wisdom eccentricities

rumours of realisation as told by Künzang Dorje Rinpoche
with additional tales of the unexpected

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Aro Books
New York
First Kindle Edition: 2012
This book is dedicated to the memory of

Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche:
Karma Gyalpo—the King of Realised Activity,

and to the continued inspiration of his realised consort

Jomo Sam’phel Déchen

If there is any value to be found in this book, it is entirely due to the inspiration of my Lamas.

If inspiration is gained from the essential nature of what is presented here, it is entirely due to their genius.

If faults are found they are entirely due to my inadequacies as an inconsequential eccentric.
I gratefully acknowledge all my Lamas, particularly:

Kyabjé Düd’jom Jig’drél Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche; Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche; Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche & Jomo Sam’phel Déchen; Kyabjé Khordong gTérchen Tulku Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche; and Khamtrül Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche.

I also—especially—gratefully acknowledge Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche who showed such immeasurable kindness to Khandro Déchen and myself. His wisdom and foresight provided us the courage to continue to be as we are – for the benefit of others.

Khandro Déchen joins me in extending our thanks to our vajra sangha of ordained gö kar chang lo disciples—the gö kar chang lo’i-dé of the Confederate Sanghas of Aro—particularly the Aro gTér brevet lamas with their respective sanghas of apprentices and ordained disciples.

We also thank our vajra family of apprentices in Britain, Europe, Scandanavia, and the United States.

Finally we thank the Friends of each of the Aro Charities in Britain, the United States, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland – for their enthusiasm and continuing support.

sNgags ’chang chos dByings rGya mTsho o rGyan lTogs lDan
and

mKha’ ’gro bDe chen tshe grub rig rTsal rol pa’i ye shes
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History and Future of The Confederate Sanghas of Aro
Wisdom Eccentrics—the title of this book—is the coinage of Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche.[1] I’ve always appreciated the way the term describes my most revered Lamas.[2] This book is a journey woven from stories. It’s only partially linear and lacks many events that would categorise it as an autobiography or even a memoir. It’s a pastiche of stories rather than a series of connected events – and I’ve left much to be inferred.

My main intention in writing was to remember my Lama—Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche—and to make him known to others.[3] He related a fascinating series of stories back in the ’70s – and imparted a great deal through the telling. Transmission occurred on many occasions throughout our time together – and at other times with other Lamas.

I have not pinpointed these moments for various reasons – the most important being that transmission is both extraordinary and ordinary. It cannot be described without diminishing or aggrandising the experience – and I have no interest in either. Suffice it to say that there may be more to this than meets the eye.

Part I—*now you something say*—is a series of preambles that take me to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s door. It gives a basic background for understanding what follows. It’s not a technical introduction to Vajrayana Buddhism. It does cover some important ground that is essential to understanding the stories – and possibly also the author. These stories—or wisdom-lays—are reflective of the unusual style in which they were conveyed to me by Künzang Dorje Rinpoche – but they’re recounted according to my own linguistic and literary appreciation. That’s what Rinpoche advised. They’re narrated according to the cant of an eccentric Englishman – a former Blues musician and art student.

Part II—*the attack without mercy*—takes you into the stories of Tibetan Lamas told by Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. These stories have been told before[4] … well … most of them. I don’t pretend to make a finer job of the telling than others have made – simply a different job. It’s all in the way of telling – and style of language. “And that’s the way of it …” as story-teller Shivam O’Brien often concluded his Irish legends of Finn McCool. I can still see Shivam sitting like a figure of legend himself – in the Iron Age roundhouse he built on a hillside in North Wales. I spent many an evening in the summers of the early ’90s listening to his wonderful tales. The stories
presented here also tell the story of my relationship with Rinpoche—as it developed—and as I was irredeemably changed by the experience … The transmogrification of a tomfool into some kind of Tom Bombadil was as harrowing to the author as it is likely to be comical to the reader.

Part III—\textit{this is strange}—mainly concerns 'Khordong gTérchen Tulku Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche, and the stories are quite …personal … sometimes entirely bizarre.

Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche was many times larger than life – and those he attracted as students were also somewhat larger than life. I’ve changed the names of the characters—apart from Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche—in order to avoid ruffling anyone’s feathers. My intention is to portray a gestalt – not to malign anyone. Aside from accounts concerning Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche – I have a few of my own stories to tell – concerning my time in the Himalayas and other places. These stories provide a picture—albeit a highly subjective one—of how Buddhism has been misunderstood in the West. I felt obliged to say something on this subject as Künzang Dorje Rinpoche always emphasised that Tibetan culture and Vajrayana were not necessarily the same. I would point out in similar vein that Buddhism and psychotherapy are not—in some instances—even remotely similar. Wisdom eccentrics are probably as popular as they ever were—as persons who appear on the printed page—but, unlike in old Tibet, where they were accurately understood – the West tends to shroud them in all manner of misconceptions.

Part IV—\textit{tales from somewhere beyond time}—sees me reunited with Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and introduces Khandro Déchen, my wife and sang-yum. It takes the history up to the passing and parinirvana of Rinpoche. There were stories here too – but they are not followed by interrogation as were the previous stories. This part of the book is more a series of vignettes of personality display – and time spent with Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel in Yang-lé-shöd and Bodha in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal.

Part V—\textit{the portal of potency: describing the indescribable}—is a collection of material that was too technical—in terms of Vajrayana terminology and Vajrayana theory—to include in Part II: a brief autobiography of Rinpoche; a listing of twenty-one of the twenty-five female disciples of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel; and, a discussion relating to the gö kar chang lo’i dé.

This material will mainly be of interest to those who have studied Vajrayana Buddhism within the Nyingma Tradition and who have a particular interest in the yogic wing of that tradition.
Part I

… now you something say
Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche told me “Vajrayana is not ordinary and so ordinary language cannot be used. Vajrayana is the poetry of existence beyond space and time. Vajrayana is every art and you must be practising every art. If you do not practise every art – how can you know the elements? And if you do not know the elements – how can you know the essence of the elements and open your eyes to great vision?” Art has therefore been my life in every sense – as far as I can make that possible. This book is a symbol of my gratitude to Rinpoche for making that obvious to me.

When I taught alongside Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche in Frankfurt, Germany – he’d sometimes turn ’round to me—at the most unlikely times—and say “Now you something say for an hour.” So … I’d launch into an aspect within the general subject matter on which Rinpoche was teaching. Once I happened to conclude five minutes early and Rinpoche said “Still five minutes coming.” So I’d launch in again without a moment to reflect: “… To look at this question from another perspective …”

‘They Sikkim him here, they Sikh him there – they seek young Chögyam everywhere. Is he in heaven? Is he in hell? That damned accursed ne’er-do-well.’[5]

Now, I something say … for some hundred thousand words … or more …
Every Lama with whom I’ve studied has been a raconteur. It’s an integral aspect of the rôle. This book describes the evolution of my experience in that rôle. You’ll either excuse my language—or not—but I’ve decided to write in the vernacular. I’m going to write as if I were speaking personally, with friends or students. It’ll give you an idea of the person who’s writing and how he sees the world.

The experience I bring to relating these lays comes from a lifetime’s committed involvement with Nyingma Vajrayana Buddhism. That experience is what it is: neither elevated nor completely demented; neither realised nor too viciously deranged. My writing style is also what it is: neither eloquently polished nor linguistically stunted; neither academically erudite nor illiterate. I’m informed by the language of my times – and by the literature I’ve read, from Ted Hughes and Allen Ginsberg back to Shakespeare and Chaucer.

I’m influenced by having a self-made man as a father. He was the youngest son of an elderly father who lacked the resources to set him up in life—a pattern continued with my father’s own sons. My father thus began his working life at fourteen as a docker in Chatham, Kent. After a year he misrepresented his age – and joined the Army as a private soldier. He was made up to the rank of major after obtaining engineering qualifications. He did well for himself in the Army – but he was never socially accepted by other officers: he was a ‘war-time major’.

Social estrangement and strain of work retired him with a heart condition in 1952. He found himself in Aldershot—‘Home of the British Army’—where he secured a civilian post as a quantity surveyor attached to the Ministry of Works.

His name was Jesse Ernest. ‘Jesse’ after Jesse James and ‘Ernest’ after The Importance of Being Earnest. His father—Charles Mathew—was a true Victorian working class gentleman and veteran of the Boer War. His mother, Elizabeth Mary, was a sprightly lass brought up to the farming life. They were both well-read in spite of meagre circumstances – and the Arts were not foreign to them. My father took to dictionaries for bed-time reading – and developed the habit of learning a new word every week. He’d then use the word in conversation each day until it became a normal part of his vocabulary. “Manners maketh man…” he used to say “…and speech maketh the gentleman.”

My mother—Renate Maria Frieda Louisa Schubert—was born when her father was fifty – and strangely enough I followed suit – my father being born
in 1902 and my appearing in 1952. She was the granddaughter of Franz Schubert. I learnt from her that ‘kindness makes you what you are’ – but she never made a saying out of it. That was simply how she was. She was an intelligent, highly educated, and cultured woman who could have married a man from a similar background – if it hadn’t been for the War. Her family was horrendously reduced in circumstances by her parents’ opposition to Hitler. Her brother Berndt—along with others in the Brandenburg Company—was involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot was discovered, and the whole company was sent to the Russian front, where he and all his company died on 19 December 1943. Her mother had to escape to Denmark ’til the war ended, as she’d been implicated due to the help she’d given to Jewish families.

My mother and her brother Berndt had telepathic communication. They used to play a game where she’d stare into his eyes and know what card he had picked from a deck. When Berndt died, my mother fell unconscious and had cuts and bruises where her brother had wounds.

My grandmother—on my mother’s side—had premonitions which always proved true. I believe this – because neither lady was given to flights of fancy. My mother only mentioned it when I started talking about Tibet. She mentioned it only the once – but it seeded me with the idea that there really is more to the world than meets the eye.

There are spiritual types who’ll tell you all kinds of nonsense – but my mother was distinctly not one of those. Apart from this one account she was entirely down to earth on all matters. When it comes to me … I can tell any card from a pack as long as I’m looking straight at it. I can even hit them at twenty yards with a .38 wad-cutter. Like my mother – I’m not particularly given to flights of fancy. That has not always made life easy. At art school one in every two girls was designing her own Tarot cards. Astrology underpinned ‘the Age of Aquarius’ – and that was the death of conversation, as far as I was concerned. I’m not that fond of spiritual seekers – not that I allow that to prejudice me toward people with whom I have no acquaintance. I always give people the benefit of the doubt – but then … spiritual seekers often take a dislike to me. It thus all works out one way or another – and I wish everyone extremely well. What would the world be without variety?

The influence of both my parents will probably be apparent in terms of how the lays in this book emerge. Throughout my childhood my father read to the family: my mother, brother, and myself. He also reminisced about his wartime experiences in China and India. He was never in Tibet – although he came fairly close.

My father fancied himself as something of a raconteur – and if something of his admiration of the Victorian novel comes through, then I trust I may be
forgiven. Tibetans always want to know about your family and so I’ve told you – and in that way a tradition is continued.

Although it may be offensive to those who prefer their Tibetan stories expressed in archaic honorifics – I can’t pretend that Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Beat poetry, Roger McGough, Sylvia Plath, or Ted Hughes were not important to me.

I’d regard it as ungrateful to forget the pints of ginger beer I drank as an art student, talking with Adrian Henry after his visit to the Hatch Mill annex of Farnham Art School. I’d not feel genuine if I put aside the impact of the Blues lyrics I heard in the garden of the Bush Hotel, where Mike Cooper made his National Resophonic Tricone steel guitar sing and cry. The words and deeds of Tibetan yogis and yoginis exist in the same world as the world of: John Milton and Milton Keynes; William Blake and Willie Dixon; Franz Schubert and Frank Zappa; William Shakespeare and William Carlos Williams. For anyone who wants access to the teachings of wisdom eccentrics – it’s found within the world we know. Trying to find it in a Land of Snows you may never see is impractical. Even to look to India for wisdom eccentrics is no longer as possible as it was in the 1970s. Those days are more or less gone. The nondual inspiration however, remains – often in unexpected places such as upstate New York or the Santa Cruz Mountains. My own sense of inspiration has always been ignited by the bridges I’ve found between: the Land of Snows and the Green and Pleasant Land of Blake; the wild Lamas of Golok and the Wild West.

The wisdom eccentrics of these lays discovered the nature of Mind as human beings. The lineage of wisdom eccentrics therefore, is represented by a wide range of personalities as colourful and disconcerting as: Boadicea and Bo Diddley; Lady Godiva and Noel Coward; John Lennon and John Martyn; Mae West and Oscar Wilde …

I’ve made no attempt to reproduce a mediæval world in these wisdom-lays, or to furnish them with a timbre of piety or ætheric orientalism. The important aspects are exactly those which were presented to me – but, I’ve attempted to give them a contemporary literary narrative quality. That’s what Rinpoche instructed me to do. “Tell these stories to your students. Make a book – but tell the stories in the language of the West – so that people will enjoy them and understand them. These are not just stories from the past – they are stories for practitioners everywhere in all times.”

With regard to telling these stories in the language of the West – I should make reference to the milieu of the West vis-à-vis current views and mores. From this perspective, it is important to understand that the references to pæderasty and homosexuality in monasteries do not represent homophobia on the part of Künzang Dorje Rinpoche or Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche.
Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had gay students, and both he and Künzang Dorje Rinpoche were entirely open-minded.

Two of our gay ordained students accompanied Khandro Déchen and myself to visit Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. The nature of their relationship was evident to him – and they were warmly received. He was more interested in the seriousness of meditation practice than romantic orientation – and he based his view of people solely on that criterion. He said “Every style of perception is utilised by Vajrayana to realise the nondual state. Vajrayana is the method by which everything is accomplished through all possible means.”

The criticisms with regard to homosexuality were based on the fact that monastics vow to be celibate. Many Lamas have told me that monastic status is seen as valuable by Tibetans. Many Tibetans apparently become monks purely for the social standing it gives them – and live as hypocrites in respect of sexuality and renunciation.

Interestingly, Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche and Künzang Dorje Rinpoche made no equivalent jests regarding nuns. The two Lamas told me that this was because the lowly social status of nuns determined that all who took nuns’ vows were entirely serious about their religious lives. They said that most nunneries were small and populated by sincere practitioners – who were often possessed of significant spiritual experience.

Another point that should be born in mind is that although there was a great deal of criticism of monasteries and monastics – every Lama with whom I studied had a profound respect for the monastic order established by Shakyamuni Buddha.

They all knew exemplary monastics – and the main reason the criticisms exist can be attributed to the fact that monasticism represents the dominant spiritual culture of Tibet. It is hardly surprising therefore, that it comes under scrutiny.

Other than the Tibetan humour concerning monastic perversion—which I’ve transcribed verbatim—I’ve employed the images of the Himalayan regions that linger in my mind. Also included are fragments from the kaleidoscope of all the images I’ve ever known: in movies; literature; poetry; prose; songs; arias; and, in the momentary arising of inspiration that continually floods from the lays themselves.

The Khamba and Golok Lamas I’ve met in the United States have invariably commented on the similarity they see between the culture of Kham and Golok and the culture of the Old West. Once—when invited to lunch with Tulku Thubten Rinpoche—he noticed the Western boots beneath my white shamthab. His eyes lit up, and he whispered conspiratorially “I have like this …” He then reached up onto a shelf and brought down a box emblazoned
with the name Tony Lama.[8] He opened the box and pulled out the cherished boots. I inspected them and he inspected mine. Then he showed his Stetson hat. Then he brought out a photograph of himself riding a bull. It was a ‘put-your-head-through-the-hole-in-the-picture’ shot – but it was clear that he’d have been on a real bull if’n he’d had the chance. Some years later Khandro Déchen and I sat with a group of our students, watching a Golok rodeo with Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen. Apart from Tibetan folk music, the scene was pretty much what we’d witnessed in Montana – but with far fewer safety precautions. The riders shot at targets set up in front of the bleachers where the audience sat. Not such a problem perhaps, if the riders had been astride their saddles – but these shots were taken from beneath the bellies of the horses. This required the riders to be upside down. Anyone in the bleachers could have caught a stray bullet – but those riders hit the target every time.

When seen in public—in Bodha,[9] as elsewhere—I always wear a Western hat and often Western boots – and these are always greeted with delight by Tibetans from Kham and Golok. It’s been heart-warming when such fine people accost me in Bodha saying “Ngakpa! Ya-po’ du!”[10] They then point at the hat and boots and say the same: “Ya-po’ du!” Now all our students—who have the chutzpah—don Western hats and boots on pilgrimage to Bodha. It’s clear that everyone from Kham and Golok loves to see it as much as we love to see their chubas[11] and long braided hair. This has become its own story – and now you can see Western hats for sale in Bodha. Word obviously got ’round that this is what people are wearing. It’s a communication—like language—and that style of communication is important to the way this book is written. My wife—Khandro Déchen—and I enjoy the Old West so some of the dialogue reflects that idiom. I remain an Englishman however, so these Golok Lamas and brigands are also given to a whimsicality of phraseology.

Although the wisdom-lays related to me by Rinpoche are accompanied by commentaries in the form of discussions – they don’t set out to provide definitive meanings. As Rinpoche points out in one of the following discussions “The meaning I find is not better than the one you find … Maybe there are many meanings – and maybe none of them match Paltrül’s mind. The important matter is method – skilful means.”

In the early stages of our relationship, Rinpoche was stern and formal – and the story came first with little or no introduction. Then—as time went on—Rinpoche became increasingly convivial and anecdotal – often telling multiple stories. Towards the end, the stories and conversation became utterly interwoven. It’s a clichéd observation on my part – but my training was an ‘organic process’ and it grew – as it grew.
I don’t think Rinpoche had any fixed plan when he started relating these wisdom-lays – apart from inciting in me an experiential grasp of ‘principle and function’. He was to give me transmission of Dzogchen – and for that to be possible, I had to have a mind sufficiently clear of useless philosophical baggage. Rinpoche obviously enjoyed unfurling these wisdom-lays – but he never recounted them just for the sake of telling a story. As our time together proceeded, I became increasingly attuned to seeing the motivation of the inhabitants of each account – and, as my perception cleared, so they became increasingly vital and inspiring.

These wisdom-lays have been re-told countless times – so there’ll be many different versions available. Rinpoche sometimes gave me alternative versions that he knew – and it was clear that he didn’t ascribe greater veracity to any one particular version. It would seem that these variations acquired different slants according to the narrator. They’re told to emphasise whatever point a Lama might be making in particular instances – and times. In turn, these slants evolved further slants – until occasionally, the stories evolved radically contrasting presentations. This oral tradition is gloriously open to human process. It suggests history as being whatever it needs to be at any one time in order to be of real value to people.

I trust that those who know other versions of these lays will not be offended or irritated by what I’ve presented here. There’s room in the world for entirely disparate renditions. I hope that other practitioners will also write these lays in their own styles. There are as many fashions of telling wisdom-lays as there are tellers – and as many meanings to be found within these lays as there are people to benefit from them. To anyone who’s moved to write their own versions: Good Luck, y’all!
The year was ’75. I was twenty-three – and ready to head for the hills. I’d made the weighty decision to quit the direction I’d taken five years earlier – on the basis of well-reasoned considerations.[12] The art school situation had changed and it was no longer possible to become an art school lecturer directly on completion of a masters degree. Becoming a working artist first was the new requirement. That seemed like lunacy to me. Why launch into a career as an artist, with the plan to jettison it to gain employment as an art school lecturer? What sort of enthusiasm would there be in embarking on a temporary career – with all the effort that such an undertaking would require? You’d have to be obsessed with the idea or it would be a non-starter. In future the only people who’d become art school lecturers would be people who previously never considered it. Ridiculous. I could have followed another route. Yes … some were suggested – but pondering those alternatives left the sour aftertaste of compromise. I wasn’t good at compromise – unless it was for the sake of friends or colleagues. I wasn’t that desperate either. There were more important things in life than securing a career at any cost.

That’s the history—cryptic, I know—but that’s what galvanised me. That’s what sent me to the Himalayas. Lead on, Carruthers!

I’d initially planned to wait ’til I retired to head East – but instead … I took early retirement. Best decision I—ever—made.

Now we’ve got that out of the way, I should explain that I wasn’t the callow youth that some young people are today at the age of twenty-three—far from it. I spoke my mind. I led my own life. I wasn’t arrogant in the conventional sense—because I liked people and I liked people to be happy—but I never took any nonsense. I tended to give-as-good-as-I-got, especially with self-appointed autocrats, petty despots, demagogues, and tinsel-town tyrants. I wasn’t exactly a rebel – I just liked to see fair play and mutual respect. I had no habit of kicking against the traces for its own sake – but neither was I a natural-born conformist.

The reason I’m explaining this is because there may be some people who find my relationship with Rinpoche a little bewildering. To those unfamiliar with Vajrayana, I risk coming across as some sort of gaga devotee. That was—and is—distinctly not the case. I’d seen plenty of bliss-kids during the ’60s – and they never liked me that much. I was too cynical for them – and they were too ætheric for me. Their jargon was as foreign to me as their curiously adopted West Coast American accents. I could never quite understand why
they expected me to believe they’d always talked like that – when they were English-born and brought up in the Home Counties.[13] It’s not that I never used the word ‘hassle’—it’s a good descriptive word—but I could never quite see the value of adopting hippie patois wholesale. Yes, I’d done the whole brown rice, tofu, and lentils thing – but although some elements of whole food remain in my diet – I prefer Italian cuisine. As for rooibos tea—give me a break—show me the nearest drain.

There were certainly things about my native culture that I didn’t like – but I had no desire to disparage everything about being English. I had no desire to become a born-again Tibetan. I loved the Tibetans’ culture and admired the Tibetans as people – but … as a Bluesman I could never become a black American, and as a Buddhist I could never become a Tibetan.

I met people for whom becoming Tibetan was ‘the answer’ – and I had no objection to that at all. I always thought that Tibetan costume was rather fine —especially that of the Golok brigands—but somehow, I couldn’t see what was intrinsically better about it than my beloved Levi Strauss 501 Serge de Nîmes trousers. I wear robes when I teach – because that’s the instruction I received from my Lamas. When I’m not teaching or representing the tradition however, I wear what I have always worn: Levis, collarless shirt, an early 1900s waistcoat, and Western boots.

I’ve never been attracted to mindless obedience to anything. I never toed the hippie party line or its conventional alternatives. I see rules as being subject to personal choice and common sense. I don’t obey speed limits. I simply drive carefully. Sometimes this means driving slower than allowed – in streets where children may be playing. Politically I’m an anarchist—always was, always will be. Whichever way you vote … it’s a government gets elected. Laws are for people who cannot govern themselves – and for whom freedom and responsibility are alien. The reason not to steal or murder is not – that to do so leads to punishment. If a person is kind—and seeks the happiness and well being of others as a natural response to being alive—then ethics and morality will be intrinsic. You simply have to like people, animals, and the whole slew of limitless phenomena.

The next thing I’d like to explain is that Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche had no desire to have power over me. He didn’t want me to do anything I didn’t particularly want to do. He didn’t even want me visiting him – let alone his having to take personal responsibility for teaching me. If it hadn’t been for the letter I carried from Kyabje Düd’jom Rinpoche,[14] he’d have turned me away. Düd’jom Rinpoche had written a letter of introduction which requested him to take me under his wing.

I’ll tell the story of how I delivered that letter later – it may cause some amusement. First however, let me describe the Lama who came to mean more
Künzang Dorje Rinpoche was beyond anything I’d ever known. He was kind—extremely kind—but in a manner that was initially incomprehensible. He was also majestically—if not vividly—ruthless. Somehow, I knew he liked me— but whether he liked me as a father might like his son, or as a tiger might like a gazelle—was not easy to distinguish. He was dazzlingly wild—magnificently ferocious—and he knew the answer to the nature of existence. He read it like a book. He read it in everything he saw, heard, tasted, or otherwise sensated.

At the outset of my training, being able to relax in his company was a fleeting experience. I suppose I must say that—apart from Düd’jom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche—I’d never really experienced devotion for anyone before. There’d been people I’d respected in the past—sure—and some had certainly been older and far wiser. The last person to be worthy of respect had been Derek Crowe, the Head of Illustration at Bristol Art School. He was so entirely jovial and avuncular however, that—although he was an authority figure—his authority never impinged on our relationship in any obvious way. I just knew him to be a thoroughly good, worthy, and honourable man. He was knowledgeable, cultured, humorous, witty, whimsical, and eccentric—but open-minded and circumspect. His eccentricity never impinged on others and his humour was never at the expense of others. He was very much what I wanted to be, when I became an art school lecturer—but that was not to be.

This is a good point to set another matter straight—in case you’re wondering—I wasn’t searching for a father figure. To be honest … Derek Crowe did serve me in that rôle—but by the time I hauled out to India, I was pretty much my own man. I could handle most things thrown my way, and there was no question of parents bailing me out. I had some self-respect in terms of being independent. That’s probably an outrageous statement to make in the twenty-first century—where people are often not entirely independent adults until their thirties—but in the middle of the twentieth century, it wasn’t quite that unusual.

I won’t go into my personal history here because it’s well documented elsewhere.[15] Suffice it to say that I considered myself an adult at fourteen years of age—because, amongst other things, I worked every weekend from that point ’til I went to art school. In the early 1860s, fourteen-year-old Confederate and Union drummer boys were walking into musket fire. In the late 1700s, ten- to twelve-year-old powder monkeys were scuttling between decks as the ship they served was raked by French cannonade—and some eighteen-year-old women had already had three babies, with two having died in their infancy … That’s a thought which might give some perspective to this question of maturity. Maturity is often merely what society suggests or
demands.

Anyhow … I was simply searching for the secrets of existence – and Rinpoche was a major custodian of that knowledge. I’d learned enough about Vajrayana by the point I met him, to regard him as a Viking might regard Thor or Odin. When you begin having even the faintest idea that someone knows everything there is to know about reality – that person ceases to be ordinary in any sense. How did I know he knew that? Well … to be honest … I can’t answer that. All I can say is that it seemed obvious to me at the time. I felt it in my blood, bone, muscle, cartilage, and nasal septum.

There was also some logic that went along with it – because I’d studied the Madhyamaka psychology of perception. That—together with the sheer human presence of Lamas such as Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche and Künzang Dorje Rinpoche—filled me with awe. You obviously have to get over awe to some degree. If you don’t get over it, you’d never learn anything – but it’s a state of mind that’s probably necessary in the beginning. It happens of itself—in any case—because study and practice lift the veil that prevents a person seeing certain Lamas for what they are. True, there are some Lamas who are simply members of the clergy; and, although worthy of high respect, they’re not likely to nail your head to the wall with a mere glance.

Much is said of ‘devotion’ in Tibetan Buddhist circles. The general idea is that you’re supposed to have it. If you don’t have it, there’s no way forward. Because of this, too many people try to have it – without it having them. What’s that supposed to mean? It’s not mysterious – it means there’s no choice about devotion once you follow a certain line far enough to have direct experience. When it happens – it’s obvious. You can’t manufacture it – and it cannot be demanded. If it’s a direct response to what you see—based on your own knowledge and experience—there’s no question. If you fabricate it – it falls apart.

There were plenty of spiritual types who fabricated it. Some of them turned it into something quite obnoxious. Some merely became jellified. Some made a competition out of it – in terms of who had more than others. Some turned it into a cult. Some were encouraged to turn it into a cult. Not every person who looks like a Lama is going to be what they’re supposed to be. There are horror stories in every religion, and Buddhism is no exception. There are certainly a few Lamas who are no better than cult gurus – and it would be no service to Vajrayana if I pretended that were not the case. There was some cultic type from Kalamazoo called Eddie Kurtz – a veritable sumo hamster who’d set himself up as an enlightened master. He had some entirely bizarre Lama circus set-up going where obedience to his whims was the main practice. The idea was that male students worshiped him – whilst the female students were summoned to his bed. This kind of situation should be no cause
for surprise however – because the estimated percentage for sociopaths in the general population is eight per thousand.

It was sad to see people playing the devotion game and vilifying those who’d not learned the rules. I generally kept away from Western people in India and Nepal – because I found we had little in common. I even pretended not to speak English at one point. I’d reply “Entschuldigung, aber ich kann kein Englisch sprechen.” This generally worked and they’d reply “Yeah, like cool man – see y’round.” One day however, I ran into Johannes Frischknecht – who replied to me in German. He soon lost me. My German is rudimentary.

I admitted my ploy – and jolly silly I felt. Johannes thought it was extremely funny. He had to sit down on the steps of the store that faced the chörten – because he was crying with laughter. We’re still friends to this day. Johannes turned out to be a Tibetan translator and an expert on Vajrayana ritual symbolic accoutrements.[16] He helped me a great deal in my studies with Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche – both as a translator and as a guide with respect to accessing materia-tantrica.

So back to devotion. As far as I’m concerned devotion isn’t measured in terms of empowerments or anything that can be added to your spiritual credit rating. Devotion is direct understanding – and that never has any need of being displayed. In spiritual terms this could sound too subtle, too abstruse to understand – but the same phenomenon exists in the world of the Arts. Almost anyone can enjoy world-class music – but only a proficient musician can know the worth of a world-class musician. The greater your musical ability the more astonishing a master-musician becomes. Mozart is a composer of extremely pretty melodies – until you learn enough about music to understand his compositions. JS Bach is a composer of marvellously intricate sonic adventures – until you learn something about contrapuntal composition. Then you gasp. Jack Bruce said “Bach was my greatest bass teacher.” So … Bach isn’t some dim and distant figure. Bach is alive and well – and his compositions are as fresh as the present moment. I’d describe that statement as ‘devotion’ – the gasp born of the inseparable nature of developed musical knowledge and critically-inspired appreciation.

Now … I don’t want to give the impression that my gasping at Rinpoche’s spiritual genius is some mighty qualification. I certainly gasped – but there was much in what he did that made the gasping possible. He made it possible in the way a racing driver could introduce an experience that was out of your range. You’d get yourself strapped into the seat—cocoon your head in the safety helmet—and then … the racing driver would make you gasp.

You’d probably not be able to drive in excess of 200 miles an hour and handle bends on a race track at that speed – but you could sit there and gasp. Of course … I’d had preparation for this experience, with Kyabjé Düd’jom
Düd’jom Rinpoche had certainly inspired me to gasp – but in a different way from Rinpoche. With Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche it was like being on another planet – but with Rinpoche that planet was teeming with harrowing threats to my sanity. I was electrically on-edge in circumstances that were utterly unpredictable. I never knew which way the tiger was going to pounce. I never knew which of my cherished concepts of reality he was going to devour. In spite of the terror however, I came back day after day to a jungle – in which I was tentatively willing prey. Sometimes we’d simply sit in silence together. Sometimes in the silence he would suddenly roar “Hey! Look! Now! What is the nature of Mind!”

So … what was I doing putting my head into the tiger’s jaws, when Düd’jom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche had both been the epitome of gentleness? They’d both made me tingle with giddy exhilaration as my practice evolved – but they never terrified me. It would have been wonderful to have stayed with Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche – but he was the head of the Nyingma Tradition. His responsibilities had grown since I’d first met him in 1971, and he no longer had the time he used to have at his disposal for wandering Westerners. Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche also had disciples in great numbers in India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Both great Lamas were committed to giving teachings and empowerments throughout the Indian subcontinent and Taiwan. Because of this, Düd’jom Rinpoche advised me to seek Künzang Dorje Rinpoche out as my main teacher, and so it was that he became my Tsawa’i Lama. It was from him that I received almost everything I understand of Dzogchen men-ngag-dé – the series of implicit instruction.

Now we come to another subject that needs to be understood, in order to comprehend the wisdom-lays that compose this book: the rôle of the vajra master. Rinpoche was my vajra master and that meant that I was committed to seeing everything exactly as he saw it. If we differed in view – I was wrong. I was at his command – for whatever it might be. I’d put myself —and my sanity—in his hands. Some people think this is an Eastern mode of tutelage that has no place in the West or with Western people – but in that they are misguided. The vajra master exists in Christianity and Judæism – and probably in most other religious traditions. Rather than quote scripture however, I’ll quote Bob Dylan:

_God said “Abraham kill me a son.”_

_Abe said “Man, you must be putting me on!”_

_God said “No.” And Abe said “What?!”_

_God said “You can do what you want, Abe, but next time you see me_
coming you better run.”

Abe said “Where d’you want this killing done?”

God said “Out on Highway 61.”

The reason I choose to quote Bob Dylan is because I live in that world as much as I live in the world of Vajrayana. Rinpoche didn’t use any form of exalted speech with me – and what he had to say was often loaded and ironic in the same way that the God of Bob Dylan’s song said “You can do what you want, Abe…” I could have done what I wanted – I could have walked out at any point. Rinpoche was not keeping me there. Unlike the God of Bob Dylan’s song, there was no threat “… but next time you see me coming you better run”, because Rinpoche was no tyrant or sociopathic cult guru. I doubt whether Düd’jom Rinpoche would have minded too much if I’d quit. It was well known that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche was a wrathful Lama. The problem was that I would have minded. Anyhow, I knew that Rinpoche was the real deal. I knew it with every goddamn fibre of my being.

I was actually entirely at liberty; completely the master of my own destiny – as far as that is conventionally possible. I was simply trapped by my own knowledge of what was possible in my relationship with the Tiger of Tantra.

So … Künzang Dorje … what’s in a name? Kun means ‘all’ – but kun might be better rendered as ‘total’. Zang means ‘good’ – but ‘good’ can be a prissy word in some respects – and should not be thought of as ‘the good that is the opposite of bad’. Zang has more the sense of ‘complete’ or ‘whole’ – like tasting a good brandy. It is a whole fulfilling experience beyond which nothing else could be required. ‘Good’ pertains to complete lack of doubt. [22] The word Künzang also relates to Küntuzangpo[23] – the personification of the primordial nondual state. Dorje means ‘indestructible’. Dorje also means ‘diamond’, ‘adamantine’, or ‘thunderbolt’. So Künzang Dorje could be translated as ‘thunderbolt of total completeness’. It could also mean the tiger who ate me from the inside out. That might not make sense to anyone – but it gives the sense of the Lama who rearranged my conceptual mind with the violent virtuosity of consummate uncompromising skill.

In some of the wisdom-lays you will find reference to yetis, zombies, and miracles. These are part of Tibetan culture and part of Vajrayana. There’s no need to believe in these things in order to enjoy this book – because the lays don’t depend on belief in such phenomena. They depend on their essential meaning. I don’t advocate belief or disbelief with respect to anything that is not within anyone’s personal realm of experience. Not being able to believe shouldn’t be confused with active disbelief. You can remain agnostic. You can simply not know. They say that human beings have walked on the moon – but I’ve no absolute proof of that. It’s what my culture tells me. I
have no reason to doubt it – but what evidence do I have? I have the same evidence that any Tibetan has, as to whether zombies exist.

I’ve never seen a zombie – but that doesn’t mean I have to disbelieve in them. It doesn’t mean I have to believe in them either. Now … people don’t tend to like that limbo—that intermediate state between certainty and uncertainty—but … it’s highly creative and open to endless possibilities.

I feel that it is possible to enter the world of Vajrayana – whilst remaining English or whatever nationality you happen to be. I believe that you can cross boundaries and live in the tidal margins between cultures. You can be a gay rodeo rider; a vegetarian fire-arms enthusiast; a priest who enjoys the sport of pugilism; a pacifist who enjoys war novels; or, a heavy metal guitarist who loves Baroque chamber music. You can even be a hippie who speaks the Queen’s English, enjoys Shakespeare plays, and reads Jane Austen novels … Oh, that’s me by the way – welcome to my book.
Before describing the journey to Tso Pema—or unfolding the experiential milieu I entered with Künzang Dorje Rinpoche—there’s some background to cover. It’ll help in terms of understanding the pilgrim’s metaphysical point of view. I’d begun to study Buddhism at the age of eight or nine—although the word ‘study’ is employed somewhat loosely. I found two books in the school library—On the Road through Tibet and Tibetan Art. I read these books repeatedly ’til I found other books. Those all proved far too difficult to understand—and so I returned to the aforementioned ’til I pretty much knew them by heart. As I grew older, the books by Giuseppe Tucci et al. began to make a little more sense—although I continued to find them monumentally turgid—especially the ‘thee and thou’ favoured by Evans-Wentz. By the time I set out for the Himalayas I had the broad principles down—from a variety of sources including Theravada and Zen.

Tibetan Buddhism proved the most inaccessible in terms of practice—so most of my instruction came from Zen and Theravada. Silent sitting seemed to be the heart of it all—and so I sat every day. The idea of sitting was intriguing because I’d sat silently since childhood—and had been harangued about it by my father, “Why can’t you play like a normal boy!” I was always able to sit and stare—without going off into dreams. I’d just observe the colours and sounds of my environment and allow them to drift in and out of my observation.

It was the idea of silence that eventually led me to Dzogchen as being the heart of everything. I tried to sit for an hour every day from the age of about sixteen onward. The Buddhist Society in London provided me with the address of the Tibetan Friendship Group—and they, in turn, provided me with a penfriend—Yeshé Khandro—in McLeod Ganj, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh, India.

So—with that strange synopsis out of the way—the journey begins. September ’71 and the chota baresh—the little rains—were supposed to be over. So much for information books on India… That was no big deal however—as I was rising up out of the lowlands of Himachal Pradesh into the foothills of the Himalayas, and that was where I wanted to be come rain or shine. It didn’t look as I expected it to look—but then again…I had no precise expectations. I think I expected these foothills to look like Wales or Scotland. If I did I was disappointed—but then it changed suddenly. Pine trees took over from subtropical trees. Rock escarpments began to emerge. It was still drizzling. The drizzle however gradually turned into cloud—and, eventually, into McLeod Ganj.
The little hill station loomed into view through the mist and I got my first view of a chörten – a white monument which describes realisation in terms of the elements.

It was simple and elegant – and the gold crescent moon and sun disc at its zenith glowed warmly in the cold air.

Yeshé Khandro had been going out to meet every bus-up-the-hill for two days – and there she was, looking just like her photograph. She was a student at the Tibetan School of Medicine and Astrology, and I was to lodge with her aunt – Ama Norga, the chang[31] lady.

What a strange and wonderful place. This deserted British hill station had received an influx of Tibetan refugees and a shantytown had evolved – roofs made of beaten-out oil cans. The doors of the shacks were made of oil cans hammered onto wooden frames – some brightly painted. It was a shantytown – but, unlike India, litter-free. Every dwelling was enlivened with flowers grown in painted cans. The human dignity—unmistakable in these efforts—has remained with me down to the present day. I can still see that scene glowing in my mind. It’s a symbol of nobility and courage in the face of adversity.

I spent part of every day wandering the mountain track between McLeod Ganj and Forsyth Bazaar. McLeod Ganj and Forsyth Bazaar—as you’d imagine—were names left over from the British Raj. They were hill stations – but little was left of what they were, apart from a deserted church that lay between them – St John in the Wilderness. The church could have been lifted directly from England, and sat—in charming incongruity—in a Himalayan forest, mouldering in silence. Tibetans told me not to explore the place as it was infested with dré – ghosts.[32] Only ngakpas[33] could venture into such a place without risk.

Ngakpas … I’d heard of them in books—by Anagarika Govinda and Alexandra David-Neel—and, although the stories of the latter seemed somehow suspect, I was hoping I’d meet one of these majestic mavericks of the marvellous to whom the nature of Mind was as familiar as a garden path. [34]

There was a photograph that haunted me: Ajo Répa Rinpoche – a ngakpa wearing a white widely pleated skirt, a striped shawl, and a meditation strap across his chest.[35] He wore conch spiral earrings. His uncut hair was wound up into a considerable topknot. I would always return to that picture – every time I did, I had the same thought: ‘This man knows what it’s all about.’ Ngakpas were people who inhabited the stratosphere of Vajrayana. They could be both part of the community and simultaneously entirely removed from mundane appearances. Wherever they lived, they lived in their
own dimension – a tidal margin between the explicable and the inexplicable. I had no idea how I was going to find such an embodiment of visions – but I had time to wander and follow my nose. I’d just start asking questions and see where they led me.

The point of departure was Ama Norga’s hut. Ama Norga—Yeshé Khandro’s aunt—was a splendid person. She made and sold chang – but I was abstemious at the time and so I never got to taste a drop of it. That was a pity – but Ama Norga thought I was some sort of holy man because of that – and because I was vegetarian. I heard her voice every morning as she chanted the mantra of Chenrénzsigs, wafting burning pine needles around the hut – in a tin can with slit slides that had been bulged-out like a lantern. The fragrance wafted through to the bedroom where I was usually just emerging from sleep. Her pure soprano lilt was living proof every morning that all was remarkably well with the world – whatever happened. I used to sit with Ama Norga most evenings and test out my Tibetan.

The walls of her living room/bedroom/shrine room were papered with pages from National Geographic magazines – and these gave us a wealth of opportunities for the exchange of language. I’d point to an animal and tell her what it was called in English “Horse.” Then she’d tell me what it was in Tibetan “rTa.” That’s how it came to be that I know so many animal names in Tibetan. She taught me how to count in Tibetan and gave me useful words and phrases. I wrote everything down in Tibetan script – but discovered later that Ama Norga’s spelling wasn’t fantastically accurate.

I learnt this from Sonam – a friend of Yeshé Khandro’s at the School of Medicine and Astrology. Sonam became my Tibetan language teacher, and I worked every day to learn enough to get by. Yeshé Khandro wasn’t to remain in McLeod more than a month, as she was recently married to Amji Pema Dorje—a Tibetan doctor—and she was going to join him at a clinic he’d set up in Bodha, Nepal. She was simply remaining the month in order to complete her training.

I shared a bedroom with Ama Norga’s son Phüntsog. He was a silversmith and his command of English was more than reasonable. I used to love watching him work. He made butter-lamps, shrine boxes, and all manner of wonderful things. He told me that there were two ngakpas in McLeod Ganj. One was an astrologer and a little dour. The other—Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche—was a weathermaker/exorcist – and he was known to be cheerful. I had no interest in either of their sidelines—vis-à-vis astrology, exorcism, or weathermaking—but cheerfulness sounded like my cup of tea. Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche[36] lived up at Forsyth Bazaar. I planned to walk up to find him, but that didn’t prove simple – and so, in the meantime, I enrolled at Gangchen Kyishong.[37] There I was to investigate Madhyamaka Buddhist
philosophy with Geshé Ngawang Dhargyé – a course of studies which stood me in good stead in terms of logic and understanding emptiness.

One weekend not long after I’d arrived I was walking down to McLeod Ganj — having spent the day watching the children dance at the Tibetan school in Forsyth Bazaar — when he hove into view. He was like a figure of legend and looked like Ajo Répa Rinpoche. “Yes!” he exclaimed loudly and merrily. ‘Yes’ was his one word of English – and it was a damn good one with me. Who the hell wants to hear ‘no’? The ngakpa turned out to be Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. He gesticulated—and somehow with the aid of my extremely rudimentary Tibetan—got me to understand that I was to come to his hut the day after tomorrow.

It was the hut up on the ridge, which is why I had not succeeded in finding it on my previous explorations. He pointed to the hut and said something that involved time. I knew enough Tibetan by then to know that an assignation was being arranged – but too many of the words eluded me.

“Sang-yin?” I suggested. He shook his head at ‘tomorrow’ so I tried again. “Sang-yin—sang-yin?”

He nodded gleefully at that. “Yes! Sang-yin—sang-yin!” he replied – and left me believing that I had to go to the hut on the ridge to which he was pointing on the tomorrow after tomorrow. We’d counted Tibetan numbers from one upward ’til we established a time – and all was set. I had no idea what was set – but I was jolly pleased about it. I wasn’t wearing gö kar chang lo robes then – but he seemed to have some idea about me.

The day arrived and I set out. The arrangements I’d understood were correct and I was expected. Food was enjoined upon me by Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar – Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s wife. When I’d partaken of their delightful hospitality, I was ushered though to the shrine room where sat about a dozen of the most fearsome ngakpas I’d ever seen. Maybe fearsome isn’t the right word – but I have no idea what other word to use. ‘Awesome’ is clichéd, and most other words fail to be serviceable. The ngakpas were from another time and another place, and I’d slipped sideways through time to a place where ‘supernormal’ was as natural as a stile in an English meadow – as contemporary as … ‘Wop-bop—a—loo-bop—a-lop bam boom.’ They were like relatives of Ajo Répa Rinpoche – and as soon as I saw them, I knew I’d arrived.

Alien as the situation was, I felt right at home. Then … the injis arrived. They arrived late. They’d been told the time – but anyhow … there they were, looking vacant yet imperious. For reasons too bizarre to describe, I didn’t count myself as an inji – well, not inji of this stamp.

It’s not that I thought I was Tibetan – but I saw nothing incongruous about
my presence in this hut, with these ngakpas. The reason—most likely—was that I couldn’t see myself and so there was nothing to remind me that I was ethnically other.

The injis were there for only three days of the nine-day ceremony. They talked with me a little in the tea breaks – and, despite the fact that I was evidently gauche, told me they wouldn’t be there for the rest of the ceremony. The Dalai Lama was performing a ceremony – and they’d be going there. They anticipated that I’d leave when they left – but I had other ideas on the matter.

“Thanks for the advice …” I replied “… but Rinpoche invited me to this ceremony – so I feel I should keep my commitment.”

They looked at me with incredulity. “But His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s ritual is so much more important. It doesn’t make sense to stay here. No one would miss His Holiness’ ceremony – the blessings are inconceivable. It’ll affect your future and prevent negative rebirths!”

I tried to look apologetic – although I was ever-so-slightly irked at their insistence. “Yes—I’m sure you’re right—but, as I said … I accepted Rinpoche’s invitation to spend the time here with him …” [pause] “I do not wish to change that. I regard it as an obligation that I would not break.”

“But Yeshé Dorje won’t mind you leaving. He understands that it’d be far better for you to go to the His Holiness’ ceremony.”

This was getting ridiculous. “Yes, I’m sure you’re right …” [pause] “I’m sure Rinpoche wouldn’t mind if I left …

“The problem is … that—I—would mind. I’m not in the habit of breaking agreements I’ve made – not with anyone …” [pause] “I accepted Rinpoche’s hospitality. I expressed pleasure in being allowed to be here. I will therefore—not—change the intention I expressed to him; no matter—what—I’d miss. I’d find it dishonourable – and I don’t like to act dishonourably. I’m sure you’ll—understand—my—freedom of choice—in that.”

The ‘honour’ word caused ill-concealed ridicule. My freedom of choice was that of a lunatic. They regarded me as a prim moron with hard-wired Victorian ethics. I was in Forsyth Bazaar – but I was right out of *The Forsyte Saga* – and, moreover, I was someone who’d offered some sort of insult to the Dalai Lama. I was obviously nonplussed by this idea, and so one of the males of the party regaled me with a fearsome warning: “And you must know that people are being abducted and having their human-oil extracted!”[39] Apparently there were foul and cunning Indian necromancers abroad. “They’ve been seen, man – on the road between Forsyth Bazaar and Dharamsala. They wear red turbans and carry red bags.” I sat and listened,
wondering what chemicals they’d ingested before they arrived at Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s place. “It’s serious, man! Like really! So you should know. Victims are captured, drugged, stripped, and hung upside-down over a low fire until oil drips into the pan. That’s what they keep in their red bags.”

“Yeah, man” added a female from the party. “It’s boiled and bottled for black magic rituals. Everybody knows, and no one’s wandering about on their own right now – so you’d have to be out of your mind to keep coming up here every day when you could have the protection of His Holiness.”

Well that was a thing and no mistake. How was I to respond to that? “Right … well … I think I’ll just take my chances.”

“It’s your fate, you bourgeois materialist!” They spluttered in an irritated disbelief that left me no choice but to quote Blues: “Y’know … I’ve already been to the crossroads – so …

I gotta black cat bone,

Gotta mojo too,

Got Johnny Conqueroo[40] –

I’m gonna mess with you …[41]

“No one’s gonna get my oil unless I’m frying chips.”

At that they snorted with derision and left. What was it about these people that made them believe in almost anything? How could I explain my position? It seemed as if I were always on the cusp of two worlds – the world of Western scientific rationalism and the world where anything is possible. The problem for me was that I had no idea how I cut the deck – so I had nothing rational to offer. There was the world of visionary appearances and the world of hard facts. I knew there was a cross-over—and I was exploring that cross-over—but I had no interest in absorbing ghoulish mythological structures as part of my raison d’être if they obstructed my freedom of choice. If I were to take some visionary idea on board – I’d have to choose to do so for reasons that were personally meaningful. There’d have to be an experiential linkage with something or someone that was powerful enough to shift me out of my habitual paradigms.

I saw the insulted injis in McLeod Ganj from time to time – and they made a point of sneering at me whenever they saw me. I wondered at their persistence in this – ’til I realised they must be locked into school playground behaviour of some sort. It didn’t worry me – in fact I gradually came to find it amusing. I smiled whenever we crossed paths and bid them good day – but they never replied. I met a fair few injis like this – people who’d demand that you adopt their socio-spiritual mores on pain of excommunication. I thus
attended the Madhyamaka class at Gangchen Kyishong as a pariah. There were a few people who liked me—mostly explorer types—but they couldn’t understand why I was bothering myself with Tibetan Buddhism. They seemed able to allow me to be-what-I-was however, and so conversation remained possible.

Meetings with socially malfunctional Western aspirants sadly became more common as time went on … I was attending a Tröma Nakmo Tsog’khorlo at his place in ’82. It was in Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s new dwelling out on the Kharadandha road. It was marvellous—of course—but I had loved his old place. The wind whistled in the wooden slats of the ramshackle hut and the smell of pine resin rose and fell – a rolling tide of strange fragrance punctuated by the smoke of burning pine needles.

Anyhow the new place was larger and better appointed. In the meal breaks the Western Dharma students who’d called in to join the Tsog’khorlo talked about the Lamas they’d met. They talked about empowerments and teachings they’d received. They generally communed in a way that allowed no welcome to an outsider – or even to an Englishman who might have been an old visitor to Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s gompa. It was—alas—the usual tawdry festival of one-upmanship I’d come to expect. I hardly spoke a word. I found little enthusiasm for participation – although I tried my best not to seem standoffish. They largely ignored me and I was actually content for that to be the case. I took my ease—gazing at the large photograph of Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche and taking in the new wonders of the shine room.

Evening drew on – and, one-by-one, the dharmites left. I was eventually left in the sole company of a girl – and she fell to talking with me, due to the absence of other company. She asked my name. I gave it. She asked if I was headed back to Dharamsala.

“I’m only going as far as McLeod Ganj.” The Western Buddhists called McLeod Ganj ‘Dharamsala’, even though Dharamsala is the name of the Indian town some miles down the road. In fact that town is actually Upper Dharamsala – and Dharamsala proper is at an even lower altitude still.

It turned out that she meant McLeod Ganj – and she was happy she’d have company on the dark track that led back to the village. Walking in anything less than daylight is never entirely safe in some parts of India and Nepal. People are mugged and murdered even to this day – so I was quite content to escort her.

I was somewhat less than content to be embroiled in further spiritual discussion of the type I’d avoided earlier – so I probably proved a trifle laconic. This didn’t please me, as it felt unfriendly – so I spoke of the things around me. The light was dimming, but there was still a wealth of shapes to
be seen. I commented on the beauty of the trees with their twisted roots. I commented on the cries of the various birds that found their homes in the trees. I tried, as best I could, to be affable on ordinary subjects. She however, kept pulling the discussion back to areas I’d avoided back at Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s gompa. I’d privately designated that kind of conversation as ‘lama-karma-dharma’ – or ‘pranayama-pyjama-panorama’ if it was espoused by the followers of Swami Up’n’under.

