



## ACTUALLY

**Wednesday, 24 January, 2018 – Tashiding (India) Pema Homestay**

**27.3239016,88.2872402**

I'm lying in bed. Under a thick, fragrant blanket that has warmed countless other guests before me. It is pitch-dark because the power has failed again. It has been out for over an hour. Rain is beating down against the windowpanes, somewhere to my left water is dripping into a yard, making a hollow sound like that of a sleepy drumbeat. A flash of lightning illuminates my room now and again. Had I ever noticed just how bright the light of lightning is? Or, are only Himayalan flashes such a brilliant white? Soon, thunder follows. It's not an aggressive thunder that crashes down as if it's furiously breaking a giant log, rather it's a majestic thunder that takes its time to roll, knowing full well that it has enough space in these skies, and that nobody will oppose it, or interrupt it.

The thunder reminds me of the monks' prayers earlier in the evening in the great convent of Tashiding – the voice of the leader, to be precise: a deep, voluminous, incredibly calm and self-confident baritone. The monastery is located on a hilltop about two kilometres from the village. At first I heard only this one voice and the sound of a dull, rather quickly struck drum. As I approached the prayer hall, though, I heard other higher-pitched voices joining in, and then archaic croaking horns being blown, bells chiming, and little drums whirling, and even the sound of whistles being blown, a loud clash of sounds: half-heavenly, half-hellish. As it ebbed, the head priest took the lead again – with a kind of sigh in which there was so much serenity that it sent a shiver down my spine. If the universe really came into being, then it came neither from

the big bang nor from a primal fart, but definitely from such a great sigh.

What colour is the blanket under which I lie? Is it really orange and dark red? Or are they merely the robes of the monks? And is the wall of the room really green? I know for sure that it is not white. Maybe it is blue? A flash of lightning would bring enlightenment, but none seems to want to enter my room right now. I remember the «guru» (as he had introduced himself to himself), who had told me in a partly disdainful, partly arrogant manner – while on a train journey from Thalassery to Kozhikode a year earlier – that everything that I was seeing rush past my window was only an illusion. Behind it lay another reality, the actual reality, which only people like him could see. So, why was I struggling to photograph this apparent world from the window of the train, he had asked me, pointing out that it should really not matter to me whether the fields were ordered with rice, with coconut palms, with camels, or with cars. By that token, the colour of the blanket should also be of no importance. But I found the guru so disagreeable that I have absolutely no desire to be comforted by him at this moment in spite of being engulfed by darkness. Moreover – my head sprays this thought like paint into the lacquer of the inner wall of thought – the symbolic and the metaphoric has always interested me more than the real thing. So I need to know immediately whether this blanket is really orange. I search next to the bed for my smartphone, which is blessed with a flashlight, but my hand finds the camera instead. I turn on the flash, hold the camera to my eye, albeit without being able to see anything through the viewfinder, and press.

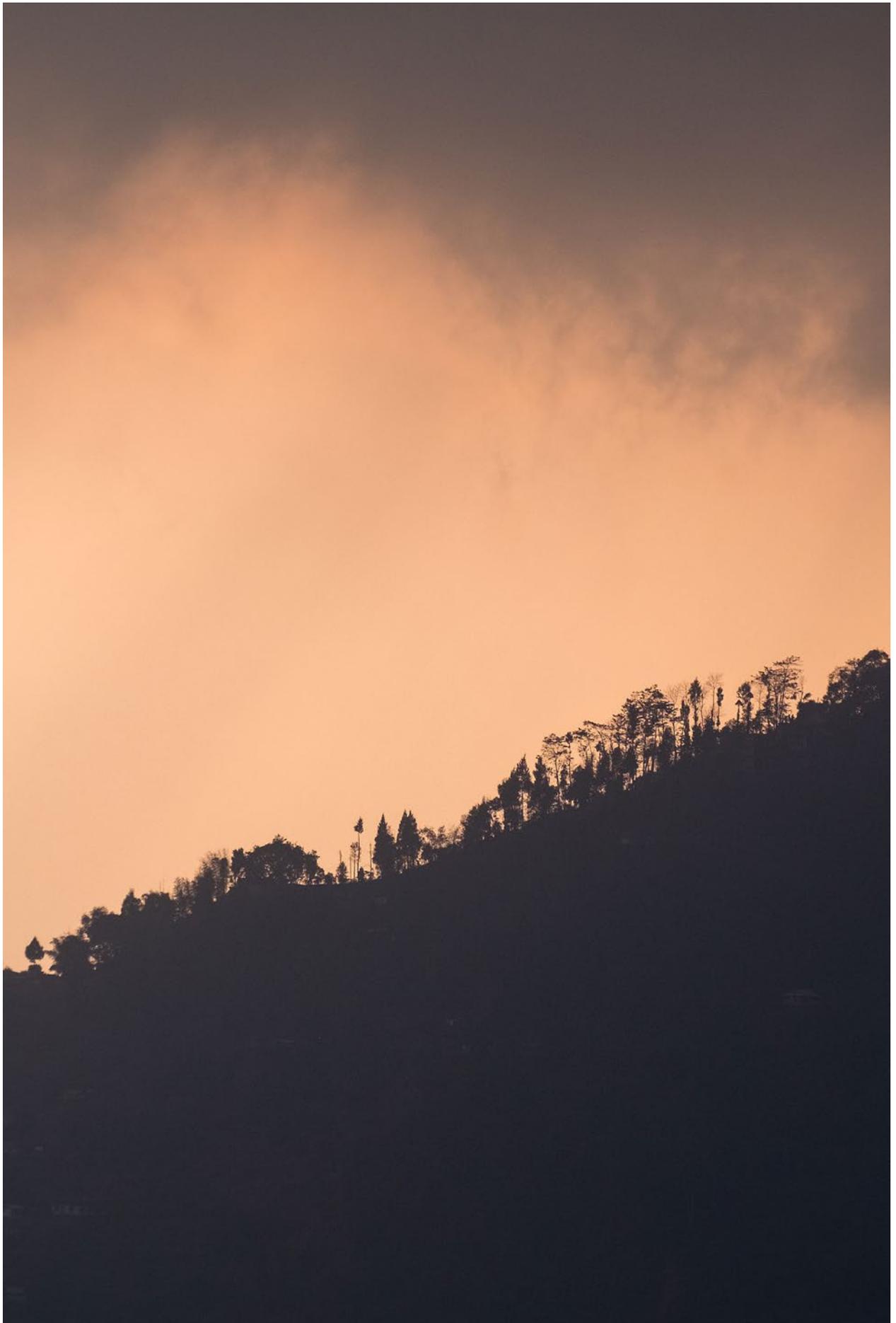
Of course, the ceiling is orange-red, the wall is bright green, while the table and door are blue. The stark contrasts of my bedroom landscape remind me of the evening view from the monastery square – when a cavalcade of thunderstorms had rumbled across the valleys as I was making my ascent to the temple mount. Their cloud-filters had broken down the light in such a fashion that the air was suffused with the shade of salmon pink, the ideal wallpaper for the final scene of the theatre of the day. I love it when the sun shines on things from behind and leads all the details on the earth to disappear, turns everything into a silhouette, a

