveniently lying on the table... it worked. My cart was kept in the storage room, however, also under lock and key... Attached to the first key was a second one. It worked. I brought my cart out, my heart racing, trying not to make a single noise... I had made it this far, but what about the main portal?

As I approached, I realized the padlock was set in place but hadn't been clicked shut: I could just manually remove it. I exploded with excitement - without breaking the silence of

course - and made my way out. I turned around one last time to face the hotel... All the lights were off and not a soul was stirring. Even the dog was sitting obediently, looking at me with love and approving my mission. I bowed down and thanked the world. This had obviously been prepared: the hotel staff had been pressured themselves by the government, and out of pure love they had arranged everything so that I could break out in the middle of the night.

I took a small country road to avoid attention, walked relentlessly until dusk, and camped on a forested hill with dreams about my arrival tomorrow...

Day 1'587 - 14'321 km

This was such a meaningful day that I vowed to make it a meditation from beginning to end... Meditation means awareness. Awareness means not letting a minute of life slip away, cherishing

the beauty of every instant with the raw presence that it deserves... and my last day of walking was so significant that the only way I could give it due respect was through meditation.

It started at 3 am with battering rain outside... this was the middle of monsoon, I wasn't expecting anything different, and I didn't mind. I did my morning Taichi in the rain, folded camp, and took the road. The rain went on continuously for ten hours and eventually all my stuff was drenched, but personally I loved it: a cool and refreshing experience amidst this subtropical heat. After a fascinating walk through a misty jungle, I reached the cement road again, which marked the start of a steep climb that would bring me 1'000 meters higher in elevation.

Much of it was walked in overwhelming bliss, not really born from the satisfaction of being so near the end of my mission, but simply

because... awareness is bliss. Anapana and Vipassana accompanied me all the way up and I was no less than a floating cloud of joy...

I've known all along, that happiness doesn't come from the destination, happiness comes from the way. We all know it: no lasting satisfaction comes from reaching anywhere or gaining anything. True happiness comes from acknowledging that the way, the present, is enough unto itself. It already contains all the joy we could possibly be imagining from the future... Our only role is to appreciate, to be aware.

My arrival in Dharamshala was celebrated with sweet sunset light accompanying a symphony of bright green parrots and jet black crows expressing their ovation in a flurry of sound, from the clarity of melodious whistles to the harshness of throaty cries. *The goal is the way*, we all know that by now... But I was still pretty darn happy to be here.

- Chapter 19 -

Meeting an old friend

September 2022

I couldn't possibly consider it an end to my journey, or to this book, without meeting the old friend to whose small town I had come in the first place: His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. I had never met him before... yet he was my old friend. He loves without needing a reason. He loves you just because you're a sentient being. That is the scope of his affection.



I spent three days writing him a letter to describe my walking journey, express my devotion and ask if we could meet. But in a way, I'd been preparing for six year: four years walking to India and two years living there, waiting until the corona situation had settled down enough to even consider making contact.

His entourage the *Gaden Phodrang* answered positively and I was invited to His Holiness' residence. The thought alone mesmerized me... and making my way through the main portal already imbued me with a sense of inner peace I can't describe.

Upon my first glimpse of him I was in a new state, completely absorbed and yet so awkwardly unsure of how I would go about greeting such a unique individual... But as we finally came face to face, I realized there was no way to greet him. No words I could utter could possibly come to the height of the sacred moment between his eyes and mine... I was hurled into a dream,

unsure of what was real. His gaze was so deep and his hands so soft, as if touching a baby's skin. He seemed to be ageless, timeless, and beyond this world...

No word of introduction was needed from my end, as his attendants described to him with great praise the efforts I had made to reach his town. He was moved by my story, held my hand, and brought me closer and closer until our third eye met, forehead to forehead... he held it there for quite some time, his body language and radiant energy speaking louder than anything that could be verbally expressed... Then coming back to my eyes, he started speaking.

"Thank you. Thank you... Thank you." Why *he* was thanking *me*? That's what I wanted to say! I was now officially speechless...