Suddenly she burst into tears. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me how lonely she was in India. “I came to India thinking it would be wonderful – but no wants to know me or talk to me even.” Western Dharma students were often self-satisfied elitists who excluded her because she didn’t know enough.

“I’m sorry …” I replied “… I—do—know what you mean …” [pause] “D’you … find me like that?”

She shook her head “No … but it’s not easy having a conversation with you either.”

“Ah …” [pause] “… ’bout the shapes of trees and stuff…?”

“Well yes … I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You can say anything … whatever comes into your head. I’m certainly not going to judge you … or try to be clever at your expense.”

“Really …?” she asked with a degree of pathos.

“Yes—really—I’ll respond to most things apart from lugubrious Lama-listings and interminable initiation-inventories. That stuff really does—not—interest me.

“I’d rather gnaw my own goddamn leg off than hear people incessantly name-dropping” I continued “You may remember …” [pause] “… I didn’t say much back at Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s gompa. I did try to speak about the amazing sound of the tantric orchestra—the rolmo and silnyen[44] —but no one wanted to take me up on that.”

She nodded. “Yes … I remember … I was going to ask about that … but the conversation moved on – someone said something about ‘spiritual materialism’, whatever that means …”

“Yes … that was quite funny …” [pause] “The term ‘spiritual materialism’ y’know … was coined by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Most people however, don’t seem to understand what it means. Trungpa Rinpoche was referring to the way people convert spirituality into materialism by concretising it – by making territory out of what they know …” [pause] “So … from their point of view, liking the sound of rolmo is ‘spiritual materialism’…” [pause] “… but
“reeling off the names of Lamas is … what?”

“I see what you mean …”

“I’m not trying to say that I’m—not—a materialist. Good gracious no – I’m a card-carrying materialist from way back. I probably like objects more than most. I lust after—all kinds—of things – but … I’m not interested in proving anything by it.”

“Right …” [pause] “No one I’ve met on the spiritual path has ever admitted to being a materialist before.”

“Well I’m content to be an ordinary materialist – it’s so much simpler and more convenient than being a spiritual materialist …” [pause] “I’m not trying to say that I’m special in any way – it’s just that spiritual materialism bores me rigid – so it’s not exactly a great accomplishment not being involved with it.”

“I see … well, that’s interesting, although weird …” [pause] “I did notice … that whatever you said they always moved the conversation back to talking about empowerments and teachings they’d received …”

At this point I told her one of my favourite Jewish stories. One day in the shul the rebbe—seized by the impulse of the moment—threw himself on the ground and declared “Lord! I am nothing but dust and ashes!” Now … it just so happened that the cantor observed the rebbe’s religious zeal and thought he’d better get in on the act. This was obviously the thing to do. So after a discreet interval he threw himself on the ground and declared “Lord! I am nothing but dust and ashes!” Now … off to the side, the janitor—busy with cleaning duties—happened to observe both the rebbe and the cantor. Being a man of initiative—and never backward about coming forward— he decided to emulate the zeal of his superiors. He threw himself on the ground and declared “Lord! I am nothing but dust and ashes!”

No sooner had he made his proclamation than the cantor turned to the rebbe and said “Look who thinks he’s nothing but dust and ashes!”

The lady found this story most amusing and—set in the form of a joke—she seemed to get the idea pretty well. “I’ve seen a lot of that since I’ve been in India” she commented “but isn’t it weird that there’s a joke about it in Judaism …”

“I’d imagine there’s a joke about it in every religion. It’s a shame that people allow themselves to see some advantage in that kind of behaviour. I’d hoped that Dharma would be free of it – but the desire to be listed in the ‘Who’s Who’ of Vajrayana and the ‘Burke’s Peerage’[46] of Buddhism seems to reign supreme” I grinned.
“And yet … you’re wearing robes?”

“Yes – I’m wearing robes … and … I do actually have a lot of interest in Lamas, teachings, and empowerments – but … it depends on how it’s being discussed. When it’s the rhetoric of rivalry, it makes everything tedious – even things that would otherwise interest me.”

“Well—that’s—refreshing” she opined with a smile “… but doesn’t that mean that you always find yourself in the same situation with no one wanting to talk to you?”

I burst out laughing at that point. “Yes – just like you … it seems.”

“But you don’t mind?”

“No – I don’t mind …” [pause] “Well … I used to care – but now … I’m used to it – and it no longer matters …” [pause] “I always try to be friendly with everyone I meet – but when I’m cold-shouldered or rebuffed … I get on with life on my own.”

“Doesn’t it make you angry to be treated like that?”

“No” I chuckled “I find it slightly comical.”

“Comical? How can that be comical?”

“Well … it’s the predictability of it. I speak in a friendly way—ready to be friends—and I wonder whether this new occasion will be different.

Then I’m repulsed as some sort of reincarnation of the Lone Ranger or Biggles[47] – and … well, I find the inevitability of it funny.”

We chatted as we walked down the track and eventually rolled into McLeod Ganj village where she offered to buy me a meal. I accepted. I was hungry. Money was extremely short. Over dinner she asked “Tell me … how d’you square being a materialist with being a Buddhist?”

This almost made me choke on my food. “Well … maybe I’m not a—conventional—materialist …” [pause] “I suppose I can say ‘I’m a Buddhist’ … because I don’t believe that the acquisition of material things will make me happy – or that the lack of them make me sad. I’m happy simply because I appreciate.”

“So … you don’t—have—to have things?”

“No …” [pause] “I like to have things, but – I don’t have to have them. Well not—too—much. I enjoy what I have and constantly see things I enjoy … but I can enjoy whatever I see whether I own it or not – and I never get tired of what I have. If I like something … I invariably like it in perpetuity.”

“So … you don’t try to be a renunciate?”
“No … not in the—normal—sense of the word – but then … I’m not a monk, I’m a ngakpa.” Then—of course—I had to explain the meaning of ‘ngakpa’. That took a while. “So I guess … what I try to renounce is having things mean more than they are. I orient myself to seeing things as innately valuable – whether I own them or not …” [pause] “I see the greatest wealth as being the extent to which I can appreciate everything within the sense fields. So … my wealth is dependent on how much I can enjoy what I see, hear, smell, taste, and touch – but without any need to own whatever it might be …” [pause] “If I can—own—whatever it is – then, of course, I’m happy to own whatever it happens to be …” [pause] “… but if I can’t … it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“And … if it—is—a problem?” she asked.

“Yes … I can’t say it’s never a problem … I won’t say that doesn’t happen – but it doesn’t happen that often …” [pause] “When it does, I remind myself that it should—not—be a problem … and then … I sit with the sensation of however that may happen to feel …”

“That’s quite an unusual way to look at things …” [pause] “How did you come to develop that idea?”

“It’s not—my—idea” I smiled “… it’s Vajrayana … and … all I try to do … is live it.”

I never saw her again – but I hope she remembers me as someone who was friendly and who had no interest in using Vajrayana as a means of social climbing. Not that I’m ‘Mister Humble’ or anything of that nature. I’m somewhat revolted by the ‘humile’[48] number – it’s too complex. I like people – and I like to be friendly with all … as far as possible.

Anyhow, be that as it may … back in 1971, when I wasn’t studying Madhyamaka I visited with Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche and his sang-yum Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar. What a wonderful woman! Khandro Ten’dzin was born in and grew up in Long-sha – Rong-shal, Tibet. Rong-shal is close to Lip-shi – the area where Milarépa often stayed. At sixteen years old—when her mother died—she walked to Trülshik Rinpoche’s gompa in Zar-hombu. She received teachings and transmissions from him and practised them ’til she was twenty-four. She then married Ngakpa Tséring Thöndrüp, the eldest son of Pasang Rinpoche. Sadly they were separated by the Chinese invasion—Ngakpa Tséring was killed—and she fled to Nepal. Early in ’71 she left Nepal and went to McLeod Ganj in India. That’s where she met and married Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche – and … where she first met an odd inji. We are still friends to this day, and Khandro Déchen and I support her in her practice vis-à-vis accommodation and living exigencies.

Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche taught me how to make gTormas[49] and all manner
of ritual artefacts. These instructions could be given sans language – as I simply copied what he made and wrote down the Tibetan words which related to them. Often Sonam would accompany me to translate – and then I learnt a great deal about the Düd’jom gTér practice of Tröma Nakmo. It had been imparted to me that I’d be well served by going to Bodha in Nepal to meet Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche, as it was from him that I should receive the transmission for the practice. It was thus that I made the decision to accompany Yeshé Khandro to Nepal a month after I arrived in McLeod Ganj.

The journey to Nepal was arduous and got complicated when we reached the Nepalese border. Yeshé told me that her papers were unacceptable—she’d only just realised that they were out of date—and they’d not let her through. After some thought I decided the best idea would be to bribe the driver of a vegetable truck to take us on board and tell the passport control that I was on my own. It actually sounded quite plausible. I’d cover Yeshé with Brussels sprouts while we passed through the border – and uncover her when we were safe. The ruse worked. Yeshé and I were suddenly in Nepal. After what was probably a little too long, I let her know it was safe to emerge from her vegetable hideout, and we had a relatively pleasant journey to Kathmandu.

We arrived in Bodha having spent a grimy night in an insanitary guesthouse on Freak Street[50] in Kathmandu. We were met by Pema Dorje, Yeshé’s fiancé, on our arrival in Bodha. Like Yeshé he’d come to meet each bus that pulled in. Suddenly – there he was – a very fine young gentleman who spoke extremely good English. He helped me gain an interview with Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche.

I found a good translator in Karma Lama,[51] a splendid fellow who ran a Tibetan antiques emporium in Kathmandu. Karma Lama had a great interest in Rhythm and Blues and we therefore traded skills. He was fascinated by my previous life as a Bluesman, and I told him just about everything I knew. I knew quite a lot and he never tired of plying me with questions about Robert Johnson, Son House, Muddy Waters, et al. He asked me if I would sing something for him – and I did. I sang ‘Born Under a Bad Sign’, and his eyes lit up. At that point I think he finally believed that I’d not strung him a line. “If you have a guitar I’ll play.” He saw to it—even though a twelve-string was unobtainable—and we had some rare evenings. This worked out well, as I didn’t want to intrude too much on the newly wed Yeshé Khandro and Pema Dorje. I wrote down lyrics for him, and he eventually joined in with surprising gusto. How strange that I could spend evenings talking with Karma Lama about Blues – and yet had no way of conversing with most Western people I met …

I visited with Düd’jom Rinpoche often and asked many questions. I realise now that I had no idea how unusual my situation was. Being able to spend so
much time with Düd’jom Rinpoche was a rare privilege. He was immensely kind and dealt with my experience of silent sitting directly – answering every question I had; and I had plenty.

He was intrigued by my autodidact training in Zen and Theravada and opined that this system was somewhat like Dzogchen sem-dé. He encouraged me to continue and persevere 'til I gained experience of the nondual state. I was able to receive transmission for the Düd’jom gTér Tröma Nakmo practice as well as to acquire a text – which I was able to take back to McLeod Ganj. It’s not appropriate here to give a detailed account of the time I spent with Düd’jom Rinpoche – or with Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche. I studied with both Lamas whenever I could, and what they taught me was of immense value. Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche was also immensely kind and understood the nature of my experience with silent sitting – giving me wonderfully pertinent advice. I put the advice of both Lamas into practice immediately, and it changed the course of my life utterly.

Whilst staying in the house where Pema Dorje and Yeshé Khandro held their clinic, Pema Dorje happened to comment on my stammer. It was not as bad as it had been when I was a child – but it was still noticeable. He therefore wrote a letter which I was to deliver to the famous Tibetan lady doctor Amji[52] Lobsang who lived in McLeod Ganj.

When eventually my Nepalese visa ran out, I returned to McLeod Ganj. It was sad to take my leave of Düd’jom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche – but I realised that I was enormously fortunate to have been able to spend the time that I did.

Back in McLeod Ganj, I returned to my lodgings with Ama Norga. She was not surprised to see me wearing ngakpa robes and smiled broadly at me. “Ah! Ngakpa! Ya-po’ du!” Düd’jom Rinpoche had instructed me to get some robes sewn up in Bodha, as there was an excellent tailor there. Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche had given me the gö kar chang lo vows whilst I was with him. Jig’mèd Dorje—one of his monks—showed me how to wear them – and I gave my Western clothes to the beggars.

I spent a delightful evening with Ama Norga – together with Phüntsog, her son, and Sonam, my translator with Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. They were overjoyed to hear that I’d spent time studying with Düd’jom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche – and informed me many times that I was ‘too lucky’.

The next day I went directly to see Amji Lobsang. I sat with a charming group of Tibetans waiting on the doctor. They all smiled at me and I felt strangely cheerful about what might be to follow. To get rid of my stammer for good and all would be little short of miraculous. When it came to my turn
to see the doctor I handed her the letter, and she asked me to show her my tongue. Out it came—on request—and she looked at it. Her expression was not encouraging. “A—yah—yah—yah … much too fat—much—too fat.” She looked under it and over it and to each side. “You must at same time tomorrow coming back – but nothing eating, only hot water drinking.”

As good as my word I was back the next day – and she sat me down in a chair. It all happened quite quickly after that – and I still can’t quite understand how I found myself going through such an outlandish experience.

A clamp was applied to my tongue – two steel bars tightened with wing nuts. It hurt more than I would have imagined – but hey, I was here in the East for the experience – and this was it. I was incapable of communication once the clamp was applied – so asking “Is this as bad as it’s going to get?” was no longer an option. As soon as I’d got used to the pain of the clamp, she started to wind the clamp backward ’til my tongue was coiled into a scroll. Tears streamed. My eyes felt as if they were about to bulge out of their sockets. My whole mouth hurt like the very devil, and I wondered how long I’d have to endure this level of pain. ‘Just as long as it doesn’t get worse!’ I hoped – but I hoped in vain. She then inserted a knife into the root of my tongue—on either side—and squeeze out half a cup of blood. Then—just before I blacked out—she released the clamp and I lay back panting, as if I’d run up the hill from Gangchen Kyishong. I’d gripped two holes in my shamthab[53] with my fingers – and had to have it patched. Whenever I saw those two patches I stared at them in mixed disbelief and enthusiasm. If I could go through something like that – almost anything was possible. Now … I could’ve complained that she’d not explained the procedure to me in advance – but then … I was grateful not to have known. I think I might have backed out. Of course Amji Lobsang didn’t regard it as a big deal at all – but the most pain a person’s ever had is just that. It’s purposeless in some ways to make comparisons. What was extreme for me might have been merely uncomfortable for a Tibetan and unendurable for someone used to more comfort than I needed.

She smiled at me. “Now over. All good now and tongue normal becoming. Just hot water today drinking—no food—then tomorrow again eating.” I thanked her and listened while she gave me detailed instructions. I was to take certain pills every day and to recite the mantra of Jampalyang: Om A Ra Pa Tsha Na Dhi: 108 times a day. After each recitation of the mantra I had to recite the syllable Dhi: as rapidly as I could – 108 times. I was to follow this régime for a month.

The month went by quickly, because I went into retreat fairly soon after I went to see Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche again. He deemed it best that I took what I had been given by Düd’jom Rinpoche into solitude – and that’s just what I
did. My first retreat is described elsewhere,[54] so there’s no need to speak of it here. Suffice it to say that my stammer was gone when I re-emerged – and so was I, to some degree. I was helped in my retreat by Jamyang Dawa—a Nyingma monk of my acquaintance—and I treated him to dinner at the Kunga Restaurant as a token of thanks for his kindness. I also gave him my mountaineering boots, as he’d taken a great fancy to them. The Kunga is about as large as the average bus shelter and had a television perched on metal brackets near the ceiling. As we ate our dinner of Swiss rösti with cauliflower and onions we were treated to a documentary on Indian open-heart surgery. Now … I’m not squeamish, so this posed no problem – but it was a surreal experience nonetheless. The documentary had background music – fairground themes on ‘The Mighty Wurlitzer’ which accompanied statements such as “… now we are exposing the left ventricle …”

Only in India.
So … it’s now 1975 – and … it’s time I talked about my first meeting with Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. Since my first sojourn in India and Nepal in 1971, I applied myself—as best I could—to consolidating what I had learnt and practising as I’d been instructed. I made some visits to Samyé Ling in Scotland – but unfortunately Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was no longer there. I’d hoped to meet him – because he seemed to be extremely interesting. I had heard a great deal about him from Alf Vial – a Vajrayana Buddhist friend I knew in London through the Buddhist Society. He was a student of Trungpa Rinpoche and had many fascinating stories to tell. He also had a wealth of knowledge about his teaching style. Trungpa Rinpoche obviously had an approach to communicating Dharma that inspired me more than anything I’d previously encountered in terms of language and insight into the fundamental reality of the everyday world.

So … with a few Trungpa Rinpoche books in my rucksack, I arrived in Tso Pema on an exceptionally grim evening. The period of ‘winter rains’ had kicked in early. This usually transforms the Western Himalayas into an enduring tide of drizzles that dampens a person to the bone. I’d hoped for a long and pleasant autumn—an Indian summer—but … that’s often the way with hope.

Tso Pema cannot always be found on a map. It’s in Kangra District—Himachal Pradesh—northern India. It’s south of Manali and east of Mandi – the ancient capital of Zahor. The Indian name for Tso Pema is Rewalsar – but most maps fail to mark its existence. People hardly know it’s there because it’s off to the side somehow – and, well, there’s nothing special there, unless you know about it. That’s like many things in life. Tso Pema is remarkable because the lake there is adorned by a floating island – no larger than the average suitcase. For most of the year it lies motionless on the surface of the lake, but on the day of Padmasambhava’s birth—and other special days associated with him—the little island circumnavigates the lake – always in a clockwise direction.

Padmasambhava had taken Mandarava—the daughter of the King of Zahor—as his disciple and consort. The King was seriously displeased. He acted as such kings acted before the advent of human rights – by sentencing them both to death by fire. The island is the remnant of the execution pyre on which he had attempted to burn Padmasambhava and Mandarava. Padmasambhava—as a master of the elements—turned the pyre into a lake and Tso Pema has been a pilgrimage place ever since.

I do not know how the average reader understands histories such as these.
Whether a person believes or not however – the island does move. It circumnavigates the lake every year and anyone can go there and see it. There are no ropes or wires. There’s no scuba diver either. Anyone sufficiently foolhardy to submerge themselves in that lake would have to be fearless. Amœbic dysentery and worse would be the likely outcome of the water touching your lips – let alone your swallowing any of the murk. There are some authentic mysteries in the world – and the moving island at Tso Pema is one of them. It is moreover, one that anyone can witness.

Anyhow … I’d arrived in Mandi by bus. It was stuffed with people, goats, and chickens. It took an entire day from McLeod Ganj – and I was feeling the worse for it. I then had to find a taxi to take me to Tso Pema. Tso Pema was off the bus route – and most taxi drivers were reluctant to go there.

The road was bad and there was little or no chance of picking up a return fare from anyone in the remote place. I therefore had to pay through the nose for the ride – and my finances were tight. I managed to trade my Swiss Army knife as the larger part of the fare – so all was well apart from having no way of trimming hang-nails. The taxi driver argued a little about whether it was the biggest model or not and I replied “Mit aller Werkzeuge – with all tools! Just look at ’em!” I swung out half a dozen blades including the mysterious one that people claim is a hoof pick and a fish de-scaler. “This is the largest model with the most blades, and—you—my friend, are getting an extremely good deal. If you aren’t happy with it I’ll have it back and find another taxi driver – someone with the wit to understand its value.” He shrugged—smiled a nervous smile that betokened that he had to try me out—and opened the door for me to take my seat. I boarded the strange automotive relic of the British Raj and sat back to peruse the view – such as it was in the mist. I felt pleased I’d achieved my goal.

After an hour or so the car came to a halt. “Here we are arriving Rewalsar, sir …” the taxi driver announced “Now I must be Mandi again driving.” I looked around. It was patently not Rewalsar, because there was no lake – just a vague scattering of hovels in a light rain under a lowering sky.

“No …” I answered “This is—not—Rewalsar.”

“Oh yes, sir—this Rewalsar—we are arriving.”

“No … we have—not—arrived. You will—remember—that I wanted to go to the lake. You will also remember that you agreed to take me to the lake. There is—no—lake here – so you will kindly drive on until we see the lake.”

He shook his head. “Here Rewalsar—lake very close coming—very close. No problem, sir.”

I smiled as broadly as I could. “No … that is incorrect. There—is—a very
considerable problem. It’s raining. And—you—agreed to take me to the—lake—at Rewalsar. So … whatever part of Rewalsar this is … there is no lake that I can see. So … I will be—sitting—in this taxi ’til I see the lake.”

“Already I have gone too far—big problem for me—too much petrol.”

“Already? Already you have my Swiss Army knife!”

“Oh yes, sir—I am knowing that—but this too far for me driving. Too much petrol needing.”

“Listen, my friend … I must warn you … you may have my Swiss Army knife … but I have a—much larger knife—in my robes … if you want to see it …” [pause] “Do you—want—to see my—large—knife?” [pause] “If you don’t want to see my—large—knife … then you will drive on ’til we see the lake, exactly—as—you agreed … when I handed over my Swiss Army knife.”

Completely untrue of course. I had no goddamn large knife – but the message was understood. We drove on for about three miles and the lake finally hove into view. The taxi pulled to a halt a stone’s throw from the lake and I alighted – happy to have arrived. “Thank you very much indeed, my good sir” I grinned. “It has been a pleasure to travel with you.” The taxi driver also alighted – to open the boot[57] for me, and I unloaded my damp canvas rucksack. Strangely the taxi driver beamed at me as I gave him the remainder of the taxi fare and said “I am thanking you, sir. You are sending message when you want go back Mandi, sir! Good luck, sir—good luck!”

“Thank you—you too—I hope you pick up another fare going back to Mandi.”

“You are sending message, sir? You are sending message when you are wanting go back Mandi?”

“I’ll keep that in mind … I wish you well. Have a safe journey back to Mandi.”
I wondered for a moment just how much good luck I might require. I felt relieved that I’d avoided walking the extra three miles in the rain. I didn’t see that I needed more luck than that. My robes were damp though … and I hoped I’d find somewhere to get completely dry. That might require a little luck. My robes had been damp for days – as I could never afford hotel rooms equipped with heaters.

I’d stayed in one the previous night however—due to the kindness of two young Austrian ladies—and managed to dry out a little. We shared hot beverages: chang with honey for them and lemon juice with honey for me. We listened to Keith Jarrett whilst trying to keep the chills away. I was abstemious, to all intents and purposes—unless I was offered alcohol by a Lama—but the chang was somewhat tempting. I’d developed a taste for it with Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche – even though it reminded me of a subtle blend of kerosene and low-fat yogurt. The one large room with three beds was quite comfortable. It was equipped with an electric fire that we nicknamed ‘the death ray’ – because it was equipped with a conical ceramic obstruction around which the electrical element was wrapped. You could only get warm directly in front of it – and if you got too close it burned holes in your clothes. I had one such burn hole in my shamthab when I arrived in Tso Pema. I kept it hidden in the folds. So there I was, a damp victim of the death ray – but I was gleeful with a buoyant frame of mind, feeling myself to be set for high adventure.

Mandi had been quite an experience – like stepping back a hundred years in time. Age seeped out of everything in Mandi. There were minimal signs of the twentieth century. Tso Pema had always been a Tibetan outpost in India – and now, with many Tibetan refugees having arrived, it was another country. It felt even older than Mandi. Bodha in the Kathmandu Valley—where Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche lived—had the same feeling, so I felt at home.

The first problem when I alighted in Tso Pema was finding anyone who could speak English. That proved more difficult than it had when I went to Bodha – as the Kathmandu Valley was already an established leg of the hippie trail. Smiles were not lacking when people saw me. They returned my “Tashi delegs!”[58] but “Haku mindu …”[59] was the response when I asked “Do you speak any English?” Why do English speakers wander around the world assuming there’ll be people who speak English wherever they go?

Finally a young monk called Pema Dorje answered “Yes, Rinpoche, sir, I am speaking English.” And—true to his word—he spoke remarkably good English – if slightly Victorian in its construction. He had learned English from an Indian teacher who equipped him with a blue book called First Aid
The book contained an example of how to conjugate the word ‘rejoice’.

Pema Dorje was a Nyingma monk and lived at the Nyingma monastery. The first thing he did was to take me directly to Könchog Rinpoche—the head Lama—on the basis that I was some kind of visiting dignitary. I discovered later that this was due to the dark maroon waistcoat that I’d had sewn up by a seamstress in Bristol. It was rather nicely made even though the elephant ears were ever-so-slightly elephantine. I didn’t know at the time – but only the aristocratic monastic elite wore this colour. Dark maroon fabric was hideously expensive in India – for no reason I could establish. Someone told me that to get that dark maroon colour they had to use a fearful quantity of dye – but I never worked out whether or not that was apocryphal.

Könchog Rinpoche was a wonderful Lama – kind, friendly, and ebullient. I explained “I’ve come with a letter of introduction to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche from Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche.” This of course sealed the deal. At the mention of carrying a letter from Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche, I was given the visiting Lamas’ room.

I was loaned another set of robes in order that mine could be dried. The shamthab was calf-length as Tibetans are somewhat short on average, so Könchog Rinpoche grinned when he saw me in a monk’s shamthab. “Now you are gélong!” he chuckled. “Now no khandro having …” [pause] “You have khandro?”

I laughed. “Well, Rinpoche … that’s a long story … but … I may as well be a monk at the moment – unless you have any Tibetan khandros who are on the lookout for an inji ngakpa.”

Könchog Rinpoche laughed even louder. “Oh yah! Many coming! Maybe too many coming! But now … maybe you rest.”

“Looks like I’ll need to rest” I jested, and Könchog Rinpoche laughed. I was having a real good time.

Pema Dorje took me to my room and told me that I’d have my supper with Könchog Rinpoche when I was good and rested. I’d certainly fallen on my feet here! I’d never seen anything quite as wonderful – and it was dry! No mould anywhere! No rats! No dead bird in the corner! I tried saying that the room was too grand for the likes of me – but that simply made it the more obvious to Könchog Rinpoche that I should stay there and nowhere else. It turned out to be Düd’jom Rinpoche’s room – and that made me feel somewhat uncomfortable. I tried saying that I felt it was improper for me to stay in Düd’jom Rinpoche’s room – but it was to no avail.

As it happens, it was raining heavily. It was late. It was dark – dark as only
the countryside can be in a place where there’s little or no electricity. It was decided that it would be better that I should go see Künzang Dorje Rinpoche the next day. Pema Dorje would be free in the afternoon. Excellent. That would give me the morning to get used to the place that would be my home for the next while.

I spent the evening with Könchog Rinpoche drinking ‘Old Monk’ Indian rum. “This must be called ‘Young Monk’ – old monks can’t drink any more[64] – why are old monks with Indian rum wanting?” he laughed. We talked of many things: our respective families; Düd’jom Rinpoche; Nyingma history; funny stories about people he knew; and, fascinating people in the distant past.

He told me that a couple from the USA had travelled through a while back and they’d been extremely distressed. They’d been waylaid and the woman had been raped. The man had been raped as well. They were more upset by the incongruity of violence in ‘peaceful India’ than by the assault of their persons, and begged Könchog Rinpoche to tell them what it meant that this had happened. “I’m sorry …” he replied. “It means only that you were unlucky … but … maybe lucky you are alive. People sometimes are being killed – and dangerous for Western people – so maybe better you home going.”

Many Western Buddhists are actually more or less Hindu in their view and assume that everything means something. They assume that karma accounts for the exact direction the dried mucus flies from your finger when you’ve picked your nose. This is called eternalism in Buddhism – and it’s one of the four denials. Karma is how you interpret what happens and how you feel about what happens. Karma is your intention and what you do as a result of your intention. This is often as badly misunderstood by Eastern Buddhists as by their Western counterparts. Könchog Rinpoche made a wry face about the man having been sodomised and said “Yah … in Tibetan monasteries this also sometimes happening. Maybe it is better they home going.”

Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche[65] told me the same thing about monasteries in Tibet. “People think Tibetan monasteries were many saints and sages – but also, many men young boys loving.” This was quite a shock – but it was good to know the reality of the situation. Tibet was as full of ugliness as it was full of wonders. It wasn’t the heaven about which naïve Western believers penned eulogies – and it wasn’t the hell about which the Chinese propaganda ranted.[66]

It was a land inhabited by human beings: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Of the good – it must be said that they were good beyond common understanding. Of the bad and ugly – they were no worse than Machiavelli or the Spanish Inquisition. My Tibetan Lamas made no secret of this – and so I
was surprised when other Western people entertained the notion of Tibet as a paradise on Earth. The result of this mismatch was that I said very little when in the company of other Western people.

Könchog Rinpoche was extremely interested in the fact that my father had been in Rawalpindi in 1927 and lived for a time near the Khyber Pass. His eyes widened slightly when I told him that my father had been the engineer who’d overseen the re-building of the Great Wall of China. He was responsible for all the financial and material calculations involved. I wished I knew more. I wished I’d asked my father more questions about his Army life in India and China – but that was no longer possible. He’d died just before I left Britain.

Könchog Rinpoche was unusually sympathetic about my father’s death, and I asked whether—as Buddhists—we should not be completely accepting of death. He smiled warmly. “Yes – but still great sadness.” That statement has remained with me to the present day – and stands out in stark contrast to the comments of many Western Buddhists, who tend to be quick to ‘teach impermanence’ to others – just as long as it’s not assailing them to any noticeable degree. Why was it that some Western Buddhists were so emotionally deranged? It was a question that I could not ask Könchog Rinpoche. There was no answer to that question until I researched antisocial personality disorders – and then it all made sense. These people were attracted to Vajrayana because it gave the appearance—from a perverse point of view—of being replete with social climbing possibilities. There were secrets to be had and secrets to be kept from others as a means of self-aggrandisement. It was no matter to me that evening. I was delighted—and monstrously grateful—to have spent the evening with Könchog Rinpoche. I went to bed and slept extremely well.

Pema Dorje was all smiles when he came to take me to my prospective Tsawa’i Lama. My robes were dry and my white shamthab had been mended. There was a perfect—neatly sewn—square patch over the hole the death ray had made. The patch was of a lighter-weight cotton, so it didn’t look or feel ungainly, and I was delighted with the workmanship. Sometimes a repaired item can have greater æsthetic appeal than something new.

We set off—arrived fairly quickly—and were ushered in. The house was ancient and rather beautiful. There was wood everywhere and some was marvellously carved. It was not a wealthy home—there were no gilt ornaments, and the furnishings were quite plain—but it was somehow marvellous. It was not Rinpoche’s home. He had no home – but he had rooms. He had rooms in diverse places in various parts of the Himalayas. He moved among them – never saying when he was arriving or departing. The Rolling Stones song flitted through my mind: ‘She would never say where
she came from — yesterday don’t matter if it’s gone.’

It was always at times like this that I tended to miss a Western person with whom to exchange repartée — repartée based on common knowledge and enjoyment. That was a slight sacrifice when compared to the great privilege that lay ahead of me — and the great privileges that I’d already experienced.

The mistress of the house ushered us into Rinpoche’s room — and, there he sat like the King of the Universe. Rinpoche was not the King of the Universe because he was grandly dressed. He was simply dressed and his Lama’s appurtenances were simple. He wore a black chuba with an emerald green shirt beneath it. Both were noticeably faded — but otherwise spotless. He was the King of the Universe because … it was an indisputable fact of his existence. Other people have noticed it too and said the same thing.

Then it struck me that Rinpoche looked like Errol Flynn. The similarity hit me – it was unmistakable. Rinpoche was — in my mind — one of those rare people whose face transcended his race. You’d have to be of another race to see it — so I can’t find an English example. Muddy Waters was like that too.

There are a whole range of Blues artists you can see in photographs — then you see Muddy Waters, and he has that certain attribute that places him outside the ordinary range of human beings. Be that as it may, I stood there — feeling as if I were suspended in mid-air — and not knowing what to do.

Then all hell broke loose.

“What does — this — idiot want?” Künzang Dorje Rinpoche almost sighed.
the idiot savant

“Rinpoche is asking … ‘What does—this—idiot want?’ …” Pema Dorje translated with evident discomfort “This … is what Rinpoche is asking …”

Right … I was an idiot … I didn’t know how to reply to that. Well … I did. I could’ve said ‘What does—this—idiot want?! Whadya think this goddamn idiot wants?! This idiot wants what—all—idiots want! This idiot wants to be told he’s a jolly fine fellow! He wants to be told that his wishes will all be met ’cause he’s the most righteous dude who ever walked the goddamn hills! I would’ve thought that obvious! … Rinpoche …’

With hindsight … that might have been worth a try, for an idiot savant …[68] However … I just fell to earth with a sickening emotional thud. I’d come all this way from Nepal for nothing. What would Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche say? How could I go back and tell him that I’d been thrown out as an idiot?

It’s not that I had some huge objection to being described as an idiot – but I’d not yet opened my mouth to be thus designated. I knew that whatever my qualities were as an artist – this was no exemption from idiocy when it came to the world of mind and the nature of Mind.

After the unreal royal reception I’d received at the Nyingma gompa – this reduced me to my rightful size. It’s not that I’d got bloated with spiritual dignity nouveau from dining with Könchog Rinpoche. I had no false idea of myself – or no falser than the average 1960s upstart. I was inordinately happy with my situation at the Nyingma gompa – and had foolishly taken that as some kind of ‘good sign’ … I’d later be accused of eternalism for that kind of view – but Rinpoche had yet to start in on me and my mess-of-a-mind.

“Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche … told me … that I should study Dzogchen men-ngag-dé[69] with you … and this … this is his letter … and … he explains …” I ran dry. Poor Pema Dorje translated my fumbled mumblings as best he could – and probably made me more coherent than I was.

Rinpoche sat like a mountain. I knew it was possible to sit still – but there was something about his utter motionlessness that was dramatic in the same way the Grand Canyon is dramatic. I read an account of someone’s travels in the USA, in which the author is standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. It’s befogged. Nothing can be seen. Suddenly the fog clears – and a score of people exclaim “Jesus!” – more or less at the same time. Rinpoche’s the only human being who’s ever had that impact on me. I didn’t hiss “Jesus!” with a sharp intake of breath – but the effect was not entirely unlike vertigo.

Vaguely stunned by Rinpoche’s presence, I placed the letter on his table. He didn’t move. His eyes were fixed on me – but his eyes were impassive. I
wasn’t being scrutinised – it was more that he held me in his wider field of vision. It was as if I were a rock or a tree in the landscape that was begging to be noticed – and … he wasn’t even ignoring me. I was merely there.

Then followed the unlikeliest pantomime I’ve ever witnessed. Rinpoche picked up the letter with great care. It was valuable. It had come from Düd’jom Rinpoche. He opened the letter – again, with great care. He then took a great deal of time to read it – and I found myself wondering whether he could read. I knew that some amazing yogis were illiterate – and so I found myself wondering whether Pema Dorje should read the letter out loud. As this vile thought passed through my mind—like faeces in an open sewer—Rinpoche looked up at me and smiled. It was an eerie smile. The smile of extreme censure. The smile of the prosecuting barrister having caught the defendant in an evident fabrication. The smile which anticipates the judge placing the black cap on his head and sentencing the prisoner at the bar to death … Actually, it was nothing of the sort – but it was a look I’d never witnessed before. It stopped me in mid-thought. I felt myself about to faint. I willed myself to regain average consciousness.

After several centuries … he returned his gaze to the letter. Having read it … he turned it over. He looked at the back. The reverse of the letter was blank – but he gazed at it for several moments as if there were a hidden cypher that might reveal itself if he stared long enough. When the reverse of the letter remained obdurately blank, he made a clucking noise that seemed to suggest something that wasn’t entirely positive. Rinpoche then folded the letter—-slowly—and replaced it in the envelope. He then slid the letter—-slowly—inside his chuba. Having done this he opened his mouth wide and rubbed his chin with his thumb and index finger. He looked around the room – as if in search of something. After a while he looked out of the window. I wondered if he was expecting another guest. Maybe I’d arrived at an unfortunate juncture? I thought of asking ‘Maybe Rinpoche is busy – maybe I should come back another time?’ but thought better of it. That might sound discourteous – as if I were impatient.

After some time had elapsed Rinpoche looked at me with what appeared to be a slight sneer – although I wasn’t quite sure if that is what I’d seen. The movement of his mouth was too brief.

He reached into his chuba and—-slowly—pulled out the letter. He opened it. He read it again. Again—having carefully read the letter—he turned the letter over and examined the reverse side of the sheet of paper. As before he saw nothing there – and simply gazed at it for a while. Then … he refolded the letter—replaced it within the envelope—and slid it—-slowly—into his chuba. Then another phase of pantomime began. Rinpoche began looking around the room – but this time, languidly. He’d remain motionless, looking at what
appeared to be undifferentiated points on the ceiling. Then he sat back and yawned. After a moment or two he said “Oh yah …” and returned to looking out of the window. Pema Dorje said nothing, I figured that there was nothing too unusual about what was happening, so … I might as well sit it out. After what seemed an uncomfortable period of time I began to be plagued by concepts. Should I ask Pema Dorje whether our departure was required? Should we leave? Somehow I didn’t feel at ease about giving voice to such an idea.

When Rinpoche had looked out of the window for some ten minutes – he turned his attention to the letter again. He reached into his chuba and pulled out the letter—opened it—and read it again. Yet again—having carefully read the letter—he turned the letter over and scrutinised the back. As before he saw nothing there. This time however – he placed the letter on the table in front of him. Then he shook his head as if to say that he’d tried to get rid of me by all means possible – but somehow I was still there. There was something that moved in his gaze that looked decisive … and he exclaimed “Yah—yah—yah … maybe you come back tomorrow.” He then turned his head to look through the window. I felt a tug at my elbow and found myself being led backward through the door by Pema Dorje. Left to my own devices, I would probably have floated there in some kind of trance until Rinpoche had to call someone to have me removed.

Suddenly—and somehow unexpectedly—I found myself outside on a clear sunny afternoon. When we were at what felt to be a discreet distance from Rinpoche’s residence, I asked “Pema Dorje … do you know Rinpoche very well?”

Pema Dorje looked puzzled. “No, Rinpoche, sir – he is a very great rTsa-rLung master – he is not someone I could know.”

I pondered and tried again. “But you know—about—him?”

“Oh yes, Rinpoche, sir – everyone knows Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche. In some places he is known as Karma Gyalpo[70] Rinpoche. In Sikkim they call him ‘The Flying Lama’. He does not live here all the time. He does not live anywhere all the time. He stays in different places, and no one knows when he will come or go.”

“What does he do when he comes here to Tso Pema?” I enquired “Does he teach?”

“No, Rinpoche, sir …”

“Pema Dorje … I hope you won’t mind my asking – but would you mind calling me Chögyam, rather than ‘Rinpoche sir’?”

“Yes, sir” Pema Dorje laughed – a little nervously.
“So … if Künzang Dorje Rinpoche doesn’t teach … Does he have no students?”

“Oh yes—he has students—but they are not many … and no injis. When Rinpoche is in Tso Pema—some personal students come to see him privately. He comes often at the time of Guru Rinpoche’s [71] birth when we are having gar’cham, [72] and then he is presiding in the dance as Guru Rinpoche.”

“I can imagine Rinpoche is a wonderful dancer!” I blurted out.

“Ah no …” Pema Dorje laughed “Rinpoche does not dance. Rinpoche sits as Guru Rinpoche so that the gar’cham will be perfect.”

“So …” I ventured, returning to what was most prominent in my mind “Rinpoche is always … as he was today? Or do you think he doesn’t like me?”

Pema Dorje smiled. “He is … like this … but …” he paused, rubbing his head with his hand as if to help him in his explanation “… he is a most wrathful Lama – but I cannot say that he does not like you. No – he will see you tomorrow, so that is good. That is very good.” Pema Dorje smiled and nodded with pleasure as he said these last words – but I was far from reassured. I wondered—if my reception had been very good—what slightly untoward would be – or even not so good. As to bad … I’d have had to have been dragged out feet first …

Later that afternoon we walked around the lake with Könchog Rinpoche. The difference was palpable. Könchog Rinpoche was all affability and ease. He evidently liked me. It flitted through my mind that I might be better placed studying with him. After all, Könchog Rinpoche was a renowned Dorje Tröllö [73] practitioner who was undoubtedly highly conversant with Dzogchen. Then it occurred to me—fairly rapidly—that Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche would have sent me to Könchog Rinpoche if he thought I should study with him. It was not to be – and I decided to think myself grateful that I’d be able to spend some time under Könchog Rinpoche’s benign influence.

As we walked ’round the lake, a stream of Tibetans approached Könchog Rinpoche and he gave each supplicant a touch on the head – in token of blessing. They then approached me – and I affected a gesture of it not being appropriate in my case to offer blessings. When Könchog Rinpoche saw this he nodded vigorously and gesticulated to the effect that I was to bless the people. Then followed a queasy ritual that I was glad to have done with, when the circumambulation of the lake was concluded. It was a highly peculiar situation.

The difference between being with Könchog Rinpoche and Künzang Dorje Rinpoche was like ‘good cop – bad cop’, and the stress that this produced
made me a little uneasy. Had they planned this together? No … surely not. I
couldn’t believe that.

No one had been informed as to my arrival in Tso Pema and so nothing so
diabolical could’ve been arranged in advance. I’d have opted for some kind
of middle ground between total acceptance and being viewed with utter
contempt.

The next day we were back outside Rinpoche’s door again. I was feeling a
sense of dread about what was to follow – but held it in check with sensible
notions to the effect that Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche would not have sent me
here, if here were not where I should be. Düd’jom Rinpoche knew me and he
knew what I needed better than I did – so any anxiety I was feeling was down
to some kind of infantilism that needed avulsing. Pema Dorje and I were duly
ushered in. We offered prostrations and took our seats.

“Oh yah …” Rinpoche began, shaking his head in what seemed to indicate
dissatisfaction “So you have come back again …” [pause] “… I do not know
why …”

I couldn’t think of a response to that other than ‘Well, Rinpoche … I’ve come
to learn Dzogchen men-ngag-dé from you because that was Düd’jom
Rinpoche’s advice to me’ but he already knew that – and … I sensed that
repeating this would seem like some kind of obdurate petulance on my part.

“And so …” Rinpoche announced “… what—is it—that you do not
understand? Tell me what you do not understand?”

“I don’t understand Dzogchen men-ngag-dé, Rinpoche.”

“You don’t—know—Dzogchen men-ngag-dé! You don’t know Dzogchen
men-ngag-dé, either to—understand it—or—not—understand it!” Rinpoche
shouted. “I didn’t ask what you do—not—know! I asked you what you do—not—
understand!”

The main thing I didn’t understand was impossible to express … ‘I don’t
know why Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche sent me to you.’ But that seemed a
highly impertinent answer – and I could not bring myself to say that. I didn’t
understand my own life narrative – it had gone haywire. The idea of life as a
story that could be understood had always been at the back of my mind.

That’s not in terms of destiny—or predestination—or anything of that nature;
I just liked to have a picture that made some kind of sense. I wasn’t on the
lookout for everything to be meaningful – but I wanted to know that I was
going in a creative direction of some sort. As elements of this idea flickered
in my mind, one of the stories of Dza Paltrül Rinpoche[74] edged into view
and adventitiously gave me something to ask.
“Rinpoche …” I began – just on the cusp of his patience wearing thin.

“There is … a story about Dza Paltrül Rinpoche that … I don’t understand.”

It was a story about offering ‘unnecessary prostrations’. This will be the first story in this book. I won’t summarise it here – but anyhow, I was confused by Paltrül’s motivation. “His behaviour seems out of character for a realised master.”

Rinpoche laughed. “Ha!” [pause] “… ’thom yor [75] …” he sighed. Then suddenly and with great force he yelled “You think you are better than Paltrül?!”

It was almost as if I’d been whacked ’round the head with a length of two-by-four.

“No, Rinpoche …” I squeaked “… but … I cannot understand—why—he does what he does.”

“You understand nothing!” Rinpoche shouted. “What do—you—know of Paltrül to understand or not understand?!” Rinpoche demanded, at slightly less volume.

It was unnerving to be shouted at in this manner – and difficult for me to keep any kind of concentration on the discussion. “I know very little, Rinpoche … apart from a few stories I heard from …”

Rinpoche interrupted at that point. “Ha! Never mind about all that! Every ’thom yor tells these stories! Almost no one understands them!” [pause] “Better you go now!” [pause] “Maybe … come back tomorrow …” [pause] “Maybe I will speak of Paltrül – maybe not.”

Rinpoche sat in silence for a while glaring at me – then yelled “You have nothing to say!”

“Thank you very much indeed, Rinpoche … I would like to learn about Dza Paltrül.”

Rinpoche yawned “Yah—yah—yah … maybe … maybe … maybe … maybe there is something to tell of Paltrül that you need to know …” [pause] “… because you are a ’thom yor and know nothing!” [pause] “Maybe you can understand —maybe not—but … Düd’jom Rinpoche says you need teachings on Dzogchen men-ngag-dé.”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Ha! ’thom yor! Why you agree with me?! Künzang Dorje did not ask you to agree!”

By this time Rinpoche observed that he had practically plastered me into the wall – and this seemed to ameliorate the situation slightly. “Yah—yah—yah

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Wrong!” [pause] “No, you do—not—know!” he barked – let out a huge sigh “’thom yor … ’thom yor … ’thom yor …” [pause] “You do not know anything! If you knew principle and function you would understand this story of Paltrül! If you are ever to receive teaching on Dzogchen you will need a clear mind! If you cannot understand Paltrül you will not understand Dzogchen!” Rinpoche shook his head slowly from side to side in a manner which seemed to indicate doubt that I’d ever understand anything. “We will have to see if this is possible …” [pause] “It may not be possible …” [pause] “You can go now.”

“Thank you, Rinpoche.”

“What for!” he shouted – and, then shaking his head he sighed “Kyé ma” … ’thom-yor …”

I sat vaguely stupefied for a moment – but I’d been asked a question and felt that unless I answered I’d be given up as a lost cause. “I was thanking you for agreeing to teach me, Rinpoche.”

“No!” [pause] “I have—not—agreed to teach you anything! Not yet …” He grinned ever-so-slightly. “So! What do you say now?!”

“Thank you for letting me come back, Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche shook his head from side to side. “… ’thom yor …” [pause] “… maybe … maybe not … we’ll see …” [pause] “Now go!”

That seemed a good point to leave as requested.

“Kale ju-ten ja-go” I offered politely and backed out of the door.

Hot damn! I was in with a chance! Once back on the track to the Nyingma gompa—and out of earshot—Pema Dorje said “This is too good! Rinpoche – will teach you now. He is very—very—very wrathful! He does not like to take students. He has only few students. You are too lucky.”

Lucky … yes … I was lucky – but it felt like the kind of luck that consisted of being told ‘… Although you’re falling to your death at the moment – the altimeter is faulty and you’ll have another full five seconds before you hit the ground.’

I returned the next day and the rest is history—the history of the stories in this book—along with the interrogatory conversations which followed them …
unnecessary prostrations

“Oh yah …” Rinpoche sighed “… here you are again. What will you say today?”

What would I say today? How was Rinpoche able to ask so many questions that had no obvious answer? Maybe I should answer ‘I’ll probably say what you’d predict an idiot like me would say’ but that didn’t seem like an answer I could give. Rinpoche sat staring at me with unwithheld menace. I dropped my eyes and sat waiting for the explosion – but it never came. “Now… I’ll tell the story of Dza Paltrül that you did not understand …” Rinpoche began “… and you must listen clearly – not like a ‘thom yor!’” [pause] “You must listen with open mind – and with attention!” [pause] “Then … I will ask you what you don’t understand …” [pause] “Then … you must answer well! Or … you must leave!”

And so Rinpoche commenced the telling of the first lay. I sat and listened as Rinpoche spoke, and then as Pema Dorje translated. There was something utterly otherworldly about the process, because it was as if Pema Dorje weren’t there.[78] There was a blur of words—the alternation of English and Tibetan—in which I lost track of which was which. I found myself understanding something that was somehow hovering between the two languages. The sound of Rinpoche’s voice appeared as it was echoing through Pema Dorje’s English.

It was probably because I was sitting gawp-eyed, fixated on Rinpoche – but whatever it was, it had a hallucinatory quality – dreamlike, yet extremely poignant. Every moment was a moment of unprecedented presence in the moment.

“Yah … so … Paltrül awoke one morning from a dream of clarity in which one of his root teachers—Min’gyüri Namkha’i Dorje—had appeared to him …” He was so moved by this experience that he set out immediately for Dzogchen gompa to make prostrations at his Lama’s feet. Min’gyüri Namkha’i Dorje was a gTértön. He was known for his mercurial character and unpredictable behaviour – so any damn thing was possible.

“Do you think Künzang Dorje is mercurial and unpredictable?” Rinpoche enquired in a mild offhand way.

“No … Rinpoche – I don’t think so … but I’ve only just met you.”

Rinpoche looked as if he were about to smile – but nothing formed itself physically where a smile would have appeared. “Just angry – and disliking you?!”
“I… can’t say yet, Rinpoche—about disliking me…”

“Why?!”

“Because…” I had to say it “…you’ve not known me that long.”

Rinpoche laughed an icy laugh—then—in a chilly voice, said “Yah … good answer … maybe …” There followed a slightly long silence. “Maybe … you stay – maybe not, we will see …” [pause] “Now I tell the story …” [pause] “So … Namkha’i Dorje was mercurial and unpredictable, but Paltrül had no qualms about that – he was up for anything…” [pause] “Maybe you are like this?” Rinpoche interjected with a cool restrained chuckle.

“Yes, Rinpoche – I’m up for anything” I nodded.

Rinpoche made a barely audible harrumphing sound and shook his head. “Yah … maybe … maybe not …” Then he shouted “Are you sure?!?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – I’m sure.”

“How are you sure?!” he barked.

That was quite an assault. It was as if he were poised to catch me out with every sentence I managed to offer him. This wasn’t the moment not to answer well – so I plunged in almost before I knew what I was going to say: “Because it’s what I’ve done all my life. I never turn back if I’ve made a decision. I’ve already lived in a world that’s not been easy – so I know I can stand behind my words.”

Rinpoche widened his eyes in theatrical mimicry of being surprised. “Yah, yah, yah – very big warrior now.” [pause] “Maybe now you want to fight with Künzang Dorje?!” He loomed forward at me brandishing his fists – and I was certain he could have punched me senseless had he wished to do so. He was a rTsa-rLung master and extremely fit. Rinpoche’s menace however, had the opposite effect—maybe— than intended. I could never tell what was a set-up, what was straight, and what something else entirely. The effect was that a slight smile moved on my mouth for a fleeting moment. Rinpoche noticed it and laughed loudly. “Oh yah! This is better!” [pause] “So … no need for fighting?”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“Can you use a sword?!”

“I’ve never touched a sword.”

“A gun?!”

“Yes, Rinpoche – I’ve shot rifles when I was young – but they weren’t large calibre.”
“DoKhyentsé shot rifles!” Rinpoche barked “Maybe I’ll speak of this later – if … I let you stay.”

“I would like that – thank you very much indeed, Rinpoche.”

“Time for thanking later!” Rinpoche barked “When I tell you! If I tell you! Not before!”

Rinpoche eyed me in an almost predatory manner. “Oh yah …” [pause] “So … when Paltrül arrived he was welcomed by Namkha’i Dorje”…

… Min’gyüür Namkha’i Dorje was very casual and open. He was not a Lama with mighty pretensions. He said immediately “Paltrül! It is good that you have come to see me! Come! Rest your skinny ass on a cushion!” Paltrül failed to answer however – and immediately attempted to perform prostrations. Min’gyüür Namkha’i Dorje Rinpoche seeing this display of devotion removed himself from his seat and began prostrating to Paltrül.