series of letters over which only the sky can spread out in various tones and shades. It's a moment at which you are reminded about the concept of Maya, which the guru had wished to rub under my eyelids. But for me it is sufficient that the world appears utterly different in the backlight, that it stirs me in quite another way, allows me to address and approach it in a markedly different manner – that itself engages me deeply.

But now I am keen on preparing a tea with my immersion rod (orange blossom with milk powder and some sugar – a dream or, a consolation, if you will). And I would like to read a few more pages. Only the electricity does not cooperate. The Olympic thunderstorm-victory parade has travelled southwards, only now and then does the notion of thunder roll into my ear. The rain has stopped, too. How quiet it is now, outside: no vehicles, no voices, no TV or radios blaring.

At eight o'clock sharp, the officer from the Tashiding Police Outpost had stepped into the street and blown his whistle three times – once at the upper fringe of the village, once at the lower fringe of the village, and finally in the middle of the village, in front of the outpost. Once these whistles were blown it was forbidden to go out into the street, I was informed by Schering Ongmu – that's the name of the student who takes care of me at the inn. Even the dogs seem to stick to the curfew and howl their hearts out far away from the village.

I stretch my fingers out, and they find a caramel candy in the outside pocket of my backpack that is standing next to my bed. I know that it's an «Alpenliebe», I do not need a light to know that. How unusually sweet the candy tastes. Can it be that caramel tastes sweeter in the dark, that the Alps are more «lieb», feel more dear? When I move the candy over my tongue, it sounds as though I have a stone in my mouth. Like it had earlier in the evening, when I had suddenly felt hungry on the climb to the monastery – although I was a bit nervous because of the rain and the sudden flashes of lightning in the grey behind the trees. I had unpacked a short but thick banana that I had bought at a stall in the village and pushed it bit by bit into my mouth. It tasted highly aromatic and I was pretty greedy. Suddenly, however, I had bitten into a stone. Amazed, I had detached the stone from the sweet pulp and spat it into my hand. And





I found myself staring at a black pebble, the size of a pea, in the hollow between my fingers. How on earth had a stone gotten into my banana? Was it a joke by the fruitseller? Unlikely. A swelling during growth? Improbable.

I had discovered a small eye on the stone and at that instant I had remembered that the banana is actually a berry, like the blackberry or raspberry, with seeds that are crunched between our teeth when we munch on them. The banana also has seeds, but humans have managed to breed this fruit with such manipulative success that its embryonic blobs are now normally minute dots in the flesh. Only this particular seed had decided to flout the human-designed rule and defiantly grow and grow until it reached a hundred times, perhaps even a thousand times the size of its brothers and sisters.

Something is tripping through the street past my window: maybe a monkey? But doesn't he be-

long on the roof? And where are his enemies, the dogs? I notice I'm getting sleepy and I pinch the candy between my molars and lower lip. Normally the stones are so small that we do not even notice them while eating. But this one has become so big that I almost cut my teeth on it. What belongs to which reality?

It's raining again now. Now that the policeman has whistled everyone into their houses, will the village reveal itself in its true reality? What would constitute a false reality? And what kind of surface can be expected on a 'improper' road? And where did I actually put my smartphone? This blanket smells like that; no, it's not rain, it's a small animal out there. How sweet my mouth is now, on the left. Or right? I should brush my teeth. Actually.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.