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108 Turns

Om mani padme hum. The beauty of this mantra lies not merely in its literal translation "*Hail to the jewel in the lotus,*" but way more so in the origin of each word and sound, the reason it became popular, and the connections it is drawn to Buddhist teachings and even nature itself, and so on. This mantra serves well as the entry to the Tibetan culture, history, and the vast land that enables it all to have happened. 6th June 2026 was the fourth day of our Tibet journey. We were on the way to the North Base Camp of *Mt Everest*, where it was necessary to pass through the infamous 108-turn road to enter the area. In Buddhism, 108 is believed to be the most sacred number: for what our 6 senses receive; our judgement of it being good, bad, or neutral; our subsequent attachment to pleasure or aversion to pain; and it happening in the past, the present and the future, these combined give 108



Figure 2. Picture of me with *Mt Everest*.

types of defilement out of human experience. A number as large, as personal, visualised and experienced as turns we must pass through, is one of the most surreal experiences ever.



Figure 1. 108 Turns. *Mt Everest* in the background.

Visiting Tibet is no easy feat. The planning and research necessary before the trip; the anticipation and expectations, the uncertainty and surprises that would come during the trip; how we feel, think, and act during the trip; they are all part of the experience. To arrive in the base camp with clouds covering *Mt Everest*, and that it takes the sun to about to set that the peak unveils in its most beautiful



Figure 3. Nagqu covered in snow.

form, is absolutely a blessing. At that moment, it felt like my dream of climbing *Mt Everest* is coming true. Snow fell during our stay in Nagqu: while it drags the driving time and almost disrupted our schedule, it allowed us to see the rare Tibetan wolf, and the side of Tibet that we originally wouldn't expect to see in summer.

We have reached an altitude above 5000 meters multiple times during the trip. To see *Mt Everest* at this altitude is also to pay the price of some headache and shortness of breath. One must slow down and take care of themselves when the symptoms of altitude sickness comes. The freezing cold at night is brutal, and it makes sleeping well incredibly hard. It became quite

common to catch naps on the coach. As scenery pass by the windows, we occasionally rotate our seats with neighbours, so we could sleep while others take pictures and enjoy the view, and share us the pictures later.

Tibet is loud. The plane touching down on Lhasa Airport. The howling wind on the Base Camp. The intense debate between monks in *Jokhang* and *Sera Monastery*. The chattering as we queue up for restroom. The coach flying through highway to get us back to hotel every evening.



Figure 4. Debate session in Sera Monastery.



Figure 5. Group picture.

Tibet is quiet. The coach in the early morning carrying twenty sleepy souls to the first destination of the day. The moment when we smile to the camera as we take a group picture. The sun covering our body as we traverse through the alleys of Shigatse. The stillness of water in *Yamdrok Yumtso*. The colourful prayer flags hanging down when wind stops briefly. The praying hall where a hundred golden Buddha statues rest in a kindly expression. The calming scent of butter and incense.

The trip feels complete as we navigate through our experiences and come to love Tibet even more after. As we experience our 108 defilements, we silently chant *Om mani padme hum*, aloud or in our mind, alone or together. To sooth our soul, to clear our mind, and to let us take the next step of the journey of life.

This reflection also serves as programme notes for 108 Turns, an orchestra composition I composed on 23rd June, 2026.

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAzjvdJTGks>

Musescore: <https://musescore.com/user/9052796/scores/35161184>



Figure 6. Me playing on a public piano with a view of Potala Palace.