Paltrül was aghast and ran away in order not to observe his Lama’s prostrations toward him. Namkha’i Dorje returned to his seat tittering gleefully.

After a while Paltrül returned and began his prostration performance again. The same thing happened—and happened—and happened. It happened so many times that Paltrül had to give up that particular approach.

Undeterred, he attempted a more furtive approach. He decided to hide in the temple behind Namkha’i Dorje’s teaching throne – and offer his prostrations there in secret.

This had not been happening long when Paltrül discovered that Namkha’i Dorje was still returning his prostrations on the other side of the wall. He then learnt that these extraordinary procedures were interrupting the teachings that his Lama had been requested to give. When Paltrül discovered this, he became reconciled to the fact that offering prostrations to his Lama was a futile pursuit – and—in that moment—gained immense clarity.

Rinpoche rubbed his chin. “Yah … and so—this—was the story you didn’t understand …”

“Yes, Rinpoche … it was …”

“And now …” he shook his head “… you still don’t understand.”

“No, Rinpoche.”

This seemed to cause annoyance. “Why do you agree with me?! ’thom yor! Did I ask you to agree?! Why should Künzang Dorje need you to agree?! Are you a—complete—’thom yor?!”

“No, Rinpoche” I stated as calmly as I could. I was always braver when
attacked than I was when he simply put me on the spot. “I’m probably an ‘incomplete’ idiot. If I was a ‘complete idiot’ I’d be more like the mahasiddha ‘the enlightened moron’ … and that wouldn’t be as bad …”

Unaccountably Rinpoche seemed to approve of my making a rejoinder. “Oh yah.” He grinned slightly—pausing to consider—smoothing out the cover cloth on his Lama’s table. “So … what don’t you understand?! You must be clear! You must be clear even of what your lack of understanding is!”

I was silent for a while – and, as the seconds ticked away, Rinpoche looked increasingly severe. I felt rather embarrassed about the reply that was forming itself in my mind. I didn’t really want to express what I was thinking.

“Come on!” Rinpoche suddenly roared. “Answer now – or go away!”

In spite of my fear of annoying him, it remained difficult to speak. “My difficulty … is caused … by my sense of irritation with Dza Paltrül.”

Rinpoche appeared to grin ever so slightly at this – and shouted “So! Explain! What irritation?! What cause?!”

“It’s his insistence on formality … It seems … almost … infantile – but I don’t feel right about voicing that idea.”

“Yah …” Rinpoche almost yawned. He was looking rather bored by me. “… And so?”

“Well … from one point of view … it could be said that there seems to be some quality of ridiculous wilfulness in Paltrül Rinpoche’s behaviour … but I must be mistaken in that feeling – as Dza Paltrül was a realised master. So there’s obviously something that I don’t understand.”

Rinpoche gazed at me unblinking and with an intense gleam in his eyes. Suddenly he let out a deep roar – but this time he also laughed. “You think all Lamas are perfect?!” There was no answer to that question. “Why can’t Paltrül make a mistake?!” There was no answer to that either. “Answer me!”

I had to say something so I tried “How can you make a mistake if you’re realised?”

“Yah … ‘thom yor …” he yawned. “You do not understand rigpa … or even ma-rigpa …”[79] he replied matter-of-factly. “Rigpa—realisation—is not always present – and … Paltrül’s devotion is too strong … too strong.”

Rinpoche watched my expression of vague bewilderment for a while – and, when he considered that enough time had elapsed, commented “The relationship with the Lama should not be based on our desires. No matter how much devotion Paltrül has, he should not make an indulgence of it. He can’t demand to dominate his Lama with his devotion …” [pause] “What do you say now?!”
“I understand that, Rinpoche … that’s clear.”

“What is clear?!?” he shouted back at terrific volume.

“It’s important to show respect to your Lama – and not be altered in your devotion just because your Lama has a self-effacing manner. Neither should you insist on expressing devotion in a certain form if it is clear your Lama’s trying to dissuade you from it.”

“Yah … yah … yah …” Rinpoche yawned “So … it is—very—easy to understand! What makes it difficult to understand is only—your idea—of what things mean! It’s not that you can’t understand! You just have wrong ideas! And wrong ideas stop you understanding because you cannot mix them with reality! Do you understand this?!”

“Yes, Rinpoche – I do.” And I really did.

“So …” Rinpoche continued “It’s like being wet from the rain and not understanding why you are not dry – because you believe it’s not rained …” [pause] “Are you sure you understand this?!”

“Yes, Rinpoche.” I’d never heard anything like that before. I’d never considered that understanding could be obstructed by one’s own concepts – but it made perfect sense to me.

“Then explain to me now!”

“If I try to reconcile something I’m trying to understand with a false idea that is already in my mind … it won’t be possible for me to understand.”

Rinpoche gave a peremptory nod as if to say “What else would you expect – you goddamn imbecile?” He scrutinised me momentarily. “Yah … this you must—always—know! Without this, Dzogchen can never be understood! You must know what is in your mind and you must know how you see! You must know everything – but … not by learning …” Rinpoche paused for a brief moment and shouted “Bang!” in English.

Silence followed. I cannot say how long it lasted. Then, in a slightly less brutal tone, he continued “Like this … you must—see—clearly what is there … Anyway there are several versions of this story … in one, Paltrül recognises his Lama’s prostrations as a direct teaching. He recognises that he was receiving direct transmission of Dzogchen. In this version, the two Lamas simply recognise each other at that point – there is no further need for external symbols.” Rinpoche was silent for some minutes in which he gazed through the window. “Now you tell me again! Tell me about being clear in your mind!”

“Being clear … means not attempting to merge what I’m trying to understand with a pre-existing idea that I take to be an unquestioned
reality.”

“Yah … and so? What is the obstacle?!”

“Well, Rinpoche … If I try to mix the nature of reality that I receive from you with the nature of duality that I take to be real – then all I can understand is duality – and then I’ll be an idiot.”

“Yah …” [pause] “I think now you understand this … today – but maybe tomorrow you will already have forgotten.” Rinpoche shook his head.

“Sometimes … it seems … you might not be a ’thom yor – but … mostly … you are a ’thom yor …”

We sat in silence and I tried not to dwell on the fact that I might—in Rinpoche’s view—be an irredeemable idiot. I distracted myself from this gruesome fate by thinking about the story I’d just heard. In a short space of time it gave rise to a number of observations on my own behaviour. “It’s evident …” I ventured “… that many forms of externally expressed devotion are simply masks with which disciples hide themselves in order not to be seen by the Lama.”

My eyes filled with tears as I made this statement. “It is a cherished idea of mine … that if I behave very well indeed, you’ll think I’m a good student … but that gets me into all sorts of trouble.”

Rinpoche looked at me intently but not ferociously. “What kind of trouble?”

I took a risk and smiled as I replied “Making you angry …”

Rinpoche smiled. “Good! Then just be natural!” [pause] “Maybe …Künzang Dorje is not—always—angry … but that depends on whether you remain a ’thom yor.” [pause] “If you ever stop being a ’thom yor – then maybe Künzang Dorje will no longer need to be angry.”

I realised at that moment that there was nothing I could do but be myself – whatever happened. “I think, Rinpoche … that I may always be a little anxious around you – but maybe that’s just how I am with you. If I attempt to look as if I’m relaxed … that would just be another form of pretence.”

Rinpoche replied with thinly veiled exasperation “To have anxiety with the Lama is to be expected. This—is—relaxed!” [pause] “This—is—natural …” [pause] “There is no more to know about this!”

Having had this discussion, things seemed somewhat easier – and I decided to give up worrying about how he’d react to my peculiar ideas. I later discovered that such decisions are simple to make – but not as easy to carry out. That lesson has remained with me – and is of inestimable value.

Today—when I teach—if someone doesn’t understand me, I try a few
alternative ways of explaining. If these fail I know that the person must have some philosophical construct—that is acting almost like a computer virus—which I have to unearth. Most people are not even aware that these viruses exist in the fabric of their perception—so they do not know what they do not understand. It’s then up to the teacher to identify it. That is not always as difficult as it may sound—because it’s usually connected with one of the four philosophical extremes: monism, dualism, nihilism, or eternalism. I’ll give some examples so that this will not be left as a mystery.

Monism: *everything is one – we are all part of God – all religions preach the same truth.*

Dualism: *heaven and hell are separate – creator and created are fundamentally different.*

Nihilism: *nothing has meaning – life is purposeless – nothing has value.*

Eternalism: *everything has meaning and value – there is a purpose to everything that occurs.*

This is obviously an extremely simple overview couched in everyday language—but it gives you some idea. If a person wants to hang onto any aspect of the four philosophical extremes as being valid—then Buddhism will either never make any sense, or become distorted. There are other philosophical problems that get in the way of understanding Buddhism, and some of them lie in the Judæo-Christian view of what religion is. The Three Religions of the Book are based on ‘Truth’—but Buddhism is based on ‘Method’. If you expect Buddhism to be ‘Truth’ rather than *that which points in the direction of truth or reality*—then Buddhism will seem to be full of contradictions. Buddhism is composed of vehicles and each vehicle has its own base in terms of experience. Each vehicle therefore has its own way of proceeding that is different from the other vehicles.

This is what I learned from Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche—and a great deal more. Each story that follows elucidates some aspect of Buddhism. Rinpoche’s method was to teach me how to find my own answers—and find them to be Buddhism.
Part II

the attack without mercy
“No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!” is a catch phrase from the Monty Python television series. Men—dressed in late eighteenth century Spanish costume—invade other Monty Python comic scenes – on sharply contrasting subjects. The surprised actors in the other scenes exclaim “We never expected the Spanish Inquisition!” to which the Inquisitors respond “No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!”

In similar vein—in the movie Little Big Man—General Custer is told by one of his captains that the Indians know his platoon is there – so there’s no purpose in launching a surprise attack. General Custer responds “But nothing is more surprising than the attack without mercy!”

Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche said “The world is full of idiots. There are many kinds of idiots: foolish harmless idiots; shy emotionally vulnerable idiots; oversensitive idiots; ridiculous pious idiots; comfort-seeking idiots; mundane conformist idiots; tight-minded conservative idiots; unconventional exhibitionist idiots; puritanical idiots; pompous spiritual idiots; self-righteous hypocritical idiots; self-satisfied sanctimonious idiots; academic scholarly idiots; tedious self-centred idiots; clever scheming idiots; power-seeking idiots; arrogant bigoted idiots; cruel avaricious idiots; and, dangerous vicious idiots. I have no time for idiots.”
Having entered Rinpoche’s room—and performed prostrations—I sat in eager anticipation mixed with dread. Rinpoche ignored me. He was busy with some text—and was arranging the order of the pages. Tibetan texts are all loose-leaf compilations contained between two wooden boards. They are then wrapped in cloth and bound closed with a fabric tape. Rinpoche occasionally looked up at me—or at Pema Dorje—as if he were checking how many of us there were. It was only ever a cursory flick of the eyes in our direction—and he made no statement as to how long he would be occupied. I started wondering—after about a quarter of an hour—whether we should suggest coming back later—but realised that if Rinpoche had wanted us to go and come back at another time, he was quite capable of conveying that information.

Rinpoche suddenly spoke: “Stories of DoKhyentsé[80] are widely known … maybe you have heard stories of DoKhyentsé?”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“What stories?!” he barked.

“I heard one about DoKhyentsé reanimating a wild blue sheep after he and his disciples had eaten it.”

“Oh yah … this is—one—story …” [pause] “But do you know the meaning?!”

“I think I do …”

“Ha! You think! Too much thinking! Always too much thinking …’thom yor … but no clarity!” [pause] “Anyhow … we will see – I will tell this story and then I will question you!” [pause] “… Then you must know the meaning!”…

… On one occasion—after killing a wild blue sheep—DoKhyentsé instructed his disciples to take the meat and roast it over a fire. The fire was burning merrily and the smell of the roast sheep was wafting amongst the eagerly gathered nostrils of DoKhyentsé’s disciples. One disciple however, was having some sort of religious-idiot ideas about this sheep butchering. DoKhyentsé—sensing his spiritual doubts—said “Be careful to preserve the skin and the bones.”

At the end of the feast, DoKhyentsé said to the doubting disciple “Now bring the skin and bones. Lay them out in front of me, as they would naturally be from the sheep.” DoKhyentsé then sat in silence for a while before suddenly snapping his fingers. The sheep jumped up, shook itself in its hide, and
trotted away. The sheep was limping a little however – because the doubting disciple had omitted to replace one small piece of bone.

“What do you learn from this?”

“That …” I stumbled “… you shouldn’t have doubt about the Lama …”

Rinpoche shook his head. “…’thom yor …” he sighed “This is the answer you have—learned—how to give! All ’thom yors can give this answer! That is—not—why I tell you stories! I do—not—want to hear conventional answers! I want you to use your natural intelligence! I do—not—want you just to parrot the teachings you’ve received!”

I was back in the jungle with the tiger again. I thought I’d made some headway and suddenly I was back at the beginning – giving idiot answers. Rinpoche was poised for a lethal pounce. I realised I’d be thrown out if I didn’t come up with something better almost immediately – so I blurted “Precision, Rinpoche – a disciple has to be precise in following instructions or there is no transmission.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Ha! Why did you not say this first?!”

“I don’t know, Rinpoche.”

“You must know! It is bad enough to be a ’thom yor – but not to know why you say what you say is to be worse than a ’thom yor!” [pause] “Now! Answer again and this time – do not answer like a ’thom yor or you must leave!”

“I answered as I did because I thought it was … an answer that …showed something important about Vajrayana.”

“Yah—yah—yah … ’thom yor! This is merely a ‘proper answer’! This is an answer that people learn to give! This is how ’thom yors learn! They learn all the ‘proper answers’ and then they give these answers and become parrots.”

Rinpoche then made noises like a squawking parrot. We then sat in silence for ten minutes – ten minutes of purgatory. I wondered what would happen next – but at least I’d not been thrown out. Rinpoche had been looking out of the window – but suddenly he turned to me with a furious look. The fury however translated into another story rather than a reprimand.

“The Gyalpo of Dér-gé had been a benefactor of Jig’mèd Lingpa!” [pause] “Did you know this?!?”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“No, Rin—po—chay” he replied, imitating the hint of whine in my voice. “Yah—yah—yah … ’thom yor …” [pause] “… DoKhyentsé was recognised as the incarnation of Jig’mèd Lingpa and so the gyalpo thought he ought to
revere him – like you think you—ought—to revere me.” Rinpoche said nothing for a moment or two and then shouted “You have something to say!”

What was I to say to that? Well sure, I did think that I ought to revere Rinpoche – because Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche sent me to him to receive Dzogchen men-ngag-dé, so how could I not revere him? But … was there any reverence that was not connected with Dü’d’jom Rinpoche?

I’d obviously taken too long thinking about it because Rinpoche shouted “If you have nothing to say – you must leave! So speak now or go!”

“I do think that I ought to revere you, Rinpoche – because Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche sent me to you … but that doesn’t mean that I won’t come to revere you from my own experience … but it’s still very early … and …” I ran out of words at that point.

“Oh yah! Good answer! This is not a ’thom yor answer – so I will continue …” [pause] “So this Gyalpo wanted DoKhyentsé to live and give teachings in Der-gé. He wanted to own him as his own Lama …” [pause] “Do you think you can own Künzang Dorje?!”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“Oh yah … And Künzang Dorje does not own you …” [pause] “Anyhow … because the Gyalpo wanted to have DoKhyentsé as his personal Lama there was much jealousy amongst the spiritual idiots in those parts” …

… DoKhyentsé came to hear of the jealous idiots – and decided to leave Gyarong. He travelled through Golok and Mongolia manifesting mahasiddha activities. The Gyalpo of Der-gé came to hear of this – and felt an even greater desire to have DoKhyentsé as his personal Lama. The Gyalpo sent grand invitations to DoKhyentsé – but he never replied. The Gyalpo then sent representatives to invite DoKhyentsé – but he refused. The Gyalpo then wrote ‘If you don’t come soon, I shall send my army to escort you to my dzong.’[81] This warning also failed to move DoKhyentsé. The Gyalpo then promised vast offerings – but again he got no response. In desperation the Gyalpo enquired of DoDrüpchen[82] “What can I do? Nothing works to bring DoKhyentsé to Der-gé.”

DoDrüpchen replied “DoKhyentsé’s activity only resonates with those who are ready to understand it. There is no way for people who cannot understand. Maybe if you give up with your attempts to force the issue – he may come … but … you will need to be open-minded and not try to change DoKhyentsé Rinpoche. He is a mahasiddha – you will not be able to place conditions on him as you would with any other gyalpo’s personal Lama.”

So … the Gyalpo resolved to rid his mind of demands – or at least to desist in writing and sending representatives. Then one day—out of the blue—
DoKhyentsé arrived. He appeared dressed as a Mongolian and—without preparation—gave the Gyalpo empowerments and teachings. The Gyalpo was delighted. He requested DoKhyentsé to be his Lama—and made his request with great fervency—but DoKhyentsé refused. “My understanding of Dharma is too unconventional. My way of living is too offensive to conservative society. I butcher sheep and eat the meat – so I cannot be any gyalpo’s Lama.”

The Gyalpo was bewildered and said “But you have just given empowerments and teachings and these were all in perfect accordance with Dharma.”

“Yah—yah—yah—that’s as may be – but you will see who I am if I remain in your land a day or two.”

Then—over the next days—DoKhyentsé displayed extraordinary behaviour. He wore a hat made from the branches of a tree. He rode his horse bareback with the saddle strapped to his back. Then he dismounted—removed his clothes—and walked back and forth in front of the Lang-da Gompa howling like a wolf. Next time he appeared wearing leaves; then dressed as a woman; then as a Mongolian warrior; then as a drokpa from Hor. The Gyalpo—seeing these displays—attempted without success, to dissuade him from manifesting eccentric behaviour – and DoKhyentsé said “As I told you – I am not a Lama you would want. My understanding of Dharma is too unconventional. My way of living is too offensive to conservative society.”

The Gyalpo apologised – but at heart he was still of the same mind on the subject. Anyhow—whilst all this was taking place—Dér-gé was suffering from drought. The temperature had risen and the crops were dying. The Gyalpo asked the ecclesiastics of the Kathog and Dzogchen Gompas for help. They tried – but they could do nothing to alleviate the drought. Recognising their failure they suggested “Why don’t you ask DoKhyentsé—he’s famous as a miracle worker—but maybe ask him to dress in the correct way when he performs his rites.”

“I will do as you suggest – but I cannot ask him to change his dress. I’ve tried that and he really doesn’t like to be asked.”

“Yes—we know that—but anyway this won’t be good for religion in this area – and he must be brought to understand this” said the ecclesiastic idiots. “If he performs miracles dressed like a nomad, people will lose respect for the ecclesiastic hierarchy and that would be bad for religion in general – you must see that.”

“Yes … I see that … but it will not be easy … I will see – but—first— we must end the drought.”

The ecclesiastics agreed that it was important to stop the drought but insisted
that as soon as the drought was ended the Gyalpo should insist that DoKhyentsé wear conventional religious robes.

The Gyalpo wasn’t too happy about this but went to DoKhyentsé and requested help.

“I’ll gladly help” replied DoKhyentsé “But you’ll have to settle for my methods—and my clothing—and … they might not please you.”

“I have no objection to—anything—you do as long as it brings rain for the crops.”

“Well I don’t need to dress like a woman for this” DoKhyentsé replied – knowing that the Gyalpo was worried about his clothing “… but I’ll have to knock a hole in the sky. Are you prepared for that?”

“Certainly – whatever you do is fine.”

“Well … get your people to prepare four huge sharp nails and a hammer with a handle the length of my leg.”

The nails and hammer were prepared as requested, and DoKhyentsé appeared dressed in his sheepskin chuba doubled down from the waist to leave his torso unclothed. Grasping the hammer in his right hand and four huge nails in his left – he approached the Gyalpo’s dzong. He attached iron chains to the nails and pounded them into the sky in the four cardinal directions. Sweat streamed from DoKhyentsé’s chest and shoulders as he pulled on the nails – and even more so, when he began to pull on the chains. A swirling vortex appeared in the sky between the nails and a roaring sound began to swell. The air trembled. Sparks flew from the nails and smoke began to be emitted from the vortex he had created in the sky. Soon dark clouds obscured the sun and rain began to fall.

Seeing the rain the Gyalpo was overjoyed – but immediately his mind turned to the question of appeasing the local ecclesiastics. He’d have to talk with DoKhyentsé the next day. No sooner had this thought occurred to him than the rain became torrential and the water eventually threatened the land with flooding. The Gyalpo ran immediately to DoKhyentsé and begged for his help again. Again DoKhyentsé gave his help and the flood dissipated.

DoKhyentsé gave the Gyalpo, his court and all the people advice on how to maintain their country and ensure rain in due season. They all agreed to follow DoKhyentsé’s advice and famine was averted from Dér-gé for many years. The Gyalpo decided to forget the admonitions of the local ecclesiastics – as he was worried about approaching DoKhyentsé with questions of clothing after the miracles he had performed.

The local ecclesiastics however, were unmoved by the miracles. “Miracles or
not, DoKhyentsé is still wearing a white nomad’s lambskin chuba! This is too bad and something must be done! Really! Now you must use your influence and ask DoKhyentsé to dress in proper religious clothes. The drought has been averted and there is now no risk of famine.”

After some argument that would be tedious to detail, the Gyalpo agreed to approach DoKhyentsé on the subject. “Rinpoche – I offer great thanks for your help.

“You have saved the crops and averted famine … but could you not placate the local ecclesiastics by wearing something that looks more … looks … just a little more … like religious clothing?”

“Yah—yah—yah … I knew that this would be the way it would work. If that’s your attitude, I’m leaving.”

“I’m sorry – I shouldn’t have asked that – please wear whatever you like— but please do not leave” pleaded the Gyalpo.

“No” DoKhyentsé replied “I told you it wouldn’t work – and it hasn’t worked. The idiots here will remain idiots – and they’ll never stop trying to make me be as they want me to be. I told you how it would be – and you’ve seen for yourself.”

DoKhyentsé mounted up and rode away – never to return to that area.

“Now …” Rinpoche began “You have shown that you do not need to answer like a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Tell me what you understand from this.”

This was much easier for me—somehow—so I answered without hesitation: “The Gyalpo is a weak man. He wants DoKhyentsé as his Lama but allows his desire to be destroyed by others. If he really wanted DoKhyentsé as his Lama more than anything else he would not have tried to change him to suit the dictates of conventional religion.”

“Oh yah!” Rinpoche shouted – but with fierce approval rather than fierce censure. “You see – you do not—have—to be a ’thom yor …” [pause] “… but there is more to say. What is the Gyalpo’s other mistake?”

Again – that was an easy question to answer. “He wanted to own DoKhyentsé, and a student—even if he’s a king or local prince—cannot own his Lama. Guru Rinpoche showed this when Trisong Détsen expected to be excused when it came to offering prostrations. Guru Rinpoche singed his beard with a sheet of flame. Trisong Détsen saw his error and performed prostrations.”

Rinpoche sat staring at me for some minutes. I could not fathom what his look betokened. At one point I got the vaguest of impressions that he was trying to repress a smile. Eventually he spoke:
“Oh yah … this is well spoken …” [pause] “Now … maybe it is enough for today …” [pause] “In some things … you are not a ’thom yor – so we shall have to see tomorrow what you are.” Rinpoche smiled faintly “Yah … this was a good answer.”

Then I ruined it all. “Thank you, Rinpoche.”

“Why?! ’thom yor! There is nothing to thank! Do you think I say this to please you?! Do you think Künzang Dorje is a flatterer?!”

“No, Rinpoche. I just wanted to be polite.”

“Yah—yah—yah … ’thom yor … maybe come back again the day after tomorrow. Maybe you sit all day tomorrow and try to gain clarity!”
“Oh yah …” Rinpoche sighed with dramatic weariness “… you have come back—again …” [pause] “Where did—you go—yesterday?” he asked as if he expected me to tell him I had been to Mandi and back to buy a bag of sweeties.

“I walked ’round the lake and I practised in my room, Rinpoche.”

“All day walking and practising?”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“And the day before? The same?” he asked with more or less the same expectation as before.

“The same, Rinpoche … walking ’round the lake – and practising …”

Rinpoche said nothing for a while – but simply sat observing me. “Maybe … today … I will say something more of DoKhyentsé …” [pause] “But you must listen well and try not to be a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Düd’jom Rinpoche has written that you have a good heart – but he does not say that you are not a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Maybe … with Düd’jom Rinpoche you are not speaking like a ’thom yor.”

I decided that I would avoid answering that on the basis that anything I said was likely to incriminate me.

“Ha! Now you hide from Künzang Dorje!”

Ouch! Trapped again. “Yes, Rinpoche … but I meant no disrespect …it’s just that I have no answer to what you just said.”

“Always you must have an answer!” he shouted. “Answer now!”

I had no choice – so I just told it like I thought it was. “I don’t think I spoke like an idiot, Rinpoche … but … but … that’s because Düd’jom Rinpoche didn’t ask me questions the way you ask me questions.”

“Yah … this answer is not the answer of a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Next time you answer me you must use your intelligence!” he barked. “Anyhow … I will now speak of DoKhyentsé …” [pause] “One time … there were two young drokpas who wanted to test whether DoKhyentsé was clairvoyant … one drokpa feigned death, and the other asked DoKhyentsé for bardo rites”…

… DoKhyentsé put ash on the head of the drokpa who’d feigned death – and his friend discovered that he actually was dead. Horrified, he pleaded with DoKhyentsé to resurrect his friend. DoKhyentsé shouted “Dza!” and the lad
returned to life. He apologised profusely for his deceit and later became a
disciple and an accomplished meditator.

“What do you say to this?”

This time I just said the first thing that came into my head. “I find it hard to
believe that two young drokpas would attempt to test DoKhyentsé Yeshé
Dorje—or any Lama—in this way.”

“Yah … good … now you have your natural intelligence again …” [pause]
“This is a 'thom yor story – and I do not believe it for two reasons …”
[pause] “First – it is as you say. Second – I have never heard a name for this
drokpa who was supposed to have become a great meditator. If such a person
existed there would be a name – but there is no name. This is a story told to
’thom yors by ’thom yors …” [pause] “So … maybe you are not—always—a
’thom yor … Anyway, I cannot think that Düd’jom Rinpoche would send me a
’thom yor unless the ’thom yor can be redeemed.”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Ha! ’thom yor! You agree again!” he shouted. “I told you before! I do—not
—need you to agree with me! Why do you act like a ’thom yor?! Do you do
this deliberately?!”

Damned if I did – and damned if I didn’t … I was caught in a fork. What was
I to say to that? Well … I said the only thing I could say “I have confidence
in Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche. If he says I must come here to study with you
then I must have a chance to cease being an idiot.”

“Mmmm …” Rinpoche hummed “You must know that I can have—no—
argument with this.”

Rinpoche sat in silence for some ten minutes and then he began to speak
again. “You should know … that DoKhyentsé once taught at La’u Thang.
During the teaching two monks and a fellow called ’ö-Sel arrived and sat in
the back of the meditation hall”…

… At the end of the teaching, DoKhyentsé approached them and asked “Why
are you here?”

They answered “To receive teaching, Rinpoche … we’ve travelled many days
for your teachings.”

DoKhyentsé asked “Do you have a Lama?”

“Yes, we have a Lama.”

“And, who is this goddamn Lama?”

“Our Lama is Mé’gyūr Namkha, Rinpoche.”
Then DoKhyentsé became furious and shouted “Who is this Mé’gyür Namkha?! If you want to receive teachings abandon this Lama! If you can’t – then leave now!”

Dejectedly the three left. DoKhyentsé completed the teachings some days later. He was then to give an empowerment. The two monks appeared in the audience again with the fellow ’ö-Sel. DoKhyentsé saw them and expelled them from the hall.

A few days passed and many practitioners arrived for another cycle of teachings and instruction. ’ö-Sel and the monks saw what was happening and asked a third time to be allowed into the teachings. They were rejected again for the same reason given on the first occasion. The two monks were highly frustrated and were of one opinion:

“We’ve travelled far to get these teachings. If we go home without having received anything – it’ll be our shame and we will be disgraced. We’ve decided …” they confided to ’ö-Sel “… that we will tell DoKhyentsé that we have abandoned our Lama – but, secretly, we shall keep him in our hearts.”

’ö-Sel wasn’t happy with this idea and replied “I can’t abandon my Lama – even as a ploy. Me’gyür Namkha Rinpoche isn’t at fault that I should say I’ve abandoned him. I can’t do this – even to receive teachings from DoKhyentsé Rinpoche.”

The next day, the two monks told DoKhyentsé they’d abandoned their Lama – and they were immediately invited to take their places in the hall. ’ö-Sel presented himself again – but said that he could not abandon his Lama. He was expelled as before. ’ö-Sel naturally felt extremely sad. There was no chance now to receive teachings. He packed his gear and left.

Before he had reached the end of the valley however, he heard the sound of a horse swiftly approaching. The horseman reined in and came to an abrupt halt calling out “DoKhyentsé Rinpoche has called you back. You may now receive the teachings.” ’ö-Sel was delighted and returned.

DoKhyentsé had waited to commence the teachings until ’ö-Sel arrived and no sooner was he seated than DoKhyentsé announced “If you go to receive teachings from a Lama, you should be like ’ö-Sel! You two miserable monks, so-called students of Mé’gyür Namkha! If you meet another Lama – you’ll probably abandon me as you abandoned him! Leave immediately and never return!”

Consequently ’ö-Sel became a close disciple of DoKhyentsé – and it was entirely evident that abandoning Mé’gyür Namkha Rinpoche was not even a consideration. ’ö-Sel’s mind mixed with that of DoKhyentsé and ’ö-Sel became known as Aku Nga-dra-ma – ‘the man who is like him’.
“So … with this story there is nothing to ask and nothing to say – I simply tell this so that you will know something. It is for you to remember.”

I sat silent. Was Rinpoche going to ask me to abandon Düd’jom Rinpoche? No. If he was going to do that he would have told me the story afterwards. So … why did he tell me this – if we were not to discuss it … ? I did not know what was coming next – but as I’d not been asked a question I decided I’d simply sit there until Rinpoche asked me to leave.

Rinpoche yawned “Yah—yah—yah … I may as well tell you about DoKhyentsé then … he was the son of Nyènchen Thanglha, the protector of the land of my birth.” DoKhyentsé was born on the fifteenth day of the tenth month of the Iron Monkey year of the fifteenth Rabjung. The place of his birth was Kong-sér Khandro in the valley of Ma. Nyènchen Thanglha could not be his physical father so his adopted father was Chö’khor Sonam’phen of the Golok A-Kyong clan. With the mention of A-kyong, Rinpoche gave me a strange look. I said nothing.

“A-Kyong” he repeated and looked me in the eye for a moment. It was not uncomfortable – but it was … weird. It was as if he were telling me something. If it was transmission, my mind was too dense to experience any more than the sensation of oddness. I felt unable to speak. I had an intense desire to say ‘What is it about A-Kyong, Rinpoche? Why is this name important?’ but it was as if I were asleep and seeing Rinpoche in a dream. I felt unable to move – as if bringing my consciousness into my limbs would be an enormous effort. The room was somehow a long way away and the light was somehow diffuse. There seemed to be a sound of something that I could not identify. Then—slowly—reality slipped back into place. I was seated in front of Rinpoche, just as I had been before. It was as if I’d had some momentary petit mal seizure.

After a moment I repeated the name of the Golok Clan. “A-Kyong.”

Rinpoche nodded. “A-Kyong.”

Now … I suppose I could have asked what it meant that this word A-Kyong was being repeated meaningfully – but without any meaning being made apparent. Asking a question at that point seemed foolhardy and so I opted for silence. If Rinpoche wanted to tell me more – he would. If he wanted a response he’d demand it – so there was no need for me to risk his ire by asking anything.

He then proceeded with the account: “… the Machu flows through fertile green fields. It’s a wonderful valley – a beautiful place … many great Lamas—many gTértöns—have lived there …” [pause] “Also many ’thom yors.”

Anyhow DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje was recognised as the incarnation of
An important point in DoKhyentsé’s life—which occurred at the age of sixteen—was meeting Ra-nyag Gyalsé Rinpoche.[88] He was like the mahasiddhas of ancient India and lived completely beyond concept. He manifested behaviour that knew no bounds and DoKhyentsé received both mind-to-mind transmission and informal symbolic transmission from him. Well … one thing led to another and DoKhyentsé had many visionary experiences. In one vision he saw an old lady and knew that she lived near the place he was staying. He asked his sister Khandro Losèl Drölma[89] and his parents to take her gifts of tsampa,[90] meat, and chang. They found the old lady and she was a powerful wisdom eccentric. She was extremely ferocious and her activity was outside all common religious comprehension.

She ate the meat and drank the chang immediately – but threw the tsampa back at them yelling “É-Hong![91] `thom yors! Why do you trespass here – bothering me with this trifling turbid tsampa!” She gave them all water to drink. The water turned out to be the most wonderful cordial – and they all felt completely refreshed. She then gave them gifts for DoKhyentsé – along with a message: ‘DoKhyentsé! Listen to my words and take action! Quit the domain of organised establishment religion! Leave the hierarchic religious autocracy and be free! Liberate yourself from incarceration in the important-Lama-prison!’

Naturally word of this got ’round and DoKhyentsé was besieged with pious and pompous supplications from the ecclesiastics. “You have duties, responsibilities, obligations, and functionary commitments to fulfil.” They kvetched on a lot more but it would be tiresome to transcribe their dismal discourse. All these requests were, of course, concerned with the wealth and prestige of the monasteries. They had little connection with the attainment of realisation. DoDrüpchen was therefore leant upon to talk sense to the young DoKhyentsé – but he said nothing for three days. Once the three days were up he went to see him and said “The whole band of pot-bellied buffoons desire that you become a monk – and they want me to persuade you that it’s the correct thing to do. Well that’s a bunch of dog dung as far as I’m concerned. Jig’mèd Lingpa wasn’t a monk – so there’s no reason why you should be a monk. In any case it simply is—not—going to happen. My advice is that you should go into retreat for a period of time and then emerge as a
ngakpa."

DoDrüpchen gave him the hair vows. “This is in order that you can never cut your hair again – and now they can never make you become a monk.” Then he gave him the gö kar chang lo robes to wear and said “You must wear the gö kar chang lo dress for three years – then … you can change again and wear another costume of your own discovery. You will be free then and it will not matter any more what the bellicose bourgeois buggers have to say.”

Then DoDrüpchen passed away.[92] DoKhyentsé changed his name to Yong-drak Répa and began a life of wandering. After three years—as prophesied by DoDrüpchen—he ceased wearing the gö kar chang lo – and wore instead a white sheepskin chuba.

“Oh yah!” Rinpoche exclaimed “There have been other yogis who have worn the white chuba – so this is not so uncommon as people think. It’s often said that DoKhyentsé adopted layman’s dress – but this is not accurate, he simply chose the Dzogchen appearance. DoKhyentsé discovered many gTérmas and was a wonderful Lama. He was the Tsawa’i Lama of Paltrül and there are many stories about him that I will tell … if I let you stay here. We will see what happens …” [pause] “Will you come back tomorrow?”

“Certainly, Rinpoche.”

“Why?!” he shouted.

“Because I want to learn.”

“What do you want to learn?!”

What did I want to learn? I knew by now that this was a loaded question. If I said I’d like to learn more about Dza Paltrül and DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje – then Rinpoche would say that I could learn these things anywhere. I could say that I wanted to learn about Dzogchen men-ngag-dé – but that was already on the back burner. I’d have to wait until such time as Rinpoche felt I’d be ready. I couldn’t think too long or I’d be in hot water so I replied “I want to learn how … not to be an idiot?”

Rinpoche didn’t move for a moment. Then he sighed “… ’thom yor …” then —entirely unexpectedly—he shouted with immense volume “Leave! Get out and don’t come back!”

I was almost violently sick. I could feel vomit about to rise and got up extremely quickly to head for the door. Vomiting in Rinpoche’s room was not an idea that appealed to me. My head was buzzing with so many thoughts that I might as well have gone blank. All I knew was that I was about to dissolve.

As I was halfway out of the door he shouted “Come back! Sit down!” I did as
I was instructed – and after a short silence, he said in a quiet but stern tone
“Do you know why I told you to get out?”

“Because …” I began without knowing how I was going to continue “I gave
an idiot’s answer.”

“Yes! It was a ’thom yor’s answer! But—why—was it a ’thom yor’s
answer?!”

At this point I could not comprehend why I’d come back. Rinpoche was
probably just going to throw me out again – and I was feeling vaguely crazed.
Then as I sat there with—unbeknownst to me—tears rolling down my face I
said “… because it’s the answer … I thought you wanted to hear …”

Then he surprised me again. “Ha! Just as you say! Never—never—do that
again! Next time will be the last time! Do you hear?!” [pause] “So … I will
ask again! What do you want to learn?!”

I decided it couldn’t get any worse and I was going to have to launch in with
the next lunatic idea that hit me. “I want to learn how to understand – how to
see clearly and see what is really happening in these stories – and … I
suppose … in everything else that happens in life.”

“And you want—this—more than Dzogchen men-ngag-dé?!?”

For the first time I knew exactly how I’d answer. “I don’t—have—that
choice, Rinpoche. It’s your choice.”

“Yah …” he nodded with approval “… this is true … this is completely true …” [pause] “So … I will give you the choice. You can have stories …or
Dzogchen” Rinpoche replied quite mildly “what do you say now?”

“I want to understand Dzogchen men-ngag-dé – so I only want it when—you
—feel that I can understand it. There is no point in receiving it before then.”

“Oh yah … this is a now—very—clever ’thom yor answer – but … it is also a
true answer. But … you have—learnt—how to give answers like this. So …
although it is a good answer it is still coming from the mind of a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Anyhow … because this answer is also a true answer … Künzang Dorje cannot be shouting and must trust that you are not devious.”

It occurred to me in a moment of insanity to say ‘You sound disappointed,
Rinpoche’ but I thought better of it immediately and said nothing. Rinpoche
eyed me suspiciously—almost as if he’d read my thoughts—and shook his
head. “Yah …” [pause] “I will see what can be done with you … maybe
something can be done … maybe nothing can be done …” [pause] “… so …
anyway … maybe I will let you come back tomorrow …” [pause] “… or
maybe not. I do not know …” [pause] “Which do you choose?”
“That you let me come back tomorrow, Rinpoche.”

“Oh yah … maybe … we will see …” [pause] “Now you leave.”
“Yah …” Rinpoche sighed with a shake of his head that spoke of pronounced ennui “So—you—come again …”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“’thom yor! I have said before!” Rinpoche yelled with great force “I do—not—need—you—to agree with me!”

What was I to say then? ‘No, Rinpoche’? No … not a wise decision. I remained silent. Rinpoche gazed at me expressionlessly for several moments.

“So …” Rinpoche began again “How often—do—you wish to come to see me?”

I answered promptly, hoping I was not going to look like an idiot “As often as you will allow – every day if I can.”

Rinpoche laughed a ruthless laugh – and eyed me severely. “Ha! So now you are—very—brave and strong!”

“Yes!” I began somewhat recklessly. “I—am—brave, Rinpoche – and … reasonably strong …”

“Ha!” Rinpoche shouted “So! You have no fear of Künzang Dorje?!”

“No—I mean yes—I—do—feel fearful of you … but only because I fear you may throw me out.”

“Ha! Maybe Künzang Dorje doesn’t throw you out! Maybe Künzang Dorje kills you instead! Ha! What do you say now! Do you think Künzang Dorje will kill you?!”

This actually tickled my sense of humour – so I came back with a rejoinder. “No, Rinpoche – but … you may kill me any time you like.”

Rinpoche grinned at me and sat nodding his head with approval for the first time. “Yah—yah—yah …” [pause] “YAH—yah—YAH! Maybe we fight with swords then!” [pause] “But … maybe … no need for killing today.”

I thought of saying ‘Exactly, Rinpoche – tomorrow’s as good a day as any.’ But I thought it was unwise to push my luck. Rinpoche sat silently for a moment looking at me with an expression I couldn’t decipher.

“So … do you want to hear more of Paltrül?”

“Yes, please, Rinpoche.”

Then Rinpoche mimicked me “Yeess—please—rin—po—chay.” He knew
what I’d said without need of translation just as well as I knew the word ‘thom yor. “Yah—yah—yah … Anyhow … Paltrül came from Kar-chung ko’ö.”

“Kar-chung ko’ö?” I asked in a somewhat hesitant manner – writing the name in my notebook.

“Oh yah!” he roared “A valley!” [pause] “In Dza-chukha!” [93] he roared “That’s why he’s called Dza Paltrül!” [pause] “Paltrül from Dza!” he shouted with searing intensity. An uneasy interval ensued—for me at any rate—in which Rinpoche surveyed the room. It occurred to me that ‘Dza Paltrül’ was a name like ‘Turkey Creek Jack Johnson’ but there was no way of communicating that idea to Rinpoche – even though he might have enjoyed the idea of names being like that in the Old West.

“Paltrül was born in the Earth Dragon year!” [94] [pause] “What year were you born?!” Rinpoche barked.

“Water Dragon” [95] I replied almost too quickly and a little too loudly. Rinpoche ignored my answer – probably because there was nothing further to say about it.

“Paltrül was the son of a family from the Mukpo-dong clan.”

“Wasn’t Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche from that clan?” I asked “… and didn’t that belong to A-Kyong?”

Rinpoche looked almost approving of that question. “Yah … Trungpa’s family is Mukpo – and that is part of the great A-Kyong clan …” [pause] “Anyhow … Paltrül’s family also belonged to the Gé-tsé Kongma clan. His mother was called Drölma Trom-za and his father … he was called … Lhawang Gyalthog. They were simple gö kar chang lo[96] practitioners. Good people.”

Rinpoche sat looking at me in a noncommittal kind of way and I began to get the idea that I ought to ask a question. “He was an incarnation of Longchenpa,[97] wasn’t he?”

“Yah!” [pause] “He was recognised as the tulku of Pal-gé Samten Phüntsog!” [98] [pause] “Anyway, Paltrül means the tulku of Pal-gé!” Rinpoche almost spat the words at me. “And then … Pal-gé was the speech incarnation of Jig’mèd Lingpa[99] who was the incarnation of Longchenpa.”

“Speech incarnation?” I enquired.

“Yah!” [pause] “Those who become fully realised often manifest multiple incarnations; usually three, belonging to the categories of body, speech, and mind. The body incarnation continues the physical activities of the previous
Lama. The mind incarnation continues the inspirational quality of the previous Lama’s presence. The speech incarnation continues the previous Lama’s diversity of communications.”[100]

Rinpoche recited this information without a great deal of enthusiasm – but could see that I was imbibing it with unbridled fascination – so he continued “Paltrül was a practitioner of Longchen Nying-thig of Longchenpa, and one of the major holders of Yeshé Lama and rTsa rLung …”[101] [pause] “Maybe you know about this already?!”

“Well, Rinpoche … I know that the Nying-thig line originated with Longchenpa.”

“And! Do you know any more than this?!” Rinpoche shouted.

“Well …” I replied “Longchenpa appeared in visionary form and revealed it as a direct transmission to Jig’mèd Lingpa … and then … Jig’mèd Lingpa passed the transmission to Jig’mèd Gyalwé Nyügu[102] … who in turn passed it to Dza Paltrül.”[103]

“And?!” Rinpoche barked, drilling me with a fierce stare “Is there more coming?!”

“Longchenpa was … the incarnation of Pema Lédrél Tsal, and also Princess Pema Sèl.”

“Oh yah …” Rinpoche mocked derisively “. . so—now—you are a great scholar … Kyé ma, kyé ma, kyé ma …”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“Why do you say no?!” Rinpoche barked.

“Because I don’t want to be a scholar” I replied – starting to feel ever so slightly irked by Rinpoche’s tirade. “I don’t have that kind of intelligence …” [pause] “… I just try to learn what I can – because I’m interested in the Nyingma Tradition … to which I belong.”

Rinpoche looked as if he was avoiding the desire to smile. “Yah …good …” [pause] “So you know something else?!”

“A little …”

“A little what?!” he roared.

“I know that Longchenpa was ordained at the age of eleven and …studied with the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje.”[104]

“Yah—yah—yah …” Rinpoche nodded “He was born as a son of Dromza Sonam-gyen from the family of Dromton Gyalwa’i Jung-né! His father was Tengpa Srung Rinpoche the scientist and ngakpa!” [pause] “Did you know
“No, Rinpoche – I didn’t.”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“I told you that I did—not—need you to agree with me!” Rinpoche yelled. “If you do this again you will have to leave!” [pause] “Maybe you should leave now!”

Rinpoche sat in silence for five minutes whilst I sat like a lump of mouldering misery. He’d said ‘maybe’ – so it wasn’t definite that I had to leave … I’d just sit and wait.

“Oh yah … maybe you can stay …” Rinpoche began again “I still have something to say …” Rinpoche sat silently for some minutes more.

“Yah … anyhow … Longchenpa received Nyingma transmissions from his family – but also studied from many of the great Lamas of every lineage …” [pause] “He received the Kadam and Sakya teachings from Sakya Palden Sonam Gyaltsen – and also both old and new translation tantras. At nineteen years old, Longchenpa entered Sangphu Ne’u-tog[105] where he became a great scholar.” I was making notes avidly when Rinpoche laughed somewhat violently. “Yah! You become like Longchenpa! You believe this?!”

“No, Rinpoche – there’s no possibility of that.”

“Yah—good …” [pause] “What do you want then! What do you want if you don’t want to be like Longchenpa?!”

“I want—eventually—to receive Dzogchen instruction from you.” Rinpoche looked at me in slightly less hostile mien. “Yah—yah—yah … maybe … maybe not …” [pause] “… but … there is more you know about Longchenpa?”

“Very little …” I ventured “and probably not worth hearing.”

“I will tell you if it is worth hearing!” Rinpoche shouted – then exclaimed with great vehemence “You do as I ask – no more! You just tell me what you know!” Then, in a slightly less strident tone, he concluded “I have no need of your opinions about what you know. I will decide whether what you have to say is interesting to me or not!”

“Well …” I answered with trepidation “After becoming a great scholar he decided to practise in solitude in the mountains – because he’d become disgusted by the behaviour of scholars.”

“Yah!” Rinpoche shouted at painful volume “This!” and he pounded the
table with his fist “... is the most important thing to know!” [pause] “So—why—do you say— that what you know is not worth hearing?!” [pause] “There is no need to be ‘thom yor—all—the time when—sometimes—you have some intelligence!”

This alternation of censure and approval was wreaking havoc with my body as well as my mind. I was feeling decidedly queasy. Rinpoche was waiting for an answer however – and so I replied “Well ... it seemed more anecdotal ... rather than something ... specific concerned with his training.”

“Ha! So ... you—still—want to be a scholar?!”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“Ha! Then forget scholarship! Forget it or you will become an academic ‘thom yor! Then you will—never—understand Dzogchen! I will tell you more ‘anecdotes’ like this! I will tell you, because these stories have great meaning! They will be more valuable to you than this ‘thom yor scholastic list-learning!’” We sat in silence for a while. Rinpoche surveyed me closely – but he also surveyed the room. He called out to someone in another room and after a few moments the lady of the house appeared with some bottles of Indian beer. Glasses were set out and Rinpoche poured the beer. He gestured to me to take one – and I did so. He then entered a brief moment of meditation and—softly—said “Kèlpa zang.”

“Yah ... so no need for Künzang Dorje to say any more about Longchenpa ...” [pause] “… but there—is—something more important to say about Paltrül ...” [pause] “Do you want to hear it?”

“Yes, please, Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche smiled – ever so slightly. A moment of silence followed – then he shouted “Why?!” as if he’d changed his mind about being amused and was suddenly furious with me for no reason I could comprehend.

Why did I want to hear it? What sort of question was that? ‘Because it’s really interesting’ and ‘I love hearing about this stuff!’ No ... Those were idiot-answers ... So what—do—I say?

“Well, ‘thom yor! Have you no tongue in your head?!”

That of course was the very question to paralyse my tongue completely – but I knew that my presence was barely tolerated, so I forced myself to reply. “Because ... Düd’jom Rinpoche sent me here to learn from you, Rinpoche ... and ... I want to hear—anything—you have to tell me.”

“Yah—yah—yah ... but it will—not—be scholastic! If you want to be a scholar you will have to go to Gangchen Kyishong[106] where they make scholars ...” [pause] “They also have many inji ‘thom yors there – maybe
even more witless than you.”

“Whatever you have to tell me, Rinpoche … is what I want to hear – I really don’t care about being a scholar.”

“Yah … yah … so you say …” Rinpoche replied as if there were no way ’round continuing to regale me with information. “The Drüpchen[107] Gyalwa Changchub said that most people would have problems recognising Paltrül due to his non-conformism, his aversion to institutions, and his beggarly appearance.[108] Paltrül’s life style was not particularly unconventional for a togden[109] – but for a Lama of his lineal status it was extraordinary. He was supposed to have been influenced by the example of Shabkar …” [pause] “You know of Shabkar?”[110]

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Shabkar was a ’thom yor!” [pause] “… a good meditator also – and … he had—much—devotion …” [pause] “… but he was still a ’thom yor.”

“Shabkar was an idiot?” I asked—vaguely dumbfounded—whilst it occurred to me that if Shabkar was an idiot then I was in worthy company … unless I was not that kind of idiot.

“Yah … the ’thom yor threw stones at an owl because it disturbed his meditation! É Hong! Who but a ’thom yor would throw stones at an owl for such a reason?!”

This was not a rhetorical question – and so I had to answer. “Well I suppose that I wouldn’t – and in that instance, Rinpoche—yes—I see … that he was … an idiot.”

“Yah … anyhow … that’s just Künzang Dorje’s bad mind …” [pause] “You don’t have to have Künzang Dorje’s bad mind towards Shabkar – but anyway, Paltrül was never able to meet Shabkar. Paltrül’s main influence was his most important teacher – DoKhyentsé. Maybe—if you do not run away from the bad, angry Künzang Dorje—more can be told about him.”

Rinpoche sat silent for a moment or two – seeming to stare right through me. “DoKhyentsé was a great Lama …” [pause] “… but anyway – I will talk more of Paltrül.”

“Paltrül lived for long periods of his life wandering in the mountains—sleeping rough—and having no possessions. He didn’t wear a white skirt, or even the costume of a village ngakpa …”[111] [pause] “That’s why he went unrecognised. He dressed in nomad’s clothes … had a white sheepskin coat … he was a high plains drifter. He wandered from place to place, mainly in the valleys of Dza-chukha, Dzi-kha, Do, Mar, and Sér, teaching through haphazard contact with people …” [pause] “In this way he manifested secret
activity.”

Rinpoche looked at me intently and I started feeling that a question was being encouraged. “Secret activity, Rinpoche?”

“Yah … secret activity … It’s a method of teaching which is extraordinarily powerful – but extraordinarily inaccessible in terms of meeting with it. Those who can be benefited by such teachings … are only those who are completely ripe in the moment it manifests. Dza Paltrül was often taken to be an itinerant vagabond, lacking even the air of religious mendicancy that would prompt dispensation of alms. Those stultified ecclesiastical pedants who required their high Lamas to conform to the conventions of monastic institutions never met him – even though they yearned to meet him!” Rinpoche rocked backward and forward laughing at this point in his account. “They could easily have passed him in the street and thrown him a sang[112] as they’d do for any beggar!”

