

Tibet

# Witnessing a Sky Burial

## accepting death

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*Sky Burial*

High on top of a mountain in Tibet, a cut up corpse lies on a platform while vultures devour it. This is called a sky burial. Although it may seem shocking and even mortifying to outsiders, it is actually a preferred funeral practice in Tibet. In fact, “About 80% of Tibetans choose sky burials...” stated the director of Nationality Research Institute of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences in 2005 (“Sky Burial Lives on in Tibet as Traditional Way for Dead”).

My name is Tenzin Sonam and I was a sky burial operator for 15 years in Tibet. I arrived in India 2 years ago but the memories of handling bodies at sky burials are still fresh in my mind. When I cut up the bodies, I felt no fear or repulsiveness because at that

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point, it was normal. For a long time, I felt ordinary while cutting bodies but I can still remember the bone-chilling fear I felt the first time I witnessed a sky burial.

It was 7:00 a.m and I was supposed to meet my father at 7:30. Shoot. I was late for my first observation of a sky burial. I got up quickly, splashed my face with water, put on some clothes and ran out the door. The walk from my house to the Sera Monastery was about fifteen minutes, so I figured I had time to walk. Luckily, I made it on time and I jogged up the stairs to the second floor so I could watch from above. About twenty monks were already gathered around the edge peering down. They had all come to pray for the man who passed away from being shot by a Chinese official.

Looking down, I finally saw my dad come out from the corner carrying the corpse, wrapped in white cloth, on his back. In the middle of the floor, was a large wooden table that looked big enough to fit the body. The sun was finally out, causing the butcher's knife on the side of the table next to the hammer, to shine every so often. My father placed the body on the table, looked up at me directly in the eyes, and took off the cloth to unveil the curled up corpse. A small gasp escaped my mouth. I tried to compose myself and remember why I came here. Sooner or later, I would have to take my father's place as a sky burial operator and do the exact same work. Also, it is recommended by the Tibetan community to observe a sky burial at least once in your life so you learn that everyone dies eventually and to not be afraid of death.

From then on, my dad never looked up again. After mumbling a prayer, he swiftly cut open the abdomen and started taking out the organs and setting them aside. It felt like I was holding my breath in the entire time. Next, my dad stripped the flesh from bone. By now, there was about ten vultures circling above the monastery, waiting for my dad to give the signal for feeding time. My dad didn't seem to mind though and he continued to work calmly, now crushing the bones with a hammer so it is small enough for the vultures to eat. Finally, he gave the signal to the vultures, and with a loud whistle, they came flying down. I noticed that there were more of them than before. From then on,

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nobody from the second floor couldn't see anything because the large vultures were covering the corpse. If I had to guess, I'd say they were two meters.

Within an hour, the vultures had eaten everything and no sign of the body remained. I was stunned. There was so many emotions running through my head that I couldn't comprehend at once. I learned that Tibetans take sky burials very seriously. One incident to prove this is when a Chinese soldier was stoned by Tibetans because he shot a vulture (Faison). At that moment, I couldn't imagine myself working like my father, but then a sudden urge of determination crept up. I finally decided that since these are hard times in Tibet, I wanted to continue and do my best to preserve the Tibetan tradition and if that meant cutting corpses, I was up for the challenge.

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