



FALLING UPHILL

25,702 miles, 1461 days,
50 countries, 6 continents
& 4 moments of enlightenment
on a bicycle.

Scott Stoll

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*25,742 miles, 1461 days, 50 countries, 6 continents
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Some names, places and events have been combined and/or changed to protect the identity of those involved and/or provide artistic clarity, but do not significantly alter the story's emotional authenticity as experienced by the author.

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5 Give money?

As I squat behind a rock, I admire the scenery. The sun pierces the thin atmosphere, bursting through brilliant white clouds and shattering into sparkles on the rocks. Shadows pan across the ground and up the mountains like disco lights. It looks as if I've entered a floorshow, "And here we have the deluxe, super-size Himalayan Model."

The prevailing winds push streams of rose, orange and yellow sand up and over the mountains. I wish it were so easy for me. Eight other bicyclists and I are riding on a gravel road up the World's Longest Hill. We joined forces in Kathmandu to buy the visas, permits, truck, driver and guide that the Chinese require for travel down the Friendship Highway in the "liberated" and "autonomous region" of Tibet.

After my potty break, I coast alongside the New Zealander, Edwin. Although Edwin is the strongest rider in the group, he always waits for the weakest member, in this case, me, as I'm sick. My intestines feel as if I swallowed a boa constrictor, and my back end makes noises like a squeeze bottle. During my absence, a Tibetan shepherd has found Edwin. Nearby, the shepherd's large flock of sheep graze the small plants hiding among the rocks of the high-altitude desert.

Edwin says, "I'm teaching this guy that pens don't grow on trees."

The Tibetan turns to me, holding out his hand, "Hello. Pen?" a variation of the ever-popular question: "Can you give me some money?"

Somewhere in Africa tourists began giving children pens, which the children were re-

quired to have in order to attend school. This tradition of giving away pens soon spread through Africa, sailed across the Indian Ocean, sped over the plains of India, through the jungles of Nepal, up the switchbacks of the Himalayas and swept into Tibet like the People's Liberation Army of China.

Long before it reached Tibet, this tradition, initially a humanitarian gesture, began teaching millions of people to panhandle. I remember riding through the Great Thar Desert in Rajasthan, India, where an adolescent spied my foreign-white skin glinting in the sun. He ran a kilometer barefoot through the thorny desert to the road, and then padded alongside me for another kilometer as I struggled against a hill and wind. "Hellomoneyschoolpen," he said in increasing decibels. He was a muscular lad wearing colorful clothes and large, dangling, gold earrings. Clearly he wasn't in desperate straits, and pens were never required for school enrollment in India. He ran with one hand on my panniers as if to threaten to overturn or drag me to a halt. When I escaped his grasp as the hill declined, he hurled insults and rocks after me. He was like the dirty, mangy, wild monkeys of India that people have cajoled out of the jungles with sweets. When the monkeys don't get what they want—what they feel the world owes them—they sneak into your room, set banana peel booby traps, steal a kilogram of peanut brittle, then sit on your bicycle, snarling and threatening to give you a thrashing.

Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for life—this ancient Chinese proverb is both my philosophy and Edwin's, and soon to be the Tibetan Shepherd's.

The Tibetan is approximately our age, in his early thirties, though wizened by the sun and tooth decay. Still he's a handsome fellow with a broad face, strong cheekbones and golden skin. He has long hair, braided with colored string and wrapped around his head framing his face—the traditional style for men and women. "Hello. Pen?" he parrots.

"Hello. Sheep?" says Edwin.

"Hello. Coca-Cola?" I say, thinking he'll know this word and realize his absurd demand.

The shepherd points to Edwin's pen and then to himself.

Edwin points to a sheep and then himself. "You want a pen. I want a sheep. We all want something, but you have to work for it, mate." Although neither Edwin nor the shepherd speak the same language, Edwin's voice is soothing and fills the gaps. "Baa. Baa," he bleats to clarify his intent.

The shepherd looks confused, so I point from the sheep to Edwin, then from the pen to the shepherd. Grasping the idea, he imitates me and we all nod in agreement. The shepherd walks to his flock and deftly scoops a lamb from her mother.

"What are you going to do with a lamb?" I ask.

"Don't worry. He'll never trade a lamb for a pen. I just want to teach him a lesson."

“How much is a lamb worth?”

“I don’t know, but a lot more than a pen.”

What the Tibetan knows is that all the shepherds are selling their spring lambs. Lambs are a common source of food for the locals and, I believe, the desert can’t support all the newborns. Of course, the shepherd knows the value of both lambs and pens in Tibet.

