

## The Ladakh Wisdom Forum: Sharing Seeds of Wisdom Locally, Globally, and Universally

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Today is the big day- the whole reason for me coming here! It's such an honour to be here. I've been dreaming about the Himalayas since about the age of 9, and it feels surreal and yet oh-so-real to finally be here experiencing it all.

We show up at the conference venue just after 10am, and the rest of the Society of Engaged Buddhists of Ladakh (SEBOL) gang are in full swing setting up. The venue looks like a town hall, with small brightly painted tables and carpets set up throughout. Out back of the venue is the most spectacular view of snow-capped mountains in the distance, with a rocky field in the foreground and the occasional cow grazing, separated by a line of trees.

The event kicks off around 10:45am when most people have showed up- probably near 70 people in total and a good mix of farmers and students. After a very quick introduction by Otsal, it's my turn to give my talk! He welcomes me by placing a white scarf around my neck. I read my speech sentence by sentence, and Skarma translates after me, which took way more time than I anticipated! Thank goodness I kept it short and sweet. When I timed it, my talk was just under 11 minutes, so I figured with translation that would be around 25-30 minutes, but instead it was at least 45! However, people seems fairly engaged, and I saw nodding heads and compassionate faces throughout.

After the talk, we opened it up to Q&A and I answered a few questions, and after a tea break, we then broke people up into groups to discuss what they felt were the current problems with agriculture in Ladakh and also what the potential solutions were. Debate was lively, and I think they probably could have done this exercise all afternoon if we had let them continue. Each group presented their problems and solutions, which were insightful and of critical importance, and then we broke for a late lunch.

During the group discussions, I went around to each group to check on their progress and see if they had any questions, and in one group an older woman reached into her bag, and pulled out a cream coloured silk scarf, and asked a younger woman to translate for her. She draped it around my neck, and said

this is to show how welcome I am here, and how much they appreciate how far I came to share my knowledge with them. She said, “This one will be very auspicious for you.” I got all choked up, and asked the younger woman to tell her that I am very thankful to be here and to learn from her wisdom. She and all the older women next to her just smiled.

Lunch was a traditional Ladakhi fare- a tough, thick roti made with local flour (which tasted like whole wheat but I suspect was maybe kamut or something different) that you dip in a raita-like cold soup-y thing, made from a local vegetable (which tasted like spinach, but I was told was not spinach) and yogurt.

Yumiko then gave her talk on Fukushima, telling the nuclear disaster story as a cautionary tale of what happens when a society chooses to live far beyond its energy means, again with Skarma translating. The power was cutting in and out throughout the day, but managed to stay on for the length of her PowerPoint presentation of images. She was concerned that it was too difficult for the farmers to relate to, but I think they made the connection.

We wrapped up after that, and stayed behind for another cup of chai. A journalist asked me for a quote, and I obliged. One of the local farmers – the first organic farmer in Leh – had spoken up at the event and said he’d welcome anyone to come visit his farm, and I said I’d love to visit. He passed his number to the journalist and asked her to tell me to call him to arrange a visit. I mentioned this to Skarma, and he said, let’s go right now! One phone call later, we’re off to visit the farmer’s house, which is close by. The monk attending the conference joined us.

A short walk down a dirt path amongst houses-turned-guest-houses, through a gate, and we’re at his house and farm, which is really like 3 large gardens, each maybe 100ft x 50ft. Carrots, tomatoes, kohlrabi, broccoli, green onions, coriander, mint, roses, several varieties of apples grafted on trees together, apricots, cabbage, turnip, and more. I tell the farmer about our garden, and how much I love different varieties of tomatoes, and the monk chimes in that he’d love to visit our garden, as tomatoes are his favourite, too. After showing us around, the farmer pulls out huge fresh carrots from the garden, and washes them for us, and we eat them on the spot. So sweet and clean tasting, although I recognize the variety as a hybrid seed variety. Baby steps, I think- at least he is growing his garden organically, next we need to get these farmers some decent seeds! I bet these were the only ones available to him. Seems like a great starting place for next year's conference!

So happy and thankful to have been able to participate in the Ladakh Wisdom Forum, and incredibly grateful for and appreciative of the support of OOO PAF, which provided the means for The Paradigm Shift Project to be able to attend the conference. I'd also like to thank Mayumi, Skarma, Otsal, and Yumiko, who ensured that my stay was comfortable and enjoyable. I look forward to further developing this partnership, and continuing to sow the seeds of wisdom locally, globally, and universally!

Sincerely,

Rebecca Sweetman