“Paltrül occasionally allowed himself to be put to work by the ignorant, didn’t he?” I asked – and Rinpoche looked on my question with an approval that was almost as shocking as his disapproval.

“Yah … he arrived at a monastery to give empowerments”…

… But the domestic staff gave him the task of scouring out the massive cooking pot in which the monks’ tea was to be made. The abbot of the monastery enquired how preparations were going for the arrival of Dza Paltrül Rinpoche, and was told that things were going well due to the fact that they’d enlisted the help of some old ngakpa in cleaning work. The abbot, knowing something of Dza Paltrül’s style, gasped “Kyé ma … That’ll be Dza Paltrül Rinpoche! I must get down there immediately and escort him to his appointed quarters!”

Paltrül smiled when he saw his disciple. He dismissed the abbot’s profuse apologies – and said “I hope you don’t mind – but … I thought you’d like some good tea for this jamboree.” This was typical of Paltrül’s practice of falling in with whatever happened – and allowing the situations in which he found himself to manifest teachings.

Rinpoche opened a further two bottles of Eagle Indian beer. He filled two glasses – and pushed one toward me. “This … is really what I want to tell you. How to be a good ngakpa. How to be a—real—yogi and not a ’thom yor.” Rinpoche fixed me with his gaze and I realised that I was going to have to say something.

“Paltrül’s teachings have wonderful irony” I commented.

“Yah …” [pause] “… and?”
“I can imagine people remembering the words and phrases they used in conversation with him … with the high plains drifter who turns out to be Dza Paltrül …” [pause] “… and reflecting on themselves … they might then … see themselves as idiots – and then there could be a complete change in their lives.”

“Oh yah …” [pause] “… and … if you do not run away … and—if—you stop being a ’thom yor … maybe you could change …”

“That’s what I want, Rinpoche.”

“Yah! But you will need to understand—all—that I explain!” he barked “… and then … maybe … if finally you are no longer a ’thom yor … then … maybe … transmission of Dzogchen may be possible …” [pause] “… but maybe you remain ’thom yor …” [pause] “… then, nothing!” Lengthy silence. “Now … you leave.”
call me whatever you like …

“Yah …” Rinpoche yawned with amazing ostentation “… so … you are still here … you have not run away yet …”

“No Rinpoche … I will—not—run away – whatever happens.”

Rinpoche laughed a stern cold laugh. “Ha! But maybe Künzang Dorje will beat you …”

“I’ll see what that’s like, Rinpoche” I replied, not knowing what else to say.

“Yah—yah—yah … now you become a cunning ’thom yor. Künzang Dorje beats you – then you fetch Indian police!” [pause] “Then they arrest Künzang Dorje and throwing into prison!”

I actually smiled at that and Rinpoche noticed. “No, Rinpoche. I don’t think I’d do that – even if you beat me. You’ve warned me – so it’s my choice.”

Rinpoche sat observing me for a few minutes in silence – and so I sat attempting to let go of arising thoughts. That was not difficult because there was nothing to think. My whole body coursed with sensations however, and they took my attention in a way that is not really describable. It was as if I were aware of my blood and lymphatic systems circulating.

“Yesterday – we speak of DoKhyentsé …” [pause] “Today … we talk more of Paltrül …” Rinpoche began without commenting on my answer “… but now a story for questions …”

“Today I will tell you of Paltrül. This story is not well known …” [pause] “Some people say it is not a story of Paltrül. I say it—is—a story of Paltrül. Because it is told in my land – and they know it there as a story of Paltrül.”

There didn’t seem to be much to say in answer to that – but Rinpoche was wearing an ‘I am waiting for your reply’ expression so I scurried around mentally to find something that was not entirely lame.

“It’s more important to me that you want me to hear the story – than what people say about the story.” There was no more to say. I found myself a little surprised that I was not immediately the subject of a nerve-wracking inquisition. Rinpoche shrugged and began the tale.

“At one time during Paltrül’s wanderings … he came to hear of a monk who’d spent many years in retreat – meditating on ‘the perfection of patience’”…

… As Paltrül was passing—on his way—not so far from the monk’s cave, he decided that a visit might be in order. He left the path he’d been following –
and took the precipitous track that led to the cave. It was a tiring climb, in which all he met were a few wisps of cloud and a rambunctious goat. On arriving, he paused at the entrance of the cave, and waited to see whether he would be invited to take tea. When the monk noticed Paltrül on his doorstep, he motioned him in with a look of irritation. Paltrül entered the cave and offered a courteous greeting to its somewhat lugubrious and dishevelled inhabitant. To his slight surprise he was met with three questions, delivered in a rather abrupt fashion: “Who are you? Where d’you come from, and where are you going?”

Paltrül replied “I’m the one you’re looking at. I come from down there a ways – and it looks as if I shall be headed back that way pretty soon.”

The monk paused momentarily but soon thought up another three questions which he issued with a sneer: “Where were you born? To what do you owe your appearance, and why have you come here?”

Paltrül replied “I was born on the earth. My appearance is merely a matter of default, and my presence here has no significance.”

The monk now looked distinctly edgy. It took him a little longer to dredge up another set of questions but after an evident struggle he issued them with a distinct bark. “What’s your name? What’s your meditation, and who’s your Lama?”

“Call me whatever you like” Paltrül replied. “My meditation is whatever arises in my mind, and my Lama is undivided from that.”

This silenced the monk completely – so Paltrül decided to ask him a question. “Why … do you live in poverty in a miserable cave, in this remote and desolate place?”

The monk looked somewhat relieved, and answered Paltrül, jeering. “To practise virtue, to live in peace, and to avoid fools like you!”

Paltrül composed a series of gesticulations that indicated something to the effect of … how could I have been so foolish not to have understood? “I apologise for disturbing you then … but … now I’m here … might I prevail upon you—as a revered colleague—to reveal the nature of your practice?”

The monk adopted a haughty expression. “I have spent twenty years here perfecting the attainment of patience in all things – and I admonish you to do likewise.”

At this Paltrül could no longer contain his amusement. “How could a pair of clowns like us ever achieve that?!”

This was too much for the monk. He was thoroughly enraged and cursed Paltrül in the vilest manner for his gross spiritual misconduct. “Have you now
no shame in the presence of a real practitioner?!

Paltrül shrugged and the monk gave vent to a further torrent of unseemly invective. Paltrül listened patiently to the conclusion of the monk’s tirade, and apologised once more for his intrusion, and inappropriate behaviour. “My only excuse …” Paltrül allowed “… is my complete ignorance of such profound manifestations of ‘perfect patience’ as you display.” Rinpoche eyed me carefully and leaned forward slightly. This added to the menace of his presence. “And so?” he said at length. “What do you understand?!”

“Well, Rinpoche … Dza Paltrül was obviously showing the monk that he’d been wasting his time in retreat in the cave.”

Rinpoche looked at me for a while. “Yah! This is obvious! But why does Paltrül go ’round interfering with people and making judgements?!” I was a little taken aback by this question, and pondered it for a while. “Yes … Rinpoche – I can see that …” I replied “… but it may not have been Dza Paltrül’s initial intention to make judgements or to interfere …”

“Then what else is his motivation for visiting this monk?” Rinpoche asked in less menacing tone.

“It seems—to me—as if he’d just wanted to visit a practitioner … and then he’d met with rudeness. Paltrül seemed simply to be responding to the monk’s aggressive questioning.”

Rinpoche grinned extremely slightly. Then, after some moments of silence, “Yah … so it is with spiritual people sometimes … always something to be proved, always a position to take, always status being sought.” Then he looked at me very intently and roared “You must—never—behave this way!”

That was shocking in a different way from the other shocks I’d received. Rinpoche was actually deigning to give me personal advice.

“Thank you for this, Rinpoche. I will always remember your words – and … never behave in such a way.”

Rinpoche eyed me cautiously. “Yah … and so …” [pause] “… you have never sought status before?”

“No … Rinpoche … not really …”

“Then why do you thank me for advice you don’t need?!” Rinpoche barked. This time I had a quick and vaguely non-idiotic answer. “I don’t know what will happen in the future, Rinpoche – and so if I remember your advice … it will be there if I should get involved with any kind of status wrangling.”
“Yah, yah, yah …” Rinpoche looked at me and gave a slight nod – as if to say that my answer was plausible.

We sat in silence for some moments and then it occurred to me that I’d not been entirely honest.

“When I said I’d never been involved with status, Rinpoche … I was thinking only of my life as a practitioner. When I was younger … I was a musician—a vocalist with a band—and … then certainly I wanted to rise as far as it was possible to rise. I had a lot of ambition in art and poetry too …”

Rinpoche laughed – but this time there seemed to be some lightness about his laughter. It was not that hard-edged laughter which was the precursor to an interrogative assault. “Oh yah – this is not the status that I ask you about. This is not a problem. Why do anything if you don’t wish to excel? And as long as you did nothing to harm others in order to rise up high – there is no harm …” [pause] “But can you say that? Can you say you caused no harm?”

“Yes, I—can—say that, Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche nodded and seemed almost on the verge of smiling. I simply sat there with widened eyes waiting for what would come next. Rinpoche said nothing for what seemed an unusual length of time – and then in a quiet gentle tone he continued “Whatever people do or say, be friendly with everyone. Keep your natural courtesy, just as you do with me – no matter how angry this bad Künzang Dorje becomes.”

“How can I avoid falling into this kind of trap, apart from remembering kindness at all times?” I asked.

Rinpoche shrugged and replied “Just be natural.”

Now it seemed my turn to sit in silence. I did not know how to respond to that. Rinpoche had shouted an instruction at me and then melted back into some kind of sublime passivity as if it had never happened. The injunction “You must never behave this way!” followed by the mild advice “Just be natural” seemed to cause me some kind of emotional ambivalence about how he saw me. Was I someone to be shouted at as if I were likely to act in an arrogant way – or was I someone who merely needed the gentle reminder to be natural? Maybe I was both? I found myself trying to form a question around that – but it took quite a while to find words.

Rinpoche did nothing to hurry me – and eventually I asked “I feel … I know … that I like people … and … I’d rather be kind than anything else. Sometimes people are difficult or unpleasant – but I don’t think I have much natural inclination to take them on or fight with them in any way … so, is there any advice that would be helpful when I meet with aggression?”
Rinpoche laughed “Give up bothering what people say about you. Don’t imitate this sharp tongue of mine. Don’t get involved in arguments with intellectual ’thom yors. Don’t copy the cleverness of speech that delights scholastic ’thom yors. Don’t bother to defend yourself against the speech of power-seeking ’thom yors – and … don’t try to please pious ’thom yors.”

I’ve often thought about this story and the stylistics of spiritual rhetoric. I’ve seen enactments of such spiritually deranged behaviour played out many times in India, Nepal, and Buddhist centres in the West. As soon as people get some concept of themselves as being committed Buddhists—especially Tibetan Buddhists—they seem to need to publicise the fact in their interactions with others. I’ve observed various modes: the subtle put-down; the cautionary note; the gentle, softly spoken reproval; the knowledgeable retort; the tone of righteous indignation; the sanctimonious quotation of higher authority; and, ‘holier than thou’ smugness. I’d thought that these things were the result of Western neurosis – but this story points to the fact that dysfunctional behaviour has a venerable history.

Rinpoche eyed me with curiosity. “You are a kind man, I think …” [pause] “Are you a kind man?!” [pause] “Or is this just the face you show me?!”

“I … try to be a kind man, Rinpoche … that is to say I—like—to be kind and … there’s no pleasure for me in being unkind. The face I show you is … well I don’t show you a face … what you see is what you get … So … apart from the fact that I want you to like me … this is what I am.”

“Yah … I can see this … you do not lie to me … and … maybe … you will not run away …” [pause] “… so … to be kind … just be natural. “Stay as you are. Just—try—not to be a ’thom yor. Maybe … you will not—always—be a ’thom yor. Maybe … that is possible … maybe not … we will see …”

I had no response to that – apart from glowing with the idea that I could prove myself to him – that I could release myself from the bonds of idiocy.

“Those who can’t act with kindness …” Rinpoche continued after some minutes of silence “… are hardly human, let alone practitioners. Even animals have more dignity …” [pause] “… but still … you must also learn how to see clearly so that you will not be a ’thom yor …” [pause] “What do you say?”

“I will try not to be an idiot, Rinpoche.”

“Trying is useless! If a ’thom yor tries not to be a ’thom yor – how can such a person ever hope to be more than a ’thom yor?! What does a ’thom yor know of not being a ’thom yor?!” [pause] “You must see! You must be clear! You must know what is fabricated and what is not!”

Rinpoche seemed to sense the light come on. I’d understood something. “So
… an idiot’s idea of what is not idiocy … can only be idiocy?”
Rinpoche smiled very—very—very faintly. “Oh yah … maybe you understand this …” [pause] “It is possible … I may see you tomorrow … come anyway … but now … it is time to leave because you are tired – and … maybe … this bad Künzang Dorje has shouted too much.”
the brocade prison

“Yah … so … you come back again.”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Yeess, Rin—po—chay” he repeated in English – imitating my slightly nancy-boy intonation. What was I to say to that? We sat in silence. I began to wonder whether he was waiting for me to blurt something stupid so that he could whack me with some violent line of interrogation. What was I to do? Wait it out? No – that was an idiot’s tactic. I was going to have to say something.

“As you’ve let me come back again today … I’m eager to work on whatever you have in mind for me.”

Rinpoche did not answer. The silence continued. Then suddenly he launched in as if nothing had happened. “At one time Dza Paltrül was giving teachings at Kathog – one of the six ma-gön, or mother gompas of the Nyingma Tradition”…

… The Abbot of Kathog at that time was Paltrül’s nephew, Kathog Situ Chökyi Lodrö. He was a young Lama who wasn’t a monk exactly – he simply held the basic gé-nyên vows.[113]

Chökyi Lodrö was visibly moved by Paltrül’s talks and requested his revered uncle to attend a special feast at the end of his stay at Kathog.

Up to that point the Kathog Lama had joined Paltrül in the rooms appointed to him as a visiting dignitary – but on the last day Paltrül joined his nephew in his quarters. These were rather fabulously decorated – sumptuous to say the least. Paltrül sat down and looked around him. He carefully took in the rococo decoration. The ornate decorations that decorated the decorations were assiduously decorated. It was a visual extravaganza that could absorb the attention for hours without respite if one wasn’t either intimidated or wearied by it.

Paltrül nodded his head as he looked about him. “Well here’s a thing and no mistake … You’ve really got quite a place here, nephew. You’ve done well for yourself. I’d heard that Kathog was spectacular – but this beggars description. How marvellous to live in such splendour – there can’t be another room like yours in the world.”

Everything in the room was either gilt or lacquered. There were priceless ritual instruments set with precious gems in the gaudy manner that only the cultural imagination of a vast desolate land could devise. Before eating,
Paltrül volunteered “I don’t suppose you’d mind too much showing me around – I’ve never seen such a grand apartment.”

Chökyi Lodrö was happy to oblige and Paltrül showed great interest in everything. He commented admiringly on the great cost represented by every item he perused – savouring each one with a certain sense of awe whilst shaking his head in disbelief. The Lamas enjoyed their meal together – and Paltrül thanked Chökyi Lodrö for his hospitality. Just as he was preparing to leave however, Paltrül enquired “Could I ask a small favour of you, dear nephew?”

Chökyi Lodrö replied “I’d be glad to help in any way, Rinpoche.”

Paltrül smiled appreciatively and asked “D’you think—as you are following on in the same direction as me in a few days—that you could pack my old cooking pot in with your gear? I like to travel light if I can, and—but for this old pot—I’m a free man.”

Chökyi Lodrö—slightly surprised by so slight a request—replied “Sure, that’s easy for me, I’m happy to oblige. It’ll be no problem at all with all the baggage that accompanies me on my travels.”

The two Lamas said good-bye to each other and Paltrül took to the road in his usual way – he walked wherever he went.

Sitting alone in his room after Paltrül’s departure, Chökyi Lodrö looked at the old clay pot that was Paltrül’s one possession. As he looked at it, he began to feel a little uncomfortable. He had received the most marvellous teaching from Dza Paltrül Rinpoche. He regarded him as an astounding teacher … and yet … all he owned in the way of possessions was this old pot.

‘Kyé ma …’ he thought ‘… that my revered uncle owns only this old pot.”

But no sooner had that thought emerged in his mind – he suddenly realised something. ‘No! Too bad for me! If I wish to come anywhere close to Dza Paltrül’s realisation I should stop living in this brocade museum, and live as he does!’

It was at that precise moment that Chökyi Lodrö quit his rococo apartment – and his well-appointed monastery. He never returned. Rather than awaiting the day he was to set off in the direction Paltrül had taken, he left Kathog that night. He left in secret, in the early hours of the morning. He disappeared on his own and went in search of Paltrül.

When he caught up with him, he hooted “Ya-tsan! Ajo Paltrül! Lucky for me you left your old cooking pot! With it you left the best advice, and I’ve taken it!”

Paltrül smiled and said “Is that a fact …”
“Sure!” said his nephew “I’ve left the golden prison in Kathog for those who like that kind of thing!”

Paltrül smiled.

“So?” Rinpoche barked “Just—what—do you understand from this?”

The story seemed fairly straightforward in its meaning. “That you have to give up everything to practise the essence of the teaching – that wealth is an obstacle.”

Rinpoche looked out of the window for quite some time after this. I waited somewhat expectantly for some sort of pat on the head – but when Rinpoche faced me again he looked furious, and said in an icy voice “Go away.”

After such a tone, there was no asking why or what had happened to cause offence. That would have been too silly a course to have taken, even for a poltroon like me. I just got up and backed politely toward the door.

Then, just as I was about to close the door, he shouted “’thom yor!” then in a less strident tone he asked “You think an old pot can’t be an obstacle?!” [pause] “Now answer!”

Rinpoche motioned me to return. He gazed at me intently and I knew I was supposed to say something. Strangely enough it was quite clear what I wanted to say. “Yes” I piped in a slightly thin voice “An old pot’s an obstacle as much as anything – and it’s also not an obstacle.”

“And …” Rinpoche’s face shifted into the very slightest of smiles “… why might—that—be?!”

“Well …” I replied “It’s a matter of what wealth and poverty mean – one can be attached to either or neither. I suppose it’s how it’s viewed that makes it an obstacle or not.”

I’d obviously given the right answer this time – or something approaching the right answer. Rinpoche raised his eyebrows slightly and ran his forefinger very slowly down the length of his nose in an almost comical manner. “So … if both are the same … why does Paltrül want Chökyi Lodrö to change his apartment for a cave?!”

“… I don’t think, Rinpoche … that Paltrül had actually specified any kind of desire with regard to whether Chökyi Lodrö would be better off living in a cave.”

“But!” Rinpoche responded immediately “Paltrül smiles when his nephew tells him he’s left his golden prison?”

“Yes …”

“’thom yor! Do—not—agree when I make statements!” [pause] “So! Why
This was tricky. Why did he smile? “Well…” I ventured “… maybe … it wasn’t because he’d left his apartment … maybe it was because he’d simply left his attachment behind …”

Rinpoche smiled in a strangely ætheric manner but said nothing – so I continued “… but then … I suppose … he could equally well have stayed. Maybe Paltrül knew that?”

Rinpoche poured two glasses of beer and commented “Yah … in Tibet, sometimes, the only way to be free was to keep away from monastic institutions.”

When we’d refreshed ourselves with the beer, Rinpoche went on to tell me some further aspects of the story. “Yah … it is not always easy to find good circumstances for rebirth …” Rinpoche paused for a moment to refill our beer glasses “Chökyi Lodrö went to live in a cave and became a wonderful yogi. He assumed the gö kar chang lo – he grew his hair and wore the white skirt of a ngakpa. He took as a consort, Chhi’méd Khandro, a daughter of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo.[116] It was through her that all his remaining obstacles were blown away …” [pause] “Bang!” Rinpoche laughed loudly at this point in his discourse. “Just before he died he gave her a very valuable nine-eyed gZi stone and asked her to keep it for him. It was not obvious what he had meant by this – but later it became very clear. Chhi’méd Khandro went on pilgrimage after she left Chökyi Lodrö and by the time she got home she discovered that he had died. She also discovered that she was pregnant. She bore a son who was recognised as the incarnation of Chökyi Lodrö. It’s not well known that the incarnation was also the son of Chökyi Lodrö.”

Something clicked with me at that point, and I asked “So maybe … that’s why it was better that he left Kathog?”

“Yah …” Rinpoche laughed and finished his beer. “Now it is time for—you—to leave …” [pause] “Maybe you come back tomorrow.”
the golok stand-off

“Yah … still you come back …” [pause] “Ha!” [pause] “Maybe you think this is good!”

“I hope so, Rinpoche …”

“Yah … you hope—you hope—you hope!” [pause] “And also you fear!” he shouted “Anyway … do you think you will ever be anything but a ’thom yor?”

That was a loaded question for sure – but there was only one answer. “Yes, Rinpoche. I think that I will cease to be an idiot …” [pause] “… if you continue to give me guidance” I added as a quick qualifying addendum.

Rinpoche shook his head. “No! Wrong!” he roared “Guidance will—not—help you! All you will learn is how to stop—looking—like a ’thom yor! All you will learn is how to stop—speaking—like a ’thom yor! Then you will be a bigger ’thom yor than you were before!” [pause] “Now!” he shouted “You tell—me—what you need if you are not to be ’thom yor?!”

This was looking bad for me. I had no immediate answer.

“Answer!” [pause] “Answer now or leave!”

“I must see for myself … what is in my mind … in order not to mix ideas and end up confused.”

“Yah—yah—yah … ’thom yor … Now you have learned a new trick. This is what you—think—I want to hear!” Rinpoche stared at me with unblinking eyes for a long time before he eventually spoke. “Your answer is—not—wrong – but you think in tricks like a trained monkey!” [pause] “Anyhow … to see clearly … you must sit …” [pause] “Do you sit?!”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Yeess, Rin—po—chay” he mimicked shaking his head in an ostentatious simulation of weariness.

“Yah … anyway … You must have a clear mind! You must be undisturbed by thought! Only then will you know ‘what is in your mind’ and how ‘what is in your mind’ is different from what I tell you!” [pause] “This must come before Dzogchen …” [pause] “So … anyway … I ask again … Do you now think you will ever be anything but a ’thom yor?”

“I don’t know, Rinpoche. All I know is that I—will—sit … and I—will—endeavour to see what is in my mind.”

“Yah—yah—yah …” [pause] “Now … as—again—you do not run away …
there is maybe something to say of Paltrül …” [pause] “But you must listen carefully!” he shouted.

Rinpoche was silent for some minutes and then he commenced. “So … Paltrül was often wandering in Golok – so he saw much of the life there amongst the nomads and brigands … He knew their lives very well – and he knew the land very well”…

… Paltrül caught a sound on the wind … there were horsemen in the distance. Hardly an unusual occurrence – but Paltrül took special note of them as the horses shambled across the plain. He sat on the ground to await their arrival – making himself comfortable in the exact middle of the track on which he’d been walking. He’d reached a juncture at which the path plunged through a narrow defile between outcrops of rock. Not the ideal place to avoid being seen, or to hide from brigands. He watched the approach of the riders as they emerged out of the blur of the horizon – first as an agglomeration of colours, then gradually as four distinct horsemen.

After a while it became apparent that they were a group of young men from one of the fierce feuding tribes of Golok. They wore rifles slung over their shoulders. Their belts were hung about with knives and swords. Chinese and Mongolian blades of various shapes and sizes caught the sun and flashed.

The riders in turn spotted the lone shaggy individual sitting in their path, and sensed something slightly peculiar about the situation. Why was someone sitting in the middle of the track? Why did he not move when it was evident that he’d observed their approach? Could it be that this was a challenge or was the old man insane? There was about enough room for two horses to pass abreast through the defile – but with an old ngakpa occupying the central position, even to pass him on one side or the other would need to be undertaken with care.

The horses trotted in leisurely manner toward Paltrül, but he showed no sign of moving aside. The horsemen halted momentarily some short distance away and sat looking quizzically at the imperturbable character who held the road before them. It was now obvious to them that he had no intention of moving. So they exchanged a few jocular comments between themselves. Their horses champed, whinnied, and tore up tussocks of grass.

Paltrül simply gazed at them without speaking. An uneasy hiatus ensued in which they all looked at each other. Then the calm was shattered. The riders reared their horses—broke into a gallop—and charged down into the ravine. Paltrül sat perfectly still in the swirling dust as the horses thundered by on either side. Their hooves cut close enough that a stray clip could have smashed his skull. Having passed by, the four riders wheeled ’round to observe the effect of their charge. Paltrül had not moved.
A second wary interval followed.

“How did you like that, old rag-bag?!” called the foremost rider. Paltrül made no reply – so after a brief moment the rider continued. “Tell me—doddering relic—have you no fear?” he laughed “Or are you just an idiot?”

Paltrül placed a hand on the ground behind him and leaned back on his arm. He gave the impression of luxuriating in the leisureliness of the movement. He inclined his face toward them obliquely as if he had no real interest in giving them his full attention. “Fear …” he replied, as if he was unfamiliar with the word. He peered inside his sheepskin coat as if he might find some fear there. “No …” he shrugged “… can’t say as I have any fear …” [pause] “But … as to ‘idiocy’ … well now … I’ll just have to leave that to your own undoubted sagacity. It’s all the same to me.”

The horsemen’s amused expressions froze slightly on hearing these words. Was this an ambush? Were there warriors hiding, to be called forth at this man’s command? They squinted into the sun. They were not used to this kind of reply. Although Paltrül’s words hadn’t disturbed them overmuch they couldn’t immediately come up with a neat retort. So Paltrül tossed out a suggestion, in an offhand way. “Perhaps you’re afraid?” he chuckled “At least … it seems you can’t quite manage to look me in the eye.”

This prompted a yell from the riders who bore down on him again, coating Paltrül with another layer of dust. Paltrül turned slowly to face the men again, and this time he was facing the sun.

“If we weren’t the finest horsemen in Golok …” the leader of the horsemen jeered “… you’d be a—a—dead—old idiot … rather than a barely-living poltroon!”

Paltrül did not seem very impressed “Is that a fact?” he yawned with somewhat massive disinterest. The horseman did not fail to notice that Paltrül was observing him with unblinking eyes, even though he was staring directly into the sun.

They observed each other coolly while the dust settled. “D’you still have no fear?”

Paltrül smiled. “Don’t reckon I do … What about you? Least you can keep your eyes open now.”

The rider found himself balanced on a taut emotional wire between amusement and anger. He was beginning to find this exchange intriguing. “You run your mouth pretty—reckless—for a man who don’t carry weapons.”

Paltrül smiled. “You’re a most observant young man.”
The rider’s mouth moved in a curious way. It was uncertain whether he was smiling or sneering. “Even—this—close to death, you still say you have no fear?”

Paltrül’s reply was immediate – if languid. “What’s there in death that I should fear? Unlike you, I have nothing to gain or lose.”

The horseman began to wonder whether he was addressing some old warrior or some religious type, and replied “You have your life to lose, my friend!”

Paltrül laughed. “But I’ve got far less of it to lose than you. You are young and I am old – but what’s my life or yours but a bubble in the current of a river, or the flickering of a flame?”

The tone of this exchange was beginning to wax mystical and the young man was beginning to feel slightly strange, as if he weren’t quite sure of where the course of events was going to lead. “So, if you don’t fear—us—and you have no fear of death … tell me then – is there anything you—do—fear?”

Paltrül cast his gaze regretfully toward the ground. “There you have me …” he sighed “I—do—have one terrible fear …”

“And that would be?”

“I fear I may not be able to bring peace to those families whose need for revenge causes such suffering in these parts.”

This was a totally unexpected answer. It caused the riders grand curiosity and slight unease. Maybe this really was some sort of drüphthob[117] sitting on the ground in front of them – but if so why did he conduct himself like a desperado? They were not used to religious types having such an accentuated degree of swagger or bravado – but this one behaved with the downright arrogance of a brigand chieftain. “That’s an interesting answer, A-mé.[118] Who are you? Why do you sit here and let us ride ’round you? And how do you come to speak with the authority of a chieftain?”

Paltrül placed his hands on his knees and replied “I’m an insignificant resident of awareness – and … I sit here merely to inconvenience you with the conversation of an old man. I have no authority other than that which places my motivation outside the realm of comprehension. But … what of your authority? … I sense that yours … may be the power to rid me of this one terrible fear.”

The horseman was now teetering between fascination and bewilderment. “And …” he asked “… just how can—I—do that, A-mé?” The enquiry was one of exasperated yet reverential incredulity.

Paltrül gazed at him for a moment and shouted out a loud “Ha!” The sounded echoed on the mountain sides. “That!” he pronounced with
solemnity “... is entirely up to you!” The horseman inclined his head slightly – listening intently. “You command your own life and the lives of many others!” Paltrül continued “You who have no fear – ride on outta here! Do what lies within your power!” [pause] “I can say no more ...”

At this the three other riders reared their horses for another charge – but their leader raised his hand to hold them back.

The sun dipped below the distant crags and Paltrül swung himself ’round in order to allow the riders to pass. They walked their horses down into the defile, giving Paltrül a wide berth. Once past him they broke into a trot, then a canter, and eventually they galloped into the distance.

Their leader stopped at the head of the ridge and looked back for a moment – but Paltrül was gone. He was nowhere to be seen on the road. It was as if the horsemen had dreamed the whole episode. They rode home in silence and never spoke of their meeting.

Paltrül never saw the young men again – but later he came to hear that the blood-feud in Mar-khog, which had lasted over a century, had been ended. The families had made an agreement to put aside their long held disputes and bitterness in order to coexist without continual bloodshed.

“Rinpoche ...” I chimed in after a polite pause “... it seems that Dza Paltrül was showing these young warriors a face they could understand. “He was completely fearless, like a warrior, but he also spoke in a very haughty way. I can understand him showing lack of fear as a way of communicating, but I don’t understand why he displayed what seemed to be arrogance. He obviously wanted to bring peace to the area, and to influence the leader of the warriors to end the blood feud ... but I would have thought that his aggressive stance would have made an obstacle rather than aiding his intention ... There must be some reason why Paltrül was speaking in this way ...”

Rinpoche made no comment on what I’d said. “What’s so interesting about a man who’s fearless sitting in the path of charging horses?!” [pause] “It could merely be recklessness ...”

Suddenly my mind went blank, and all I could do was repeat the question internally ... ‘What is so interesting about a man who is fearless sitting in the path of charging horses apart from recklessness?’ I really couldn’t think of anything cogent – but I knew I shouldn’t dawdle with my response. “Well ... I guess it might be interesting ‘why’ someone would do that ... I mean – given the choice of sitting out of the way of the horses.”

“So ... why doesn’t Paltrül tell them why he is there?!” [pause] “If he wants to show them he’s brave—and that he wants them to stop the feud—why
doesn’t he just tell them?!”

For once the whole thing clicked together for me. “It’s the curiosity-value of it, isn’t it!”

“And so?!” Rinpoche barked.

“Well … Paltrül needs to keep the warrior interested for long enough to make him question himself.” What a brilliant strategy this was. “Paltrül was keeping the warrior interested; keeping him guessing; making it worth his while to ask questions; causing him just enough offence to be intrigued; and only then introducing the idea that he might be a yogi.”

Rinpoche seemed pleased with my analysis for once. I began to get the feeling that I was getting somewhere with these stories and my efforts to get behind them.

But then, a further question occurred to me. “There’s still the issue though, of why Paltrül concludes his exchange by saying ‘You command your own life and the lives of many others! You who have no fear! Ride on out of here and do whatever lies within your power!’ Why did he say that when the warrior had asked him point blank how he could allay Paltrül’s fear? Why didn’t Paltrül simply grasp the opportunity by giving him some suggestions as to how he could play a part in ending the feud?”

Rinpoche laughed “Yah—yah—yah … you don’t know warriors …” [pause] “You also know nothing of Goloks! You don’t give advice to warriors, or use unnecessary words!” [pause] “It would’ve been weakness for Paltrül to have made a request. Instead he showed confidence that the warrior would know best what to do, saying ‘You command your own life and the lives of others!’”

This was a fascinating perspective – and it triggered a flood of ideas as to how the rest of Paltrül’s actions might be unravelled. “So … perhaps … it was also important that Paltrül didn’t give advice to the warrior in front of his own tribesmen … otherwise, they could’ve seen him as following the dictates of a stranger … and that would have hindered actions that the warrior may have tried putting into effect.”

Rinpoche nodded as I spoke and then he poured out two beers. I thought, as was often the case, that the pouring of beers was the conclusion of our discussion – but Rinpoche went further. “You know … it’s not always good to give advice in specific about how things should be done. It’s not always wise to supply every detail. If advice is given that leaves no room for manœuvre, you make everything into form – and then form becomes emptiness. Sometimes it’s better to allow emptiness in order for the form of compassion to arise according to circumstances that are outside your control.”
I thought about this for a moment. “But … wouldn’t the warrior have benefited from Paltrül’s wisdom in terms of finding a way to end the feud?”

Rinpoche shook his head. “Maybe. Maybe not. Anyway, it’s a ’thom yor who doesn’t make use of the fact that everyone has their own knowledge. Paltrül—wise as he was—couldn’t know every part of every situation. He had to trust in emptiness. Maybe you will often find yourself in situations where there’s too much that you cannot understand. At such times you may have to trust in giving generalised guidance and incomplete directions. Sometimes there are no good answers to human problems. Sometimes there are too many.”

Then Rinpoche told me of another similar story. “Paltrül had brought about the end of another blood feud in Golok by lying across a path. The warriors asked Paltrül whether he was sick or whether he was an imbecile. ‘I’m sane … but sick …’ Paltrül replied ‘… yet it isn’t the kind of sickness that would be contagious to brave young warriors like you.’”

Rinpoche stopped to sip his beer. “See how strong Paltrül’s intelligence is? Then … he said ‘This isn’t the kind of sickness from which I ever want to recover.’ The young warriors laugh and ask ‘What sort of goddamn sickness is this then?’ to which Paltrül replies ‘Oh, nothing so terrible … just the sickness of kindness towards all beings.’ This stopped the warriors’ thought for a moment.” Rinpoche took another sip of beer. “Paltrül’s statement resulted in the young men doing whatever they could to end the feud as before.”

We sat in silence for a while in which I played with ideas of Lamas having a plethora of rôles as invisible social workers, invisible politicians, and invisible diplomats.

“So …” Rinpoche asked in a less severe tone “… which story do you prefer — and why?”

“I preferred the first one – there was more in the story to uncover.”

“Ah!” he replied with surprising energy “Maybe kindness is not such a shock to you … Maybe you’ve already caught this sickness. Maybe you—are—a kind man … like you say …”

I laughed, quite surprising myself. “I hope so.”

“Always you hope … but also … you fear …”

That was a twist – but I had an answer. “Yes, Rinpoche … hope and fear are still there – as are praise and blame, meeting and parting …”

Rinpoche interrupted my flow “Yah—yah—yah … I know this list. Why do you play this ’thom yor trick of list-giving?”
“For me it’s not just a list” I stated. I was anxious that Rinpoche didn’t think I was trying to impress him by babbling clichés at him. “It’s something I consider often in terms of how I am. When I see the jigtèn chö-gyèd in myself – it reminds me where I am … and I find that useful.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Yah … as you say …” [pause] “Anyhow … I must always check that you are not a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Today—it seems—you are not—too—much a ’thom yor. Maybe also tomorrow … we will see.”

Whenever I remember this story, I look at my life for symptoms of this rare disease—kindness—and whatever signs of health I exhibit cause me to do whatever I can to stimulate new areas of infection. The most saddening aspect of life for me, is to witness immunity to the disease of kindness either in myself or others. Although I initially preferred the first story, the second has caused me to reflect a great deal on the nature of kindness – and how it can be encouraged in the world. The idea of kindness as an illness—with all its attendant concepts of infection and contagion—is highly creative. This manner of expression is a brilliant example of how Tantra turns language on its head. It uses violent rage to describe clarity, and sickness to describe health. Sometimes you have to spread the illness of kindness in the guise of a desperado – and sometimes in the guise of a ’thom yor.
“Oh yah … you are here … again …” Rinpoche yawned – but less ostentatiously than usual. “You are not married yet” Rinpoche mused.

“No, Rinpoche . . .” I almost answered ‘Not since yesterday’ but thought better of it.

“What reason?” he asked – but not as abruptly as was his usual style.

“No reason, Rinpoche – it just hasn’t worked out that way … as yet.” Rinpoche made no comment and so I thought I’d venture further explanation. “There are actually many reasons – but they’d take a long time to explain. It’s not that I wouldn’t have liked to marry some of the ladies I’ve known … but … with my most important relationship – her parents hated me on sight.”

Rinpoche burst out laughing at this – but asked “What cause?”

“… being working class, long haired, being a member of a Blues band[120]. . .” [pause] “You see … they were upper class[121] and he was a Brigadier in the Army.”

“But you said your father was a major?”

“Yes, Rinpoche … but he was working class and … he was a war-time major. He raised himself from the ranks by studying engineering. He wasn’t respected by the other officers – and Brigadier Dale, although he didn’t know my father – would have been one of those officers who would have looked down on him as an officer who was promoted from the ranks . . .”

“Oh yah . . .” Rinpoche sighed – with evident sympathy “This is a ’thom yor … this style also existed in Tibet – and there it was worse . . .” [pause] “In Tibet there were many great yogis and sometimes yoginis who came from poor origins . . .” [pause] “Yah … so it is . . . but anyhow – you must marry one day.” Rinpoche sat silently for some minutes. He was obviously turning ideas around and eventually he said “You maybe always choose upper class girls?”

“Yes, Rinpoche . . . I suppose so . . .”

“Why?” Rinpoche asked rather crisply.

“Well . . . I suppose I didn’t really understand that all the girls from the grammar school would be likely to have parents who would despise me . . . however . . . I’d usually be attracted to those girls because they were intelligent and read books . . . and . . . well I went to a secondary school and although there were a few girls there who were bright – it didn’t quite work out.”
“Your school was for 'thom yors?”

“Not exactly, Rinpoche … just for those who …” [pause] “Well, all right—it was a school for idiots—but maybe just unfortunate idiots – and those who worked hard could become intelligent.”

“And you became intelligent?”

“Yes, Rinpoche” I stated with conviction “I became intelligent enough to get a first class honours degree.”

“Good. Maybe now parents will be happy with you …” [pause] “But still … you still remain mostly a 'thom yor – so maybe not …” [pause] “Anyhow … it is good that you look for an intelligent woman – because this is very necessary.” Rinpoche gazed through me into some kind of distance that was impossible for me to guess at.

“Yah … anyhow … Paltrül was never married … He was always wandering in the mountains …” [pause] “Do you know …” Rinpoche mused:

High mountain meadows—ornamented by alpine flowers—are the shrine rooms of yogis and yoginis.

Gilded ceremonial halls—where constipated monastics fart—are the shrine rooms of 'thom yors.

“That is why Paltrül wandered in the mountainous regions around Dza chu-kha …” [pause] “This is why Künzang Dorje never lives in one place …” Rinpoche sighed a sigh that seemed to me to betoken contentment.

Dza chu-kha was in Golok – the wild reaches of Tibet which lay to the north of Kham, far away from the central provinces where some sort of order prevailed. Golok was considered barbaric by those who lived in areas where people loved freedom less. Kham was notorious for its brigandage – but however wild Kham was, Golok far exceeded it. It was no place to travel unless you were a yogi, or you packed muskets – or, perhaps better, you were a yogi who packed muskets, such as DoKhyentsé Rinpoche, the root teacher of Dza Paltrül Rinpoche.

Golok was the Wild Northeast, and the people there were known for two things: the bravado with which they vaunted their traditional independence, and their trigger-happy disregard for legislation of any kind, no matter from whence it came. The following words from the head of one of the fierce Golok clans may typify their general attitude:

To advice of strangers we will not hearken.

We obey nought but the heart with which each Golok enters the world.

This is why we have remained as free in the past as we are now.
We are slaves of none – neither Khan nor Dalai Lama.

Our tribe is the mightiest in the land of snows.

Our birthright disdains both Chinese and Tibetan

And we regard them each with contempt.

Once whilst staying with Tharchin Rinpoche, I met Tulku Rinpoche, a young Lama who fell to talking with me about Golok. It was the land of his birth. He told me that it was notorious both for brigandry and drüpthobs. He said that there used to be a saying in Lhasa,[122] which ran:

Even if you’re on your death bed,

If you hear there’s a man from Golok approaching,

You’d better to jump up immediately and run away!

The indigenous tribes of Golok were not folk who appreciated change overmuch – least of all if it came in the form of impingements from the outside. They classed themselves as tax-exempt with regard to the edicts of the Tibetan government, and imposed their own freelance taxation on those fools hardy enough to venture into their land. As an example of this, Tulku Rinpoche told me another story. Apparently a well-to-do middle-aged Golok bought a large newfangled Chinese tent to replace his old yak-hair model. Soon afterward he died very suddenly and unexpectedly. The local people had little sympathy for him. All agreed that he had it coming. “The old fool! What did he expect buying a Chinese tent?!”

“Yah … so … anyway …” Rinpoche continued after having surveyed the room as if he’d never seen it before “Paltrül was once making his way through the wild and dangerous region north of Dza chu-kha – this is a mountainous region of great beauty”…

… Equally beautiful and ferocious however, were animals which stalked its wooded hills and isolated valleys – animals not particularly known for their tender nurturing relationship to people. But this was not the only risk of journeying through such parts – there were bandits.

So it was that in these distinctly wild and woolly parts Paltrül came across an attractive young woman called ’ö-Sel Dri’mèd. She and her two young children were weeping bitterly. They were in a state of dreadful anguish – huddled under the shelter of a large rock by the side of the mountain track.

Paltrül asked what had happened – and learnt that ’ö-Sel Dri’mèd’s husband had been mauled to death by one of the huge bears in whose cave the family had inadvertently trespassed. They’d been in search of shelter from a rising gale after having previously been robbed of all their goods by bandits. Paltrül
immediately offered his protection as a companion traveller. “What direction were you intending to take when the awful events occurred?”

“We’re on pilgrimage to Dza chu-kha …” the lady replied, although it was difficult for her to speak “… but we were robbed by a band of robbers. All our horses and money were stolen.” ’ö-Sel Dri’mèd wept even more at this point. “And then … my poor husband was killed by a red bear. And now we have nothing … nothing at all! We are destitute with no means to return to our home.”

It was a terrible sight to witness. “Seems you better go with me to Dza chu-kha, because that’s where I’m going. I’ll look after you on the way. Don’t worry.”

The lady calmed down momentarily on hearing these words – but then burst into tears again. “There’s no purpose though in us going on further to Dza chu-kha – because we know no one there …who’d help me there anyway? I should go home – but my home’s such a long way away – how can I go there through such dangers? I cannot go on without money or provisions, neither can I return.” She was in floods of tears and seemed inconsolable.

Paltrül once more tried to comfort her. “You know … I really think you should come to Dza chu-kha with me. I’ve the feeling that you would do really well there. I know how to beg for alms even if you don’t – so you can follow my example as we travel together. There’s to be a great gathering of religious types in Dza chu-kha. People are going to see Dza Paltrül … so something is bound to work out for you.”

The woman’s eyes widened when she heard the name Dza Paltrül. “Really? Dza Paltrül Rinpoche will really be there in Dza chu-kha! That is the most wonderful news! That’s why my husband and I left the caravan! That’s why we took the risk of leaving on our own – we’d heard that Dza Paltrül Rinpoche might be in these parts and we wanted to see him.”

The lady seemed suddenly elated. “I believe I will take your advice after all! You are right, I do not know how to beg – but if I can learn what to do from you then at least my children will be able to receive Dza Paltrül Rinpoche’s blessings! His blessing would be worth more than everything they have lost – even were their mother also to die.”

Paltrül observed ’ö-Sel carefully. Her whole demeanour had changed radically since hearing the name Dza Paltrül. “Seems you have some connection with this Lama, so I’d be happy to help you find him.”

’ö-Sel looked radiant, and even her children stopped crying and gazed in wonder at the kindly stranger in the ragged sheepskin chuba. She looked down at her children and said “We have travelled for a month, on pilgrimage,
hoping that we would be able to meet Dza Paltrül Rinpoche just once, and now we have the opportunity! Now it doesn’t matter what happens after Dza chu-kha, everything will be fine!”

So they set out together. They made detours through villages whenever they ran out of food – and begged for provisions to take them further. They camped out as they travelled wherever they could find relatively sheltered places. When they slept, Paltrül kept one child in his sheepskin chuba, and she kept the other huddled in hers. As the days wore on, ’ö-Sel noticed that when there was nothing else to be done, Paltrül would sit motionless with his eyes wide – staring into the sky. He was not one for conversation unless she or the children spoke to him – but when he answered he was always good humoured and kind.

She felt unusually peaceful and reassured in his company – and her children seemed contented. Paltrül would often carry either one of the children on his shoulders as they walked – and they seemed to take to him rapidly as a substitute father. The grim tragedy of her husband’s death weighed less on ’ö-Sel than she expected – and she pondered the peculiar naturalness which had settled on them like an invisible mist of benevolence. She pondered on her unusual lack of anxiety in view of the terrible events that had occurred. But even her pondering didn’t seem to hold her mind for long – she seemed content to enjoy the shifting forms of the landscape.

Paltrül talked to her a little about impermanence and death as they walked. “I have some small knowledge of the passage of the bardo, and I’ll perform the required meditation for your husband.”

’ö-Sel was much relieved by this, even though there was no Lama to perform the rites in the full ritual manner. Paltrül’s bardo practice was entirely unorthodox in being silent. It seemed however, that—although his soundless motionlessness didn’t resemble anything she knew or understood—it made her and her children confident that all was proceeding as it should.

She and her departed husband had both received some religious instructions from time to time during their lives. Although they were not ordained gö kar chang lo practitioners, they were devoted to the practices they had been given and had persevered in them to the best of their abilities.

Increasingly often, at the end of a long day’s walk she and Paltrül sang Padmasambhava’s mantra or Seven-line Song together. Sometimes they simply sat together in silence as the darkness fell. At those times he would tell her a few things about how to let go of thought, and she gradually came to discover that Paltrül had a deeper degree of knowledge in spiritual matters than she had thought.

He gave her some simple advice on dream yoga that she could practise each
night as she fell asleep – and provided her with pieces of knowledge that proved interesting and valuable to her. She began to ask him questions after a while, in order to clarify previous teachings she had received, and—as they walked—he answered every subject on which she enquired. Moreover, he answered in ordinary language – and in the simplest most direct manner. “I must apologise that my explanations are very simple – but the simple approach is all I understand.”

He gave her suggestions on practice in a manner which suggested that he was merely passing on the teachings he’d heard – but nonetheless he seemed completely clear about everything he described – as if his memory served him more than adequately.

He cared for her children as if they were his own – and entertained them sometimes when they rested or took meals. By the time they got to Dza chu-kha, her feelings for Paltrül had developed in depth and complexity. ’

ö-Sel was aware that she was astonishing herself with regard to how she felt about Paltrül. He was actually quite a handsome man under his shaggy coils of thor-chug.[123] She’d grown to be very fond of him. She was concerned not only for herself but for the future of her children – and it seemed to her that Paltrül might make a good husband. He was her senior in years—and not of the same social position as her late husband—but he was both knowledgeable and devoted to the teachings. He was also the epitome of kindness and humour. She realised that she had never met such a wonderful person in her life. She was suddenly aware that she had fallen in love with him.

After long consideration she plucked up the courage and proposed marriage to Paltrül – but he shook his head rather sadly. “That’s not really possible, my dear … but I thank you all the same. You’re a good woman. There could be nothing more happy for a vagabond like me to do but become a husband to you … and a father to your children – but I am not cut out for such a life … and anyway … I must care for a great number of people in my own way …”

The lady was clearly disappointed but somehow understood that there was something much more unusual about this strange man than she supposed. She did not pursue her proposal, but asked “What’s your purpose here in Dza chu-kha– will you also go to the gompa?” Paltrül smiled “Yah … certainly I’ll be there – have no doubt of that. I’ll be going to the gompa tomorrow – and promise to meet you there. Take the remains of what we’ve been offered as alms and find a place for you and your children to sleep tonight.” Paltrül looked at her intently – and said emphatically “You and your children will be fine. Your devotion and practice will take care of everything.”
She looked a little bewildered. “But what about you – what will you do for accommodation?”

Paltrül laughed “Oh me? I’ll do what I usually do when I come here. Don’t you worry about me. If I can’t find a good place to put my head down, something will be alarmingly amiss!”

On that note they parted. Paltrül made his way to the gompa where he was received with all due ceremony. ‘ö-Sel and her children went on their way to find somewhere to stay for the night. In their respective accommodations, they engaged in their own duties and practices before attending the teachings.

The next day arrived, and the preparations for the teachings and public blessing were underway. People were arriving from the outlying districts. Others had arrived some days or weeks previously. Some had travelled tremendous distances to hear Paltrül’s teachings, and there was a sizeable encampment all around the gompa eager to receive his blessing. Many Khamba and Golok Lamas were there in their respective encampments – even people from as far away as U-Tsang.[124]

Everyone had brought presents—as would be traditionally expected—and in similar traditional manner they were gathered together by the monks. It was well known that Paltrül never accepted presents. He always gave away whatever he was given – either to those who were in need or to help local craftspeople in religious works. He also gave the gifts to the gompa – but this time he requested that all the gifts should be gathered together to be at his personal disposal at a future point. The monks were slightly disconcerted by this change in Paltrül. Why had he deviated from his usual exemplary disinterest in offerings? But then, he was a very great Lama, and there would probably be some good reason behind this uncharacteristic action. Their curiosity was further aroused by the almost unseemly degree of interest he took in the value and quality of the offerings. He appeared to be uncommonly pleased by the way that the gifts were accumulating. One could have been led to believe that Paltrül descended to common acquisitiveness.

When ‘ö-Sel arrived at the gompa and took her place amongst the crowd gathered there, she could not really see Paltrül’s face very clearly. She listened to the teaching in rapt attention, in which she marvelled at the eerie sensation of Paltrül’s voice; it was extraordinarily familiar – almost like the old togden with whom she had travelled to Dza chu-kha. The teachings seemed unusually easy to understand. She remembered the difficulty she’d experienced in the past when she had attempted to follow such profound teachings. Now it was as if she had heard them all recently, and was simply being reminded of what she already knew. Then she came up to receive a blessing. She had some degree of anticipation of the glorious benediction that the touch of Paltrül’s hand would confer when it touched the top of her head.
— but when she looked up to see the face of Paltrül, her mind was so startled that she lost all ability to conceptualise. She found herself in a state of rapt shock.[125]

At that moment she understood all the instructions that Paltrül had given her as they walked together. She realised that Paltrül had given her all the teachings in quintessential form as they walked together – and that he had just given them all again in full.

“I’m sorry I turned down your offer of marriage …” Paltrül told the lady in a concerned tone “… but now you’ve received my transmission – and you know the nature of real practice. Although I can’t marry you, we will never be parted. Marriage always ends in death – but the marriage of transmission is indestructible.”

Paltrül snapped his fingers and ’ö-Sel’s eyes focused again. After a moment of what looked like consideration, he said “Although you have told me that the teachings of old Paltrül are worth more than everything you have lost, you will also need to take care of yourself and your children.”