When the shepherd returns, Edwin tries to swap but the shepherd refuses and reopens the negotiations. Now he wants the pen and money. Edwin looks dismayed and jockeys his bicycle around the shepherd pretending to leave. The shepherd holds the lamb in front of Edwin, turning her from side to side. Then he shoves the lamb in my face and turns her from side to side. Her blue eyes sparkle, and her thick white fleece, adapted to the Himalayan winters, smells like dung. Again Edwin offers his pen for exchange.

This time it’s the shepherd’s turn to act his part in the bartering drama. He gets angry and pantomimes, “This is a tasty lamb. You’re stealing the food from my children’s mouths.” (In my opinion, over-population is the main problem in the world. If anything, people should give away condoms. “Hello. Condom?”) The shepherd backpedals toward his flock. He’s using the basic argument I’ve heard all over the world, “You have everything. I have nothing.”

Edwin holds up his pen and flicks the button several times, scribbles on his hand then tucks it into his shirt pocket by the clip. The Tibetan is entranced and, suddenly, he agrees to the exchange, sealing the bargain. So far, the bartering has followed the usual custom and Edwin has to follow through, or risk insulting and angering the shepherd.

The shepherd reaches for the pen, but Edwin, still intent on proving the value of a pen, indicates he wants the lamb first. After a couple bungled attempts, they swap simultaneously and I photograph the moment for posterity. The shepherd quickly stuffs the pen behind the silver buckle on his belt and Edwin is left cuddling the lamb. For a moment, Edwin’s brown eyes are as big and bewildered as the lambs. “I never thought he’d go for it,” he says, wincing at the loss of his pen.

“What are you going to do with her?”

“Don’t worry,” he brightens, “It’s a bluff. He’ll never let me ride away with his lamb.”

“What if he does?”

“Then we’ll have a mascot.”



“We can eat it,” I suggest.

We mount our bicycles, and as we pedal away, I think, “Lamb noodle soup. Lamb steamed dumplings. Fried lamb chops.” Meanwhile Edwin is wondering what to name her, “The Dalai Lamb-a or Bo Peep, the bicycling sheep.” He struggles to hold the lamb in one arm and navigate his bicycle over the dirt road. The lamb bleats pathetically and 100 meters down the road, near the edge of the flock, she wins Edwin’s heart and we stop.

The shepherd stares at us with a twinge of curiosity but shows no concern for his lamb. Perhaps, the shepherd has called Edwin’s bluff.

“Dang,” Edwin pouts, “That was my last customized pen.”

“We can still eat it. Jabu and Dongteng [our Tibetan guide and driver] will know how to cook it.”

“Maybe we could just keep her in the truck,” he moves her from one arm to the other, away from me. Edwin is a vegetarian and I don’t think he can bear to be responsible for anyone eating his lamb.

“Someone has to eat it.”

Edwin puts the lamb down and begins herding her towards her mother. She bolts underneath the legs of the nearest sheep. Edwin chases the lamb. The lamb scrambles from sheep to sheep and Edwin scrambles after the lamb, zigzagging through the flock until, suddenly, he’s face to face with the shepherd. “Just give me my pen. You see—there’s your lamb.”

While Edwin was causing a stampede, the shepherd has gotten his sling out and loaded it with a rock. He swings it around several times and sends the stone soaring over his flock. Edwin doesn’t seem to notice. With a soothing voice, he keeps talking to the shepherd. The shepherd reloads and releases a second stone with a crack and it buzzes through the air, causing me to cringe, and shatters against a boulder. Undeterred, Edwin advances, “Just give me the pen.” He points to the hidden pen and then himself. “Hello. Pen?”



“They’ve both gone crazy,” I think, laying my bicycle down and preparing to rescue Edwin. The Shepherd sees me approach and grabs his dagger out of the ground and begins wagging it at Edwin, then me, then Edwin, while yelling, “Stay back or your friend gets it,” or so I imagine.

I freeze, but Edwin encroaches on the shepherd's territory holding out his hand, "Hello. Pen? Give Pen!"

The shepherd is behaving like a madman now. He shouts, lunges and feints a stab towards Edwin's belly. Finally, Edwin holds his arms above his head. "All right, keep the pen," he says. "Keep the pen."

When Edwin retreats, I'm laughing so hard that my gut twists painfully. "Buddy! What were you thinking?"

"I just wanted my pen back," bemoans Edwin. "Just wait until everyone finds out that I—a New Zealander—traded a pen for a sheep."

By now our Australian friend Matt has arrived and we laugh. The competitive and mischievous Australians have given New Zealanders a notorious reputation with their sheep jokes.

"But you don't have either."

"That's the worst part." He closes his eyes and sighs, as if imagining the embarrassment of confessing to his Kiwi mates.

"Aw. You made a cute couple."



Some Tibetan women tilling the rocky fields invite me to share lunch.