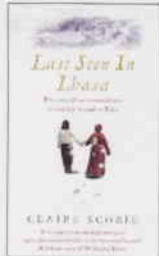


"I am very aware of the sacred in my life. Often I'll walk to this ancient fig tree and just sit there to get in touch with the earth beneath my feet"



When the young journalist Claire Scobie travelled to Tibet in 1997, she was ostensibly searching for the red lily, a rare flower that grows only on the hillsides of that high, unforgiving part of the world. What she found, however, was something much more, something that lives with her still. Through her friendship with Ani, a Tibetan nun who joined their party, she discovered a bond that transcends miles, a sense of the divine, and a taste of a life completely 'other'.

Ani, whose 'warm cranberry cheeks matched the colour of her *chuba* (full-length Tibetan tunic)', joined Scobie's party of eccentric botanists as an unofficial spiritual guide. During their trek, her friendship with this woman, whose life is so very different from her own, grew and began to answer a deeper, spiritual questioning that had been gnawing within her for some time.

During the latter half of the Nineties and into the new century, Scobie made a total of nine trips to India and Tibet, each time strengthening her bonds with Ani. In the charting of their friendship, she has recorded a way of life and a Tibet

to help others attain enlightenment, thereby forgoing their own nirvana. All her meditations are done for the greater good.

"I know people in the West can be cynical about how effective this is, but she has such a contagious joy that most people with whom we came into contact couldn't help but be affected by her. I remember when we were first together in Lhasa in 1997, Westerners were moved to silence by Ani's presence. They would simply stare at her. She would blush and look away in embarrassment. As her life's vocation is entirely about generating compassion, I think that on a subtle, energetic level she radiates that into her environment. Although, of course, it isn't tangible in scientific or material terms, I believe that is her contribution to the world."

On a subsequent visit, Scobie joins Ani on a gruelling trek to the holy mountain Kailash. When they stand on top of the Drolma La, close by, Scobie describes Ani praying to Tara, the female deity representing enlightened activity and fearlessness. "She imagines that she is shining Tara's love on every being and bringing the entire universe into her own heart."

Scobie was born in Newbury, Berkshire in 1972 the daughter of parents who enjoyed travel.

A spiritual bond

A Himalayan trek in search of a rare flower led to an unusual friendship, as Claire Scobie tells Roger Tagholm

Scobie: a constant struggle to get the balance right

which, perhaps inevitably, is changing, as the Chinese immigrant population increases and as the modern world, with its mobiles and its sex industry, encroaches.

Her account is full of extraordinary moments. She tries to climb to Ani's cave retreat, high in the Himalayas, but her shoes prove inadequate (she is endearingly self-deprecating on such matters throughout the book). Instead, they meet at the 'sky burial' charnel ground just below (so-called because it is here that bodies are left as carrion). She recalls: "I was utterly astonished that someone could live in such a remote, isolated place. There was nothing there except a human spinal cord and a few frozen clothes. It stirred inside me such a sense of desolation and loneliness, and yet she thrived there. It illuminated how fearless and tough Ani is, and what a strong sense of inner resolve she has. We were only together for a few hours, but that reunion stayed with me for years afterwards."

The red lily is found, clinging to a vertical cliff face and, feeling sacrilegious, Scobie picks one, and wraps it in tissue paper. But that quest is almost incidental to her story: in Ani, she has found someone equally rare and she has lovingly wrapped her memory in the papers of her book.

Yet some would argue a life such as Ani's is selfish, that it makes no contribution to the world. "If you look at it from a purely Western perspective, or actually Communist Chinese, then yes, she doesn't contribute materially and she is following a self-orientated path. But from the Buddhist or Eastern perspective what she is doing is serving the world immensely. For example, her prayers are always for the sake of all sentient beings, not just for her own enlightenment. She hopes one day to become a Bodhisattva - someone who continually returns to the world

In 1991 they bought a Land Rover nicknamed Stanley and drove from London to Cape Town. Scobie says she has partly inherited a love of travel from them. She read History at Cambridge and then joined the *Telegraph*, working on a wide variety of features which eventually led to her receiving the Catherine Pakenham Award as Best Young Woman Journalist of the Year. It was a piece for the *Telegraph* that led to her trip in search of the red lily.

She lives in Sydney now, and currently earns a living through freelance writing and running journalism workshops. Still interested in Buddhism, she describes her own spiritual life as haphazard. "In my twenties, I used to do yoga every day and try and meditate often. Now it's occasional. I hope this will change again. I am, however, very aware of the sacred in my life. Often I'll walk to this ancient fig tree near where I live and just sit there to get in touch with the earth beneath my feet. Or I will light a candle and say a prayer for the people in Iraq, or if I've just heard of an international disaster. I try to be conscious of what I am doing, and be aware of what's going on in my interior world, not just in the outer world. I'm not always very successful though. I find it's a constant struggle to get the balance right."

"I wouldn't call myself Buddhist. I try to align myself with the essential values of Buddhism - compassion, tolerance of others, an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all life - but I'm not a practising Buddhist."

She still thinks of Ani often and has pictures of her in her office and kitchen. "The wonderful thing about writing the book is it has made me feel much closer to her - it's almost like she is this unseen presence in my life ..."

Last Seen in Lhasa is published by Rider at £10.99 on 6 July



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