With that he requested the monks to turn over all the collected offerings to the woman, and she was able to return to her home. She became a profound practitioner of Dzogchen and passed her teaching not only to her children but to many other ordinary people who came to hear of her.

“Yah …” Rinpoche gave me his familiar look. I knew that something was expected – and soon. I also knew that playing coy and waiting to be asked would get me into more trouble than if I simply blurted out the first idea that came into my head. “This is the third story in which Dza Paltrül hides his identity – but here the reason seems different. The woman obviously has no great attitude problem to overcome …”

Rinpoche nodded in a kind of way that didn’t really indicate a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. It was a mixture of head movements that looked like ‘yes—no—maybe’ and possibly other answers that eluded me.

“So, what was the reason?!” he suddenly shouted.

I fumbled around trying to think of what he could have been trying to teach her. Nothing came to mind. I was expecting Rinpoche to get angry with me for being no better than a bucket of abattoir slops – and the tension was mounting in me to a distinctly unpleasant degree. There was an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach that was making me feel quite queasy, and I started to feel as if I were going to vomit if I didn’t escape and go lie down somewhere. This was not a good situation. It was bad enough that I simply didn’t know what to say, but the idea of vomiting uncontrollably in my Lama’s presence filled me with horror. Now … you’d have thought I’d
have settled down as Rinpoche became less ferocious—or less continually
ferocious—but now I had a situation of alternation. It seemed easier to handle
when Rinpoche was homogenously wrathful—but now he alternated and I
found myself desperate not to lose his favour once it appeared that I had it.

As I sat in this state of utter unease, Rinpoche—quite uncharacteristically—
reached across the table and took hold of my hands. He sat there holding my
hands for what seemed to be an outrageously long time. It wasn’t an hour, or
even twenty minutes—but it seemed a very long time. Whilst this somehow
wonderfully unexpected hand-holding was taking place, Rinpoche sat staring
over the top of my head so that it was not possible to meet his gaze.

As I sat there as rigid as a piece of guttering, it occurred to me that being
tense was uncomfortable, and that whatever was going to happen would
happen whether I were tense or not. So I just let myself go floppy—or the
nearest thing to it.

Gradually I relaxed. I continued to relax. It seemed strange in some way that
one could simply continue to relax, and that every stage of relaxation seemed
to be as far as the process could go. Then I’d relax a bit more. It briefly
passed through my mind that if I relaxed any more I’d lose control of my
bowels or something—but nothing quite that disgusting occurred. I stopped
feeling sick quite soon in the process and started feeling very airy and light.

Then his eyes turned downward and met mine in a liquid movement for
which words don’t appear to be a suitable medium. The sensation was
slightly threatening, but it didn’t seem that I was irredeemably impelled to
wind myself into a knot again. I could simply sit there. It was then that it
occurred to me.

“Rinpoche …” I ventured “Dza Paltrül must have known that ’ö-Sel Dri’mèd
had too much devotion … too much devotion at an emotional level—
especially in view of the events that led to their meeting … even not knowing
who he was she had fallen in love with him, and … even at the gompa her
feeling at the heart level was too overwhelming to be able to relate in terms
of meeting Paltrül directly.”

Rinpoche smiled ever so slightly and poured out two beers. He then reclined,
looking at me—in what could almost have been described as a benign
manner—over the frothing tops of the glasses. He arranged his arms
comfortably in a movement that indicated that I should continue.

“So … if he had told her who he was, it would have been impossible to have
given her the transmissions and teachings he gave her while they were simply
walking together. He simply chose to put her at her ease.”

This is exactly what Rinpoche had just done for me—he’d put me at my ease
and suddenly I realised that the same quality was right there in the story.

“Oh yah …” Rinpoche enunciated his acknowledgement with peculiar precision. “Maybe one day you will not be ’thom yor – and not too afraid of me?”

This made me burst out laughing. “Maybe, Rinpoche … but …maybe … some of my fear is useful.”

Rinpoche pulled a mock frown at that point. “How so?” he enquired with almost astringent rapidity.

“I don’t feel that it would to be good to be—too—relaxed in your presence … not unless I found myself in the state of rigpa.”

“Oh yah … rigpa …” He laughed. “Now … more coming?”

“I guess I could try to get over whatever it is that winds me up so much. It would be better if I didn’t sometimes feel as if I was about to be sick when I get stuck for an answer.”

Rinpoche shook his head and indicated the beer. We both quaffed. It was a warm day.

“Yah … you really know all these answers. But you need to have courage in looking into what you think you don’t know. Being a ’thom yor does not protect you against the world – the conditioned patterns of the world will have an effect on your circumstances whether you recognise them or not.”

On hearing this I had something immediate to say … at last. “Yes, Rinpoche … I can see that – but there’s a slight problem with the balance between devotion, respect, and openness on one side – I guess in my case that turns into naïveté or dim-wittedness. And then there’s perceptive discrimination or intelligent observation on the other side – I guess that could turn into cynical scepticism which would undermine devotion.”

Rinpoche grinned at me mischievously. “That is your practice.”

I thought about this story often after that, and it kept revealing other layers of itself. When I began to accept my own students, I began to see how there was always a balance of: confidence and doubt; devotion and cynicism; faith and scepticism; relaxation and tension; cordiality and formality; respect and self-respect.

These and a plethora of other balances were vital to the teacher-student relationship. Too much devotion is as much of a problem as too little respect; both are unworkable – at least for me. Then there’s the example of how Paltrül worked with ö-Sel Dri’mèd’s level of devotion. It was too great for him to communicate teachings to her as ‘Dza Paltrül’ – and yet the very same
devotion enabled Paltrül to turn her fear aside. I put this to Rinpoche when he’d told me the story and he’d replied “Yah … every situation is workable – you simply have to understand each aspect of the situation and be prepared to be completely flexible – beyond any consideration of your own preferences.”

Years later—whilst transcribing these stories—Khandro Déchen asked “So why didn’t Dza Paltrül marry the lady?”

I thought about this question for a moment and it suddenly seemed quite hilarious. “Y’know …” I replied “I really have no idea … it seems that questions about these stories never end. Rinpoche never asked me that, and the question never occurred to me at the time.”

Khandro Déchen mused “Maybe marriage might have prevented him from sleeping rough with unlikely companions …”

“Right!” I grinned “… and thereby benefiting people in the way that was characteristic of his personality display.”

Khandro Déchen laughed. “That’s obviously the answer – at this point in time, at least.”
“Oh yah … good morning—mighty—ngakpa!” Rinpoche grinned in an eerie manner. I greeted him and took my seat wondering what this unusual greeting betokened. He sat gazing at me for five minutes without speaking – so I gazed into space … attempting to wait without waiting.

“Yah … so … today …” [pause] “What … ?” Rinpoche didn’t sound angry – it was something else that I couldn’t identify as any emotion I’d ever seen before.

“Whatsoever you feel is appropriate, Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche looked quizzical but not angry. “Are you … tired … of stories?”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“So … you are—happy—to hear stories every day as long as I tell them?” I nodded.

“… and happy to answer Künzang Dorje’s—angry—questions?”

“… yes … Rinpoche … Although I’m happier when you’re … not … angry with me.”

“Yah—when—you are not ’thom yor—then—I am also happy” Rinpoche growled – but I had the sense that he was affecting the growl – and that it wasn’t entirely serious. “Anyhow … maybe you will—not—be ’thom yor today …” [pause] “What is your thinking?”

Ouch, double-edged—triple-edged—question … “I think … what I want most … is to avoid idiocy today.”

Rinpoche raised his eyebrows and I braced myself for a violently delivered question … but nothing came. Rinpoche simply displayed a slightly malevolent grin. “Oh yah … good … anyway … so … Paltrül was once roaming through the mountains” …

… He was wandering as was his wont. He was somewhere or other in the mountainous area of Dérgé, near Kathog Gompa, when he came across Gyarong Lama – an old monk who was evidently sincerely pious and devoted. Gyarong Lama noticed that—although quite ragged—Paltrül’s chuba was maroon in colour. He naturally suspected that Paltrül might have some vague religious connections. They struck up a conversation as they walked together, and Gyarong Lama asked “You seem like a man who might be interested in religion – am I right?”

Paltrül smiled and said “Yes – I am a Nyingma.”
Gyarong Lama—pleased by this response—questioned further. “What have you learnt about religion?”

Paltrül hung his head a little, and replied “Oh … this and that … the essence of this matter is immeasurably vast and subtle, and … I’m just a village ngakpa, you know.”

Gyarong Lama smiled in a paternal sort of way. “Well, my friend – that’s no reason to stop you learning a little more. If you’d like to come and stay with me for a while I’ll give you some coaching in these things. I’m not a good scholar or anything – but I know a thing or two about the teachings.”

Paltrül smiled appreciatively. “Thank you very much indeed – I’d be grateful to accept your kind offer.”

That made Gyarong Lama happy – as he was never more pleased than when being useful in respect of religion. “There’s an excellent text by Dza Paltrül Rinpoche called ‘The Direct Speech of Küntuzangpo’, and if you like I’ll go through it with you. Maybe you’ve heard of this great Lama?”

Paltrül’s eyes narrowed as if in slight confusion. “Yes … I’ve heard that name – but I thought he was just a ngakpa like me …”

Gyarong Lama shook his head. “Oh good gracious no—my dear friend—you are wrong there … Let me put you right. Dza Paltrül Rinpoche is nothing at all like you – oh no. He’s a very great Lama who presides over one of the largest Nyingma gompas. Wherever did you get the idea that he was a just a ngakpa?”

Paltrül looked a little sheepish. “Well …” he replied “… suppose I must’ve heard that somewhere or other – I guess there’s no accounting for what folks do say. But I’d be grateful to come and study this text with you – if the offer still stands?”

It did. So Paltrül went to stay with the kindly old Lama. Almost immediately they arrived at his home the instruction began – and good instruction it was. Gyarong Lama was no fool and seemed to have a clear understanding. Paltrül listened with interest to the precise explanations of his own book.

After they’d spent a few days together in this way, it came to Gyarong Lama’s attention that the very amazing and wonderful Dza Paltrül Rinpoche himself, was due to arrive at Kathog Gompa to give teachings on the very text the two Lamas had been studying! “This is the most incredible opportunity, my friend! Now we have an opportunity to hear these teachings from the enlightened master himself!”

Paltrül looked astonished. “Would they let a village ngakpa in to such a teaching?”
“Sure” said Gyarong Lama. “Don’t worry about that! If you come with me, there’ll be no problem – I’ll vouch for you. I’ll make sure that you get a good place to sit – a place where you’ll be able to see and hear properly.”

Paltrül looked a little apologetic. “You’re very kind to help an old ngakpa in this way – but there’s just one problem …”

Gyarong Lama asked what that was, in case he could be of help. “Well …” said Paltrül “I’ve got a few chores to attend to before I go to Kathog. But you can be sure that I’ll be there on the day. I will arrive early and look out for you. It would not do for me to miss this occasion.”

Gyarong Lama smiled. “Good, let’s meet there then. But …” he added “… maybe try to tidy yourself up a bit – it would be good to look presentable at the gompa.”

Paltrül agreed “There’s not much I can do about my hair, but I’ll make sure that I look as smart as I can so I don’t embarrass you.”

Paltrül took his leave from his gracious host and made his way to Kathog. The day of the teaching arrived – and Gyarong Lama looked around for his new acquaintance, the village ngakpa. Time was getting on and—not seeing Paltrül anywhere—he decided to go inside and wait. His friend had obviously been detained. He most likely would show up later. Dza Paltrül Rinpoche was already there at Kathog Gompa – so it would be better to await his friend the village ngakpa in the lhakhang.[128]

Seated in the audience of monks, Gyarong Lama stood up and offered prostrations as Dza Paltrül Rinpoche was escorted to the high throne. But when he came to resume his seat, Gyarong Lama was stunned. He’d never seen Dza Paltrül before – and the sight that presented itself completely disoriented the old monk. This was the simple village ngakpa to whom he had explained the teachings of the great Dza Paltrül Rinpoche. He was both horrified and bewildered – but Paltrül put him at his ease. “Ah! There you are, my friend Gyarong Lama. I’ve been waiting for you as I promised. Lucky for me that you helped me with this text – it’s been a long time since I wrote it.”

Paltrül then turned to one of his attendants. “Prepare a special seat for my friend Gyarong Lama, he really has a very good understanding of this text – you people should really study with him.”

Rinpoche gazed at me, rubbing his chin. “And so …” [pause] “Why … does Paltrül make pretences of this kind?”

I thought about this for a moment and replied “In order to teach people … through skilful means … about what is in their minds?”
Rinpoche yawned. “… ’thom yor …” [pause] “Yesterday I think you are no longer a ’thom yor” he sighed.

That was actually worse than him being angry – so I took an unprecedented plunge into utter insanity.

“I’d rather you were angry with me, Rinpoche – than bored with me …” [pause] “Can I answer that question again?”

Rinpoche shrugged as if to say ‘Say something then …’

“Well … Dza Paltrül isn’t entirely making a pretence – he just seems to be allowing the situation to flow in the direction that first suggests itself.”

Rinpoche didn’t seem too interested in this reply – but at least he didn’t sigh and say ‘… ’thom yor …’ He nodded in a desultory manner for a moment and said “So … why this pretence – what did it prove? Wouldn’t it be better for him to be straightforward in his dealing with people?”

That seemed a question I could answer. “Yes …” I replied “… that’s what I’d do … but … if a person doesn’t have realisation … then it’s difficult to do anything else … other than be straightforward.”

Rinpoche laughed heartily. “Yes, you would think that would be so – but many ’thom yors think that they can act in strange ways in order to show they have some special powers. ’thom yors make a show of being humble in order to impress. ’thom yors also make a show of being ignorant in order to impress. ’thom yors who think they are Buddhist are sometimes not straightforward in—any—way at all.”

“Yes …” I commented “… I’ve met with that quite often …”

“Anyhow …” Rinpoche continued – almost as if I had not spoken “… assuming Paltrül has realisation … what is learnt from his not being straightforward?” [pause] “Be quick with your answer!”

Rinpoche was obviously a little tired of my slowness – so I dived in headlong. “Gyarong Lama learnt not to judge by appearances.”

“Maybe …” Rinpoche nodded in vague approval. “You know … many people have disrespect for the gö kar chang lo’i dé. Those who are not so famous that they cannot be insulted … they call village ngakpas. You will find that there is often criticism of those who maintain the gö kar chang lo – but this tradition has had great honour in the past!” [pause] “You know this?”

“Yes, Rinpoche … in the time of Ralpachen, the gö kar chang lo’i-dé sat on the King’s hair. They sat on his left side while the monks sat on the right. It was the gö kar chang lo’i-dé who kept the lineages of the Nyingma alive through the time of Langdarma’s persecution.”
“Ah … you know well then …”

Rinpoche poured Eagle beer into two glasses, watching the levels rise in each, with silent spacious attention to each millilitre. “When Langdarma went in search of the gö kar chang lo’i dé to destroy them, Sang-gyé Yeshé manifested a black scorpion the size of a yak above the King’s head!” Rinpoche chuckled quietly and wiped the beer froth from his moustache. “Langdarma promised then to leave the gö kar chang lo’i dé in peace.”

“This is an excellent story! I heard it first from Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche. Is it widely known?”

“Yes …” Rinpoche replied “… but knowing and remembering the meaning are not necessarily the same.” Rinpoche was silent and pensive for a while. “Sometimes … this story of Paltrül is told differently …”

Rinpoche noticed the look of curiosity on my face – but gave a dismissive wave of his hand to indicate that he was disinterested in furnishing details. I decided to leave well alone. It was a glorious afternoon and we walked up to the caves where Padmasambhava had meditated. When we returned, Rinpoche said that we should sit together – and so we spent the rest of the time until dinner in silence. Rinpoche occasionally shouted out the syllable ‘Phat!’[129] as we sat, and each time it jolted me into space. It was always a substantial period until thoughts re-emerged – and when they did it was noticeably easier to let go of them.

Rinpoche had asked me to stay for dinner on this occasion, and I was overjoyed. It seemed as if I’d turned a corner and that I’d been accepted in some way. I was still capable of idiocy in his eyes – but I got the feeling that he accepted that I was trying extremely hard not to be an idiot.
the working class hero

“Yah!” Rinpoche exclaimed. “You are here!” he continued – but his volume didn’t seem to betoken rage. “Will today be different? Are you ’thom yor? … or …” [pause] “Yah … today … there is no need to answer this question …” [pause] “We will see – maybe today you are not ’thom yor.”

“So …” Rinpoche began “… you are a working class ngakpa …” [pause] “Also … Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche is the son of a blacksmith – and there are many Tibetan ’thom yors who say this is low-class. É Hong!” [pause] “Because of this … these ’thom yors think they do not need to respect this great yogi.” Rinpoche shook his head in disgust. “É Hong! … ’thom yor …” [pause] “Dorje Legpa[130] is a blacksmith but they chant his drüpthab every day! What kind of ’thom yor does this?!” [pause] “Drüpchen Sogpo Pal-gyi Yeshé[131]—one of the twenty-five disciples of Guru Rinpoche—was a blacksmith!” [pause] “Was he to be despised for this?”

“No, Rinpoche …” [pause] “My father came from a family where there were blacksmiths and some were known for their great strength.”

“Oh yah! This is good. Maybe because you come from blacksmiths – you can be cured of being a ’thom yor!”

“I heard that Pal-gyi Yeshé had immense physical strength” I replied – not daring to agree with Rinpoche that ‘I’m sure I can be cured – but you’d have to hold me over a smoky fire like a herring.’ I was often sorry that Rinpoche had no access to my sense of humour. He must have found me entirely dull and insipid.

Rinpoche seemed to notice that thoughts had crossed my mind. “Yah … And when Yeshé Zhôn-nu[132] met him for the first time he realised that Pal-gyi Yeshé had great potential as a practitioner. Pal-gyi Yeshé was sitting in lotus posture! He was working his bellows with remarkable ease and relaxed concentration! Yeshé Zhôn-nu apprenticed himself to the Sogpo and learnt the art of blacksmithing at the same time as introducing the Sogpo to the inner tantras. The final transmission which Yeshé Zhôn-nu gave was of such intensity that the Sogpo’s Mind united with the meanings he’d heard in the sound of his hammer upon his own anvil. The transmission took the form of Yeshé Zhôn-nu swallowing the shards of glowing iron which flew into the air when the Sogpo was working.”

“I heard that Pal-gyi Yeshé rescued Yeshé Zhôn-nu from his enemies – and had to overcome two prison guards in order to free him from his dungeon.”

“Oh yah! It was at this point that Yeshé Zhôn-nu gave him transmission of
“After this he accomplished the drüpthab and was able to tame wild animals with ease! He could calm predatory beasts by seizing their necks with his bare hands …” [pause] “Did you know this?!?”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“What did you know?!”

“That … he was even able to restrain the tigers in the lower reaches of Môn.”

“Yah … it’s good that you know this …” [pause] “Throughout his life he never lived in houses or caves. He preferred the wild forested mountains where he would live in rough shelters between glacial torrents. At the end of his life he attained rainbow body …” [pause] “But … now … I will talk about Paltrül again – because there is much you must know about Tibetan ’thom yors. There were too many ’thom yors in Tibet – so when I tell you that you are a ’thom yor, it is not because you are an inji”…

… Dza Paltrül—footloose and fancy-free as befitted his mien—was always coming across situations in which he could encourage the passage of events to do what they would.

Whilst roaming the highlands of Kham, Paltrül came upon a company of religious types travelling to the south. He asked one of the monks “I wonder whether … as a practitioner … I might join you on your journey?”

The monk replied “I see no reason why not. I’ll ask one of the Lamas in our caravan – and if he’s agreeable there’ll be no difficulty – as long as you pitch in with the work, that is.”

Paltrül seemed pleased with the arrangement. “Sure – I’m not a lazy man. I’m always happy to do my share.”

The agreement of one of the Lamas was sought and gained – and Paltrül was immediately put to work gathering firewood. Paltrül was evidently entirely willing to do whatever he was asked – and the monks soon realised they were onto a good thing. Soon he was doing a share of everyone’s work.

Behind his back the monks shared a jest about it. “Hey, this village ngakpa sure knows the best kind of practice, doesn’t he?!” And so it went on.

One day Paltrül asked “What do you do when you don’t have the work of the camp to do?”

The monk looked at him curiously – wondering whether their run of luck with the hard-working village ngakpa had come to an end. “Oh, we have no free time. All our time is spent practising.”
Paltrül looked surprised. “Ya-tsan!”

The monk felt relieved that he wasn’t going to be put on the spot – and smiled back indulgently, feeling confident of his superior position.

“That’s just perfect” continued Paltrül “What a thing it must be to be a monk such as you and your colleagues here.”

The monk smiled self-consciously, suddenly feeling wary again. “Yes … it’s the way of virtue as laid down by the Buddha.”

Paltrül shook his head wide-eyed and ostensibly amazed. “Really … you don’t say – that’s marvellous.”

This was getting a trifle uncomfortable for the monk – who had begun to feel guilty about his pretences. He therefore decided he’d better ask a question, if only to change the subject. “What do you do for religious practice?”

Paltrül looked sheepish. “Me? Oh … well … I just do my best to leave my Mind as it is.”

The monk giggled at this. “Poor fellow, you don’t know too much about religion, do you?”

Paltrül shook his head. “Seems that way … surely does seem that way – but I’m happy to help you all create merit and share in that a little if I can.”

The monk smiled nervously and excused himself – not knowing what to make of the conversation in which he’d just engaged. Was this village ngakpa a kindly well-mannered simpleton, or what?

Still, as long as he continued to do the bulk of the work, it seemed better not to ask too many questions.

After a week, they arrived in the vicinity of a Kagyüd gompa where an empowerment was going to be given by Tashi ’ö-Ser Rinpoche, one of the major disciples of Kongtrül Lodrö Tha-yé. The travelling assembly of ecclesiastics got wind of this and decided it would be good to attend. Camp was pitched. The Lamas’ horses were decked out in the prescribed manner – exquisitely caparisoned with ornately carved and gilded saddles. The Lamas and their attendants wore their finest robes and hats for the occasion and arrived with parasols and banners fluttering. The entourage displayed the profusion of polychromatic religious pageantry of which only the Tibetan sense of grandiosity is capable. It caused great wonder amongst the villagers who arrived to admire the spectacle of their arrival.

Paltrül was something of an embarrassment to the calculated dignity of the monastic cavalcade, and waited until a discreet interval had elapsed before he followed them into the courtyard of the gompa.
The place was very crowded for the empowerment, and at its conclusion it took several hours for Tashi ’ö-Sér Rinpoche to bless the assembly. First came the highest of the visiting dignitaries with whom he touched foreheads – then the lesser, whose heads he touched with both hands. Then came others according to rank, and gradually the touch of one hand was followed by the touch of a yak hair whisk. The very last of all to receive a blessing was Paltrül – but ’ö-Sér Rinpoche had seen him coming and was too quick.

Before Paltrül had approached the throne, ’ö-Sér Rinpoche had handed him the yak hair whisk and was performing full prostrations.

’ö-Sér Rinpoche offered his throne to Paltrül and took the lower one for himself. When they had seated themselves, and to the amazement of all, ’ö-Sér Rinpoche introduced the great Dza Paltrül Rinpoche – friend of his own teacher Kongtrül Lodrö Tha-yé.

“I have the idea …” I said to Rinpoche as soon as he’d finished – for once I wanted to jump in immediately to show that I wasn’t completely docile “… part of Paltrül’s personality display is to fall in with situations simply in order that people could experience their own patterning. This seems to be a method that is far more powerful than confronting people with their bigoted attitudes.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Oh yah!” he exclaimed “That’s it!” [pause] “Today you are not a ’thom yor!” He then rubbed the back of his neck, whilst looking around the room. It was almost as if he was looking for something. Then he fixed me with his stare. “This!” [pause] “… is precisely why Paltrül did the monk’s work for them!” [pause] “…and … why he asks them what they do with their time off. He gives them the opportunity to examine their actions of body, voice, and mind – but they’re not able to understand! This makes the lesson he teaches even stronger!”

A response was wanted—I could tell—and this time I had one. “So it wasn’t simply a matter of floating with the situations in which he found himself, he actually participated in the situation that was being created.”

Rinpoche nodded and gave a slight smile – the one that betokened ‘right answer’. “You have to be creative with your intelligence – but not too creative” Rinpoche asserted “Paltrül said just enough for the results of his actions to have effect. You must be highly precise to act in this way.”

I could see that. “Do you think that Paltrül knew that ’ö-Ser Rinpoche was the Lama giving the empowerment?”

This seemed to amuse Rinpoche. I didn’t ask why my question was amusing, which was probably just as well – because he had something further to add. “You can’t—always—know what will happen. Mostly you have to go into
emptiness and simply see what happens” Rinpoche chuckled “You will have to do this – so many times!”

That sounded both intriguing and disturbing – but I decided not to ask any questions about it – better to leave the future to itself.

“Rinpoche …” I asked after a moment or two had passed “This quality of Paltrül – that he’d wander ’round anonymously … was this common within the Nyingma Tradition?”

Künzang Dorje Rinpoche nodded. “Sure, and also in the Drigung, and Drukpa Kagyüd schools where there were many holders of the gö kar chang lo’i-dé. The first DoDrüpcchen and his friend Jig’mèd Nyu-gu often behaved in a similar way – but they didn’t wander as extensively as Paltrül. Maybe he learnt this style from them when he was young.”
“Oh yah … good morning. Are you refreshed from your sleep?”
“I slept well, Rinpoche – thank you.”
“Good – maybe … today you will—also—not be ’thom yor. This would be good!” [pause] “Maybe you will be clear … and maybe … you will see clearly …” [pause] “So … now … we talk about upper-class ’thom yors.” Rinpoche sat silently for some minutes. “Not all aristocrats are ’thom yors … but many—are—’thom yors … and their wealth does not help them to become anything else.”
“I suppose … the idiots who admire them don’t help …”
“Oh yah! Now you are thinking clearly!” [pause] “Maybe you are never again becoming a ’thom yor!” [pause] “Anyway … when Paltrül was young, he once travelled in the company of the first DoDrüpchen and his friend Gyalwé Jig’mèd Nyu-gu” [135] …
… They’d all donned the nomad-style sheepskin chubas that were the favourite costume of DoKhyentsé and were striding out in the direction of DoDrüp Gompa. After some time of walking they settled down for the evening. They lit a fire against both cold and wolves – and whilst seated around their campfire, they were accosted by some members of a wealthy family who were at their wits’ end. The family were returning from DoDrüp Gompa in a state of high anxiety.
They burst in on the three travellers, and without so much as an introduction they launched in on what was distressing them. “Our grandfather has died and we cannot find anyone anywhere who can perform the death rites for him. Do you know where there might be any kind of Lama or some monks at least who could come to our home and perform the rites?”
DoDrüpchen responded “Have you tried DoDrüp Gompa?”
“Yes” the rather finely dressed man of the party answered impatiently “We have just come from there – but three extremely important Lamas are expected soon for a large ceremony and no one from there can be spared. They told us to look for someone closer to home.”
DoDrüpmchen mused for a moment. “Did you request rites be performed for your grandfather at DoDrüp Gompa?”
The man looked irritated. “Yes—yes—yes! But who knows what will happen when the important Lamas arrive. We cannot be sure that Grandfather will not be forgotten! Are you sure you don’t know of any Lama or even monks
anywhere who will come to our home?"

Jig’mèd Nyu-gu raised an eyebrow. “If they have given you their word, then surely the rites will be performed.”

This seemed to irritate the man even more. “Yes—yes—yes, and so you say—and so they all say—but you must know how these things are. People say one thing and do another.”

DoDrüpchen furrowed his brow and replied “Well … I’m sure the important dignitaries will not forget your old grandfather …”

The man became haughty at that point “It may fail to reach the attention of the supreme ones that Grandfather requires their services.”

Jig’mèd Nyu-gu interrupted at this juncture “Tell me – would the Lama need to be a monk to fit your bill?”

“How else could he be a Lama if he were not a monk?” The man seemed exasperated. “You obviously know nothing of these matters.”

DoDrüpchen pondered the question as if it were the most baffling riddle, and finally said “Well there’s a thing and no mistake … you have me there … that’s a question to be sure …”

DoDrüpchen turned to Jig’mèd Nyu-gu. “What do you think, friend?” The two Lamas fell to a pantomime performance in which each kept asking the other “Lamas?” to which the other would reply “Lamas …”

Then Jig’mèd Nyu-gu sighed in mock consternation “Now let me think …”

“Monks …” DoDrüpchen sighed “… now let me consider this problem …”

To which Jig’mèd Nyu-gu shook his head as if bewildered “Yah …who could answer such a question?”

“Monks …” DoDrüpchen responded again “Mmmm … where would one find monks? It is indeed an issue with no clear resolution.”

“I really don’t know where you might find monks so far out in the sticks” Jig’mèd Nyu-gu shook his head “… but … may I ask, my friend, when did you last see a Lama?”

DoDrüpchen scratched his head. “You’re asking me … when did— I—last see a Lama. Now that’s a question … When did—you—last see a Lama?”

“Well … my friend …” Jig’mèd Nyu-gu replied “I could ask you the same … and … actually, I think I just did … but not to put too fine a point on it, I’d say that the question of ‘time’ doesn’t exactly come into it … does it?”

“Well said! Well said!” DoDrüpchen nodded with enthusiasm. “Yah, yah, yah … I see your point completely … It’s a tricky question.”
This style of discussion went on for a period of time which nearly drove the man insane with frustration. “Enough already with this gibberish! Are you crazy?! You’ve either seen Lamas or you haven’t!”

Jig’mèd Nyu-gu became serious. “Are you—sure—it’s not better to leave things be? Are you sure it’s not better to rely on the monks at DoDrüp to perform rites for you? We’re sure your request won’t be forgotten.”

The relatives however were not happy with leaving anything to chance and sat around in a dejected manner talking amongst themselves and wondering what to do.

As they were talking, various other stragglers from the family caught up with the main party. One of the latecomers was a young girl who noticed that there were péchas—texts—wrapped up in the bundles that the three yogis had placed in a sheltered spot. The wind had whipped up the side of the back pack that Paltrül was carrying, and sure enough there were péchas there. “Maybe they can help!” she called out “They have péchas!”

The eldest of the relatives looked and sure enough the girl was right. “Can you read these péchas you carry?”

The three yogis nodded. “Yes …” replied DoDrüpchen “… we can all read.”

“What péchas are these péchas that you have with you?”

“These …” DoDrüpchen replied “… are texts connected to DoDrüp Gompa – and amongst them … there are Bardo Thödröl[136] texts.”

“Then although you’re not monks, will you at least come and chant these texts for us? We will provide you with generous offerings! Please come! You’re our only hope!”

DoDrüpchen answered “Well, yes, of course we will come – but you said that you wanted monks? If you want monks wouldn’t you be better off remaining here in case any monks come along?”

The elder of the relatives looked vexed. “That doesn’t matter, you have the texts and that is what counts. As long as you know how to read.” Then over his shoulder he asked with barely concealed suspicion “You do know—how—to read, don’t you?”

The three yogis nodded, and DoDrüpchen Rinpoche added “We can read well enough to recite these texts for you – there is no need to worry if that is all you want from us.”

So it was that the three yogis agreed to help – but said that they could only remain for three days. They were on their way to DoDrüp Gompa.

They couldn’t delay too long because of the important ceremonies that were
to take place – and the gompa awaited their arrival. They said nothing of this to the party however. They simply agreed to help – until they had to continue on their journey to DoDrüp Gompa for the event. The relatives decided to keep quiet about a certain fact which was likely to have influenced the yogis in their decision to stay – the fact that the ceremonies were set to start in two days. It was due to this that no one had been able to come from the gompa to perform rites in their home.

To cut a long story shorter – the three yogis performed the bardo rites somewhat to the amazement of the family. They not only chanted the texts but also played ritual instruments and made gTormas. They seemed to know what to do and to be able to carry everything out with surprising finesse. Whoever these fellows were it seemed that they may once have been monks or something. Then, of course—as always—the family went along to DoDrüp with the three yogis only to discover that they were Paltrül, DoDrüpcchen and Jig’mèd Nyu-gu.

Rinpoche observed me closely at the end of his rendition and moved his head very slightly from side to side. This was one of his indications that I should speak.

“The rich family …” I commenced “… thought that Dza Paltrül, DoDrüpcchen and Jig’mèd Nyu-gu were ‘nobodies’ because they weren’t dressed like monks – and, the monks thought I was a ‘somebody’ because I’d brought a letter from Düd’jom Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche nodded. “More or less … but anyway … you walked ’round the lake with Könchog blessing people.”

This was suddenly awful. “Yes … I did—try—not to do that – but … Könchog Rinpoche insisted. He said that the local people seemed not to be happy about my not doing so. I didn’t feel good about it – I think you know that …”

“Oh yah!” Rinpoche found this entirely funny “… I know this. Why should I forget …” [pause] “… anyway—do you think they received no blessing from you?”

Ouch. How could I answer this? I knew I was damned both ways – or rather I thought I knew. I decided on another tack. “Well … maybe they did – if they thought they did – and maybe I was just Könchog Rinpoche’s yak tail fly whisk and they were receiving the blessing from him through me.”

Rinpoche suddenly stopped laughing. “Yah—yah—yah … I see … now you become a cunning ’thom yor.”

I’d tried to hedge my bets on the issue and say both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ – and … Rinpoche was not buying it.
“I’m sorry …” I mumbled “I say idiot things like that when I feel trapped, and I’m going to annoy you with my reply.”

“So … tell me! What do you—really—think?! [pause] “This time – no ’thom yor trick!”

“I have no idea whether they received a blessing or not … or even what a blessing actually is … to be honest. I think you have to—know—what a blessing is in order to give one.”

Rinpoche nodded. “And also to receive one!” [pause] “This is better! You could have given this answer first – without the ’thom yor tricks!” [pause] “Now – do you have any question?!”

“I do, Rinpoche … what happens then – when people receive blessings?”

Rinpoche smiled rather wanly. “They go away feeling happy …” he sighed “… as if something had happened …” [pause] “But what is the real meaning of blessing?” [pause] “You must answer …” Rinpoche commanded – but without his usual degree of force.

I was going to have to leap – and so I leapt. “Well the only thing that makes sense to me is some kind of indication of the nature of Mind.”

“Yah!” Rinpoche shouted – but with a tone of joy in his voice. “Blessing is the recognition of the nature of Mind. We all have beginningless nondual nature, and when we see that—that—is blessing!” [pause] “And it is blessing also when—like this—you are not ’thom yor!” [pause] “You know what is real … you are not ’thom yor – but you make the choice to be ’thom yor …” [pause] “Do you see this?”

“It’s … when I try to speak with humility – and when I try to make a joke out of something in order to sound as if I’m a good student.”

“Oh yah! So now you know this! Now you know you have—the choice—not to be ’thom yor!”

“Yes …” I replied cautiously “I think I will have to watch for the intention and learn to see the intention forming so that I can avoid allowing it to override my awareness.”

“Oh yah … this is being clear …” [pause] “Now … what next with the story of Paltrül?”

This however opened up a whole can of worms for me. “So … what about the rich family?” I began – but Rinpoche jumped on me in a flash.

“Yes! That’s the question! Now – what do you say?”

In for a penny in for a pound. “Well … I’d say that the grandfather certainly gained benefit – but maybe the rich family gained nothing. They didn’t
recognise Dza Paltrül, DoDrüpchen and Jig’mèd Nyu-gu through their presence – and even when they performed the rites they just thought they might have been monks in the past. Then later when they discover that they’re really three great Lamas they gain nothing either – because they merely reverse their opinions on the basis of appearances.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Oh yah! You are right. It’s rare that people understand anything. Still … Könchog Rinpoche didn’t think you were an aristocrat ngakpa when he told you to give blessings.”

I grinned and replied “I was just obeying orders.”

Rinpoche couldn’t tie my amusement in with my words—as had happened before—so I had to explain to him about the Nazi war trials when that phrase was used as an excuse for inhuman behaviour. I also explained that the excuse was not deemed valid.

This caused him to slap his thigh. He was obviously highly amused. “So … you can find humour without being ’thom yor – this is good!”

That seemed to close the subject – but Rinpoche had something more to add. “You know the only reason to wear brocade and use beautiful implements when giving an empowerment?” This time he did not expect an answer – and continued “It is because the Lama giving the empowerment needs to ‘show the yidam’.

“The Lama has to cover the signs that he is not Guru Rinpoche – he covers his ordinary body with glorious robes because he knows he is not glorious Guru Rinpoche. When you know you are Guru Rinpoche then you can give the empowerment in rags or give the empowerment naked – there is no difference.”

I said nothing in response to this statement because I knew that Rinpoche had used an old whiskey bottle and a vulture feather as a bumpa when he gave empowerments to the Chögyal of Sikkim. Rinpoche clearly was Padmasambhava in every respect – as was Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche and as is his son Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche.

“There are many conventional ’thom yors who mistake plain robes for humility …” Rinpoche concluded in remote spacious tones “… but they simply do not understand anything …” [pause] “The world is full of ’thom yors …”
d’you think about your mother?

“You remember …” Rinpoche began “… that I said Shabkar was a ’thom yor?”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

“Do you remember why?”

“Because he threw stones at owls when they disturbed his meditation.”

“Oh yah … but … there is another reason why he is a ’thom yor …” [pause] “Now … perhaps … as you are no longer ’thom yor … maybe … you know the second reason?”

This time I was right there – and raring to go. “Because the owl—didn’t—disturb his meditation, Rinpoche. Shabkar disturbed his own meditation by relating to the owl as if the owl was a disturbance. He could have treated the sound of the owl like any other arising thought.”

Rinpoche smiled at me – and it was a wholehearted smile. “Oh yah! Yah-yah —yah-yah-yah! This is—very—good!” [pause] “But you are … strange …” [pause] “… how is it that—this—you know—so—easily – and other questions are—so—difficult …” [pause] “Yes … you are strange … but then … you are an inji …” [pause] “Maybe … you have only pretended to be a ’thom yor because you like to make Künzang Dorje angry?” Rinpoche chuckled with a mock look of severity. “So … why—is—this easy for you to answer?”

“Well, Rinpoche – it concerns meditation and that’s far easier for me to understand than human motivation.”

“Oh yah! Good answer!” Rinpoche almost shouted “But … what is the reason for this …?”

“Maybe, Rinpoche … it’s because I went to art school and … because I’ve thought a lot about perception in terms of seeing colour … and painting what I see …” [pause] “… and … in terms of how I see the world – or rather, how I see the world through the filter of what I’ve been taught by society. I’ve always wanted to know what was indoctrination and what was real. Then I realised that I never—really—see the world – I only see according to societal programming. I see this thing as ‘beautiful’ and that thing as ‘ugly’ – because I’ve been educated to see things that way. Then at art school people get the opposite indoctrination – and they purposely choose subjects that society sees as ugly. This is good in many ways – but it just becomes another form of indoctrination …” [pause] “So … having questioned in this way for years … it’s not hard for me to work out that we create our own emotions in
reaction to how we understand our world.”

“Oh yah! This is good …” [pause] “So … you have some example?”

“Yes – my father thought Blues was not music … because he didn’t like it. He called it a depraved row. Then … he thought I was lying when I said I liked the music he liked. He thought it was impossible to like both Blues and Classical music – because Blues was not music …” [pause] “So … I could see—from that—that he was trapped by his own concepts of music. If he believed that Blues was not music—and I thought Blues was music—then I had to be lying about my enjoyment of Classical music. I saw that he was trapped by his own system of logic. He was trapped by his logic because it was based on a false premise.”

“Ya-tsan!” [pause] “But you say you went to a school for ’thom yors?!”

“No, Rinpoche … I’m sorry … please excuse me for contradicting you … I mean no disrespect … but—you—said I went to a school for idiots – and … I just agreed because I couldn’t think of a way of explaining the British school system and … and the social structure. That would have been extremely complex … and tedious.”

Rinpoche looked at me with a faint grin. “Oh yah … and?” [pause] “There is more coming?” Rinpoche seemed thoroughly absorbed by what I was saying – as if the parrot on the perch had started speaking rationally rather than mimicking the speech of human beings.

“There can be, Rinpoche.” He nodded with an unmistakably unwithheld smile – and so I continued. “I took charge of any serious schooling myself from the age of … twelve … I just read a lot—European literature—and studied art and music as best I could … on my own. I did have some extremely intelligent friends who helped me – but I’ve always driven my own education. My mother was a great help to me in this because she always encouraged my reading.”

“Oh yah—your mother—this is very good! It is—good—that you remember your mother!” [pause] “I mentioned Shabkar … you know … but beside the story of his throwing stones at an owl – there is another reason why he is a ’thom yor. I will tell a story of Paltrül that will show this”…

… Paltrül was sitting one day with his disciple Nyoshul. They were sitting in silence—as they were wont to do on occasion—when Paltrül questioned Nyoshul rather abruptly. “Hey, Nyoshul! How often d’you think about your mother?”

Nyoshul looked a little perplexed – but answered “Well … not really that often. I do try to keep my mind on my practice mostly.”
Paltrül frowned but said nothing further. A while later Paltrül announced, equally abruptly “But your mother’s been thinking a lot about—you—all the time!”

Nyoshul replied “Yes, Rinpoche – I think that’s quite likely.”

“D’you remember—her—in your practice?”

Nyoshul wondered where this line of questioning was leading. “Sometimes …” he replied “… but in general I try to contemplate the suffering of all sentient beings.”

Paltrül was looking out of the window at this point, in a disinterested manner. “Yah—yah—yah … and so you say …”

Paltrül sighed – but had nothing further to add. It seemed as if it were time for Nyoshul to take his leave. He offered his respects and backed toward the door, but Paltrül ignored him.

The next day some butter arrived for Nyoshul – a present from his mother. He went immediately to see Paltrül and offered it to him. It was a very fresh, fine, and flavoursome consignment of butter which the dear old lady had lovingly churned herself.

To Nyoshul’s perplexity, his teacher appeared displeased with the butter and pushed it away as if it offended him. He watched his disciple for a moment, and then exploded “You—miserable—little—sod—Nyoshul! Where—are—you! What—are—you thinking of! Is this any way to treat your mother! Get out of here! I don’t want to see your simpering little face for a week! You despicable little crawler! Spend the time contemplating nothing other than your mother’s kindness – or don’t bother to call on me again, d’you hear?!” Nyoshul was petrified by this chastisement and scuttled off into retreat for a week.

After the week was up, Nyoshul went to see Paltrül in a state of amazement. He’d thought about the kindness of his mother continuously. It had moved him to such a degree that he finally understood something of the core of what it means to wish for the liberation of everyone. As he spoke to Paltrül of what had happened to him in his contemplation, tears flooded down his face. He begged leave to visit his mother one last time before she died – but Paltrül said “No, you must not go just yet, there’s still more for you to practise.”

Nyoshul looked stricken at the thought. “But what if she dies before I see her again?”

Paltrül looked at him and smiled. “There are pilgrims coming to see us in a day or two – we need to see them first – but you will not be long delayed.”

Nyoshul returned to his meditation. He felt emotionally burnt to a cinder by a
fire in his heart that kept becoming more expansive. By the time Paltrül summoned him, his experience of compassion had evolved to a pitch that was physically almost unendurable.

Paltrül obviously understood exactly what was happening to Nyoshul, but he had nothing much to say. He smiled and advised him to relax a little.

The two Lamas received the pilgrims and Paltrül surprised Nyoshul by accepting all their offerings. Paltrül usually declined all offerings. When the pilgrims had left, Paltrül said “Now go see your mother. You were right, she doesn’t have long, but long enough for you to spend time with her. Take these offerings to her as a present. That’ll make her happy. Stay with her when she dies and practise the passage of the bardos with her. Once it’s all over you can return here, because I have something to tell you.”

Nyoshul followed his teacher’s instruction. His mother was delighted to see him after many years, and said nothing in the way of an admonition for his neglect of her. She was deeply moved by the presents he brought her, and the effect this had on Nyoshul simply propelled him further into a rising tide of meditational experience that had begun with his contemplation of his mother’s kindness. It seemed that there was no end to the energy that was manifesting.

After some months his mother died. He remained to perform all the necessary rites and bardo meditations. He became aware that his mother was a great practitioner herself. She needed little assistance from him in the dissolution of the elements.

Once the period of meditations was concluded, Nyoshul returned to Paltrül for the last time. Arriving back in Dza chu-kha he presented himself to Paltrül, who addressed him in a very kind and loving manner. “It’s now time for you to go into a long retreat, and when you come out, I shall also be gone. Always remember your mother’s kindness, Nyoshul, and remember how you received this transmission.”

During the next days Paltrül gave Nyoshul much advice, before he finally went on his way to the meditation cave determined for him. As he was leaving Paltrül called out to him a few parting words. “Remember your mother, Nyoshul! Your mother was your real teacher!”

By the end of this story I was experiencing waves of hot emotion. My eyes were on the brink of tears. It was one of those moments when you know that you can only avoid crying if you can manage not to speak. I knew however, that Rinpoche was going to say ‘So?’ or words to that effect – and I’d have to say something. But this time he said nothing. It wasn’t one of those terribly uncomfortable interregna either. Nothing happened. The story simply stopped.
Rinpoche poured out two beers in a way that gave me space to sit with what I was feeling. When he had finished his immaculate pouring of the beers, he said “My mother was very kind also.” He pushed a glass of beer in my direction and continued “Maybe you should write more often.”

I nodded. “Yes, I—should—write more often – especially from the East.” It was not that I didn’t write – but something suddenly struck me forcefully about the way time disappears. The sense of impermanence and the preciousness of relationship seemed to overwhelm me. I was struck by the fact that every moment with another human being can be one of immense value and appreciative sincerity.

I realised that there is no answer to being torn in half – of wishing to be in two places at the same time. That was the glorious pain of being real. I determined to see more of my mother – and also to try to be more vital in my teacher’s presence.

“So…” Rinpoche said at length “What is wrong with contemplating the suffering of all sentient beings? Why is Paltrül not pleased with Nyoshul’s reply?”

This, for once, seemed an easy question. “Nothing is wrong with it, Rinpoche…” I replied “I feel it’s more a matter of what was wrong with Nyoshul’s practice. Maybe Paltrül noticed that the thought of his mother didn’t move Nyoshul in any way? Maybe his practice of kindness toward all sentient beings was too abstract – too divorced from the flesh and blood of real people? Maybe ‘all sentient beings’ was just a concept for him?” Rinpoche nodded in his usual way whilst I was speaking, and so I continued to unravel the series of ideas that had come up for me.

“The thing I don’t understand is why Paltrül told Nyoshul not to go to see his mother as soon as he felt the wish to go … I mean – strike while the iron’s hot, and all that …”

Rinpoche fixed me with a stare at that point and said “It’s not good to be pulled this way and that by every emotion that comes and goes.”

Now I was confused … what could that mean? “But … I thought that Paltrül was displeased by Nyoshul’s neglect of his mother?”

Rinpoche grinned wolfishly at my response. “Maybe you think Künzang Dorje doesn’t like mothers …?”

“No…” I ventured, protracting the word as long as was seemly, “I don’t think that …” [pause] “I think … that this … this is something about me … about my ambivalence … It’s my being in two minds about enjoying being here, whilst feeling that I should be seeing more of my mother, especially now that my father’s dead.”
Rinpoche laughed. “So what of Paltrül and Nyoshul? What are—they—doing?”

Rinpoche had hardly finished speaking when I blurted out “Yes! That’s it! I know it!” I almost squeaked. “Nyoshul is experiencing swings in his devotion. First it is to Paltrül. He offers him the gift he received from his mother. Then his devotion swings to his mother, and he forgets about his situation with his teacher. So, Paltrül simply makes him hold back from following his immediate impulses. Then, in the time it takes for the pilgrims to come and bring their offerings, he’s entered a frame of mind in which he tastes the full measure of his situation. That’s why Paltrül simply tells him to relax. Paltrül has nothing else to say, because Nyoshul needs space to experience these things for himself.”

Rinpoche smiled and indicated the beer. There was a certain expression on his face when he pointed to the beer. I knew in that moment that Rinpoche’s attention to the beer, had the same quality as Paltrül’s advice for Nyoshul—he was giving me time to relax.

This was another uncanny performance from my teacher—another example of how he orchestrated our conversations, so that parts of the stories he told echoed aspects of what went on in discussing them. These recognitions were devastating in their simplicity.

Later that afternoon, Rinpoche remarked “Yah … that’s the other reason why Shabkar was a ‘thom yor. He failed to visit his mother before she died, even though she wrote to him many times asking him to come.”

“But …” I ventured “… in his namthar[137] … it’s recounted that he regretted that bitterly …”

“Yah—yah—yah, regret—regret—regret” Rinpoche snorted “É-Hong! What is there in regret that you should feel pride?!” followed by an expulsion of breath—impossible to transcribe—accompanied by a dismissive wave of his hand that indicated he was not impressed by regret. “Regret is what ‘thom yors feel when they experience the results of their actions!” [pause] “É-Hong! The ‘thom yor ignores his mother’s letters until too late and then the ‘thom yor grieves his stupidity!” [pause] “É-Hong! The pathetic ‘thom yor …” Rinpoche sighed with disgust “There is no awareness in Shabkar’s regret! If there was awareness then the ‘thom yor—Shabkar—would have known the grief he would feel and not acted as if his mother did not matter to him.”

“I can see that, Rinpoche—and I think I can say that I am not an idiot in—that—way. I’ve rarely had to regret anything in my life.”

“You don’t regret coming to study with Künzang Dorje?” Rinpoche asked—
but I knew he was not asking this as a serious question.

“No, Rinpoche … I have never regretted coming to study with you …”

[pause] “I—believe—you know that.”

Rinpoche slapped his thighs laughing at this. “Oh yah! Now you have clarity! If—you—were Künzang Dorje – you would have shouted at me for this question! You would have called me a ’thom yor!” [pause] “That is too funny …” [pause] “So … anyway … Shabkar behaves with his mother as ’thom yors behave! They stumble through their lives not knowing what is happening or why! They waste their own time and they waste the time of others!”

[pause] “You have seen people like this?”

“Plenty, Rinpoche … people who never make decisions and have no sense of what they want to do with their lives … people who try to get contradictory things and don’t understand why their lives are a mess … people who ruin their own situation by acting without regard for the feelings of others and then act as if their misery was not their own fault.”

“Yah … É-Hong … these are ’thom yor!”

“But … Rinpoche … I—do—feel sorry for them … nonetheless.”

“Yah good … but do not waste too much time on them … ’thom yors will eat your time until they are fat with it!” He looked me squarely in the eyes and decreed forcefully, but kindly “Do not make—anything—in your life a matter of regret. Regret means you have acted without awareness! Keep your awareness and you will—never—have to regret anything. Keep your awareness and you will not become ’thom yor again. If you doubt your awareness then simply be kind. Be like your mother.”

Years later, this story—and our exchanges on the subject of our mothers—remains with me. It strikes a chord when I come across those who have ‘compassion for all sentient beings’ but have kindness toward none. It often seems that the more people talk about compassion, and the more emphasis they place upon it – the less natural kindness they have. That seems to have been the heart of the matter with Nyoshul. It seems for me—as for Nyoshul—that my mother was also my teacher in many ways. Whenever I think of my mother, the same raw emotion comes up, as it did when I was with Rinpoche. I remember his face when he spoke of his own mother, and the sense of transmission becomes a seamless flow between us all.

My mother was a much-loved woman in her community. Her neighbours have no hesitation in telling me what a wonderful mother I had. The major hope of my life is that I might be remembered as having even half the kindness, generosity, and thoughtfulness which characterised my mother.
“What sort of king are you anyway?” Rinpoche asked.

