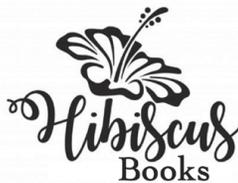


# Compassion Mandala

*The Odyssey of an American Charity  
in Contemporary Tibet*

Pamela Logan

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# Prologue

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I WAS WALKING WITH FIVE others, ascending into high, scrubby terrain with no sign of human life. The climb was harder than expected, and our progress was slow. I had planned for us to reach the little hamlet of Chakgé in a single day, but by mid-afternoon, it was clear that we would fall short of this goal. We debated turning around, but the local man who was our guide said that we would find houses a little way further.

The afternoon grew late, and the clouds darkened, but we kept climbing. Icy flecks of snow began drifting down. Scanning the desolate, rock-strewn landscape as I walked, I was heartened to see that the trail was gradually flattening, heralding that the pass was close.

As the last glimmers of daylight trickled away, snowflakes fell more thickly, covering the footpath and its surroundings with the same feathery white blanket. We pulled out flashlights and kept going. The trail was fading away, and I began to worry we would be lost. Bivouacking would be rough: between the six of us, we had only two small tents and three sleeping bags. But fortune smiled, for at long last, we spotted a lone black herder's tent crouched beneath the silver curtains of falling snow.

The Tibetans in our party nominated me to make the first approach. “They’ll know we’re not bandits,” said one, “if they see you first.”

Scattered around the tent entrance, a dozen hoar-frosted yaks stood mute and motionless as lawn furniture. As I drew near, a dog barked explosively, and I heard a chain’s taut jangle. I stopped in my tracks and called out “*Arro! Arro!*” in my best hailing Tibetan. A moment later, a woman in a dark *chuba* (Tibetan robe) emerged to see who was there.

The woman stared at me but registered no surprise. I gestured toward my five friends standing back at a safe distance, veiled by falling snow. Her eyes quickly took in our predicament. Gripping the dog’s chain with both hands to keep the dog from lunging, she beckoned me forward. I carefully skirted the snarling canine and stooped to enter the tent vestibule, where three baby yaks were tethered. Stepping over them one by one, I made my way inside.

## Income Generation

*A horse is judged by its saddle;  
a man is judged by his work.*

— Tibetan proverb

One gate of the development mandala has the power to open all others: jobs. Income is the holy grail of development, for it empowers people to meet their own needs. Yet, ever since the founding of the People's Republic, the word "job" in Tibet has nearly always meant working for the government. There were few other employers and none that could match the stability, benefits, and opportunity for advancement that the government offered.

Tibetans did operate small businesses, but Han migrants from outside operated many more. Capital was not the biggest problem: although Tibetans had poor access to credit, they could still raise cash from gathering caterpillar fungus or by borrowing from family members who did so. The biggest problem was knowledge: they had little exposure to the new types of businesses that were popping up in towns and cities across China: internet cafes, print shops, salons, karaoke bars, mobile phone stores, automotive shops, photography studios, pharmacies, clothing boutiques, and more.

In Kham, Tibetan entrepreneurs mainly ran restaurants and drove taxis, but even in these industries, they struggled to compete with Chinese migrants, who were quick to spot opportunities and toiled ceaselessly to capture market share. Migrants outcompeted indigenous Tibetans even in many

traditional Tibetan trades such as tailoring, silversmithing, and home construction. Competition from migrants was a big reason why the microcredit model, so successful in South Asia, faced stiff headwinds in Tibet. Tibetans also lacked role models and networks to help them source the manufactured goods needed in the new economy.

Tourism was the only sector where the playing field tilted toward Tibetans, but tourism in Kham was still tiny and seasonal. Were there any other business models they could use? That was the riddle I yearned to solve.

## Modernizing Agriculture

Early in the year of the male Water-Horse (2002), my own mother solved the jobs problem by proposing that KhamAid should help Tibetans grow vegetables. The traditional Tibetan diet—tsampa, yak-butter, and tea—fell light-years short of her nutritional standards. She wanted me to fix it.

Apart from a few hardy varieties of cabbage, potatoes, and turnips, most vegetables will not grow in the Tibetan climate unless they are protected from the weather. My mother agreed to donate five thousand US dollars if KhamAid would start a program to construct greenhouses. Families would grow vegetables for home consumption and for sale. As development ideas go, this one was pretty groovy: it would solve two problems—poverty and malnutrition—at once.

