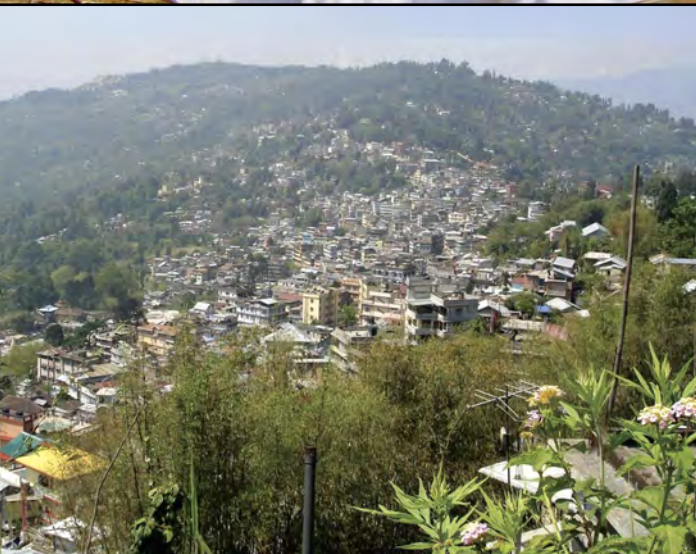


jhankri encounter

A chance meeting with a Nepali shaman
in the high Hymalayas and an unexpected
healing from long-term asthma

David Charles Manners



For half my life, I have been privileged to have a home at Kalimpong, in India's Bengal Himalaya. The old British hill-station is now a polluted, over-built version of its former self, its once many charms virtually eradicated. And yet the crowded town still tumbles along a narrow ridge that thrusts through lush foothills, the local people still largely gentle, playful and generous in nature.

I first found my way to Kalimpong in my early twenties at the culmination of an arduous solitary journey across the Subcontinent's vast breadth in search of the truth of ancestral legends. To my great astonishment, within hours of arrival, I had found

myself on an old family estate still inhabited by mixed-race cousins, a tribe of kin of whom I had only ever heard unsubstantiated whispers. Every year thereafter, I returned to their step-cut fields and fruit trees, rice paddy and bamboo groves, to forge myself another, very different life below the eternal snows of Kanchenjunga, the world's third highest mountain.

However, these passing years brought with them a marked and dangerous decline in the asthma I had long endured. The battle to breathe had become such a part of the daily round that it was

normal to wake straining and in pain, unable to exhale. Too often in the early hours, I would have to stumble out into the garden to focus on the moon or stars in a desperate effort to calm the strain and searing panic in my chest.

In time, such attacks became more frequent and intense, induced by animals, woollens and dust-mites; changes in temperature, humidity or altitude; coal smoke, petrol fumes and perfume. Such

was their increased severity, so demanding the effort to survive them, I became convinced it would be asthma that would ultimately speed my end.

One cold Kalimpong winter, I found myself struggling and fatigued. The accelerating environmental degradation of the town had been so rapid in the intervening year that I now found it difficult to survive the usual walk to busy market or painted Buddhist *gompa* (monastery).

A sudden influx of fresh money from the manipulated rise in land prices had blocked every street and lane with new traffic, a permanent plug of cars, lorries, buses and taxis that mindlessly pumped into once lucid Himalayan air a filthy, billowing concoction of gasoline cut with oil.

In desperation to relieve my constricted lungs, I escaped the town one day, to travel far into the hills. I did not stop until I reached a village of lowly wattle cottages, cinchona forest, cave temples, goatherds - and a much-respected *jhankri* (shaman) of the Magar tribe, whom I had visited before.

As the brighter, smogless atmosphere rendered my tired chest a new relief, I took the opportunity to re-acquaint myself with the kindly, clear-eyed shaman.

As I approached his little, scarlet temple, I could see the *jhankri's* brown cheeks that bore the rosy hue afforded by pure mountain air, his smile that bore the easy calm of honest words. He looked surprised and eagerly beckoned me to approach, but as I neared he studied hard my eyes and pronounced me *rog!* (ill).

With near-affectionate concern, he guided me to sit beneath the corrugated canopy of his temple and served me ginger tea. He first ensured I would accept his humble intervention, then touched his heart in *pranam*. He turned to don a scruffy ceremonial tunic, a headdress stitched with peacock feathers and kauri shells, a twisted sash of red and white cotton around his waist. With a broad smile of reassurance, he indicated for me to part my lips, placed upon my tongue grains of rice and turned to face the altar of his temple.