“...yes, Rinpoche... it means ‘king’ or a class of demon.”

“Oh yah... and in England you have Queen Elizabeth II” Rinpoche laughed.

“I am not laughing at your Queen. I laugh because Tibetans thought Queen Victoria was Palden Lhamo! Did you know this?”

“Yes, Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche smiled quizzically. “How do you come to know this...? I am thinking this is something that few Western people know?”

“Well, Rinpoche... before I came here I read a lot of books about old Tibet - travelogues and so forth. I made a point of reading any book I could find on Tibet and this idea about Queen Victoria was in one of those old books.”

“Do you believe this?”

“If I had to say either yes or no – I’d say no.”

“Yah—good. I don’t believe it either. There are many superstitions like this. Only a ‘thom yor would believe such a thing. How can Queen Victoria ride a horse naked – sitting on the flayed hide of her own son?

“How can she carry sacks of diseases and play with loaded dice? Palden Lhamo is a protector – she is not a human being—and even if Queen Victoria is her emanation – she must have qualities of this protectress...” [pause]

“Anyhow... I think she was a good queen whose husband had great respect for her.”

At this point I asked Rinpoche if he would like to hear a story about Queen Elizabeth II. He nodded his approval...

... The Queen sometimes goes out into the world incognito. One day she happened to be sitting in a Scottish tea room and a lady approached her, saying “I hope you don’t mind me mentioning it – but you do look frightfully like the Queen.” The Queen smiled and replied “How very reassuring.”

Rinpoche laughed. “Yah! Good answer! I—like—this queen too much!” [pause] “You know any story about Queen Victoria?”

“No, Rinpoche, but I know one about Queen Elizabeth I.”

Rinpoche motioned for me to tell my story – and so I began “There was once a knight called Sir Aubrey who was at the court of Queen Elizabeth”...

... Sir Aubrey—when he presented himself to Queen Elizabeth—happened to
fart as he made to go down on one knee before her. He was mortified by the grossness of his inadvertent flatulence – and banished himself for seven years from her court. On his return Queen Elizabeth welcomed him. “We have missed you, Sir Aubrey – and, we have forgotten the fart.”[139]

Rinpoche roared with laughter. “Yah … she also good queen—too funny—it is good that you can tell stories …” [pause] “So … anyhow … now I have something to say about Paltrül”…

… Paltrül was teaching in Dzam-thang. The people there appreciated what he said to them and gave him offerings. He re-directed these gifts as was his wont – apart from one object. This was to become an unusual catalyst of change.

Of the gifts, he gave goods to the poor people and financial donations to those engaged in religious craft work.[140] The one gift he kept was given him by an old man. It was a special gift, a silver ornament made in the exact shape and size of a horse’s hoof!

“What a thing!” Paltrül exclaimed. “What—a—thing!” Paltrül realised this was an important moment for the old man and confided quietly “This will accomplish—much—more than you imagine.”

True to his word, Paltrül took the hoof with him when he left Dzam-thang – even though its weight was not a welcome addition to his bag. The old man was overjoyed that Paltrül had accepted his gift – and, as a result, applied himself to practice with enormous dedication. It was said later, that he became an accomplished practitioner as a result of the inspiration of Paltrül accepting his offering.

Things being as they are, there was a thief in the audience by the name of Gyalpo. Now Gyalpo means ‘king’, and this impoverished monarch noticed the silver horse’s hoof. As soon as he clapped eyes on it, his mind started buzzing with ideas. He thought of a wealthy Golok chieftain to whom such a thing might be desirable.[141] What he would pay for such a thing! Gyalpo was as surprised as were some of the monks present when Paltrül hoofed it with the silver hoof. They’d expected him to give it away along with all the other gifts. It was then that Gyalpo decided to relieve Paltrül of its weight in some desolate place a few days’ walk out of Dzam-thang.

Once Paltrül had concluded his dealing in Dzam-thang, he took off into the hills, and it was a few days before Gyalpo found him.

Paltrül was asleep when the would-be robber crept up on him, but he was not unaware of Gyalpo or his intention. The thief stealthily investigated Paltrül’s bundle in search of the silver hoof – but nothing was to be found.

Paltrül, recognising that the pilferer was frustrated, said “It’s back at the last
place you watched me light a fire. I’d have thought you would have found it there – it was easy enough to see.” Then he sat up. He looked carefully at Gyalpo, asking in disbelief “What sort of king are you anyway? I guess you must be a king though – you’re too damn timid to be a demon.[142] You will have to do a bit better than this if you want to make a living out of larceny.”

Gyalpo jumped back surprised. He was perplexed by Paltrül but demanded “Cut the guff, joker, where have you hidden that damn horse hoof! I saw the old man give it to you – I want it, and I want it now!” Paltrül laughed “Dear me … you—poor—fellow, what a miserable mess your life is.”

The robber was annoyed and slightly bewildered by Paltrül’s attitude, but also a little curious. “Whadya mean by that, you jerk-off?!” he shouted “These hillbillies may think you’re a goddamn big shot – but you’re not a real Lama! You’re just a ragged old fart who can shoot his mouth off!”

“That’s as may be, m’lad …” Paltrül smiled “… but the fact remains that the silver’s there waiting for you back where I last camped. It’s got no value for me, so you are welcome to it. But come now – why run around like a lunatic chasing dreams of wealth that won’t last? That old Golok horse lord won’t give you the price you want, and you will be shortchanged from here to Amdo as like as not. It won’t be a month before it’s all gone, and then where will you be? What’s the use in that? Think about it. Have you ever made out with this kind of deal before?”

Gyalpo, all the while Paltrül was speaking, was scurrying around in a frenzy, hunting in every crevice. Where could that crafty old con artist have hidden that silver hoof?

It was only when he had exhausted every option, along with himself, that he sat down and began to weep. “I’ve never had anything! I’ll never have anything! I’ll never amount to anything! I’m not even a goddamn successful criminal!”

Paltrül shook his head sadly and put his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Yah, yah, that’s the way of it, my friend, but never mind – there are other ways of occupying your life…” Gyalpo looked wretched. “Come now …” Paltrül added “… just take a walk back there down the valley and you will find what you’re looking for.” Gyalpo looked confused. “Come on now!” Paltrül repeated. “If you leave now you will get there by dawn. I left that useless lump of silver in the ashes of the fire.”

Gyalpo looked up at him with a mixture of hope, despair, and vague remorse. “Really?” he enquired.

“Really!” replied Paltrül “… if that is what you want. But—is that—what you want?”
The thief nodded. “This isn’t a trick?”

Paltrül laughed. “What’s there to trick?”

The thief took the situation in for a moment, and said that he would ascertain the veracity of Paltrül’s story, and that if the silver wasn’t there, he’d come looking for him. “Well, my friend, you may do that anyways – you know how it is … although, before you go there’s something I’d like to tell you.”

Gyalpo looked at his unusual prospective benefactor cautiously. “Tell away then.”

Paltrül fixed his eyes and stated in slow even tones “Well … king or demon or whatever you are – this hoof may well be exactly what you think you want – but I’m damn sure it’s not what you need. One day you’ll realise that you need the teachings more than you want this silver horse’s hoof … But in the mean time …” Paltrül yawned “… go get what you—think—you want …”

Gyalpo left and went to find Paltrül’s last campfire. Gyalpo walked through the night, and in the morning he found the place Paltrül described. There was the campfire, and sure enough, there in the ashes he found the ingot.

Gyalpo leapt in the air for joy. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” he shouted when he laid his hands on it. He sat down and gazed at it lovingly. He rubbed off the ash and shone up the silver on his ragged sleeve. He watched the metal begin to glitter as he rubbed away the ash.

It really was a large piece of silver – he was in no doubt about that. He began to think about the deal with the Golok chief, and the rich reward he’d get. But then the words of Paltrül came back to him. “That old Golok horse lord won’t give you the price you want, and you’ll be short-changed from here to Amdo as like as not. It won’t be a month before it’s all gone, and then where will you be?”

This was an unpleasant thought. He’d been down that road before. How could he be sure that old Golok horseman wouldn’t swindle him? How could he be sure that those Goloks wouldn’t just waylay him on the road and take their lord’s money back? This wasn’t going to be as easy as he thought … Then he started thinking about Paltrül – that old Lama really had jettisoned the silver … Then he thought of the abusive language he’d thrown at Paltrül. “These hillbillies may think you’re a goddamn big shot – but you’re not a real Lama! You’re just a ragged old fart who can shoot his mouth off!”

Paltrül was evidently the real thing. Gyalpo began to feel very sad and confused. The pattern of his life started moving through his mind, and there wasn’t much to it that looked like anything. Then in the next moment he broke down and wept. “Worse and worse!” he cried “This Paltrül really—is—a great being – and I’m just a loathsome mouldering turd! What use is this
goddamn horse’s hoof anyway?!” The knowledge that the hoof could make him rich for a while, but that he’d only become poor again seemed somehow too poignant. His life seemed futile and irrelevant. “Better for me that I try to be like Dza Paltrül. He doesn’t seem to need anything to be happy!”

Gyalpo left. He grabbed the silver hoof and walked without rest ’til he’d caught up with Paltrül. The march left his feet raw and blistered – but he felt compelled to find the old ngakpa. The silver hoof had started to feel like a massive weight – but something in him had determined that he was going to take it back.

Paltrül had some sense of Gyalpo’s approach, and sat down to await his arrival. When he arrived Paltrül exclaimed “Hey! How the—hell—are you, King Demon! What pushes you on at such a lick – you must have walked your feet off to catch up with me again.”

Then in a soft voice he added “You know … you will drive yourself insane with this senseless galloping! Didn’t you find that hoof?”

Gyalpo was gasping with the effort of this sleepless trek but managed to blurt out “Yeah, I found it, and I’ve brought it back to you. It’s a bloody nuisance! I just needed to tell you that I don’t want it any more.”

Paltrül smiled at him. “What do you want then, King Demon?”

With those words Gyalpo threw the ingot into the river. “I want you to teach me what I have to do to be like you!”

The two men laughed heartily together, as the hoof bounced down the hill toward the torrent below. “Now you are a free man for the first time in your life, King Demon!” Paltrül was happy to give Gyalpo the teachings he requested, and sent him off to practise them.

Gyalpo, after being beaten up a couple of times by victims of previous thefts, went on to be a great practitioner. When Paltrül heard that Gyalpo was being beaten up by people who caught up with him, he promptly issued a severe warning to all who respected him: “If you harm my disciple you harm me! He was once a thief – but now he’s a yogi! I want you to leave him be!”

Rinpoche smiled when he concluded the story and we sat in silence for a while. There was no sense in which he was impatient to hear my comments – but I had an idea and decided I may as well lay it out. “So …” I ventured “Paltrül knows all along that things are going to go this way – I mean, he seems to know right from the outset – as soon as he is given the silver horse’s hoof … Is that right?”

Rinpoche made the familiar ‘yes-no-doesn’t-matter’ rocking motion with his head. “So why doesn’t Paltrül simply give the hoof to the thief immediately?”
Why? Now that was a question … “That would have upset the old man and maybe he wouldn’t have been inspired to have practised with such devotion?”

Rinpoche snorted his opinion of this in disgust. “If the old man had devotion, he had devotion – what Paltrül does with his offering is of no matter. If he had devotion what does it matter if Paltrül throws the hoof into the rubbish?”

I eyed a recent gift I had given Rinpoche sheepishly, which made him laugh loudly and somewhat severely. “Now you think the bad Künzang Dorje throws your chuba away?”

Things were looking tricky again. A slight sense of panic – but this time I just ploughed ahead. “That’s fine, Rinpoche – my devotion’s the same whether you throw it away or keep it to wear.”

Rinpoche arched his eyebrows in a comical manner. “Possibly bad material – maybe nothing is lost if it is thrown out?”

I realised I was being teased and that I’d have to stand my ground or risk his displeasure – even though that was becoming less easy to instigate. “It’s not worth a silver horse’s hoof, Rinpoche” I stated as crisply, firmly, yet respectfully as I could “… but it—did—cost me my camera.”

He laughed and his face relaxed completely. “Oh yah – I know this well …” [pause] “So now you know … that you are—not—like the thief.”

That was an unusual leap in thinking … so now I knew that I was not like the thief. What did that mean? I’d moved from one tricky position to another. I thought of saying ‘Damn right, Rinpoche, I have no intention of stealing your chuba’ but thought better of it. This was not a time to attempt humour. We sat for a few moments in silence, in which Rinpoche kept his eyebrows unremittingly raised, and then it occurred to me why I was not like the thief. “I don’t think anything is going to change my life apart from what I do to make it change.” Rinpoche nodded and reached behind him for a bottle of Indian Eagle beer. “And?” he asked.

“And…” I replied immediately but not knowing what I was going to say “… I’m not desperate. I don’t indulge in too much self-pity …and … I don’t back down if I believe in what I’ve said or done.”

Rinpoche poured out the beer. “You have self-respect … but not too much. Stay as you are – do not respect yourself too much or too little. You know how to stay with your word – without that there is no practice.”

We sipped our beer for a while, and then he continued the questioning. “What would Paltrül have lost, if he had given the thief the hoof?”

Feeling somehow reassured by our previous exchange, I allowed myself
some space to reflect on the story. “Paltrül would have lost the opportunity to give Gyalpo a teaching in a way that would actually effect a change in him.”

Rinpoche nodded. This exchange was going smoothly, so I asked “What else is there in this story that I am missing – it seems quite simple.”

Rinpoche looked at me quizzically. “What is simple?”

Then I had to set about explaining. “It seems … to be a question of allowing the thief to experience himself and his conditioning as much as possible. He had to develop a decent degree of lust for the hoof. He then had to conceptualise vividly about the future and evolve a whole plan about how he’d steal the hoof and how he’d sell it. Then he had to track Paltrül down and attempt to burglarise the hoof whilst Paltrül is sleeping. There’d be a lot of anticipation, tension, and anxiety there.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Yah … and?”

“And so … Paltrül tells him he left the hoof in the ashes of the fire he left the previous day!”

“Yah … and so?”

“Well … that must have shocked Gyalpo – but his lust was up and this display of clairvoyance or foreknowledge doesn’t throw him. Then Gyalpo proceeds to abuse Paltrül, but Paltrül keeps his calm under … fire …”

Rinpoche laughed uproariously at this point in my summary. “Like you are, with this bad-mouthed Künzang Dorje! Now you are fearless like Paltrül!”

Ideas suddenly occurred to me – but I wanted to laugh at this joke Rinpoche had made at the same time as expressing what I’d suddenly understood. It was an experience almost like choking!

I also wanted to grasp the moment in terms of what had just become clear to me – so I just laughed as I spoke. “Everything Paltrül does is causing Gyalpo to see his life as a mess! Gyalpo’s stealth doesn’t work. His bravado doesn’t work. His threats don’t work. Nothing works.”

Rinpoche nodded “Yah … and?”

“Paltrül’s like a mirror! Gyalpo has little choice but to confront the uselessness of his life!”

Rinpoche nodded. “… but still he has to get the silver hoof …”

Yes, still that hoof … “So … why … does he still want the hoof?” I asked.

Rinpoche gave me a faint smile. “Look at your own life. You don’t have to ask me this question.”
Right … I’d look at my own life. I knew—somehow—I’d probably walk through the night for the right kind of hoof. That was a depressing thought – but an answer was not forming itself.

Rinpoche noticed how this statement had affected me. “Yah …” he chuckled “This is another difference between you and the thief …”

Rinpoche opened another bottle of Eagle beer. “You know …” he continued “… there are other stories like this. Paltrül is always throwing things away or leaving them along the way.”

Rinpoche told the story. “Apparently Paltrül was presiding over a yogic encampment at one time. A number of yogis and yoginis had come to hear him teach. Ngakpa Tsé-wang Norbu was there. He was the son of the gTértön Cho’gyur Lingpa, by the way – although this makes little difference to the tale”…

… As Paltrül was teaching, a warrior galloped up, jumped down from his horse, and offered three prostrations. Maybe it was the same man as before, because he had another of these silver hooves. Maybe it was the same hoof as before, I don’t know. Maybe this was the same man at an earlier time.

Anyhow, the warrior blurted out “Rinpoche, please save me, I have murdered people! But now I have given up my life of brigandry!”

He threw the silver hoof onto the grass in front of Paltrül, then leapt onto his steed and wasn’t seen for dust.

Rinpoche eyed me carefully at that moment and I made my reply to his wordless request. “Maybe he knew that Paltrül didn’t like accepting gifts.”

Rinpoche ignored my comment and continued the story. “Anyhow, Paltrül looked momentarily at the hoof and continued with his teaching. Ngakpa Tsé-wang thought to himself ‘I know Paltrül – he’ll probably leave that hoof in the grass where it was thrown.’ But … when the teaching ended … Paltrül picked the hoof up and took it with him.”

Rinpoche topped up our glasses of beer. “That’s one ending of the story.”

Rinpoche took a drink of his beer and carefully wiped the froth from his moustaches. “Another ending … is that he left the hoof where it was, and Ngakpa Tsé-wang was inspired by the similarity to a story in which the Buddha and his disciples pass a piece of gold on the road and each one remarks that it is poison, and best avoided.”

Rinpoche had that wolfish grin again. “Which ending do you prefer?”

“I like them equally … they’re much-of-a-muchness to me – although I’m intrigued that the hoof had turned up again in relation to Dza Paltrül.”
“Yah … and so?”

“Well … if this story had preceded the first, in terms of history, then the fact that Paltrül took the hoof was obviously more interesting.”

“Why … ?” Rinpoche asked, but not in the old abrupt manner.

“Well because somehow the same man might have turned up with it again years later. Maybe there is some karmic connection that links people and objects sometimes.”

Rinpoche began to rub his neck with his right hand in the way that always reminded me of Jampalyang. Suddenly he laughed uproariously. “Yah! Sometimes these things are just a mystery. Maybe you are right!”
damn right, nyoshul!

“Oh yah … good. Now … today … I want to tell you a story of Paltrül and DoKhyentsé – but … it mainly concerns Nyoshul. This is one of my favourite stories. You will enjoy this …” [pause] “Especially now you are not a ‘thom yor … or … rarely a ’thom yor …” [pause] “I want you to listen carefully to what Paltrül says when he speaks to Nyoshul and also what DoKhyentsé says to Nyoshul.”

“There’s transmission in their speech?”

“Oh yah” Rinpoche exclaimed with enthusiasm. “Now all these things are clear to you! Now … maybe … there is no need for Künzang Dorje to be fierce?”

“Possibly, Rinpoche – but you never know with me. I’ll do my best and avoid formulaic answers – and all that stuff.”

“Yah—yah—yah … anyhow – just be natural”…

… Dza Paltrül was biding his time. He was in mountain retreat with his disciples – doing and saying little apart from what seemed needed in the moment. He wasn’t one for shooting the breeze, but then—one day—the wind changed. A breeze laden with the fragrances of highland herbs stirred in the hermitage. Nyoshul didn’t really notice. Nyoshul looked a little flat and enervated.

Dza Paltrül took a sideways glance at Nyoshul – and, perceiving his dull state of mind, called out “Hey! Nyoshul! Get lively now!”

Nyoshul jumped a little on hearing his Lama’s voice directed at him in such a crisp manner. He apologised for his flatness of affect – but Paltrül waved his hand to indicate that apologies weren’t necessary. Paltrül grinned “Why don’t you-and-me-both, take a long—long—long walk over yonder?”

Nyoshul was still taking in these words when he realised that Paltrül had leapt to his feet and was packing up an overnight sack. He quickly grabbed his own appurtenances and rammed them into a bag to hitch up onto his back. Soon they were both headed off at a brisk pace in the direction of the high pastures.

“Sheep country!” Paltrül quipped over his shoulder in an unnecessarily loud voice. This obviously amused Paltrül greatly – but Nyoshul had no inkling of what might be amusing in such a statement. He scrambled after his Lama with as much decorum as he could muster.

After three hours’ walk without a word exchanged, they heard a crack that
echoed ominously amongst the mountains. “Yo!” Paltrül shouted to his disciple’s alarm “D’you—hear—that?! Do—you—hear—that?!”

“Yes …” Nyoshul had heard the sound “… maybe distant thunder?”

“Thunder—all right—my lad!” Paltrül yelled “… but—not—the sort that brings rain …” he whispered in a mock-conspiratorial manner. Nyoshul looked perplexed, so Paltrül confided in an immense bellow “That … is the —sound—of liberation!”

Again Nyoshul had no idea what his teacher was talking about. Paltrül strode ahead appearing disinterested in elucidation. Nyoshul enquired no further.

Soon they saw a great herd of sheep in the distance. Nyoshul had some slight sense of foreboding that made him feel he should say something “There are sheep in the distance” he observed.

“Damn right, Nyoshul!” Paltrül smiled broadly. “You could be—on—to something … eh …” he murmured with a conspiratorial air that was almost ludicrous. There was definitely some private joke afoot, but it was not to become apparent.

‘This’ thought Nyoshul ‘must have got something to do with sheep …’ but he couldn’t get any further with his line of reasoning. They continued to walk.

Soon they were up in the high pastures amongst the sheep. They seemed unusually lacking in nervousness—for sheep—and Nyoshul remarked on it. “They seem unusually lacking in nervousness for sheep.”

Again Paltrül’s rejoinder was oblique and impenetrable. “Foregone conclusion, Nyoshul! Fore—gone—conclusion! Just as we should have expected! They! … are DoKhyentsé’s flock! Make—no—mistake!” Paltrül was obviously elated. He strode ahead vigorously in spite of his advancing years.

Having climbed the ridge that lay before them, they halted momentarily to catch breath. Paltrül shaded his eyes to get a clearer view of the distance. “Yo! Nyoshul!” Paltrül shouted at mighty volume – even though he was right next to his disciple. “There! Look! There—is—the—gar[144]—of DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche!”

Nyoshul almost leapt out of his skin at the shout – but composed himself quickly enough, having got used to Paltrül’s sudden penchant for loud statements … and, yes, there it was. In the distance he could just make out small white flecks that could quite possibly have been tents. They were a long way off, but it was evident that this was their destination.

Now Nyoshul had heard a lot about DoKhyentsé – and what he had heard was all utterly astonishing. The Lama was an enlightened maniac by all
accounts, and held in the very highest esteem by many Nyingma Lamas. It was said by some that he was one of the greatest living masters of his age. He was the incarnation of Jig’méd Lingpa. Fragments of a picture began to shape themselves – but Nyoshul could not manage to tie them together in a way that made any sense. Paltrül was certainly acting in a singularly strange manner – but why? What was this shouting all about?

Something unusual was evidently in the air, but what it could be, Nyoshul could not guess.

DoKhyentsé had known about his visitors since early that morning, and now he espied the pair from a distance. He knew through his innate clarity that his disciple Dza Paltrül Rinpoche was coming. He knew also that with him, Paltrül had a disciple of his own – a man who needed to break through some obstacles. They would have travelled all day by foot, and they would doubtless be tired and hungry – so preparations were made for their comfort. A tent had been arranged for their privacy. Bedding had been appropriated and arranged in a commodious manner. Food had been organised, and was in the process of being cooked. Chang had been allocated and stood waiting in wooden pitchers ready to quaff.

When the two Lamas arrived, disciples of DoKhyentsé came to meet them and escorted them into the maniacal drüpchen’s tent. DoKhyentsé welcomed them in grand style and bade them sit down on the thick pile of sumptuous carpets and sheepskins arranged for them. He was dressed in a fine chuba made of lambskins and sat on the scattered skins of leopards and tigers. They found DoKhyentsé in the final stages of cleaning, oiling, and re-assembling his rifle. The sight of the rifle was a bit much for Nyoshul – he had certain ideas about that kind of thing. Nonetheless, he sat down along with Paltrül, and the three Lamas talked. They talked about the way things had been, the way things were going, and the way things might turn out. A somewhat matter of fact conversation, with no particular spiritual inclination as far as Nyoshul could ascertain – but every time DoKhyentsé addressed him, it was with some extraordinary appellation such as ‘dangerous ruffian’, ‘savage barbarian’, ‘audacious scallywag’, ‘incongruous reprobate’, ‘degenerate miscreant’, or ‘impetuous rapscallion’.

“Nice rifle, Rinpoche” commented Paltrül.

“Certainly! British – not some miserable Indian musket or an old smooth-bore. This is an Enfield – a ‘Pattern 1853’—with—a rifled barrel! Came from India last month … I’ve been waiting on this for a good while now – damnedest thing I—ever—saw” DoKhyentsé chuckled, passing the gun to Paltrül.

“Shoots well?” Paltrül enquired, whilst examining the various functional
components of the weapon.

“Damn right!” laughed DoKhyentsé. Each phrase that DoKhyentsé turned was delivered with shocking volume. It was eerily similar to the style Paltrül had employed during their trek up to the gar. The pieces of picture in Nyoshul’s mind looked as if they were going to assemble themselves coherently for an instant – but they didn’t. Nyoshul’s bewilderment simply escalated.

DoKhyentsé was continuing with some discussion of powder, shot, and muzzle velocity, when he caught sight of attendants in his peripheral vision.

“Ah!” he yelled “… but I see a feast is ready! And! Dispatched with—this —very—gun! In honour of—your—visit!”

Paltrül had passed the rifle to Nyoshul, only moments before. Nyoshul was engaged in a personal struggle to find something interesting about this ‘horrible implement of death’, when DoKhyentsé made his announcement about its recent use. “Butchered! Just—for—you! What d’you think about —that— eh, Nyoshul m’boy?!”

Nyoshul was mortified. Finding himself minutely observed by both Lamas, he squirmed grievously. He gave a sickly smile as he passed the weapon back to its ferocious owner, “Thank you, Rinpoche” being all he could manage to say. He was now feeling monstrously uncomfortable, and wondering why Paltrül had brought him into the presence of this Lama who was doing his best to manifest as the most frightfully depraved hedonist one could imagine. He had heard that DoKhyentsé was a wrathful, mercurial teacher – but this had gone way past anything he could have imagined.

Now Nyoshul knew Paltrül to be vegetarian,[149] and so things started looking even worse when his master started slamming into the lamb with unconcealed gusto. Nyoshul knew that not only was Paltrül vegetarian – but that his teacher would always go out of his way to save life wherever he could. Nyoshul had often seen Paltrül refuse to visit nomad camps if he knew there was any chance of an animal being killed for the specific purposes of feeding his party. He was not one of those Lamas who believed in the concept of the heart not grieving over anything the eye had not seen. Paltrül didn’t believe in innocence through contrived ignorance – and yet here he was … acting completely out of character. It was like a bad dream.

Looking at Nyoshul’s dazed expression, DoKhyentsé hacked off an enormous steak of lamb and hefted it deftly into Nyoshul’s bowl, yelling “Hey, Nyoshul! You murderous little sod – get your diabolical gnashers ’round this!”

Nyoshul gasped – but his devotion to Paltrül was such that he thanked his utterly shocking host and proceeded to nibble at the slaughtered flesh as if it
had been roasted for his personal anguish. It was so evident that he was not enjoying his food, that Paltrül noticed his timid lack-lustre style, and nudged him in the ribs. “Eat! Eat!” Paltrül encouraged. Poor Nyoshul. This was an abhorrent ordeal for him. He was practically bug-eyed with confusion as DoKhyentsé and Paltrül devoured abundant servings of meat.

Having concluded their repast—and cut the grease with some rather excellent chang—Paltrül requested some brief essential teaching. DoKhyentsé acceded with alacrity – and spontaneously revealed something that he’d long kept hidden. “For many years I’ve wanted to give you this teaching, Paltrül – and tonight is the night!” He winked at Nyoshul as if he were about to tell a ribald joke. “I’m extremely happy to give it to you now. You’ve waited long enough!”

DoKhyentsé took a long careful look at Nyoshul – who was by now practically deranged. “And … this drooling debauchee here! This insatiable inebriate! He can also receive this teaching. He’s a funny little fellow but he has a good heart and a fine appetite for lamb!”

Nyoshul was somewhat aghast at being described as a debauchee – but felt himself unusually privileged nonetheless. To receive a transmission from such a master was a rare thing – no matter how bewildering the circumstances.

And so it was. It was the most searingly direct of pointing-out instructions – the most brilliantly eloquent yet refreshingly simple teaching. Nyoshul was utterly rapt. His attention was totally absorbed with the words of DoKhyentsé. Once the teaching was concluded Nyoshul was left in complete shock. Bewildered incomprehension. DoKhyentsé was a realised Lama who toted a gun – an enlightened master who slaughtered sheep. This was the most terrible ambivalence – but somehow he’d gone so far into experiential overload that he was quite relaxed – there was nothing left with which to struggle.

When Paltrül and Nyoshul took their leave at the conclusion of the teaching, DoKhyentsé touched foreheads with them both. He looked lovingly at Nyoshul for the first time since he arrived and wished him a comfortable night in the friendliest, most gracious manner. It was quite uncharacteristic for DoKhyentsé to behave in a style befitting a venerable ecclesiastic – but on this occasion he manifested the benign serenity one might expect of the archetypal saint.

Nyoshul—almost paralytic with pure pleasure—was reeling as he made his way to the tent set aside for them. Before entering and bedding down for the night, he and Paltrül stood for a while looking at the stars.

“What a day … what—a—day!” Paltrül exclaimed taking in the endless
view. “I’ve been your teacher for a long stretch, haven’t I, dear Nyoshul … but I’ve never given you anything as marvellous as you’ve just received.” Nyoshul was speechless – but it didn’t matter. There was nothing to say.

“Y’know, my friend, with all my experience, I couldn’t guarantee to send you to the Copper Coloured Mountain[150] if you were to die tonight” Paltrül sighed “What a pity the two of us couldn’t be sheep in this marvellous herd! Every sheep here will find itself liberated into that dimension in the instant of its death!”

Nyoshul’s eyes filled with tears. “Then … DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje is … in reality … none other than Padmasambhava.”

Paltrül smiled warmly at Nyoshul. He replied quietly – and very gently “Damn right, Nyoshul.”

“So, what is the meaning of this?” Rinpoche asked.

“Transmission …” I replied “… an extremely powerful transmission. I can’t imagine Nyoshul not being changed forever by that.”

“Oh yah” Rinpoche smiled “This was necessary.” Rinpoche detected my question and answered it before I could put it into words. “Necessary … because Nyoshul had become hard … not hard like a stone … but hard like milk that has dried on the edge of a bowl. It is not milk and it is not cheese – it is merely a rind of grease. There is no possibility there without movement.”

“Am I like that, Rinpoche?”

Rinpoche shook his head from side to side, laughing. “No, no, no –nothing like that. You are too emotional to be like that …” [pause] “Not emotionally ridiculous like a ’thom yor – but you feel strongly …and that makes you awake to everything …” [pause] “This … is good … but you have to have strength to carry this emotion. This is changchub sem and a changchub sempa[151] must be a warrior.”

“Do you think I can be a warrior?”

Rinpoche laughed and then gazed at me affectionately. “You have no choice …” [pause] “Yah … you will see …” [pause] “You have a long life to live … and you will see.”

We sat in silence for some time gazing at the preparations being made for tantric dances which were to be staged on the day of Padmasambhava’s birth. The dancers were practising in the courtyard below, and it was intriguing to watch them gyrate whilst balanced on one leg. This particular day was a dress rehearsal, and so we had this glorious spectacle for the play of our attention. Lama Ngödrüp suddenly appeared in the costume of Dorje Tröllö. Lama Ngödrüp was a genius by any definition. He danced with a precision and
passion which made the heart ache so beautifully that there was nothing to say about the experience. The other dancers were excellent, but he was in his own category – beyond categories. Here I was confronted with something that was outside the usual performance. This was gar’cham at its most powerful, but it was also like the most exhilaratingly inspired Western ballet. Here was incomparable beauty and consummate artistry as well as the heavy stomping movements of a visionary giant. The movements were a communication that by-passed concept and spoke of the essential quality of Dorje Tröllö which can arise within any culture – at any time or place.

Dorje Tröllö is the crazy wisdom manifestation of Padmasambhava, and Rinpoche was an emanation of Dorje Tröllö. There was something excruciatingly poignant about the way that understanding descended on me in that moment. The dance, the costume, the stories, and the conversations we had about them – they were all aspects of the energy called Dorje Tröllö. Crazy wisdom is the quality of realisation that cuts through every position. It cuts through all the spiritual positions too. It turns the ‘spiritual’ and ‘non-spiritual’ inside out and explodes the limitations inherent in the patterns that belong to either.

As if it had been part of the pre-ordained choreography of our own dance, Rinpoche and I both turned our faces from the window at the same moment. Rinpoche was still smiling. Unusual. Slightly unnerving. He ran his finger backward and forward along the edge of his chog-sé,[152] and suddenly he was asking me a question.

This was peculiar, because I hadn’t noticed how his question had started. It wasn’t that I was daydreaming, so I couldn’t work out how he came to be asking. It was also rather unsettling that I couldn’t catch hold of what he was asking.

“Lug mindu”[153] Rinpoche quipped, noticing my bemusement. He repeated this several times. Then our lunch arrived. Lunch was a pile of rice with a few shreds of dark green vegetable matter and somewhat smaller shreds of meat.

“Lug mindu” I commented. Rinpoche burst out laughing, occasionally repeating the phrase. Somehow this became hysterically funny and we both laughed till the tears were flooding down our cheeks. It seemed that it would be an act of impenetrable imbecility to ask at that point what Rinpoche had intended when he began the ‘Lug mindu’ routine – so I didn’t ask. It seemed somehow self-explanatory from my naïve apprehension … It was a joke about the story. Nyoshul had to eat a lot of lamb as part of receiving transmission from DoKhyentsé. We were both getting very little sheep to eat – but maybe the transmission was there nonetheless … These thoughts wove their way through my mind when suddenly “Transmission …”
Rinpoche exclaimed “… needs preparation. What d’you think of the way in which Paltrül prepared Nyoshul in this story?”

A straightforward question. “Well … Paltrül acted strangely as they were walking together … and … it occurred to me that he was reflecting some aspects of what Nyoshul was going to witness in the personality display of DoKhyentsé.”

Rinpoche resumed his earlier gesture – rubbing his finger backwards and forwards on the table. “Yah – possible” was all he had to say. He waited for me to think of something else.

I somehow knew that further comment was expected. “Well … it also seemed as if Paltrül were giving little clues all the time. He started out saying ‘sheep country’ as if Nyoshul should understand what that meant. “It seemed as if he were teasing Nyoshul, or trying to cause him to be intrigued in some way.”

Rinpoche looked at me carefully and said “Yah … you see, every word is important. You mustn’t miss anything. Every word is important – but Nyoshul is content with his confusion.”

Suddenly the ‘lug mindu’ phrase came to mind. “Lug mindu” I ventured with slight trepidation.

“Transmission.” Rinpoche poured two beers. He then continued to talk about the story. “Nyoshul went through with everything no matter what he thought or felt. His devotion was the main thing that made transmission possible – his capacity to remain with ambivalence and bewilderment.”

“Yes …” I ventured “He allowed Paltrül and DoKhyentsé to wreak havoc with his conceptuality to the point where transmission was inevitable.”

“Oh yah … now nothing is hidden from you.”

It occurred to me then that there were many points of transmission during the story, and many aspects of preparation. “The humorous insults that DoKhyentsé threw at Nyoshul were all reflections of what was going on in Nyoshul’s mind: dangerous ruffian; savage barbarian; audacious scallywag; incongruous reprobate; degenerate miscreant; impetuous rapscallion; murderous little devil; drooling debauchee; or, insatiable inebriate. These were all variations of ideas in Nyoshul’s mind – descriptions of DoKhyentsé of which he was deeply ashamed. Each shocking appellation terrified poor Nyoshul as it occurred to him. He tried to force such thoughts out of his mind, but DoKhyentsé kept reminding him of them by reflecting them back with aplomb. It was almost as if they were stages of transmission in the same way that there were stages within an empowerment: the rifle empowerment, the meat empowerment, the insult empowerment, and the saintly charade
empowerment.”

Rinpoche laughed and teased me “Yah … one day … you will give the four empowerments[154] this way …”

Then he continued “… every sound is mantra … every movement is mudra … every act is empowerment … every moment is transmission …”

It occurred to me many times since then, that I was a little like Nyoshul in some respects – the ways in which he was bewildered that is. Rinpoche often precipitated me into terminal perplexity and preposterous puzzlement. Whether Rinpoche modelled the Nyoshul of his tales on his inji disciple for the purposes of his story telling, or whether that was the actual Nyoshul is a matter for speculation. Will the real Nyoshul please stand up?
“Oh yah … so …” Rinpoche chuckled “… yesterday you were not a ’thom yor! I did not have to shout all day – and it was better for my throat!” [pause] “So … today … I am wondering … if it will be the same …” [pause] “Maybe it will be the same … anyhow … there are two stories – but you must wait to the end before we talk”…

… Paltrül was staying in Dza chu-kha—minding his own business and doing whatever needed to be done—when he received a visitor. Now … Paltrül had seen enough monks to last him a while – and at that time, he was spending some quiet time with Nyoshul and a few other yogis. It just so happened—at this particular time—that gTértön Cho’gyur Lingpa was having some difficulty with one of his main disciples. This was a monk by the name of Rinchen Thar-gyé. Now this monk was a Khenpo—a scholar—and a punctilious ecclesiastic into the bargain. He kept the monastic rules with precision – but had a tight mind. Cho’gyur Lingpa had tried various approaches with him – but couldn’t seem to shift him in terms of spiritual practice. The man was suffocating in the tension of his own moral purity. Now Cho’gyur Lingpa knew that Paltrül didn’t have much time for institutionalised monks in general – and this type of monk in particular. He knew that this was the sort of ecclesiastical dignitary who’d not immediately get a warm and affectionate reception from Paltrül – so he wrote a letter:

Paltrül, Old Friend, I’ve got this stick-up-the-arse disciple who’s as proud as a cockerel about being a monk, but seems hell-bent on mediocrity. If you can do something with him, I’d be most obliged. He’s a good fellow in many ways and works hard – but he’s a bit given to supercilious sanctimoniousness and assiduous puritanism. I can’t seem to flush the stuff out of him … et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.’

The letter discussed a few details, exchanged a little news, and signed itself off in a cordial manner. When Cho’gyur Lingpa had finished the letter, he appended his seal, and handed it to Rinchen Thar-gyé. “Here m’boy, take this to Dza Paltrül Rinpoche. It’s about time you high-tailed it to Golok and got some teachings and transmissions from him – but don’t come back before you’ve received everything you need to receive, y’hear?”

Rinchen Thar-gyé made prostrations to his teacher, took the letter, and made his way to brigand country. “Take care you’re not buggered on the way, young feller! Some huge fat monk might like the look of you and decide to break your vows for you.” Cho’gyur Lingpa called after him, but this didn’t manage to alter Rinchen Thar-gyé’s countenance – he was, as usual, frozen with solemnity. He set out for Golok with a party of attendants and finally
reached Paltrül’s place in Dza chu-kha.

When Paltrül saw him coming, he called out to Nyoshul “Hey, Nyoshul! A prince of pæderasty has come to see us!”

Nyoshul looked anxiously to see who deserved such an appellation from Paltrül. He could only see a party of monks on horseback. They were dressed in the usual regalia. Monastic types of a certain hauteur liked to turn up at monasteries in all pomp and plumage. “Where is the prince?” asked Nyoshul in some perplexity.

“There, Nyoshul – that pox-ridden parrot with the high-crested hat” Paltrül replied and pointed to the head Lama in the party of monks. Sure enough – there was one of the monastic big-shots whom his teacher characteristically held in low esteem.

“Show the insufferable blaggard in, if you will, Nyoshul – looks as if he’s coming our way, like it or not” Paltrül muttered in a derisive tone. “I’ll not be welcoming him out there – and that’s for sure. I’ll be in my room if he wants anything from me.”

Nyoshul waited for the visiting party to arrive and welcomed Rinchen Thar-gyé with all due respect. “Dza Paltrül Rinpoche will see you if there is anything you want from him.” Rinchen Thar-gyé asked him if he would kindly present a letter to Paltrül from gTértön Cho’gyür Lingpa. Nyoshul took it with all due haste to his teacher. “Yah, it’s just as I thought …” grumbled Paltrül “… a prince of pæderasty!”

Nyoshul knew that his teacher was not keen on monks – but this one had come with a letter from gTértön Cho’gyür Lingpa himself. Surely this was a person worthy of respect and the very best treatment? No … maybe the very best treatment – but respect was not going to be Paltrül’s way of working. “Why d’you call him a prince of pæderasty?”

“Take a butcher’s[156] at this, Nyoshul m’lad” he passed the letter over. Nyoshul was very surprised indeed. “Show the bumptious little bounder in if you will” Paltrül yawned. And so it was that Rinchen Thar-gyé entered the illustrious presence of Paltrül. He made his formal prostrations and sat before the renowned Lama.

“What d’you want of me then, king of pæderasty? There are no young monks to bugger here. If you’re looking for a nice firm pair of buttocks you’d better get back to where you once belonged.”

Undeterred by Paltrül’s vulgar remarks, Rinchen Thar-gyé made a highly respectful request for teachings on the Longchen Nying-thig. “Mmmm … Longchen Nying-thig …” repeated Paltrül thoughtfully “there’s nothing about sodomising young boys in that text … You’d better go someplace else. I
don’t think that I can be of any help to an insatiable pæderast …”

Suddenly before the monk could understand what was going on he was being ushered out of the door. A splendid room was found for him – and he was left to his own devices. A room was also allocated to his attendants, who all slept together next to the kitchen.

The whole party was very well treated – but although the Lama’s room was grand, no heating was provided.

The next day Rinchen Thar-gyé presented himself to Paltrül with the same respectful request, but Paltrül dismissed him. “My hiney is too old and baggy to raise your lust, you’d better try someplace else. I hear there’s a new intake of young monks down a-ways; maybe if you get there quick enough you’ll get to them before the other monks bugger them senseless.” As before Rinchen Thar-gyé was ushered out of the door before he really knew what was happening. His room awaited him.

Now it must be said that the room assigned to him was a rather well appointed apartment – the perfect room to offer to a visiting monastic Lama – and the best room in the place. Every day Rinchen Thar-gyé returned to the room and sat on his own. He spent his time in solitude engaged in his practices and in his studies of the texts. Every day he presented himself to Paltrül, and every day Paltrül dismissed him with some snide remark. One day Paltrül would merely repeat that he was ignorant of buggery. The next day he’d say that he could be of no help to one of such great learning. Another day he’d say that his own buttocks were too hard and pock-marked from years of sitting in caves to give the monk a worthwhile erection. This went on for a month – and all the while the weather was getting more wintry. The monk was not used to living at the altitude of Dza chu-kha and was evidently suffering. Nyoshul, feeling sorry for the monk, asked whether the poor man would ever be ready to receive Paltrül’s teachings.

“Maybe …” replied Paltrül in lackadaisical style “… but probably not today … maybe tomorrow … maybe never …”

Rinchen Thar-gyé was walking sedately across the courtyard at the time, making his way to present himself to Paltrül. His robes were immaculately pleated and his right arm was bare in spite of the bitter cold.

“He seems so sincere” Nyoshul reflected. “Can you tell me what it is that’s wrong with him? What is the obstacle that prevents him from receiving your teaching?”

Paltrül shook his head in disbelief on hearing this – and said “Well … Nyoshul … I’d have thought it was as plain as the nose on your face …” Nyoshul looked but discovered little from what he saw. All he saw was a
monk bearing up well under repeated disappointments, even though he was possibly becoming more miserable as the days wore on. However, he was as well turned out and elegant as the day he had arrived.

“Just check the details, Nyoshul” Paltrül repeated. “Do you see a man who could leave appearances behind?”

Nyoshul watched the monk as he walked with carefully measured tread toward Paltrül’s door. When Rinchen Thar-gyé entered Paltrül’s presence, he offered his prostrations and said “I am a well-disciplined monk. I keep monastic vows purely. I maintain the bodhisattva vows and offer up merit to the realisation of all sentient beings. I maintain my tantric oaths to Lama, yidam, khandro, and protectors. I have studied texts with diligence – and do my best not to waste this precious human rebirth. I have complete trust in your realisation and in the lineage – but I have been here for a month now requesting teachings and am still unworthy to take refuge in even a few words of your teaching – so now I must regretfully take my leave. I must depart in disgrace, and return to my teacher without having fulfilled his instruction.”

Paltrül looked at him severely – but, detecting some change in the monk, did not have him ushered out. Rinchen Thar-gyé’s speech was practically strangulated as he spoke – he was dejected, hopeless, and slightly frantic.

“You want to take refuge in a few words of teaching?” Paltrül enquired.

“Wouldn’t you rather take refuge in the tight arse of a young monk?”

Rinchen Thar-gyé spluttered in total exasperation. “But, Rinpoche …this sodomy business has nothing to do with me!”

Paltrül eyed him carefully and stated in slow even tones “And – your pretences – have nothing – to do with – me.”

Then, quite unexpectedly, Paltrül roared with laughter. “Come back tomorrow – but come just as you are. If you come just as you are, I will give you a few words of teaching!” Again he was ushered out of the room and returned to his apartment.

Rinchen Thar-gyé sat alone in his room wondering what Paltrül had meant. He was painfully cold – so cold that he had to give up turning the pages of his liturgical text. He wrapped his shawl around him but the bitterness of the temperature was more than he could bear – he was reduced to shivering, tormented by Paltrül’s parting remarks.

The words ‘Come back tomorrow just as you are’ flapped uselessly around his head. What could he do with such an injunction? Whatever he did—however he presented himself—it would be the same as before – accusations of anal intercourse … But ‘Just as I am …’ he pondered … ‘But what am I,
that is not apparent? I’m a monk – but he knows that … what else can I be?

How can it be that I am something that I do not even know about?’ This was impossible – totally impossible. How could he be just as he was – when he was—always—just as he was … An hour passed.

Another hour.

Then suddenly something outlandishly preposterous occurred to him. ‘I’m cold’ he thought … ‘I—am—cold … If that is not just who I am then there’s nothing else! I—am—cold! I am—very—damn cold! I am going to freeze my butt off in this damn room!’

Rinchen Thar-gyé got up immediately and left his room. He went directly to the kitchen – the only place where he knew that some sort of warmth would be guaranteed. There were some of his monk attendants in the kitchen drinking tea with the cook. He joined them. They were all most honoured by his visit – and he joined them in their simple good-humoured conversation. The place where his monk attendants slept had some warmth that came from the kitchen. There was a hearth where dried yak dung was burning. He enquired tentatively whether there was space to sleep there. The monks were most surprised – but were only too happy to have him join them.

He spent the day talking with them and keeping warm. His monks offered him some of their thicker clothing but he declined to take it from them. Instead he borrowed a woollen monastic jacket from the cook – a blackened greasy affair. It was patched so much that it was practically shapeless, but it was warm.

He slept the night with the monks, and slept so well that he was almost late for his appointment with Paltrül. He was in such a hurry that he lashed his robes about his person in an unprecedentedly untidy fashion. He beat a hasty path to Paltrül’s door with his shawl wrapped tightly around him against the villainous chill factor of the wind that swept through the courtyard. His robe was a bit besmirched with soot from the fire – and he gave the appearance of a dishevelled monastic menial worker. He had no time to wash, eat breakfast or present himself in anything close to a suitable manner; and in this embarrassing state, he threw himself to the ground in front of Paltrül.

“Welcome, welcome, dear fellow!” Paltrül greeted him. “Forget prostrations! Sit! Be comfortable! Eat with us! You will have missed your breakfast, I’ll be bound! A smoky room makes for heavy sleep.”

Poor Rinchen Thar-gyé had only managed one prostration – he had simply crumpled onto the floor in a flood of tears.

“Nyoshul!” Paltrül called “Help our good monk up! Make our venerable friend comfortable! Today we’ll have a few words of teaching!”
It was a while before Rinchen Thar-gyé had composed himself – but when he did, they ate together as if he had just arrived as an honoured guest. After a good breakfast, he sat with Nyoshul and a few other yogis and listened to Paltrül’s teaching.

There was a joy and radiance emanating from him that was palpable. The change that had come over him was astonishing to Nyoshul. This was a different man! What had happened to the exalted pietistic monk overnight? When the teaching was over Paltrül announced that he’d give the monk the entire cycle of transmission, teachings, and commentaries of the Longchen Nying-thig. Rinchen Thar-gyé was overjoyed.

He was just about to leave when Paltrül called after him “By the way, I hear there’s no fire in your room – you must have been freezing in there! I will see to it that you have some heating.”

Rinchen Thar-gyé responded that there was no need because he had found a perfectly comfortable place to sleep.

Nyoshul was amazed. “He’s been there in all this cold without a fire?”

Paltrül’s face assumed a more serious demeanour, and he replied in a reverential tone “Well I’ll be damned! Extraordinary, isn’t it, Nyoshul? This is one—exemplary—monk!”

“Yah …” Rinpoche almost murmured “… and now the second story”…

… A while afterwards Paltrül was sitting quietly with Nyoshul. “Do I smell like the dung that hangs under a dog’s tail?”

Nyoshul was quite startled by the question and could find no immediate answer. Why was Paltrül asking him such a bizarre question?

“No” he answered.

“Then why do so many flies buzz around me?”

Nyoshul didn’t see any flies. He started to feel as if something unusual was about to happen, and Paltrül caught his look of bemused incomprehension.

“There’s one very large fly at the door at this very moment, and he’s buzzing fit to bust!”

Nyoshul looked at the door but still didn’t see any flies.

“It’s just outside the door! Go see what sort of goddamn fly it is!”

Bewildered again by his teacher’s peculiar drift of language, Nyoshul got up and went to the door. As he walked across the room he did start to hear some sort of droning noise. When he opened the door, what did he see but the largest maroon and yellow fly he’d ever seen in his life! It was a monk
making prostrations and chanting the refuge and bodhisattva vows at astonishing speed.

“Hey—hey—hey! You out there! Quit that goddamn nonsense! Immediately!” yelled Paltrül.

The young Lama halted abruptly in his prostrations and was ushered inside.

“Yah … venerable fly … why – are you buzzing at my door?” Paltrül enquired.

The monastic tulku was evidently unnerved by Paltrül, but was not one of these flatterers who gush in grandiose terms to show how they are. He answered simply that he was a Nyingma monk who had been inspired by the lineage which Paltrül held and that he had wished to meet him and receive transmission directly.

“Mmmm …” Paltrül pondered “Then why grovel at my door in this loathsome manner – do you think Padmasambhava lives inside or something?”

The tulku replied “I don’t really know who is inside, if it is not Dza Paltrül Rinpoche.”

The conversation went backwards and forwards for a while in this style until Paltrül was sure that he did not have an obsequious sycophant before him. Paltrül never had immense patience with grovelling flatterers. The tulku was quite bright and answered every question that Paltrül put to him. He seemed to display wit and intelligence, but without impertinence or aggression.

Once the questioning was out of the way, Paltrül gave the Lama the transmission he requested and they sat and drank tea together with Nyoshul. While drinking his tea, the monk surreptitiously picked the odd hair off the carpet in order to take them away as a blessing. He had obviously heard that Paltrül didn’t like this kind of thing very much, and decided to obtain his blessings in a furtive manner.

“Nyoshul!” Paltrül directed his disciple’s attention to their guest’s activities “What’s this insect up to now!”

The tulku apologised for his clandestine collection of Paltrül’s hair, but explained that the sheep in his locality were prey to wolves and that he had thought that tying the hair to them would be a protection.