My staff and I explained the concept to the Women's Federation, our partner on other successful programs, and they steered us to Nyarong County. The county Agriculture Bureau was keen to see a

model greenhouse project, and the county Women's Federation knew some farmers who wanted to grow produce instead of barley. Nyarong County was isolated and poor and needed to boost its economy. No vegetables were grown locally; instead, they were being trucked from the Sichuan basin and were fiendishly expensive.

I put Linda Griffin in charge of the program. She was a new recruit, a British traveler and spiritual seeker who lived in China and spoke fluent Mandarin. Petite, soft-spoken, young, and pretty, she inspired trust and worked well with Chinese officials. She worked for us part-time, filling the rest of her time with freelance writing.

The Agriculture Bureau sharpened their pencils and designed a program that would build five greenhouses and train five families how to grow, but the cost was nearly \$4,000 per family. I couldn't countenance spending that much money on one family, not when other forms of assistance, such as scholarships, were so much cheaper. Linda Griffin and I dissected their plan, looking for expenses to shave.

The county seat was at a relatively balmy 3,080 meters (10,160 feet) above sea level. As in many other developing countries, subsistence agriculture in Kham was very effective in keeping people on their land and soaking up excess labor, but it provided an inadequate diet and put farmers at grave risk if their crops failed. Yet cash crops were not readily accepted by people who cherished their fields of barley as insurance against hunger.<sup>51</sup>

It was therefore remarkable that some farmer women in Nyarong had shown unusual initiative: they had hired workers from eastern Sichuan to grow lotus root, asparagus, spinach, and other vegetables

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51 Chinese law kept families on their land by making it difficult to transfer the right to use a given plot except to descendants.

on their land, without a greenhouse. The experiment wasn't going well: the tomatoes were hardly out of the ground before frost killed them, and other crops were barely hanging on. Still, the women had entrepreneurial spirit and the courage to take risks.

One of the women slated to benefit from the program was Ajeh, forty-six years old. She had been to primary school but was functionally illiterate. When I went to her home to meet her, she had just come in from the fields, and her chuba was dusted with soil. Decades of outdoor toil had darkened and lined her face. In addition to their cropland, the family owned a tractor that her husband drove. His earnings of twenty yuan per day (less than US\$3) was enough to make them middle-income by local standards.

While walking around the hamlet, I met a girl who was just skin and bones and looked far younger than her stated age of ten. Food was evidently a problem for some Nyarong families.

At that time, *Tuigeng Huanlin* ("Grain for Green") was transforming the Nyarong countryside. The program's objective was to restore ecological balance, halt soil erosion, and reduce siltation of rivers. It gave technical assistance and financial incentives to farmers so that they would take slopes exceeding 25% out of production, shifting the burden of agriculture to less fragile areas elsewhere in China. Former agricultural lands were to be treated in two ways: those deemed as "economic areas" would be planted with trees to produce timber, fruits, or nuts. Those deemed to be "ecological areas" would be left alone to regenerate natural grasses and trees. Nyarong was an "economic area" where the owners of the freed-up land would get cash to buy seedlings. They would also receive subsidies in the form of grain, which would continue for five years or until the new orchards were mature enough to produce an income. In some areas, participa-

tion was voluntary; in other areas, farmers were obliged to take part, whether they wanted to or not.<sup>52</sup>

The land under our future greenhouses was not sloped; it was flat, fertile, and easily irrigated: really, too good for barley. It would inevitably be converted to other uses. We hoped to make the owners agents and beneficiaries—not victims—of that process.

Working with the Agriculture Bureau and the Women's Federation, Linda Griffin and I redesigned the program. Ten women would participate. The greenhouses would be simple in design and easy to maintain and repair. There would be one hired hand: a trainer to teach the women how to grow. The Agriculture Bureau would manage the construction and provide tools and seeds, all as an interest-free loan, which the women would repay over five years. Repaid funds would be rolled back into the program, allowing more greenhouses to be built and additional families to take part.

I soon found a second sponsor: Trace Foundation, a medium-sized NGO in New York City that ran several assistance programs in Tibet. Together with my mother's donation, we now had enough money to fund the program. We had a product with high margins and proven demand, firm support from the local government, and motivated participants. Everything looked set for success.

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