The odor of rancid yak butter again assaulted me - forming an invisible barrier to my forward progress. Indeed, as I gingerly continued around the corner of the cramped, dark passageway, more candle-lit sculptures fashioned from this pungent product flickered into view. A wave of heat from these candles struck my face forming an additional, tangible obstacle. The cacophony of monks chanting mantras receded as I pushed on to the next chamber. Here, the ceiling was much higher. Peering around in the gray, filtered light, I saw several marvelously ornate, 15-foot tall urns. These each turned out to contain the bodily remains of a previous dalai lama. The visitor ahead of me optimistically raised his camera in the dismal light. But a saffron-garbed monk silently materialized out of the shadows to interrupt this desecration.

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"Why do you want to go there ? The people are so dirty." The seven Chinese teachers in my weekly English conversation class were perplexed by my plan to visit the neighboring Tibet Autonomous Region. They could readily understand leaving our college in Chengdu. Because of its summer climate, Chengdu is called one of China's five furnace cities. When I questioned them about vacation alternatives, most of them longed to return to their hometown or to visit one of the large "civilized" cities along China's east coast, like Hangzhou or Suzhou, destinations they could ill-afford on their salary.

"You should spend the first day in bed." Unable to sway me to change my itinerary, my students were determined that my health not be adversely affected by Lhasa's 12,000 foot altitude. Certainly, my first night in the Tibetan capital was far from restful. In Lhasa, countless dogs freely roam the narrow, cobbled streets. Perhaps this reflects the Tibetans' respect for animal life. Anyway, that night, in fact every night there, we were the captive audience of an irregular canine chorus - a Stephen King version of 101 Dalmatians. My tour group consisted of Mr. Idono (a retired Japanese high school principal), Sally and Ann (both teachers from Australia), Sally's brother, and me. Mr. Idono and Sally also taught at my college. That first night, Mr. Idono and I shared a closet-sized room in a hotel where only foreigners were sequestered. To be on the safe side, Mr. Idono had climbed under the heavy quilt of his bunk still wearing most of his clothes. In the middle of the night, he got up and snapped on the room's solitary, naked 25-watt light bulb. Mumbling to himself, he floundered down the un-lit hallway to the communal bathroom. To my groggy amazement and annoyance, he returned with a basin of water. He then removed his trousers and started to scrub them in the basin. "Does he do this every night?" I wondered. This cleansing dragged on and on. That day on our early morning flight over the Himalayas, the stewardess had given each passenger a small bar of chocolate. Most of us ate this bite-sized morsel with little delay. But apparently Mr. Idono had put this unexpected bounty in his pants pocket and remembered it that night only after it had turned to ooze.

I was awakened yet again shortly before dawn as other foreigners trooped out of the rickety, wooden hotel. These early birds were off to witness a "sky burial." In this honorary ritual, a corpse is taken to a rocky cliff near town. There, at sunrise, the body is butchered into small pieces. Sledge hammers shatter the bones. Finally, the carrion is left for vultures to devour. Thus, according to Tibetan custom, one may be carried to heaven.

My group had opted, instead, to tour the 17th century Potala, the traditional temple residence of the dalai lama. The majestic, 13-story high Potala looks like a dozen Legos of colossal proportions. These red and white blocks together extend 400 yards and rise in three terraced rows, crowning a steep, 400-foot hill. The Potala's near vertical exterior walls are broken only by rows of gunport-like windows which reinforce its citadel-like appearence. Upon reaching the head of the stairs up the hill to the Potala, a startling riot of Buddhist gods painted in brilliant colors on a double door entranced me. I ascended the walkway around the corner to a courtyard flanked by the palace's multi-tiered golden tiled roofs. Gargoyles of fantastic beasts punctuated the surrounding rooftops and walls. From the courtyard, my group, one-by-one, entered the 1,000-room labyrinth of the Potala itself. Through living and working

quarters, the convoluted route soon descended into an oft bewildering twilight zone of ancient scrolls, banners, prayer beads, murals, jewelry, and religious texts. A wonderland of handicrafts, sacred relics, weapons, sarcophagi, and those breath-taking candle sculptures. Once inside the brobdingnagian Winchester Mystery House, the members of my group became separated, each of us traversing the near claustrophobic serpentine maze at our own pace.

At last, re-emerging outside into the open air and bright sunlight two hours later, I felt disoriented and drained by the just ended stupefying phantasmagoria. A taste of Shangri-La ? Yes. This is the stuff myths are made of.