Paltrül looked quizzical. “Really … you don’t say …”

It was quite evident that their guest wanted the hair for himself and his own disciples, but it was also evident to Paltrül that he was a sincere practitioner with a kind and generous heart. It was clear that he had his disciples’ good in
mind, and so Paltrül did something highly unusual – he gave his guest a relic. An old ngakpa skirt he sometimes wore was falling apart, and so he tore off a long strip of it and gave it to his visitor, laughing uproariously. “Take this then, you cunning wolf … if as you say, your ‘flock’ need protection. With a shepherd like you they need all the help they can get! But growl like a wolf rather than buzzing like a blue-bottle when you call on me again!”

“So…” Rinpoche asked with a grin “…what do you think about these stories?”

“Are they linked in some way, Rinpoche?”

“Maybe…” he replied and continued to drink his beer. “Today, I remember them together, that’s all … do you see a link between them?”

This was also not a difficult question. I had quite a reaction to the culmination of the first story, and had intended to bring it up anyway. “The story about Rinchen Thar-gyé made me feel quite sad … I found it very moving that this poor monk goes back to be insulted day after day for a month. That is really quite extreme – not as extreme as the treatment of Milarépa[157] – but extreme in terms of what happens these days … it seems quite an ordeal, and it saddens me when I consider honestly whether I would be able to do that. I feel that I would have given up.”

Rinpoche observed me for a moment – almost as if he were examining a wedge of cheese. “No … you are not ’thom yor like Rinchen Thar-gyé. Why would he come every day to hear such nonsense?”

This was a question, and no mistake. “Because…” I ventured “…he trusts in the Lama?”

Rinpoche interrupted me at this point. “So you trust Künzang Dorje? You ask for Dzogchen and all I do is tell you stories? Do you trust that you will ever receive more than these stories?”

Here I had another immediate answer. “It doesn’t matter, Rinpoche – whether it’s stories or Dzogchen teachings. It’s more important for me to be here and spend this time with you. If you want to give me the Dzogchen teachings you will – and if it doesn’t work out like that, then I’m equally happy.”

The room was suddenly deadly quiet. Rinpoche had me riveted with his gaze. “Yah … so … never mind about Künzang Dorje. Why is Paltrül so rude to people who come to see him – do you think this is how a Lama should behave? Why does Paltrül spend a month baiting Rinchen Thar-gyé with insinuations of buggery and accusations that he desires the buttocks of young monks?”
I didn’t have any answer as to how a Lama should behave, beyond the abstract concept of acting for the benefit of beings – and this was not the kind of answer to give to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche, unless I happened to be feeling suicidal. “It seems that Dza Paltrül has a very low opinion of monks in general – is that true?”

“No … this is just how he is in these stories. Paltrül had great respect for monks in other stories – it just depends on the story. If Paltrül was criticising a ngakpa he would talk of him as a drunken dirty letch – who did nothing but look for girls …” [pause] “So … you say something more?”

“A Lama can act in a variety of ways that would seem strange, repugnant, or reprehensible to the ordinary person – so there’s nothing I can say about the actions of Paltrül without trying to work out what was going on.”

This is the direction in which Rinpoche always took me in our discussions. He frequently insisted that it was utterly useless to approach these tales of enlightened activity either in a naïve credulous manner – or with the simplistic religious moralism which reduces everything to platitudes or ‘mystery’.

In view of this I knew that answers like ‘Paltrül is rude to people in order to destroy their pride’ were alarmingly unwise. Answers such as these usually resulted in my being asked to leave, or given such a horse whipping—in the form of a sneer or even simply one of those looks—that I’d have some kind of emotional haemorrhage.

I had to understand something … so what was there to understand? … I pondered for quite a while, and fortunately Rinpoche seemed content to let me think about it without looking as if every second counted. I started looking at how the situation was resolved – in terms of Paltrül’s underlying purpose with his daily references to pæderasty.[158] They were actually tedious after a while and so Paltrül must have wished to force something.

“Yes!” I yelped suddenly. “It could have gone on forever, but Rinchen Thargyé finally flipped, saying that fantasies about the buttocks of young monks had nothing to do with him … that allowed Paltrül to say that Rinchen Thargyé’s pretensions had nothing to do with him either! Up until then Rinchen Thar-gyé was simply too ‘proper’ even to deny anything.”

Rinpoche burst out laughing when he heard this answer. “Oh yah! Good answer! I did not think of this!”

A strange moment. I’d apparently got the right answer, or at least ‘a right answer’ – but there was obviously another one? Should I ask about it? Or should I sit it out … No. I should definitely not sit it out – that would be a ’thom yor tactic … I decided to take the plunge. “What do you think about it,
Rinpoche?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Yah … what does Künzang Dorje think …?” [pause] “… Künzang Dorje thinks many bad things …Maybe Paltrül just waits for the weather to get worse?” [pause] “Rinchen Thar-gyé has to give up, or he will freeze to death” he laughed.

Yes – of course, it was simple …

“I often miss the straightforward understanding of these things, Rinpoche. That Paltrül was simply using the changing season is such a direct statement of dancing with situations. I wish I could see these things more easily – the right answer is so often just in front of my nose.”

Rinpoche shook his head vehemently. “No … there is—no—right answer. My answer—your answer—it doesn’t matter. The meaning—I—find is not better than the one—you—find. You must have more confidence in your own intelligence. Künzang Dorje will not always be there to say ‘Yes – this is the right answer.’ Maybe there are many meanings – and maybe none of them match Paltrül’s mind. The important matter is principle and function. The vital point is that you know how to look for the principle and function of these stories. You are learning to see the principle and function in everything. As you know … without knowledge of the principle and function … Dzogchen men-ngag-dé is meaningless.”

I smiled when Rinpoche said “without knowledge of the principle and function – Dzogchen men-ngag-dé is meaningless.” I knew—as soon as I heard these words—that he fully intended to give me the teachings I’d requested. Rinpoche also knew by my smile that I knew what he meant. On this occasion there was no need to verify my perception. Looking back, I feel this was probably the wisest choice I ever made during our conversations.
just look, nyoshul!

“Oh yah!” Rinpoche smiled as I entered the room. “Today I am so happy to see you! Now for two days you have not been a ’thom yor!” [pause] “This makes me very happy! Today … I will tell you about something else that concerns Nyoshul – and how to learn …” [pause] “… but … this—I think—you already know …” [pause] “Anyway, it is important …” [pause] “You will see”…

… Paltrül was resting up a while. He was in one of the caves in upper Do – the rugged, craggy, wind-swept region where DoKhyentsé pitched his gar. Whilst he was in residence, an old nomad ngakpa called Shérab Dorje took to visiting him – asking for instructions. He was a simple good-natured fellow – sincere and honest. He had no pretensions to anything beyond practice, and hoped for nothing apart from continuing with practice to the point of his death – and beyond. Shérab Dorje crossed the river in a yak hide coracle every day to visit Paltrül while he was in residence in that retreat cave. He made the journey no matter what the weather flung at him – and made the journey home often under torturous conditions. One day however, the river was in severe spate and the current was so savage that Shérab Dorje’s coracle capsized. The old ngakpa drowned.

Paltrül left his cave immediately he perceived what had happened. He ran down to the river bank where Shérab Dorje had been hauled ashore by some nomads who had witnessed the calamity. His wife and other family members had been summoned and gradually they all arrived on the scene. There was considerable commotion. Everyone was in tears. Shérab Dorje was much loved by everyone in the locality and his wife was inconsolable. Death by drowning is considered highly inauspicious amongst the nomads and so various relatives petitioned Paltrül to intervene on behalf of the old ngakpa in order to ensure that a decent rebirth would be assured. They were all terribly afraid that death by drowning might precipitate the old fellow into some foul backwater of existence infested by hideous vituperative sadists.

Paltrül told them not to worry. “That ngakpa’s bound for glory. There’s not much need to do anything. Shérab Dorje’s doing just fine on his own. He was an experienced yogi. He died whilst in pursuit of teaching – braving the torrent to meet me.”

The nomads were happy to hear that Paltrül thought so highly of their kith and kin – however, they wanted to see some ritual going on. As far as they were concerned, rituals are what make the difference. Fancy talk about Shérab Dorje not needing any help were all well and good, but bells ringing and drums rattling were the basis of real confidence.
Paltrül told them “Well … if it would make you feel better, I’d be only too happy to oblige with rites and rituals appropriate to the occasion.”

Shérab Dorje’s relatives were enormously relieved that the great Dza Paltrül Rinpoche would help their lowly ngakpa. They sat waiting for the liturgical formalities to commence. They wanted to make sure that something was going to be chanted.

Paltrül sat down with Nyoshul on the high bank of the river at the foot of the rise that led to the caves. His other disciples were also there, having gathered from the various caves that pocked the mountainside in clusters below their Lama’s hermitage. They’d followed Paltrül down to the river – being aware that something momentous was afoot. Paltrül instructed them as to the nature of the rituals they were to perform together – and his disciples set about making their preparations whilst Paltrül sat and stared at the sky. Once everything was organised the yogis began to perform 'phowa and bardo recitations. All was proceeding in a traditional manner and the nomads were well pleased that Shérab Dorje was getting everything that was conventional and proper.

Before they’d got much further than ‘the dissolution of the elements’ however, Paltrül started laughing quietly to himself. After some further moments he became so amused by the whole business that he quit recitation altogether. He let his disciples continue on their own, being careful not to be observed in his mirth by Shérab Dorje’s relatives.

Nyoshul however, took it all in and was more than a little bewildered. He leaned over toward his teacher. “What amuses you, Rinpoche?”

Paltrül just pointed at the sky. Nyoshul looked up but couldn’t see anything much. He didn’t really know what he was supposed to be looking for, so proceeded to scan the horizon for some clue. There was obviously something out there somewhere. Paltrül observed him for a while. Nyoshul was looking for something, as if it were hidden – as if it were something very difficult to see. He nudged Nyoshul gently and indicated the sky again. “Just look.” But this time, with a broad sweep of his hand.

Nyoshul renewed his efforts to see something, but only succeeded in becoming more tense. “I’m sorry Rinpoche, I don’t see anything.”

Paltrül chuckled all the more. “Just look, Nyoshul!” he whispered, indicating the broad expanse of sky, but this time using both hands.

Nyoshul looked again and attempted simply to be present with his vision and the visual field. He could barely detect it – but yes … it was raining. A very fine thin drizzle – a mere mist.[159] Through the infinitesimal blizzard of blossoms, the sun was shining brightly from out of an ink-dark sky.[160]
There were rainbows everywhere – flickering throughout the curtain of mist in sporadic frissons.

“There are rainbows everywhere!” Nyoshul exclaimed. “Why didn’t I see it before!” He was entranced by the glimmering colours that came and went – appearing in swirling pools of colour before his eyes. Gazing into the drizzle was gazing into a dazzling sphere of thig-lés.[161] “Is that why you are laughing, Rinpoche?”

Paltrül put his hand on Nyoshul’s shoulder in a kindly way. “No” he replied softly – but this was also a cause for amusement. Nyoshul looked bewildered.

“See these people?” said Paltrül “Shérab Dorje’s wife and these relatives of his.”

Nyoshul looked as if he might see something unusual about them – but they looked like a fairly typical collection of nomads. “What is unusual about them?” Nyoshul asked.

“They’re very sad, aren’t they, Nyoshul?” ‘Yes’ was the obvious reply and it was duly given. “They’re also very anxious about Shérab Dorje’s rebirth aren’t they?” Nyoshul agreed. “Then, dear Nyoshul, look at yourself. You don’t understand why your crazy old Lama is laughing, do you?”

Nyoshul answered “No, I can’t understand.”

Paltrül shook his head in disbelief. “Do you think that old Paltrül has no compassion for Shérab Dorje? Is that why old Paltrül is laughing?”

Poor Nyoshul. This was a situation. He didn’t know what to say or think or do.

“Look at the bedraggled corpse of old Shérab Dorje, dear Nyoshul. This is a sad sight isn’t it?” Nyoshul had no problem with that idea – it was a sad sight. “Then look at me, dear Nyoshul. I do not see a sad sight. I know that old Shérab Dorje is a great practitioner. I know that he’s not simply this battered baggage of human remains. People think that because he was a rough nomad ngakpa, that he had no spiritual power. People think that spiritual power rests with those who live in monasteries – or those with big names like Nyoshul and Paltrül.

“I know differently. I see that he had no difficulty with the bardos – in spite of drowning. I only had to think of him and that was enough to remind him what to do – how to keep his awareness. And now he has sent us this rain as a sign that he is happy. There is no need for us to do these rites for him – as if he were merely a layman with no knowledge or experience. This performance is just for the sake of his relatives. They do not understand that what we are doing is like tipping boiling water into a boiling kettle – just make sure that it
boils! Anyone who saw such a thing could not help but laugh!”

Nyoshul smiled. “Yes …” he sighed “… and none of us here can see that.”

Paltrül sat silently for a moment gazing at the spectacle of subtle rainbows.

Nyoshul joined his teacher gazing into the opalescent mist. After some moments he asked “How can I learn to see that?”

Paltrül grinned, still staring into the rain of flowers. “Just look, Nyoshul.”

Rinpoche poured out two beers immediately he’d concluded the story, and commenced to slake his thirst.

“Paltrül repeats the words ‘Just look, Nyoshul!’ in each story – and he does so several times.”

Rinpoche gave me a wolfish grin. I knew this grin well – but now it no longer betokened that events were going to get tricky. It betokened curiosity as to what I’d say. “Yah …?” he enquired “… what do you say about these stories?”

“Well, Rinpoche … Nyoshul’s often quite literal … so Paltrül is always encouraging him to try to see what is in front of him – to see what is—just there—outside the obvious conventional structure of how things are commonly seen.”

Rinpoche nodded, so I continued. “Nyoshul seems to see what’s conventionally obvious rather than seeing in a way that opens itself to the unexpected … and …” I added “Paltrül simply keeps reminding him to look —beyond—what’s conventionally obvious.”

Rinpoche nodded again – and so, again, I continued. “Mostly …people see what they expect to see rather than what is actually there. People also see the behaviour they expect to see – and hear the language they expect to hear …” [pause] “To see, or hear, anything else requires that one is open to any possibility. I remember being on a walk with someone once and she gave me a running commentary on every plant she saw. ‘That’s agrimony,’ she said ‘… and that’s butterbur, knapweed, mallow, toadflax, celandine, speedwell, teasel …’ Pema Dorje looked flummoxed so I told him not to bother searching for these plants in his dictionary. “After a while this long list of plants started to feel like a distraction from the natural beauty that surrounded me. It wasn’t that the information was uninteresting – but it didn’t help me enjoy what I was seeing. If I’d wanted to plant any of it in a garden it might have been useful to know the names – but I saw no purpose in knowing these names for no reason.”

Rinpoche nodded vigorously – and so I went further. “We only classify the world for certain reasons. For example, plants can be food or medicine and
we need to know what is poisonous – but the sense-making frameworks we build are no more than that. They don’t really describe what we see or hear – they simply give us a means of controlling them according to what we think we want …” [pause] “… then we have all kinds of ideas and prejudices based on how we label everything.”

“Oh yah! This you see extremely clearly. I like how you explain this.”
“Come! Sit down. Be comfortable!” Rinpoche began. “Now …” [pause] “…today… we must look at politics and diplomacy …” [pause] “We have no concern about politics and politicians—almost all politicians are scheming lying ’thom yors—but Paltrül knew politics – even though he avoided politicians …” [pause] “It is useful to know the ways in which ’thom yors think – especially if their behaviour can affect your life or your freedom …” [pause] “There will be many politicians in Dharma centres – and you must learn to recognise political ’thom yors … learn to recognise them … and avoid them …” [pause] “Never trust any politicians. Ê Hong! Especially dharma-politicians.”

“Yes, Rinpoche … I saw a little of politics when I was at art school. My tutor Derek Crowe hated politics – but had to engage with it when it affected the Illustration department.”

“Yah … so you have already seen this – it is disgusting – and you will see more with Buddhists in centres. Politics is the favourite occupation of the ’thom yors who do not practise …” [pause] “… and also ’thom yors who pretend to practise …” [pause] “… and also ’thom yors who collect empowerments and the ’thom yors who collect Dharma as information …” [pause] “You have met with this already I think?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – I have … although I’ve not really seen any Buddhist centre yet …”

“Yah … you will discover this – there are politicians everywhere – small ones as well as big ones – cowardly ones and brave ones …

“All—are ’thom yors …” [pause] “All can be dangerous … and all can destroy Dharma.”

“And … it was like this in Tibet too, Rinpoche?”

“Yah … it is like this everywhere there are ’thom yors … and in Tibet there were many ’thom yors …” [pause] “The ’thom yors in Tibet would destroy each other’s gompas …” [pause] “How can Buddhists do this?! This is terrible – but the ’thom yors in Tibet did this. This is why the Chinese have control of Tibet now. It is because of the ’thom yors who fought each other to see who would be the ruling ’thom yors …” [pause] “… anyway … we need not speak more of this … now … I will speak of Paltrül and you will see how—he—understands politics”…

… Paltrül was passing through the northern reaches of Kham with nothing but stones for company. He was avoiding the kind of events in which he took
no interest – and giving no mind to the concerns of the professionally grandiose. He had no time for pseudo-spiritual posturing; preferring the sight of drong[162] on the high plains to the sight of monastic herds in their domestic institutions. That’s how he was. It just so happened, that at a point —where a brief rest seemed in order—Paltrül was invited to stay at some hick Nyingma gompa. Now this was just the type of venue Paltrül enjoyed: relaxed atmosphere; minimal formality; and a distinct absence of high-rise thrones.

Now, the usual translation of the word ‘gompa’ is monastery. But the word ‘monastery’ tends to give rise to images of large institutions, extraordinary assemblages of rooms built into impressive mountainsides. That’s the popular image of Tibetan monasteries – but the word ‘gompa’ literally means ‘meditation place’. In the Nyingma Tradition there are many diminutive gompas – some little more than shrine rooms surrounded by a few huts.

It was typical for such small gompas to be attended by a mixed group – monks, nuns, and gö kar chang lo practitioners. Arrangements were often fairly ad hoc at such places – and often those monastics who’d taken only the basic gé-nyèn ordination would marry, without anyone causing any kind of unseemly ruckus about it. They would continue to wear their robes – but were otherwise family people. Such gompas can still be found today – not only in the remote Himalayas, but also in and around the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal.[163]

The gompa to which Paltrül was invited was a size up from many a tiny gompa that the well-to-do might pass by as a hovel – but it had only enough room to accommodate ten people. The head Lama, Namgyal Dorje,[164] was a good careful man, and his wife, Ani Tsomo, was devoted to her practice. They spared no effort to maintain the place in tidy order. They had a good association with the drokpas – the local nomad tribes. The drokpas put in requests for practitioners to visit their gars, and made healthy contributions to the general upkeep of the gompa. This was an arrangement that made everyone happy. The brigand camps also sent invitations – but Namgyal Dorje didn’t consider it appropriate to have dealings with them. They occasionally took to rustling the drokpas’ yaks and dris,[165] and that didn’t go down too well. He didn’t refuse the brigands—that would have been unwise—but neither did he send anyone to visit them. There was always a good reason – the monks were needed to perform rites for the dead, or for the crops, or for any one of a long list of reasons.

Anyhow – such were the diplomatic arrangements of the gompa according to the most circumspect tactics that Namgyal Dorje could devise.

The small lhakhang, or main shrine room, was well kept, and they had a small gön-khang or protector house which held statues of the Ma-za-dor sum,
the three Nyingma protectors, and a large painted wooden statue of the local mountain protector – the Screaming Red Tsèn. The statue was very old. It had been made at a time when Bön practitioners used the place. The little gompa had alternately been used by Buddhists and Böns down the centuries and had occasionally run into neglect. Originally it had simply been a diminutive temple that held the one large statue of the mountain protector who had his residence in the subtle dimension of the nearby mountain. Since the obscure beginnings of clan memory, the local farmers had had the habit of making offerings to the Screaming Red Tsèn at harvest time, in order that their crops would be protected from hail, and so the door to the gön-khang was always open.

Hail may not seem too terrible to most people, but in certain parts of the world hail is not the brief shower of petit pois that the British might experience. Hail in Tibet and the Himalayas can devastate crops. Hour-long assaults of falling ice pellets—from the size of acorns to horse chestnuts—can thrash a field of barley into a slushy fibrous pulp. Occasionally lumps—the size of grapefruit—hurtle out of the sky killing sheep and goats. In view of this, it’s not difficult to understand that any local protective spirit who can be called upon to prevent such things is well regarded and called upon frequently. Khambas are nothing if not pragmatic when it comes to making offerings to local protectors, and—if they don’t deliver the goods—respect tends to dwindle rapidly. In one remote region a local protector had failed to produce a decent harvest and the villagers dragged his statue out of the temple and beat it conscientiously with chains.

One blustery day a brigand galloped up to Namgyal Dorje’s gompa with a leathern bag dangling from his saddle. He dismounted with unmitigated swagger from an impressive stallion and unhitched the leathern bag.

His saddle—from which he detached the mysterious bag—was decorated with the most impressive Dér-gé ironwork and sumptuous Shi-ga-tsé carpentry. He was a dashing young fellow. He wore an expression of the most profound insolence and impeccable nonchalance. His face was set off admirably by a fine moustache, well-oiled hair, and a large golden earring. He sported rakish leather boots and a dapper lambskin chuba draped back off his right shoulder. He walked with a long relaxed stride covering the short distance to the gön-khang in a quick but unhurried manner. He entered without removing the aforementioned foot-wear – and, lacking any pretense at formal courtesy, addressed the local protector: “Screaming Red Tsèn! This is the deal – you get an offering like this every month on the twenty-ninth day – I get to rustle yak without any problems. If you agree … take this shoulder of lamb – if you don’t agree, kill me now! Here—on this spot—where I stand! I tell you in earnest … I’m a dangerous man – but my word is my word!”
And there it was … that was the deal. He obviously thought he’d rather die with his boots on. The brigand waited a while – motionless, with unblinking eyes. Then, in a careful yet leisurely manner, he unwrapped the leathern bag and deposited the shoulder of lamb in front of the local protector. He stood for a moment and said “This is my vow then – if I break it, take my life – but if I keep it always, reward me with unrestrained banditry!”

Then, turning on his heel he left the gön-khang, leapt onto his horse, and galloped into the rising gale. That was the way of it.

Now, it so happened that there was a young scrap of a monk, no more than a boy. He’d been sitting in the gön-khang at the time the brigand made his deal. He’d been cleaning and trimming the butter lamps, and consequently the brash horseman hadn’t seen him. The boy was quite taken aback by what he had seen and heard – but decided that discretion was the better part of valour. He was afraid to say anything to anyone – after all … the Screaming Red Tsèn hadn’t killed the horseman on the spot … So, who was this brigand? The young monk had never seen such a thing before. He’d never even heard of such a thing before. What to do? Keep quiet? That seemed the best choice.

After some time had passed the monks began to notice the leg of lamb that appeared in the gön-khang every month on the day of the protectors. Some had observed the audacious brigand who strode into the gön-khang with his boots on – he came in the morning of the day and they practised in the evening. Some wondered what was going on. Some tied the two things together. After a while everyone at the gompa fell to talking about it – and before long the young monk piped up with what he had seen. The story was unbelievable – but there had been a lot of rustling going on. Some of the nomad families were getting rather more than touchy about it. Having their herds of yaks and dris diminished was not a situation guaranteed to please most drokpas – and parties of young men slung about with blades and primed muskets were riding out in a mean disposition, looking for culprits. Their blood was up – and blood was evidently going to be shed before much time had elapsed.

After some weeks these events came to the attention of Namgyal Dorje – and he in turn came to discuss the situation with Paltrül. “What can be done? The rustler is in mystical cahoots with the Screaming Red Tsèn … and I’m sorely vexed by my inability to handle the situation. What can be done, Rinpoche – what can be done?”

It was a dilemma – and Namgyal Dorje presented the awful fact of it to Paltrül in the hope of a supreme solution. “The drokpas are getting irate to say the least, and the heads of the families are coming soon to ask for advice.

“I owe a duty to the local drokpas but I also owe a duty to the local
protector. This brigand must be stopped – but how can he be stopped if he has the help of the protector? If I try to intervene then the protector will be offended and the pastures may not provide sufficient food for the animals. There seems to be no answer.”

“Yah …” Paltrül commented “… so it is in the world – you can please all the people some of the time, and you can please some of the people all of the time – but you can’t please all the people all the time.”

Namgyal Dorje sat silently before Paltrül waiting for something; he didn’t know what – but he hoped that Paltrül would think of some way out of the situation. Finally he put his cards on the table. “Rinpoche, can’t you punish this brigand?”

Paltrül looked a trifle quizzical at this question. “What for?”

Namgyal Dorje was obviously surprised by this response. “What for! … he’s a thief!”

Paltrül eyed Namgyal Dorje carefully. “He’s just like us then – why should we punish one of our own?”

Namgyal Dorje was uncertain how he should proceed with the discussion at this point, because he had no concept of the nature of the theft to which Paltrül was alluding. “But …” he attempted “… we’re not rustlers …”

Paltrül laughed. “No—not of yak and dri—but we’re rustlers nonetheless …”

Namgyal Dorje was silent – Paltrül obviously had something in mind about which he was not being explicit. They sat together without further exchange for an uncomfortable duration. Namgyal Dorje struggled with what it could be. Paltrül had included himself as a rustler, so whatever it was they rustled could not be animals, and could not really constitute theft in the usual sense of the word.

“You see …” Paltrül said at length “… this brigand … he really—is—quite a good practitioner. He’s without fear. He keeps his vows. He’s simple and straightforward in his dealings – and, he’s not compromised himself with anyone. I wish the same could be said for us.”

Curiouser and curiouser … this was becoming a miasma of perplexity. Namgyal Dorje wondered how he might have compromised himself but could not think of anything.

“What concerns you in all this?” asked Paltrül after another difficult silence.

Namgyal Dorje didn’t need much time to find an answer. “Protecting the drokpas from rustling …”

Paltrül eyed Namgyal Dorje quizzically. “Yes … and …?”
Namgyal Dorje started to think about the drokpas and it gradually dawned on him that Paltrül might be insinuating something to the effect that Namgyal Dorje’s little gompa relied on donations from these people.

“Yes …” repeated Paltrül “You rustle in your way. I rustle in mine – and he … rustles in his. Most people rustle pleasurable experiences. Some spiritual types even try to rustle teachings.”

Namgyal Dorje looked ashamed at these remarks. “It is true …” he said with a deep sigh “I—am—a rustler too … I rustle donations … I rustle everything you have named – but I am neither fearless nor do I keep any vow as diligently as this brigand.” He bowed his head and fell silent.

“But …” said Paltrül “… you are a good man – and you are not dishonest. You understand the nature of your situation and your motivation well. So … I will do what I can to help. However … you must make a vow now – and one that you will always keep. Promise me that your monks will visit the brigand gars as well as the encampments of the drokpas. It’s not right to neglect people simply because of their brigandage. These people need the influence of the teachings as much— if not more—than others.”

“Yes” Namgyal Dorje agreed “This is certainly true … I promise to send monks to the brigand camp when they request visits. I recognise my fault in partiality towards my nomad benefactors, and I recognise that I’ve allowed myself to live in a compromised position.”

Paltrül nodded and smiled – and the plan was underway. The twenty-ninth day was close, so Paltrül gave some advice as to how he would proceed. On the eve of the day of the protector no one at all was to go to the gön-khang – Paltrül would practise there for the entire day himself. No other rites would be necessary or welcome. He’d wait for the brigand to arrive with his shoulder of lamb – and deal with the protector in his own way. Paltrül had no great anxiety when it came to local protectors – or brigands for that matter. He’d seen both before and neither caused him any loss of sleep. He was especially unimpressed by local spirits whose vanity was immense – and whose intelligence was such that they could be bought for a piece of meat they couldn’t even eat.

Paltrül arrived just before dawn and sat silently, obscured by the large drum which was used in the invocations. Dawn arrived … and with it, the brigand. He galloped into the courtyard and sprang from his horse in the manner anticipated from the rumours that had become legendary. He strode into the gön-khang with his leathern bag – and was about to proffer its contents to the Screaming Red Tsèn when Paltrül spoke. “You keep your vows well, master horseman.”

The brigand was surprised but reasonably unruffled. “What’s it to you?”
“Nothing much really …” replied Paltrül “… apart from the issue of this local protector being directly answerable to me.”

That was an unexpected answer for the brigand. This old yogi was either insane, or he was someone to be reckoned with. “Is that a fact?!”

Paltrül bored him clean through with a steely gaze. “Yes … that’s a fact …”

The brigand considered these words briefly and adopted a defiant stance which belied his slightly eroded sense of ease. “And so … what does that add up to—exactly—you loose-mouthed pile of yak dung?”

Paltrül smiled. “It adds up to the fact that your pact with this little imp is over – if you rustle now, you do it without the assistance of this curious creature.”

The brigand pondered the import of this statement. Was it true or was it a piece of spiritual bravado? “Strong words for a ragged flea-bitten old-timer without a blade.”

Paltrül roared with laughter at this piece of sarcasm. “I don’t need a blade to get the edge on a youngster like you.”

The brigand’s ire was touched. “I’m real—scared—now, you mangy old marmot.”

Paltrül wasn’t moved. “You bet your damn life you’re scared.”

“What goddamn brilliant deduction leads you to that conclusion, you doddering old dickhead?”

“Nothing that brilliant, my fine young fellow. It’s just that you’ve volunteered your life to the hands of this local imp – but he’s nothing but a menial servant of a minion of those I invoke …” [pause] “I would imagine that would make a person nervous.” Something about this yogi was becoming very disconcerting. He wasn’t backing off – neither was he becoming angry. He was speaking to the bandit as if he were some rising nomad Johnny-come-lately … Was he lying? Was he stark raving mad? He didn’t seem to be mad … and … if he was lying – he’d surely be dead by now. After all … the Screaming Red Tsèn obviously had the power to protect his rustling. He knew the power of this protector from his own experience – and yet here was this old yogi trivialising the protector as an imp – a little nothing. This must mean that Paltrül had far greater power than this local protector. Maybe this was the end of his life?

Paltrül knew the brigand’s thought and replied “No …” Paltrül smiled. “There’s no need to fear for your life from me. I have no wish to kill you …” [pause] “You could do a great deal of good one day if you gave up this nonsense.
“What’s it to me if a fellow like you rustles every goddamn yak and dri he sees?” [pause] “But let me ask you one question … is the money that good? And … hasn’t it even—started—to get just a little tedious yet?”

The brigand sat down. “What do you want of me, A-mé?” he asked – recognising that this was no ordinary everyday situation.

Paltrül took his time. “Nothing. It would be useful … if you give the drokpas a break with this rustling of yours …” [pause] “… but—come now—what d’you want for yourself? Surely there must be—something—beyond this business of droving yak and dri from one place to another – and then teaching your children to do the same when you’re too old to do it yourself …” [pause] “Or is that what you—really—want?”

The brigand had no good answers, so Paltrül continued “You know you can do this brigandry business blind-folded – but you’re not yet ready for the life of a yogi. We’ll meet again one day though – and when we do you may want to receive teachings from me. Until then try to do as little harm as you can – and … remember our meeting.”

The brigand left. The rustling stopped. Everyone seemed quite contented for a while. Namgyal Dorje kept his vow to Paltrül and sent monks to visit the brigand camps, and in turn the brigands turned their attentions to the Chinese borderlands. Brigands, after all are brigands and have to continue the business of brigandage somewhere or other.

“Now …” Rinpoche began “… there are several things here – aren’t there?”

“Yes” I said putting down what I hoped would be a royal flush, and spreading my cards with as little timidity as I could manage under Rinpoche’s penetrating gaze. He’d stopped shouting at me – but there was something about his gaze that still unnerved me. “There are questions in this story about spiritual qualities in unlikely people – such as the brigand. He’s both fearless and able to keep vows. Then there’s the Lama at the gompa who’s well-meaning – but whose diplomacy compromises him with regard to his spiritual integrity. Then there’s the question of relying on unenlightened protectors for mundane concerns.”

Rinpoche gave me a look which confirmed that all this was obvious. “Yah … and then?” he said, in the way of an open-ended prompt.

And then what? Right … well … yes … there were a few other ideas, so I put those out on the table as well – but I’d laid out what I thought were my trump cards.

So it was with no great confidence that I posited some further thoughts on the story. “Well, Rinpoche … it strikes me that Paltrül is very gentle with Namgyal Dorje – when the head Lama is obviously sitting in a mess of his
own devising. I mean … if he’d sent monks out to the brigand gars all along, the situation might not have arisen.”

Rinpoche smiled “Yah, possible … but to behave correctly is no guarantee that others will do the same.” He laughed “You will discover this.”

This time I had a quick reply. “Yes, I can see that – but the Lama would have been in a more powerful situation if the brigands had been obliged to his impartiality toward them. He could have approached them directly with the depredations of one of their young-bloods.”

Rinpoche roared with laughter at this idea. “Good, good, good! Maybe one day you will become the Prime Minister of England!” [pause] “But we are not here for you to learn diplomacy – even though it is useful in dealing with ’thom yors. If you are here to learn the nature of things – that is good …” [pause] “But if you want to learn politics, you will have to go and spend your time with Indira Gandhi …” [pause] “… but … I think this is—not—what you would enjoy.” Rinpoche was not angry. He was serious in manner – and determinedly pointing me in a different direction. I’d evidently complicated the whole issue – and the question turned out to be far more simple than I’d imagined.

I suddenly realised that it was simply a question of power. “Namgyal Dorje lacks power. He lacks power to refuse the brigands. He lacks power to face the drokpas. He lacks power to face the local protector.”

“Oh yah!” Rinpoche exclaimed with a smile.

“So …” I continued “… it’s not so much a question of the Lama’s failure to be impartial … but his being unable to be up-front about things. Impartiality is obviously preferable – but impartiality’s based on power – the power to risk offending the drokpas.”

Rinpoche gave me a sideways glance. “You can’t simply—decide—to be impartial. You have to have the strength, capacity, and realisation to be impartial …” [pause] “Power …” Rinpoche concluded “… relies on being able to let go of everything.

“You must be able to allow everything to fall apart. Power rests on the ability to let everything for which you’ve worked be destroyed. You can’t have power whilst there is anything that you want to keep intact. This is why Paltrül has the power to command this local protector.[171] Paltrül can—not—be bought.”

Now it all made sense to me. “This is why he can speak to the brigand in such a forthright way. Paltrül isn’t afraid of death. He knows that death might result from the confrontation – but that doesn’t concern him.”
Rinpoche nodded. “Yah! This is it!” [pause] “… but … there was something interesting in what you said before – Paltrül is very gentle with Namgyal Dorje … Why …?”

Now that was a question. “Well … he was gentle … but … he was also rather noncommittal.”

Rinpoche donned his quizzical expression. “Yah—and so—why was he not fierce when he is fierce with the brigand?”

As soon as Rinpoche shuffled the deck in this way, it all gelled. As soon as I compared Paltrül’s manner with these two individuals it dawned on me. “This was also a question of power…” I spread my hand on the table again. “Paltrül was gentle with Namgyal because the Lama didn’t really have much power – he was a simple good-hearted country abbot trying to keep everyone happy.”

Rinpoche nodded. “And the brigand?”

“He was fierce with the brigand … because the brigand—in his own limited way—was very powerful. The brigand’s power lay in his ability to lay his life on the line, and the Lama’s lack of power came from his desire to maintain the status quo.”

By Rinpoche’s expression, I could tell that I’d given the right answer – but he had something else to throw at me that I’d not expected. “So…” Rinpoche chuckled “… why was this—bad—Künzang Dorje fierce with—you—when you first came here?”

 Somehow, I realised that I had no choice about the answer I was obliged to give – the only problem was the wording. Fortunately there was no time to think it out. I toyed for a split second with ‘Because you perceive me to be powerful in some way, Rinpoche’ but that seemed instantaneously cretinous, so I went for broke. “Because I am powerful … enough…”

Rinpoche chuckled and poured two beers. “Sometimes yes…” [pause] “Maybe one day, all the time.”

“Power’s a strange subject … an elusive commodity” I ventured. “Yah…” Rinpoche observed “… some people have power without realising it – people who simply are-what-they-are.”

“And some people…” I commented – risking the continuance of Rinpoche’s statement “… are powerful because of their neuroses – but … their power is self-destructive. People who sulk have a certain kind of power – but they get nothing from that power but sadness and bitterness.”

Rinpoche nodded almost sadly. “Yah … It is good to remember this.”
I have thought about this question of power many times, since my discussions with Rinpoche. I have realised that power has got very little to do with power to – but rather, power not to. It is not a question of supernormal abilities. It’s a question of being prepared to die in the next moment – to be totally insignificant. The power to be unafraid of looking like an idiot. The power not to care about what people think or say. It is not a question of being physically, intellectually, or emotionally strong – but of being open to annihilation. Everything has to matter—and not matter—at the same time. There have been some hard lessons to learn in this department. I was far from the end of learning – but … at least I knew the shape of the lesson.

Later that afternoon, I asked “This brigand … he wouldn’t happen to be the same brigand who gave Paltrül the silver horse’s hoof? It almost seems as if you’ve told me three stories about the same man in reversed order.”

Rinpoche shrugged. “Yah, you mentioned this before – but … there were many brigands. Paltrül wandered a lot in Kham and Golok. There were many brigands there, you know. Maybe this one went on to become a yogi, maybe not. Some great Lamas came from brigand families and some great yogis were formerly brigands.”

A thin drizzle was blurring the end of the afternoon into night. It became suddenly cold. Food arrived and we ate. Potatoes, dark green vegetable matter, and a few emaciated shreds of goat. Having eaten, Rinpoche fished around in a pile of things in the dim of a corner made incomprehensible by the light of a guttering candle. Electricity was an intermittent occurrence in Tso Pema. His hand finally alighted on the sought-after shape. It was placed on the table. ‘Old Monk’ Indian rum.

“Könchog Rinpoche once quipped that ‘Old Monk’ should be called ‘Young Monk’ because ‘What would an old monk want with rum?’ That was the first night that I arrived in Tso Pema.”

Rinpoche laughed. “A La La Ho – Kèlpa Zang!” Then we wrapped blankets around ourselves against the cold and damp – and made emptiness of the Old Monk Indian rum.

“What is important …” Rinpoche concluded “… is that you’re able to have the fearlessness of a brigand and the heart of a kind mother …” [pause] “Do you think you can be like this?”

“Yes, Rinpoche … it seems entirely possible…” I grinned “… whilst I have the mind of an ‘Old Monk’.”
“Today I have a—special—story” Rinpoche began. “This concerns DoKhyentsé and Düd’jom Lingpa[172]… Do you know of Düd’jom Lingpa?”

“The previous incarnation of Kyabjé Düd’jom Jig’drèl Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche.”[173]

“Oh yah! Then you know well … there is a special connection here – as there is between us … and … this kind of recognition concerns being a real yogi – being an authentic ngakpa. All real gö kar chang lo yogis and yoginis share this because we are the vajra sangha of Guru Rinpoche and Yeshé Tsogyel”…

… DoKhyentsé rode out of a dream and a premonition. He told no one of his dream. No one asked. Questions at such a time would not have been appreciated – and his disciples were well aware of that fact. A party of yogis, having mounted their horses in great haste, followed him in a ragged line. It was evident that DoKhyentsé had something in mind. He wasn’t lingering much to admire the view; not that there was much view in the last darkness of the dregs of night. There were no stars. There was no moon to guide their way. But the plains were flat to a distance beyond the dawn – so they galloped into the brooding lack of definition; allowing their horses to feel out the land that spread before them.

It had been a stormy night – dragons discussing personal matters at an impossible altitude above the mountain peaks.[174] The air was still damp and cold. His disciples had no idea where they were going, but they knew there was no use in being late. DoKhyentsé had simply suggested “Those who wish, can mount up and follow me.” An unaccountable announcement.

After an expeditious breakfast—which was somewhat less than adequate—his disciples had little time to prepare. Only those who were always ready—just as they were—managed to make the departure in time. DoKhyentsé was given to sudden decisions which propelled his disciples into unlikely ventures – and so the word to ride out in haste into the darkness that preceded the dawn came as no great surprise. His close disciples were all aware a great honour had been allowed them.

The dawn creaked into gear – and shapes began explaining what they were. Pallid light raddled the ominous cloud base. They rode for some time with a sense of growing urgency, and climbed higher and higher into the stark reaches of the mountains. Finally they struck the track which led to a notorious high pass in the mountains – a place known be a thoroughgoing lair of demons. DoKhyentsé’s disciples had gradually assimilated the idea that
they were headed for this wretched place – and an atmosphere of grim resolution settled on them. There was no turning back. They knew that no one made their way over that pass unless it was high noon, but they had arrived amongst those lugubrious crags in the cold ashen hues of first light. Their horses slowed to a walk, their nostrils steaming. They picked a careful way onward through desolate tracts of mountain scree and the discomforting shades of an overcast dawn. The track came and went unaccountably – swept away by the occasional landslides which had ravaged the slopes. After several hours of eerie plodding, they ascended to the high point of the pass – and when they arrived … an uneasy hiatus ensued. Having brought his horse to a halt, DoKhyentsé simply sat motionless in the silence – staring out into a distant blur of ill-defined colours.

He gave no indication that this was where they’d stop. He gave no indication that they could dismount either – so they simply sat and waited. DoKhyentsé was evidently waiting … so they waited with him.

After some time they heard the far sounds of movement. Gradually the dull rattle of horses’ hooves in the distance could be heard, coming up toward them from the other side of the pass. Various thoughts crossed his disciples’ minds as they observed DoKhyentsé unsling his favourite rifle and lay it across his saddle. He checked the weapon briefly – but with the confident care of one who had performed the action on countless occasions. Maybe there were bandits coming toward them? No … DoKhyentsé left his rifle draped casually across his saddle and cradled it gently with his hands – maybe simply for the pleasure of holding it.

It soon became apparent that another band of yogis were clattering up the track toward them from the south – rocks croaking under the passage of their winding ascent. At the head of the approaching party was an impressive young gö kar chang lo Lama with a rifle slung across his back. He looked every inch like a younger brother of DoKhyentsé – it was the great gTértön, Düd’jom Lingpa. His extensive beard was unusual for a Tibetan. His bell and vajra rings—one studded with a ruby, the other with a diamond—caught the light as he allowed the reins to slip and gave his horse freedom to make the steep gradient of the final rise.

There was not much doubt amongst their respective followers that the two Lamas were expecting to meet – but it was slightly disconcerting when neither spoke. They simply gazed at each other … as if each were looking at his own reflection in a mirror.

As if on cue, the sun sparked out into full visibility from behind the distant black mass of stone. DoKhyentsé—prompted by this sign—began to open a leathern bag that had been hanging at his waist. He loosened the leather thongs that held the bag closed, and slowly drew out an iron disc about the
size of a hand with splayed out fingers. He turned the disc around in his hand for a moment or two, surveying its surface.

It was smooth but unpolished – black as his gun barrel. After gazing at its surface, he hurled it high into the air. In a flash Düd’jom Lingpa’s rifle was at his shoulder – sights lined up on the iron disc. A fierce crack was followed by a startling clang that resounded in the sky until the disc hit the ground some moments later. It was as if an enormous gong had been stuck. Within the vibration were strange harmonics which sounded to some disciples like the tones of gyélings and silnyens playing – others heard rolmos and dungchens. Some heard seed syllables. DoKhyentsé smiled. One of DoKhyentsé’s disciples dismounted and ran to find the disc.

Düd’jom Lingpa slung his rifle onto his back again – and, with a deft movement, swung halfway down from his horse to scoop up a stone. The one he found—almost immediately—was about the size of a large potato. As if it were carefully choreographed, he swung back into his saddle and flung the rock into the sky. With equal ease DoKhyentsé lined up his sights as the stone reached the zenith of its trajectory and blasted it into minute fragments in the air. The dust of the shattered rock drifted in the wind and the disciples saw a variety of shapes materialise and disappear. Some saw ga’kyils and yung-drungs. Some saw thig-lés. Some saw a flying garuda which, when it vanished, left them looking at an eagle circling high in the sky.

The two great yogis laughed loudly. Düd’jom Lingpa smiled. “There’s nothing I have that you need – and there’s nothing I can teach you!”

DoKhyentsé smiled in return. “There’s nothing I can teach you either – but there is something you have that I will need …”

“You could …” DoKhyentsé grinned “… arrange a roof over my head one day.”

Düd’jom Lingpa laughed. “Sure. There can be no doubt of that – consider it arranged. I will be waiting … just—say—when.”

“Oh … in some years … there’s no great hurry.”

Düd’jom Lingpa made an affirmative gesture. “And where?”

DoKhyentsé nodded and indicated the direction he had hurled the iron disc. With that they parted, never to meet again in DoKhyentsé’s life. DoKhyentsé’s disciple Jig’mèd Dorje, having retrieved the disc, offered it back to his teacher – but DoKhyentsé declined. “Keep it for me for the while … You will return it to Düd’jom Lingpa one day. I will tell you when.”
Jig’mèd Dorje received the leathern bag for the disc from DoKhyentsé’s hand—attached it to his belt—and mounted his horse. The two great Lamas turned their horses and were followed by their respective disciples down either side of the pass. They returned to their gars. Nothing further was said about the episode.

The years passed. Almost no one knew what the occurrence was supposed to have meant. It was obviously a highly auspicious event—and all took it to be the most profound transmission. Some took it to be a display of siddhis for the benefit of the respective disciples of the two Lamas—but tying this idea in with the words that had passed between them was not possible.

At the time when DoKhyentsé was about to pass away, Düd’jom Lingpa was sitting with a group of his disciples. Jig’mèd Dorje had come at that time to take teachings from Düd’jom Lingpa—as advised by his teacher DoKhyentsé.

Now—Jig’mèd Dorje was sad to have been sent from his master’s side so close to his death—but he’d been sent with specific instructions. It was obviously of great importance to DoKhyentsé that Jig’mèd Dorje was with Düd’jom Lingpa at that precise time.

Now … it came to pass, that DoKhyentsé passed away whilst Düd’jom Lingpa was celebrating the vajra Tsog’khorlo feast[179] with his disciples. Moments after the death of DoKhyentsé, something unusual happened—but again, few understood what it meant. Düd’jom Lingpa and his disciples were eating together, having concluded the yogic songs of their Tsog’khorlo feast. The khandros—led by Düd’jom Lingpa’s sang-yum—were bringing tea for the assembly, when Düd’jom Lingpa froze—wide-eyed—for a moment. In the stillness which ensued all conversation died abruptly—and, with ferocious suddenness, Düd’jom Lingpa yelled out a violent “Phat!”

The disciples were stunned. Several momentarily lost consciousness. At that moment Düd’jom Lingpa’s sang-yum threw the tea urn into the air and appeared to faint. The disciples were all drenched with hot tea—but miraculously none were scalded. Many felt as if they had received the vase empowerment from Düd’jom Sang-yum.

When Düd’jom Sang-yum arose she was radiant and joyful. She called to the disciple of DoKhyentsé “Jig’mèd Dorje! The promise has been fulfilled! You can now give my husband the iron disc that you carry in that leathern bag at your side!”

Sure enough, there it was! Jig’mèd Dorje was amazed. No one knew that he had the iron disc with him. DoKhyentsé had simply told him to carry it with him when he went to take transmission from Düd’jom Lingpa. The fragments of the bullet which disintegrated on contact with the disc, had formed a
pattern like a mélong, and Jig’mèd Dorje unwrapped it with care out of the same leathern bag from which it had been drawn on that previous inexplicable occasion.

Only three of those present understood the portent of what had happened. Düd’jom Lingpa understood because he had fulfilled his promise. He had been expecting Jig’mèd Dorje to arrive at some point in the future – because he had been the one to have run after the disc.

Jig’mèd Dorje understood because he had retrieved the iron disc and promised DoKhyentsé to return it to Düd’jom Lingpa at a time in the future that he would indicate.

Düd’jom Sang-yum understood—because nothing was hidden from her—and because she became the mother of the next incarnation of DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje.

This was a wonderful story. “There’s something I’d like to ask about this story, Rinpoche … It’s not that I don’t understand what happened … it’s just that I can’t imagine something like this happening in the West … There is a level of symbolism, secrecy, and mystery that’s culturally Tibetan. So … I’m just wondering what would happen in a different culture.”

“Yah …” Rinpoche grinned.

“I mean … would there be some important difference if DoKhyentsé and Düd’jom Lingpa had simply communicated mind-to-mind about the subject?”

Rinpoche yawned as my question unfolded. I wondered whether this was a bad sign – but decided that this was to think like an idiot. There was no point in entertaining such ideas.

“So …” he answered “Say that this had been the case. Say there was simply this mind-to-mind communication … what then?”

What indeed …? This was a question that had to be answered with the aplomb that Rinpoche had been trying to encourage in me – but the only answer that came to mind seemed altogether banal. I wracked my mind for a more intelligent response – but soon had no choice but to spill out a solitary puerile statement of the obvious. “… Then … there – wouldn’t be a story, Rinpoche …”

Rinpoche smiled a genuine smile.

Something clicked at that moment and I knew I’d been clear. Right! There would not be a story! There wouldn’t—be—a goddamn story! “So …” I blurted out “This story … and many of the others you’ve told me were living teaching stories—exactly—when they happened. The lives of these masters were simply full to the brim with teachings which manifested in every
situation as opportunities for transmission!"

“Yah! And so?” Rinpoche grinned.

“Well … that’s why there was no need for DoKhyentsé and Dü’d’jom Lingpa to speak to each other when they met on the pass! They knew that all their actions created stories and they were aware of acting in such a way as would create an emblematic understanding that would be passed on – as you are passing it on to me.”

Rinpoche nodded with a look that betokened that this was the most natural and obvious conclusion to have drawn. “When one looks into a mirror one is simply free to observe what is there – one does not have to have a conversation with one’s own reflection.”

After these words had settled into the many eager little hands of my grasping concept consciousness, I was suddenly jolted by the fact that various aspects of the story were almost frightening in their degree of dramatic irony. “There were many opportunities for transmission in the sequence of events that unfolded, weren’t there?”

Rinpoche nodded whilst ferreting in his shoulder bag for the pocket watch I had given him. It had a moon phase facility which he much admired. “Tell me what you think” he answered whilst continuing his search.

“Well …” I answered “… maybe both groups of disciples set out on a mystery ride at the suggestion of their Lamas.”

“Yah … possible …”

“Maybe … that was like entering the space or mandala in which empowerment was to take place. Then there were the sounds and shapes created out of the iron disc and stone being shot – maybe these were the qualities of mantra and visualisation. Then there was the word empowerment – the few sentences spoken by DoKhyentsé and Dü’d’jom Lingpa. It seems as if the whole event reflects an empowerment.”

Rinpoche nodded cursorily. “So … why can’t this happen in the West?”

I had some answers – but they were all a bit apologetic. “Well …” I began “… the West’s so very different … somehow, the idea of a Lama getting a group of people to set out in cars, or motorcycles for some unknown destination … I mean … it’s possible, just rather unlikely. In the West, people need everything to be explained carefully before they’ll do—anything—even slightly unusual … and … the kind of people who’d do unusual things without explanation tend to be idiots – or mentally unstable.”

Rinpoche blew his nose at this point – but whether this was a reflection on me, idiots, or the West, or what I’d said about the West, was not entirely
“Well …” he commented “… you must know – but what makes you think that people in Tibet were different? Masters such as DoKhyentsé simply inspired great faith – and only such Lamas were known to act in such ways. Are there no such disciples in the West?”