He went on. "You and I, the same. We are the same. We are human. You have to tell all humanity. Keep doing what you're doing. Keep bringing this peace. Inner peace. Seven billion..."

one. And the environment! Keep doing this, think of the environment, and peace. Inner peace."

He withdrew an intricate statue of Tara - the female Buddha of compassion - and gifted me the weighty brass figure with both hands. As the statue reached my hands I started melting... Photographers clicked away but I was in so much awe I must have looked downright ridiculous.

No square hat on my head nor fancy paper in my hands, but to me this was graduation: the actual end of the four year walk. Today, it became not just physically, but spiritually complete: every dream had come true.

I still had one thing to hand him though...

His Holiness tells people that if we want to personally give him anything, the best gift we can make is to help the world and be kind to others. Today, however, I *had* come with a gift, something very strange.. maybe the weirdest

thing he's ever been given: my battered 4-year-old distance-counter.

That little bit of plastic with a screen on top had been with me the whole way, and such a faithful companion that I considered it holy... It was also a digital indicator of every kilometer I had



Sharing my total distance with His Holiness

walked to reach Dharamshala: it now displayed 14'321, and it would stay that way.

I presented it to His Holiness, explaining what it was and what the number on it signified. He found the object funny but had no inclination to take it... Still, his entourage took great enthusiasm in convincing him. Obviously he was right: this encounter had nothing to do with any kind of material exchange or even distance travelled. This exchange was spiritual, beyond appearances, beyond bodies, beyond life and death.

It marked the end of one journey, yet the beginning of a greater one... the vow I had taken on day one:

If the world actually allows me to make such a journey until the end, if it grants me the fathomless good fortune of coming out successfully from such an unpredictable feat, I vow to spend the rest of my days in pure gratitude and recognition, giving back and giving back as much

as I can, dedicating my life and existence to the peace and the welfare of all.

As if he knew, His Holiness the Dalai Lama had instructed exactly that, and it was now time to carry it out.

- Epilogue -

Have you noticed that we never covered the sixth perfection? If so, then you've definitely mastered the fifth one, meditational awareness, well done!

The sixth one is wisdom, which the buddhist guys often call *wisdom of emptiness*. Though the oddly-named concept of *emptiness* sounds much less attractive than wisdom, it actually points to the same thing. This isn't the emptiness of a glass of water that's half full or half empty. The glass is completely full: it's full of air, of water, it contains a whole universe... but without a perceiver, which is you, there is no glass at all. It's empty of *independent existence*. It's inter-dependent.

It goes the other way too: your existence depends on the glass of water. You are made of

60% water. Without the glass of water, you wouldn't even be there. And whatever 40% is left in you is also entirely made of things that come from the world and go back to the world every second, even every millisecond.

There is no barrier separating you from the world, not even your skin. Just like the ego, it appears to be separate. But if you dive down, with wisdom, this separateness is an illusion. The ego is an illusion. When the Dalai Lama told me "You and me are the same", he wasn't stating that we both have flesh and bones and blood and consciousness. Those things are true, at a relative level... but on an absolute plane, he and I are the same because there is no independence. We both make each other, we both are each other.

Likewise you might think that this book has an author who wrote it, *me*, and a reader who just got to the last paragraph *you*... But you *are* me. And without you, this book wouldn't exist. So I

want to thank you from the depths of my heart,
and I hope you enjoyed our co-creation.

- Special Thanks -

To Barbara Remenyi for her relentless proofreading and finding so many mistakes that I should go back to preschool, to my Czech grandmother for being with me at the start of my walk though she will never get to read the story, to aunt Vlasta and uncle Honza for having been my very first host on the road, showering me with more kindness and provisions than I could possibly imagine, to their son Honzik for helping me rig my cart, to Anička and Jirka for the stainless steel frame, to Mom for joining me in Armenia and gifting me the sleeping bag that would come to save my life, to Dad for joining me in Kazakhstan and gifting me the tent that would host me for years, to my brother Jonas for joining me in Turkey and gifting me the snow-proof socks that would allow me to cross the snowy Himalayas in sandals, to Simon Schaffer

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- Donations and References -

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