At his instruction, to the deities within his sanctuary, we made symbolic offerings of rice, mustard-oil lamp, fruit, camphor,

incense, vermilion paste, areca nuts, betel leaves, cow's urine in a metal pot, and a crimson length of gold-trimmed cloth to dress the multi-limbed image of the principle goddess. And all the while he muttered an endless stream of mantras, 'seed' sounds with the vibratory power to effect a change in consciousness.

The jhankri placed in his lap the palm-worn drum that would take him into trance. He unwrapped the thurmi dagger from its cloth binding and plunged it into the smoking ash of dried *gurubuwa* (a general name of a psychoactive teaching-plant) he had ignited in a bowl. He raised high the ceremonial dagger with both hands and drove its iron tip into the earth to draw a circle on the ground, then marked the eight directions of this new periphery with white, paper-thin totala seeds.

The sounding of a thin, dark pipe of human bone heralded the addition of psychotropic saal resin to the embers of his fire, and then an offering of two bright drops of blood, obtained by the pricking of his navel with a porcupine quill, as evidence of his self-surrender.

He offered his drum to the rising smoke and then, as calloused palms voiced its taut skin, the rhythm mingled with my marrow. I felt the union of earth, sky, mountain, breath. I lost all sense of time and place - and of myself.

And then, it seemed as suddenly as he had begun, all was done. All was quiet. He leaned forwards to touch my chest, then swiftly covered my head with scarlet cloth and gave me the instruction, "Hriday bata suna." I was to listen with my heart.

He placed rice upon his own tongue and spat hard at me in three sharp bursts. With practised fingers, he scattered water steeped with mountain herbs, then raised the cloth to whisper into each ear a mellifluent, metrical mantra.

This I repeated in return until he was assured both pronunciation and intonation were perfected, whereupon he noosed about my neck a consecrated mala string of wooden beads.

He smiled and we both touched our hearts in *pranam*. He placed his hands to the earth, then to my knees. In respect, I touched mine directly to his feet.

"Brother," he announced softly, "this sickness is your attachment to the death of a cousin-brother."

I was dismayed by such a charge, and silently dismissive. However, as I thought back to the year my asthma had first flared, I found myself astonished. It had indeed been during the grief-muddled aftermath of a much-loved cousin's loss, a cousin-brother who

had died too young, poisoned when he tried to help a neighbour anxious to take her sickly child to hospital by siphoning petrol from

his motorbike to start her car.

"It is time to release your response to his demise," the jhankri encouraged. "There is no purpose in making his passing yours.

For one year from this day keep away from cemeteries, avoid the dead. To remind yourself of your new intention wear around your neck the talisman I shall make, and repeat the practised mantra one-hundred-and-eight times twice a day. But most of all," he offered in conclusion, "be happy. Be happy."

The long, slow journey back to Kalimpong was consumed by doubts. Could such a ritual really bring about the deep, organic change my tired and hurting lungs would need to heal? Could the historic rite of rice and mantra, drum and yantra surpass the modernity of medicine? My ingrained Western cynicism said it could not be so.

And yet, the very next morning back in bed in Kalimpong, it was not the usual vice-like stricture of my chest, the habitual fight to breathe that woke me, but the kitchen maid singing to her chicken as she collected breakfast eggs. I stared hard into the morning light to ensure my senses fully roused - and found no sign of asthma.

Now six years on, I still repeat my given mantra at both dawn and dusk, happy with the memories of a cousin-brother whose likeness I have since kept prominently displayed - and have not, since those unexpected hours with the jhankri in his hillside heaven, once known a single wheeze.

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His book, 'In the Shadow of Crows' (Reportage Press, 2009), describes the journey that led him to his first contact with the shamanic tradition of the Eastern Himalaya and the remarkable changes that it wrought. www.davidcharlesmanners.com

NOTES:

1: Pranam, an Indian and Nepali act of greeting or gratitude with hands joined (palms together), and a bow, often done with the saying of the word *namaste* (Sanskrit: I bow to you).

Left: the hill station of Kalimpong

Inset: a Nepali jhankri shaman

Below: a jhankri performs a ceremony for Himalayan villagers