This was not a question I could answer and so I explained that I could only speak from what I had seen. “There do seem to be disciples with great faith – especially around Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche – but beyond that I have no idea whether faith proves itself over the course of the lives of students of other Lamas. Faith is motivated by many different things in the West. I’ve seen a lot of short-term faith – and faith as a cloak for neurosis.”

Rinpoche considered what I had said – and, after having questioned me for a while on what I meant by ‘neurosis’, commented “Relationships like this were also common in Tibet – but whatever the situation – what else could be different which would make such means of transmission unlikely in the West?”

This was no point to give up and tell my Lama that I didn’t know – even though, at that point, I didn’t know. This was the point at which I had to start looking at the questions involved with great agility.

I grabbed at the first thing that presented itself and ran with it.

“It seems to me that the disciples of DoKhyentsé were wise enough not to ask questions when the circumstances were clearly part of an experience that was being provided. No one asked ‘Where are we going, Rinpoche?’ No one asked ‘What was the point of the display of fast and fancy shooting?’ That seems to be one big difference – people in the West would find it very difficult not to ask those questions.”

“Why …?” Rinpoche asked with evident interest in my answer.

“Because …” I replied “… we always think that we can understand the answers that we will be given in answer to our questions. I get the feeling that the disciples in the story are all aware that understanding either dawns or it doesn’t. These disciples are more used to learning through experience and we are more used to learning through the process of intellectual enquiry.”

A smile had been slowly emerging on Rinpoche’s face as my explanations unfolded. I knew that there’d be another question for me as soon as I ran out of breath.

“Yah – and so …” he asked immediately I’d concluded “… which is better?”

I knew immediately what the answer was, but I didn’t really know why. So I
gave the answer and took the chance that reasons would occur to me on-the-
hoof as our discussion proceeded. “Neither and both – they both have
advantages and disadvantages.”

Rinpoche gave a mixture of shout and laugh “Ha!” [pause] “Oh yah … now
you become extremely wise!” The Eagle beer appeared at this point and two
glasses were duly filled. “Oh yah” he laughed again.

“Well, not—so—wise, Rinpoche, I’m not completely clear why neither
approach is better.”

“Which is better for you?”

“I tend to come down on the side of the experiential approach in terms of
what I feel.”

Rinpoche nodded in a friendly way and indicated that I should simply think
aloud and work it out.

“Well … for those who can experience … for those whose openness to
experience is clear … to ask questions would be to interrupt the flow of what
they were observing … but for those who never understood what had
happened, it could have been better to have asked questions – although …
possibly … at a later point in terms of courtesy to their Lama.”

“Yah” Rinpoche nodded “Sometimes people are just faithful ’thom yors.
They have great faith … and great idiocy also. Such people act with respect
which comes from devotion – but they never—learn—anything. This was
common in Tibet. The disciples who did not understand were too passive. To
be passive in this way is to make respect into ignorance. You must—always—
be active in relation to the teachings. There’s a time to experience the display
of the Lama – and a time to ask questions.”

I thought about this for a moment. “It occurs to me that stupidity takes many
forms – and that intellectual questioning is one of them.”

“Yah” Rinpoche responded “The habit of asking intellectual questions is as
stupid as the habit of not asking any questions at all.”

“Maybe the style of teaching through symbols will develop in the West” I
ventured.

“Yah, maybe there will be more understanding because those who miss the
point will be able to ask. The important point is that one knows when to ask –
and when questions are an inappropriate interruption of the Lama’s activity.
You must not make the mistake of thinking that the Tibetan cultural habit with
the teacher is better than the Western cultural habit.”
tales of ’thom yors

“Oh yah—when you first came to see me—what did I say?” Rinpoche asked with a look that could have betokened mischievousness.

“Your first words—Rinpoche—were ‘What does this idiot want?’ … I remember it well.”

“Oh yah …” he laughed “… but—that—is not what ‘’thom yor’ really means. You—were—one kind of ’thom yor …sometimes …maybe not so often … but anyway … you were not a self-serving stubborn ’thom yor. You were not an obstinate, inflexible, intractable, intransigent ’thom yor …” [pause] “You were not really a ’thom yor at all …” [pause] “It was mainly your waistcoat … and your enormous beard.” Rinpoche laughed. “So … anyway … today I will tell you what ’thom yor can—really—mean …” [pause] “… this … is a story about DoKhyentsé and the second DoDrüpcchen. It is not a long story and I tell it to you just to make a point – not to ask you questions. You will understand very well what this story means.

“The first DoDrüpcchen was called Jig’mèd Thrin-lé ’ô-Zér – and he was a disciple of Jig’mèd Lingpa and it was said that he was a monk—but I do not know—it does not matter, he was a great yogi. His incarnation was Jig’mèd Phüntsog Jung-né. Then the third was Jig’mèd Ten-pé Nyima, then Thubten Thrin-lé Palzang, and now DoDrüpcchen Rinpoche is the fourth incarnation of that line, Rig’dzin Ten-pé Gyaltsen. He lives now in Gangtok in Sikkim.

“The second DoDrüpcchen founded DoDrü Gompa in Golok and did not dress like a monk. He did not wear the ngakpa dress either – but wore a white lambskin chuba like DoKhyentsé. This was a problem for the monastic authorities at DoDrü Gompa because they were idiots.

“Everywhere there are ’thom yors! Every religion has ’thom yors and they abound in every walk of life. Some ’thom yors are harmless, and, when they are well meaning, it’s not a problem to anyone – especially if they—know—they are ’thom yors. The problem comes” Rinpoche stressed with surprising conviction “when ’thom yors do not—know—that they are ’thom yors”…

… Now it just so happens that the idiots at DoDrü Gompa found themselves irritated by the fact that DoDrüpcchen was a ’phowa master who was widely recognised as such. What to do with such an embarrassment to the monastery? The white sheepskin chuba was severely bad news – but then DoDrüpcchen took a consort. This infuriated the major ecclesiastical idiots and he was forced to leave DoDrü Gompa. DoDrüpcchen left the area and travelled north. He went to the Chinese borderland and became the Lama of the Prince of Dar-tsé Do.
So … DoDrüpchen was out of the way at last – much to the relief of the idiots at DoDrüp Gompa. Time passed and they were happy in their daily round of meaningless mumbling. The coffers were accruing money and the prestige of the gompa was rising. The dignitaries had equipped themselves with finery – and the whole place had acquired an aroma of stultified sanctity to disguise the underlying banality of the institution. The idiots had all but forgotten about DoDrüpchen when some rather unfortunate news reached them. There’d been a widespread outbreak of smallpox in Dar-tsé Do – and DoDrüpchen, because all other methods had failed, took the nature of the disease on himself. He was a mahasiddha – and, through his power, everyone was cured of smallpox. So … what was the bad news? Surely this was good news. No. Not for idiots. For the monastic idiots in authority, this was a severe blow. Where would their prestige be if it came to be known that they’d ejected DoDrüpchen Rinpoche from DoDrüp gompa? This was the gompa he had founded … If it turned out that he was a mahasiddha—as his name gave him to be[180]—the idiots would be pilloried. It’s not a brilliant move for a gompa to cast out a realised master.

It doesn’t end there however – because idiots are never entirely without guile. It wasn’t long before the idiots had further concerns. They’d heard that DoDrüpchen was dying of smallpox – as a consequence of taking the disease upon himself.

“Well that’s good in a way …” one of the chief idiots proclaimed “… because then there’ll be another incarnation and we can bring him up to be a monk.”

“But what if the second DoDrüpchen manifested miraculous signs at his death?” chimed in another of his idiot colleagues-in-vestments “… that would reflect—extremely—badly on those who had cast him out! We’d look like idiots!”

After considering the problem for some time the idiots decided to send a delegation to Dar-tsé Do. They arrived and sought an audience with the dying DoDrüpchen. They were ushered into his room and explained the problem to him. “You see, Rinpoche … it’s like this. You’ve cured everyone in this district of smallpox. That is a very wonderful thing—of course—and it’s a real shame you’re dying and all … but … if … when you die … you manifest miracles … how would that look? How would it be for DoDrüp Gompa? It would not look good – would it? You see … you founded this gompa for the benefit of beings – and … it would be better for the gompa if its reputation were not stained by the fact that we rejected you …” [pause] “We think you will appreciate the delicacy of the situation …”

“Yah … I see your point …” he replied “… and I’m quite agreeable to what you want – so … I’ll do as you ask. I’ll die a normal death – it’s all the same
The delegation of idiots were relieved to hear this and departed for DoDrüp Gompa to give the senior idiots the good news.

The next day DoDrüpchen died in a manner perfectly in accordance with how one would ordinarily die of smallpox.

Now … when DoKhyentsé came to hear of this, he was furious. He mounted his horse and galloped directly to the Prince’s dwelling in Dar-tsé Do. Without any form of customary address to the Prince, he sought out DoDrüpchen’s room, threw open the door and pushed the attendants aside. He addressed the corpse with enormous force. “Hey, DoDrüpchen!” he yelled “D’you know so little that you die like a goddamn ’thom yor! You’re a great yogi! You’re a mahasiddha! How can you die like this?! Get up immediately and die properly!”

DoKhyentsé then shot his rifle into the ceiling much to the anxiety of those who were still in the room. Immediately on hearing the report of the gun, DoDrüpchen sprang into meditation posture and rose into the air. The room swirled with rainbow light and everyone who saw the miracle was overcome with joy and inspiration.

“Now go tell everyone you know – exactly what you saw here today!”

DoKhyentsé commanded – and sure enough that is exactly what they did. They weren’t reticent about it either – it was a once-in-a-lifetime story. DoKhyentsé left as quickly as he’d arrived – and called to everyone to witness the miracle at every turn and in every village he passed. News spread about as wide as news could ever spread—and further—and the idiots at DoDrüp Gompa were duly discommoded.

Rinpoche sat with a regal smile on his face. We sat smiling at each other for a while and then he nodded. Something was expected of me and so I told him what was on my mind.

“So, Rinpoche … I understand this. It’s quite straightforward – it’s a story about idiots being faced with their idiocy.”

“Oh yah …” [pause] “So … maybe nothing to say then.”

“No … not too much … but … there is something else that’s just occurred to me, that I could tell you.”

Rinpoche nodded his approval and I launched in. “DoDrüpchen concedes to the idiots – even though it’s plain that they’re idiots – and arrogant self-satisfied idiots to boot. I can understand that – even though I think that conceding to them was a pity in many ways.”

“Yah … if you listen to ’thom yors—if you take the advice of ’thom yors—you
become a 'thom yor’“ Rinpoche pointed out with a seriousness of tone.

“Yes … but—maybe—that’s not exactly what happened …”

Rinpoche grinned wolfishly at me. “Oh yah …” [pause] “… what then?”

“Well … DoDrüpchen’s acquiescence only makes sense to me – when it’s tied together with the fact that DoKhyentsé reverses his acquiescence … because—that—makes two things possible at once.”

Rinpoche gave the familiar air twist of his wrist that said ‘Go on then, tell me about it.’

“Well DoDrüpchen acquiesces – and shows himself to be completely indifferent to what people think of him. This shows him to be utterly beyond concern with appearances. He evidently has no self-interest. He’s content to die with the appearance of an ordinary person even though he isn’t – but then DoKhyentsé rides up and tells him to die like a yogi and so he does that too!”

“And then?” Rinpoche asked – almost in a whisper.

“Then, Rinpoche …” [pause] “… the idiots at DoDrüp Gompa would have to look at themselves extremely critically. DoDrüpchen acquiesced – but was overruled by DoKhyentsé. The idiots knew that DoDrüpchen tried to help them – but that his realisation had manifested in miracles anyway … and —this—might have made them think about their idiocy far more than if he’d ignored their entreaty about not manifesting miracles.”

“Yah—yah—yah … very good—very—good! But what kind of ’thom yor knows that DoDrüpchen can manifest miracles and yet asks him not to do so? É Hong!” [pause] “Do you really think that ’thom yors with motivation to preserve the bogus reputation of a gompa against their own ’thom yor actions would question their own motivation?”

I sat slightly perplexed at this. “Well … If I was one of the idiots … I’d certainly feel bad about myself.”

Rinpoche laughed at this. “Oh yah, I believe this completely – but you were not—that—kind of ’thom yor even when you were a ’thom yor.”

“What kind of—fool—was I?” I asked—in a sing-song manner—well aware that I was misquoting an early ’60s crooner’s ballad.[181] How would I ever explain the humour of that to Rinpoche?

He noticed my smile – and it was evident to me that he knew I’d made another of my incomprehensible Western jokes. He shook his head slightly and grinned. “Mmmm … what kind, eh … Maybe the kind who has pure vision – or who at least always tries to see the best in people.”
“Thank you, Rinpoche … but … isn’t it good to see the best in people?”

“Oh yah! But only if you do not miss the worst! If you miss the worst and find yourself and others to be cheated or tricked … then it is not so good …” [pause] “Now what do you say?”

“That I’m not the kind of idiot who would want to throw DoDrüpchen out of his own gompa in the first place. Then … I’m not the kind of idiot who would want to ask DoDrüpchen not to manifest miracles on his death.”

“No” Rinpoche nodded “You were not that kind of ’thom yor …” [pause] “You’re weren’t—really—a ’thom yor at all – not very consistently anyway …” [pause] “So … now I will tell you how the fourth DoDrüpchen gained realisation. He is two years older than me. He was enthroned very early—I don’t know how young, but very young—and of course they tried to make him a monk. He took gé-nyèn vows—but no more—and now he has a sang-yum”…

… At the age of twelve, DoDrüpchen’s Lama—Yuthog Chatral—came to see him – and, on this occasion, offered him a skull bowl of chang. DoDrüpchen was unsure as to whether to drink it because various ecclesiastic idiots were priming him for full monastic ordination.

Yuthog Chatral—observing some reticence in his disciple—said “You are DoDrüpchen! This is no way to embody Dzogchen!” At once DoDrüpchen realised his error – and also that there was no choice other than to drink the chang he had been offered.

His Tsawa’i Lama had given him a vajra command and he was obliged to accept it. He drained the skull bowl of chang in one draft. He then sat and stared into space. In that moment he understood the nature of Mind. He was entirely free of intoxication and Yuthog Chatral declared him to be a siddha. DoDrüpchen then composed this song of realisation:

*Today the nondual master has turned this would-be monk ‘round about—front to back and back to front—upside down and inside out—in order to show him the reality of Dzogchen— as the nature of Mind.*

Rinpoche was silent for a few moments after reciting the song of realisation. “So … as you see—even today—there are ’thom yors …and … ’thom yors who can transcend being ’thom yors.”

I smiled and Rinpoche juggled his head a little as if to say ‘Oh yah – it’s good that it can be overcome!’ [pause] “And you have overcome too! You are no longer a ’thom yor! This makes me very happy!”

Then he reached inside his bag and pulled out a little book wrapped in cloth. The pages seemed handwritten in a rather fine Tibetan cursive script with
which I was not familiar. “Oh yah!” he exclaimed having found what he was seeking. “So … more ’thom yors coming.” He laughed. “These ’thom yors lived about 800 years ago. What do you know about Kathog?”

“Kathog is one of the six main Nyingma lineages – and Kathog Dorje-den Gompa[182] is in Dér-gé[183] in the Southeast of Kham. It was founded by Dampa Désheg.[184]”

“Ha!” Rinpoche half exclaimed—half laughed “…and—you—say you will never be a scholar!”

He continued to chuckle “… never mind … anyhow Guru Rinpoche prophesied that on the slopes of a rock mountain in Kham—shaped like a lion—there’d be a great gompa called by the first syllable ‘Ka’. Dampa Désheg’s Lama—Jamgön Rinpoche—told him ‘If you go to Yulri Mountain, it would be a good place to settle.’

“So Dampa Désheg searched for the mountain – and eventually found it. The mountain resembled a lion – and it also displayed a naturally formed letter ‘Ka’ in the rock …” [pause] “So … Dampa Désheg built the gompa on top of the ‘Ka’ and named it Kathog. This means ‘on top of the Ka’ – and in this way Guru Rinpoche’s prediction was fulfilled …” [pause] “Dampa Désheg was also prophesied by Guru Rinpoche … did you know this too?”

“Not all of it, Rinpoche – all I knew was that Kathog meant ‘on top of Ka’ … and … that the mountain with the self-arisen ‘Ka’ was shaped like a lion.”

“Oh yah! So you knew everything anyway!” Rinpoche laughed “Never mind …” [pause] “But what you do not know about … is the ’thom yors there. There was a time after the establishment of Kathog when Dampa Désheg was giving an important empowerment and many people came from all the districts of Dér-gé. In Dér-gé—you know—they make beautiful work with iron and gold. Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche has a marvellous ga’u[185] like this from Dér-gé – did you see it when you were with him?

“Yes, Rinpoche – I remember that. It was black and gold filigree – and the black was matted so that it didn’t shine. I didn’t know it was iron. I’m amazed that such fine work can be executed with iron.”

“Oh yah, beautiful! … but not necessary for us …” [pause] “So … Dampa Désheg is giving the empowerment and the gompa is full”…

… The courtyard is full and everywhere around is full. Three country ngakpas have come – but they cannot get into the empowerment at all because there are so many people. They are country people—these ngakpas—so they simply climb a tree and sit in the branches where they can see Dampa Désheg and the whole empowerment.
Some monks see the three ngakpas roosting in the tree. One says “Hey – just look at that posy of pitiful pillocks up in that tree!” Another says “Yah – they look like a gaggle of senile vultures!”

Another says “What d’they think they’re at? They’ll not receive the empowerment like that – the idiots. They can’t get anything from that distance apart from septic splinters in the sphincter.” And so it went on until every idiot amongst the monastic community had dispensed some derogatory remark. The three ngakpas however—even though they were out of range for some things—were observing each phase of the empowerment with great care. They followed each mudra and made the kyil’khor mudra at the appropriate time. They recited the 100-syllable mantra of Dorje Sempa at the correct juncture and were cognizant of each transition. At the end of the empowerment Dampa Désheg sang a spontaneous song of realisation to the assembly:

É: Ma: Ho: Activities and appearances are without limit in their variety,

But within this kyil’khor it is most marvellous that three old ngakpas in a tree

Have received the empowerment that most of you—here present—missed.

“I like that story, Rinpoche.” Rinpoche raised his eyebrows in question and so I continued “I think that if there were many present-day examples like this – there’d be fewer people who would cheat themselves with the idea that there was a profitable future in idiocy.”

“Ha!” Rinpoche almost shouted in a form of mirth that was made of iron. “Yah … you have said this well. I like this …” [pause] “Anyhow … I have another story. It concerns vajra command—like the story of the young DoDrüpchen—but this time the command comes through action …” [pause] “… and this time there were no idiots involved”…

… This is an account of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo[186] and Lama Gar-mé. They were together at one time camped near a lake in Kham. Gar-mé was unwell – and living rough was not the best thing for his health at that time.

One day whilst picnicking with disciples, Khyentsé Wangpo began to fling pebbles at Gar-mé. At first Gar-mé simply shielded himself – but as the onslaught became more intense – he got up and started to run away. Khyentsé Wangpo immediately jumped up and followed him, hurling whatever pebbles he could grab from the lake shore.

It became evident to all who observed that Khyentsé Wangpo was driving Gar-mé toward the lake – but they simply sat and observed. Gar-mé reached the lake and waddled into it up to his neck whilst Khyentsé Wangpo continued to fling pebbles at him.
Gar-mé was finally summoned from the icy water and returned to the picnic party where he was able to dry himself by a fire which Khyentsé Wangpo had ordered to be lit.

Khyentsé Wangpo was not known to be a wisdom eccentric. His actions were usually entirely comprehensible – but on this occasion something entirely out of the ordinary was taking place. Transmission was the only possibility.

Some short time later, Lama Gar-mé’s illness disappeared and he lived to the age of 112. He lived in good health for the rest of his life – and whenever the subject was raised he always ascribed his recovery and consequent good health to the informal symbolic transmission he had received from Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo.

“Rinpoche …” I began as soon as his account was concluded. I was almost at bursting point with eagerness. “This reminds me of another story of informal symbolic transmission with Paltrül and DoKhyentsé.”

“What story is this?” Rinpoche asked in a pleasantly curious manner.

“It’s when DoKhyentsé dragged Paltrül around by his hair.”

“Oh yah! I like this story too much! You tell—me—this story!”

That was somehow slightly shocking – but Rinpoche was in jovial mood so I sallied forth.

“There was a time when Dza Paltrül was staying at a small Nyingma gompa. He did this sometimes on his travels because he loved to be with simple people in small unpretentious places”…

… Paltrül was alone—sitting in his room one morning—when DoKhyentsé rode into the courtyard. He sprang from his horse and stood in the courtyard assuming a threatening stance. “Paltrül!” he shouted “If you are up there—and if you have no fear—come down here and I will give you transmission!” Naturally Paltrül was delighted that his Tsawa’i Lama had come to see him and even more delighted that he was being offered transmission. He rushed down straightaway. He was in mid-prostration when DoKhyentsé seized him by the hair and proceeded to drag him around the courtyard. Now … as Paltrül was thus being dragged he happened to catch the smell of alcohol. As he was naturally almost abstemious, this thought crossed his mind: ‘Ah – this is the danger of alcohol. And this is why it was proscribed by Shakyamuni Buddha – because even such a great master as DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje can succumb to its detrimental effects, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.’

Now … no sooner had this degraded thought crossed his mind than DoKhyentsé let go of Paltrül’s hair – as if he’d discovered himself to have his hand in a puddle of pig’s vomit.
“You disgusting old dog!” DoKhyentsé yelled “How does a thought like this enter your mind?!” Then he spat in Paltrül’s face and showed him the sign of a crook’d little finger.

Rinpoche laughed heartily at this point in my rendition – and said “Show me this gesture!”

Now this was—not—easy for me. I knew that I’d have to show Rinpoche my little finger. I’d have to curl it in the correct way, too. The finger thus curled would insinuate that he who viewed it had a penchant for being sodomised. I was about as reticent as I’d ever been about doing anything and was on the verge of becoming an idiot again. I had to force my hand upward and curl that little finger – almost as if it were the dive I’d taken from the highest diving board at Aldershot swimming pool.

The obvious discomfort which accompanied my gesture made Rinpoche laugh even more. “Oh yah! You must now show this sign in that place up the hill!”[187] He then urged me to continue my story.

So … Paltrül, hearing these words “You disgusting old dog! How does a thought like this enter your mind?!” realised he’d made a huge and ugly error. As soon as this realisation arose – he froze and remained in the exact position that DoKhyentsé had let him fall. It was at that moment that he recognised the nature of Mind. He’d received informal symbolic transmission from DoKhyentsé.

After that event, whenever he gave the pointing-out instructions to his own disciples – he’d always say “I first realised the nature of Mind from my Tsawa’i Lama, DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje – and the secret name he gave me at that time was ‘Disgusting Old Dog’.”

“Yah!” Rinpoche pronounced in a commanding manner “Now you question me!”

Damn and blast … just when I thought I was riding high and all was well – this had to happen. What in hell was I going to ask? What was there that he didn’t know or understand? Rinpoche had the entire franchise on principle and function!

“Have you heard this story before, Rinpoche?”

“Yes” he laughed “Next question.”

“So … if you’d heard it before … why … did you want me to tell you the story?”

“Good!” he beamed “Now you become intelligent. Künzang Dorje is not just a story teller – as you know. I can tell stories – but the first importance is to give transmission …” [pause] “It is also interesting to me to see if you can
tell a story and if you can give it with the real meaning …” [pause]
“Something more?”

“No, Rinpoche …” [pause] “… no questions – but … this—is—Dzogchen men-ngag-dé, isn’t it? I am receiving transmission all the time … aren’t I? … or … rather, you are trying to give me transmission all the time.”

“Oh yah.”

There are three kinds of transmission in terms of Dzogchen: direct transmission; symbolic transmission; and oral transmission.[188]

Direct transmission is ‘mind-to-mind’ – no word is spoken. This is why Lama and disciple will sometimes sit in silence. This must have accounted a great deal for the silences to which—at first—I felt myself subject. If I could simply have sat silently without some circus-clown uproar in my head … I might have understood what Rinpoche was trying to impart far more quickly than I did.

Symbolic transmission functions through cryptic expressions—in conjunction with the display of a symbolic object[189]—which describe the nature of Mind. This occurred toward the end of my sojourn with Rinpoche. Symbolic transmission occurs in two ways. The first is as described and is called ‘formal symbolic transmission’. The second is ‘informal symbolic transmission’ – and this is what is being described in the encounter between Paltrül and DoKhyentsé. This kind of transmission can take any form at all. The two examples given in this chapter are somewhat violent – but that is not an essential characteristic. The Lama might simply tell a joke – or dance – or give a display of gurning.[190] The Lama might organise an unaccountable event or simply act out of character. The possibilities are limitless and are not open to second-guessing.

Oral transmission is any instruction or explanation which is given in the context of Dzogchen. This was in fact—as far as I was concerned—every word that Rinpoche uttered.

“Oh yah.”
why don’t you ride horses?

The day arrived—as they usually do, one after another—but this one was different. Rinpoche greeted me in an exceedingly affable manner. Affability was something that had become more common as our time had proceeded together. He no longer scowled at me as I walked through the door and he no longer barked at me. He no longer even shouted at me suddenly or asked me questions that almost made my bowels dissolve.

“How do you ride horses?”

“No, Rinpoche. I went for a donkey ride at the seaside when I was a child—but I don’t think that counts. I think it had digestive problems because it suffered almost constant flatulence the entire length of the beach…”

Rinpoche laughed and shook his head. “Why… don’t you ride horses?” Rinpoche asked—but seemingly out of curiosity rather than anything else. It was always odd when we had ostensibly normal conversation.

“No reason, Rinpoche—apart from the fact that it’s expensive. People like me don’t ride horses in England.” Rinpoche knitted his brow slightly. There was a question in his expression and so I took the cue. “I’m working class you see…and riding horses is something that isn’t normal for working class people. I don’t know how much it costs—but I’d have to be quite well off in order to do that.”

Rinpoche nodded slightly. “In Tibet I rode horses. Many Nyingma Lamas rode horses. DoKhyentsé rode and so did Dūd’jom Lingpa—you remember the story?”

“Yes, Rinpoche—I remember it well—it’s one of my favourite stories.”

“Yah…you—will—ride one day” Rinpoche commented quite matter-of-factly “Not soon—but maybe when you are my age it will come.”[191]

“Is it important for me to ride, Rinpoche?”

“Oh yah! You must ride! A ngakpa must ride! A ngakpa must be like Ling Gésar! We are warriors of Ling Gésar’s army! We must ride to overcome the savage ‘thom yors who harm others—and…you must teach your students to ride.”

Well—I had no students and the idea was almost inconceivable that I should ever be called upon to teach anyone anything—even though I’d once been working my way toward being an art school lecturer.

“So…I will become wealthy?”
“No” Rinpoche laughed “You will not need to become wealthy – just remember my words …” [pause] “They are only words for you to hear – no need to tell others about my words until there is some purpose. You will know when that time comes …” [pause] “Anyway … I have a story to tell you – about horse racing”…

… Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo, Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tha-yé and Cho’gyur Lingpa were all horsemen. They were good riders – and one day they came together and decided they’d have a race. They made no great secret of it – in fact they made sure that news got around. The perfect day was selected for the race and people began to make arrangements to be there. People came from considerable distances to witness this event – because when three such Lamas decide on such a thing, it’s obviously of paramount significance. You’d have to be an idiot not to understand that. No one knew why they’d decided to have this race and no one asked.

The fact that the decision had been made was quite enough.

The day arrived and there were getting on 1,000 people there to witness the spectacle. Many tents had been erected and food had been prepared for a great feast. The race commenced and was concluded. It wasn’t quite clear who won the race – but Jamgön Kongtrül came in last. Kongtrül wept. Rinpoche paused for some moments looking at me in a slightly wistful manner. After a while he nodded and continued “So … Khyentsé, Kongtrül and Cho’gyur Lingpa went to the feast – and, afterwards, Kongtrül went into retreat.”

Those who had seen Kongtrül weep were curious. It was incomprehensible that Kongtrül should weep merely because he’d come last in a horse race. The Golok riders didn’t weep—nor did the Khambas—so why should a great Lama like Kongtrül weep? It was not appropriate to ask—obviously—but when Kongtrül emerged from his retreat he explained “There was more in this race than winning and losing. I know from coming last that I will outlive Jamyang Khyentsé and Cho’gyur Lingpa. I shall still be running my race when they have gone to meet Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel in the dimension of the Copper Mountain.”

Rinpoche raised his glass of beer. “Kèlpa zang!” He took a draught to slake his thirst and said “Yah … I will win this ‘race of life’ before you – but you must be a rider …” [pause] “There is no reason to speak of this – but every moment is important … and … the time we spend together is transient. Even for the great Lamas there is sadness when such valuable friends die. It is not a problem to be sad – it is only a problem when there is self-obsessed clinging to fixed form. You can feel sad when you remember a friend who dies – but that sadness does not have to be a solid thing. You don’t have to carry it like great weight …” [pause] “You have known this sadness already,
I think.”

“Yes, Rinpoche … when my friends Ron and Steve died…”[192] [pause] “I am sad now when I mention their names. I could even cry if I let my mind settle on the times we spent together … but then it’s gone – and I feel fine in the next minute.”

“Yah … then you understand.”

We sat in silence for some time and it actually felt quite comfortable. There was no more to say and I got no sense that Rinpoche wanted me to leave. I occasionally took a sip of my beer. If the truth were known, I wanted to make that beer last as long as possible. The emptying of my glass often portended my dismissal – but that had been a less frequent occurrence of late. Suddenly Rinpoche spoke again. “You say … that when you were child … you rode a donkey.” I nodded.

“Did I tell you the story of how Drukpa Künlegs[193] taught a donkey to chant?” Rinpoche didn’t wait for an answer. “I will tell you that story now. It’s a good story”…

… Drukpa Künlegs arrived at a gompa one day – and found a monastic ritual in progress. It was one of those situations where the outer performance was good but there wasn’t much else. They were all well dressed.

“Some even had—very fine—dark—maroon—to-ngas like yours” Rinpoche interjected with a chuckle …

… The chant master was obviously very proud of his voice and made sure that however loud the monks chanted – he was always the loudest. The chant master wore an extremely high crested tsé-zha[194] that must have been the wonder of the assembly. He held notes longer and made sure that he was noticed in so doing. Drukpa Künlegs ambled in and plumped himself down without ceremony. He observed the situation for a while and shook his head with dismay. “‘thom yor …” he muttered and departed. The monks had noticed this individual come and go and were slightly apprehensive. Drukpa Künlegs was known to have arrived in the vicinity and they were wondering whether this was the man himself.

He was dressed unusually – like a hybrid between a ngakpa and a Golok warrior. Yes … it probably was Drukpa Künlegs.

The next day Drukpa Künlegs returned leading a donkey whom he had equipped with a tsé-zha; not anything near so fine as that worn by the chant master – but basically the same model.

As the monastic orchestra struck up their opening to the ritual, Drukpa Künlegs patted the donkey rhythmically and it began to bray in a similar
manner to the chant master. The chant master immediately called a halt to the proceeding and demanded to know why Drukpa Künlegs had chosen to insult him and defile the ceremony.

“Well…” Drukpa Künlegs replied “I was worried that you were going to strain your throat with all that loud chanting. I couldn’t see how you were going to keep it up day after day – and thought I’d bring in some help. My friend here has a fine voice – not quite equal to yours but most people wouldn’t know the difference.” Drukpa Künlegs rose to his feet and left the courtyard with his donkey – without waiting for a reply.

“Do you think, Rinpoche …” I asked “… if there was someone like Drukpa Künlegs at this present time – that something like that might still happen?”

Rinpoche laughed. “No … but it should happen …” [pause] “Maybe sometimes it happens still – but it is more subtle and hard to see …” [pause] “Anyhow … Drukpa Künlegs could act in this way because there was great respect. Even though some people were angry with him – they knew who he was. Nowadays … there are few great yogis. Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche is such a yogi and his activity is limitless. You must try to meet him one day. There are many stories about Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche.”[195]

“Do you think it would be good if there was someone as outrageous as Drukpa Künlegs today – who could cure idiocy?”

Rinpoche grinned. “Oh yah … good – but too many idiots and too few who would listen. Also … there is no use if a person just gets a bad name.

There are some Lamas[196] who have a bad name because there are too many idiots with high rank who make idiot comments – and … that causes confusion …” [pause] “Also … it is important that the result is seen as nondual activity … there is one story of Drukpa Künlegs that I will tell now”…

… There was a monk at one time—a good monk, as it happens—and he’d had a thangka painted of his yidam. He was sad however that he hadn’t been able to commission any gold-work to be incorporated into the image – as he was too poor for such an expense. Although he was poor, he was sincere and determined. He decided that as he could not afford gold he would make a pilgrimage to the monastery of Pema Lingpa and hope to ask that great Lama to authenticate his thangka. It was a long journey and he was worn out by the time he arrived at the foot of the hill on which Pema Lingpa’s gompa was situated. He decided to rest before the final ascent – and as he sat in the shade Drukpa Künlegs appeared walking down the road from the gompa. “You’re an old monk with a thangka, aren’t you!” The old monk nodded agreement with Drukpa Künlegs’ observation. “Yah! I thought as much! … but where
are you going with that thangka?”

The monk answered politely that he was hoping to see Pema Lingpa. “I hope he will be so kind as to authenticate my thangka.”

Drukpa Künlegs shook his head. “Pfff … the sodomites are all busy up there. Those who aren’t trying to memorise texts are dreaming of the buttocks of child-monks – and those who are too old for buggery are plotting mischief. Pema Lingpa has his work cut out trying to make any of them do anything sensible.”

Now—as it happens—the old monk was not an idiot and it occurred to him that he might be in the presence of Drukpa Künlegs.

Who else would speak in such as way? “If you are Drukpa Künlegs …and if Pema Lingpa is so busy … will you authenticate my thangka?”

“Ha! You know my name, do you!” [pause] “… but are you serious in your request?” [pause] “If you know who I am – then you must know that I am likely to do something disgraceful.”

The old monk looked a little nervous but replied “You are like Pema Lingpa – so I will be grateful if you would honour me by authenticating my thangka.”

Drukpa Künlegs asked him to unroll the thangka and stretch it out. As soon as it was thus unfurled Drukpa Künlegs flipped up his shamthab—whipped out his schlong—and urinated all over the thangka.

“There you are, my friend – that’s how Drukpa Künlegs authenticates a thangka – but now, I must be on my way.”

The poor monk was utterly shocked and stood aghast as the urine dripped from his thangka. He waited ’til the sun had dried it out and decided he’d better try to see Pema Lingpa after all. The thangka didn’t appear to be damaged – but he was unsure about the propriety of the act which Drukpa Künlegs had perpetrated. He knew that Drukpa Künlegs was famous for these actions – but what if it had not been Drukpa Künlegs? What if it had just been some meschugganah with a perverse sense of humour?

The old monk made his way up the hill and sought an audience with Pema Lingpa. To cut a long story short Pema Lingpa put the old monk’s mind at rest. “Sure it was Drukpa Künlegs! Just look at your thangka!” The old monk unrolled his thangka and found that it was ornamented with gold. “I wish I could get that maniac to piss on—our—thangkas!”

Rinpoche could see that I’d enjoyed the story. He poured more beer and announced “If you can gild thangkas like this – then you would be invited to piss on everything!” [pause] “Not every Lama is like Drukpa Künlegs or
DoKhyentsé. With less power—the acts must be less—but … in the present time there are too many ’thom yors – they have closed minds and gossip too much …

“You will find that there is a great deal of gossip around Dharma centres. Always—where there are ’thom yors—there is gossip. ’thom yors become frightened by what they don’t understand and they don’t have enough intelligence to look for the meaning according to Dharma. This is why we’ve talked so much about principle and function in the stories of Lamas.”

“I’ve met idiots …” I offered “… but the idea of ever doing anything to help them seems almost impossible – for me at least.”

“…” ’thom yors?” Rinpoche asked “What kind of ’thom yors?”

“Idiots like me, I suppose …”

“Ha! Now you try very hard to become a ’thom yor again …” Rinpoche stated flatly – but without any of the harshness of voice he’d employed during our initial discussions. “Tell me again – but without nonsense ’thom yor humility.”

“The idiots who want status …” [pause] “… but it’s more than that. Enjoying admiration isn’t such a big problem. I can enjoy praise and applause – as I did when I was on stage as a vocalist. The problem comes when people want applause at the expense of others. It’s when they’re selfish about it. When they’re unkind to others and try to exclude others. When they’re haughty and arrogant. When they use knowledge of Dharma to make others look stupid. When they point out the faults of others in order to look special. When … actually … the list could go on and on …”

Rinpoche laughed. “So—not—like you then?”

“Well … no … I don’t do—those—things. I do other things – and, probably, other people can see those things better than I can.”

“Yah!” he laughed “You wear the—big important-tulku—dark—maroon to nga!”

Rinpoche teased me about that to-nga quite often and I’d got used to it. It made me laugh every time he mentioned it, and I swore I’d give it away as soon as I could have another made.

“You can do nothing for this kind of ’thom yor – other than being natural. Just remain natural. Be friendly to all – but never let ’thom yors cause you problems either …” [pause] “Yah … so … tomorrow you must bring writing paper – because I will tell you something important and there may be many details.”[197]
you never ran away

“Yah … so after all – you never ran away” Rinpoche chuckled.

I was quite relaxed—or as relaxed as it was possible to be with Rinpoche—and so I replied “Did you think I would, Rinpoche?”

“No” Rinpoche laughed slapping his thighs with delight. “First I was—too afraid! Too afraid that you would—not—run away …” [pause] “Then … I was—glad—that you had not run away … but …” [pause] “… I knew you would stay – as soon as I saw you.”

“I knew I’d stay, Rinpoche … as soon as I saw you.” A bold comment – but I believed it. Rinpoche knew that I believed it – and simply smiled at me. Then it occurred to me to ask “Rinpoche … how did you—know—I’d not run away?”

Rinpoche laughed. “You have a—very—large beard!” [pause] “You looked like an Indian mahasiddha!” [pause] “… apart from the aristocratic tulku’s waistcoat.”

Then Rinpoche shook his head in disacknowledgement of what he’d just said. “No … not like this …” [pause] “I saw you in a dream … but you had white hair … so I was not sure. You looked like the man in my dream – but then … you are different in your manner. You are too polite and courteous – and—that—I did not expect …” [pause] “… but anyway … there are many things to tell … and … it is not good that I tell all of them now.

"So … today … I have many things to tell about DoKhyentsé … but… maybe I think you should cut your beard short like Nyima ’ö-Zér[198] – I think this is better.”

“As soon as I can find a beard trimmer, Rinpoche, I’ll be onto it – you can be assured.”

“Oh yah …” [pause] “I think maybe khandros will not like this long beard – and you will need to find a khandro to marry – so it is good that you will have a short beard like Nyima ’ö-Zér …” [pause] “So … anyway DoKhyentsé … well … aside from his sister—Khandro Losèl Drölma[199]—DoKhyentsé held Rigpa’i Raldri to be his closest disciple.” …

… Rigpa’i Raldri was his second-born son. Rigpa’i Raldri was a ngakpa—naturally—and of high realisation. His mind was inseparable from the mind of DoKhyentsé. He had two children: Tsé’dzin Wangmo and Do Rinpoche Zilngön Gyépa Dorje, who upheld DoKhyentsé’s lineage. Once DoKhyentsé went away travelling and he asked a disciple—a monk—to take care of his
wife—Sémo A-Kyong Drölma—and make sure that she had whatever she needed. While he was gone however … A-Kyong Drölma became pregnant—and this made the monk highly anxious. He went to her, quite embarrassed, saying “I don’t understand this—no one has been near you—and I did nothing with you—but DoKhyentsé will think I am responsible. Please—you must speak for me and say it was not me.”

A-Kyong Drölma said “Certainly … but you know … it’s strange. There I was, roasting tsampa when suddenly a flower appeared in the barley. I felt immediately that I should eat the flower—and later I had the sense that I was pregnant. Anyhow … don’t worry about a thing. I’ll ask DoKhyentsé about it. He’s bound to know what happened.”

A few years later when DoKhyentsé returned from his wanderings the monk approached him and apologised. “I’m sorry I didn’t care for your wife properly—for she became pregnant and has had a child.”

“Oh yah!” DoKhyentsé replied “Damn right! I know this! He’s my son!”

“But how can he be your son—when you weren’t here?”

“If you don’t believe me …” DoKhyentsé asserted “… bring me my sword.”

As soon as he received the sword he cut open the child’s chest and there was a yellow flower in the boy’s heart. “Do you see this!” DoKhyentsé exclaimed. “This is my essential sign!” DoKhyentsé then waved his hand and immediately his son’s chest closed—and from that time, he was given the name Rigpa’i Raldri—Sword of Nondual Awareness.

“I’m surprised … that the monk doubted what DoKhyentsé said.”

“You would—not—doubt?”

“It depends who told me a thing like that. If it was you or Düd’jom Rinpoche … I don’t think I’d be doubtful … even though it’s outside anything I know to be possible.”

Rinpoche said nothing—but it was not an awkward situation. He seemed to be waiting for me to continue.

“I don’t think that you necessarily—have—to doubt or believe. When something is outside my experience … what’s the purpose of believing—or—disbelieving?”

“Yah … and?” Rinpoche asked—obviously not displeased with what I’d said.

“Well … there are many miracles that are recorded in the history of the Nyingma Tradition. The lives of the mahasiddhas are full of miracles. These miracles are part of our history and there’s no need for me to have an
opinion about whether they happened in the dimension of vision or the
dimension of common reality …” [pause] “… and … these realities are not—
so—separate … as far as I can see.”

“Yah … most interesting … the Western mind …” Rinpoche sighed “… but it
is good. You do not make a ‘thom yor of yourself because of this. Tibetans see
things very differently from Western people and in both places there are
’t Thom yors who can only see in one way …” [pause] “You have a good heart
… and so … you have clarity …

“There is no need to become a Tibetan – but also there is no need to remain
within the Western view. A yogi must be totally beyond culture.”

It was time for beer. Rinpoche called and the lady of the house brought the
tray. This time there were fresh kapsé too – delicious Tibetan fried biscuits,
knotted into various designs.

“Rinpoche … there’s something else about that story. I find it strange that
the monk has no respect for what DoKhyentsé’s wife has to say. After all –
she is DoKhyentsé’s sang-yum.”

“Yah … and this means what to you?” Rinpoche’s voice was quite relaxed.

“It means—in terms of what I know—that the Lama is always Guru Rinpoche
for his disciples and his sang-yum is Yeshé Tsogyel. If that is how it should be
for Nyingmas – why does the monk not accept that something of a visionary
nature has occurred?”

Rinpoche smiled a slightly weary smile. “Yah … so it is. You are correct –
completely. This is culture. Tibetan culture is like this – but this is—not—
Vajrayana. I made before some comment on Western mind – but here
Western cultural mind is—better—than Tibetan cultural mind. In the West
women are free – but in our culture ngakmas cannot wear a white shamthab
in public because of what people would say. Such a woman would be scorned
and it would not be good for her. É Hong! It is disgusting! In the time of
Yeshé Tsogyel there were 3,000 female gô kar chang lo practitioners. In the
‘First Spread of Vajrayana’ there was—true—Vajrayana culture …” [pause]
“That is—you—task now: to make a true Vajrayana culture in the West.”

“This was Düd’jom Rinpoche’s request to me … that I work to establish and
propagate the gô kar chang lo’i dé in the West and help preserve it in the
East.”

“That is your—task now: to make a true Vajrayana culture in the West.”

Then there is no choice for you …” [pause] “I am glad that Düd’jom
Rinpoche asked this of you—very happy …” [pause] “To preserve the gô kar
chang lo’i dé will not be easy – because there is opposition from the wealthy
monasteries who wish to remain wealthy …
“I don’t speak of Könchog and the Nyingma monastery here in Tso Pema … Könchog is a very good Lama and a very good practitioner. He wears the monk’s robe but he is a real yogi … This good Pema Dorje, too – he is a good monk. You have good motivation—I know this—and you are not a politician – not a ‘thom yor … but … you are naive about Tibetans. We have a history of murder. There have been many good Lamas of all schools—gö kar chang lo and monastics—but also bad ones who live by politics. “There are people who will commit murder for power – or spread lies to separate friends. You must know this if you want to spread the gö kar chang lo. I cannot help you in this. I have no power in politics. All I can say is that you must avoid politicians …” [pause] “… and … have a clear mind.”

We sat in silence for a while – and as we did so, I contemplated Rinpoche’s words. I’d read Snellgrove and Richardson’s Cultural History of Tibet[200] so the idea of ecclesiastical pontiffs plotting assassinations was not a total shock to me. I knew that Reting Rinpoche had been murdered in the 1950s … but who’d want to murder me – Mister Nowhere Man? What threat would I ever pose to anyone? How many Western people would I ever encourage to become ngakpas and ngakmas?

The whole thing seemed improbable. I’d try my best to keep my promise to Düd’jom Rinpoche—naturally—but keeping that promise was not just down to me. Other people had to become interested. I could imagine a handful perhaps over the course of a lifetime – but never enough to worry those to whom it might pose a threat. The established monastic order was not going to get edgy about anything I might accomplish. However … I did not feel I could dismiss Rinpoche’s warning. He was not alarmist and had never said anything like this before.

Rinpoche had picked up the fact that I’d been ruminating. “Yah … do not worry now – there is nothing you can do. Düd’jom Rinpoche remains with us and he is powerful.

“He loves the gö kar chang lo’i dé as his own sons and he does much to help them. It is when he passes that you must be careful …” [pause] “Yah—now—there is more to say. You have heard of mi-gu[201] – you call them … Yeti – or abominable snowman.”[202] Rinpoche laughed at the term abominable snowman. “Oh yah … detestable, offensive, repulsive, repugnant – too funny … revolting, loathsome, nauseating, abhorrent, hideous, disgusting,[203] … really too funny—anyway—there is much to tell … DoKhyentsé and his disciple ’ö-Sel[204]—I mentioned him earlier—travelled to the old mountain hermitage of Zha-ra Lha-tsé”…

… They took with them only those things that could be loaded onto a horse. It was a long haul – a steep and winding trail. After an hour the horse went lame and lay on the ground. DoKhyentsé wanted to reach the hermitage
before nightfall – and so he told ’ö-Sel “*Stay here with the horse and find some water so he can drink. I’ll go to Zha-ra Lha-tsé and send help. Don’t worry, young lad – you will have my protection.*” As requested, ’ö-Sel stayed put and found water for the lame horse. Then he sat and watched as DoKhyentsé ascended and passed out of sight.

The track that led to Zha-ra Lha-tsé is merely a trace that leads through pine trees. The country there is wild and teeming with wildlife. ’ö-Sel was somewhat nervous about being left on his own – and darkness was descending.

By some quirk—soon after DoKhyentsé departed—the horse revived and got to its feet. It commenced nibbling the grass and seemed back to normal. ’ö-Sel considered following the trail that DoKhyentsé had taken – but he’d been told to stay put … Not the best situation in the world – but he had no choice.

It was soon utterly dark apart from ’ö-Sel’s small fire – over which he was brewing some tea. He reassured himself by remembering that DoKhyentsé had said he would send help and that he’d soon see a group of disciples to lend their support in the situation. He attempted to practise to gain a little calmness of mind – but he started hearing large wild animals away in the trees.

Then a large being covered in red hair stepped out of the trees. ’ö-Sel was terrified. The yeti didn’t speak or make a sound – but moved slowly towards his fire. Although partially frozen with fear ’ö-Sel offered the yeti a bowl of tea. The yeti accepted.

So there they were – ’ö-Sel and the yeti. They sat by the fire and drank tea. ’ö-Sel remained highly anxious – unsure what would happen next. When nothing untoward occurred ’ö-Sel rose and went to get some blankets from the back of the horse. He organised sleeping arrangements for the yeti and himself – and, incongruous though it was, they both lay down close to the fire and went to sleep. Neither spoke – but ’ö-Sel found it hard to sleep next to the yeti. Still wracked with anxiety he made supplication almost continuously to DoKhyentsé.

Just gone midnight, ’ö-Sel was startled from sleep by the loud growling of some animal and the frightened whinnying of the horse. He looked around to attempt to identify the source of the fearful sound. A tiger leapt from the trees and was about to maul the horse when the yeti killed the tiger by flinging a stone at it.

“I must tell you about this stone” Rinpoche commented. “*This stone is a special stone shaped like an egg – and yetis keep this stone in their armpit all the time … then—if they are in danger—they throw this stone and it always kills their adversary.*”
“Have you ever seen a yeti, Rinpoche?”

“Oh yah … but … never close. My uncle had the skin of a yeti hanging on his door – and … they say that there was a live yeti that was kept in the small zoo in Lhasa. I don’t know whether this is true …” [pause] “Have you seen?”

“No, Rinpoche, not live … but I’ve seen the scalp—attached to part of a skull —and hand of a yeti that they keep at Thyangboche Gompa near Everest. ”

“Yah … many people have seen yetis – it was not so strange for Tibetans … anyhow”…

… The yeti carefully skinned and cleaned the tiger skin and placed it on the horse’s pack. He then came back to the campfire which was still warm and went to sleep alongside ’ö-Sel.

In the morning however, the yeti had disappeared and ’ö-Sel wondered whether the events of the night had merely been a dream. As he was speculating about the event he turned ’round and saw the tiger-skin. Yes … it really had happened. It had not been a dream. ’ö-Sel then decided that he’d better head off in the direction of Zha-ra Lha-tsé. He didn’t want to spend another night out there with tigers and yetis – and even though the yeti seemed benign, ’ö-Sel found himself in a jittery state.

’ö-Sel eventually arrived at Zha-ra Lha-tsé – and found DoKhyentsé in the meditation hall – asleep on his throne. DoKhyentsé was sleeping deeply – and it took some while before ’ö-Sel was able to wake him. DoKhyentsé was not in good humour when he finally awoke. “Can’t I get any rest! You prayed to me all night long! All night long! It was impossible to sleep with all your concepts flying ’round my ears! Even when I sent the yeti to protect you, you were still calling to me! Get out of here, you goddamn ’thom yor, I’m exhausted – go away and let me get some sleep!”

’ö-Sel knew he’d acted like an idiot and went outside immediately to fetch the tiger skin – which he laid out where DoKhyentsé would see it as soon as he’d caught up on his sleep.

DoKhyentsé greeted ’ö-Sel on waking and treated him with great kindness – which made ’ö-Sel reflect on his previous lack of confidence in the promise of protection that he had been given. ’ö-Sel resolved not to be an idiot in the future.

After that time … whenever DoKhyentsé stayed at Zha-ra Lha-tsé the yeti visited him – bringing offerings of food. The yeti became his disciple – but remained extremely shy of other people. The yeti would only converse with him and his sister Khandro Losèl Drölma. One day the yeti took hold of DoKhyentsé and respectfully placed him across his back in order to carry him away into the woods up the side of Zha-ra Lha-tsé Mountain.
The assembly of disciples saw what happened – but were powerless to act due to the fact that the yeti ran too fast for them.

The yeti took him to a cave and placed him carefully on the floor. Left alone in the cave, DoKhyentsé found a heap of rilbus on a stone. He ate a rilbu each day and never felt hunger or thirst. One day—at dawn—the yeti returned and lifted him onto his back again and carried him down the mountain and back to the hermitage.

While DoKhyentsé was gone, his retinue of disciples were wracked with anxiety that he’d been thrown off a precipice or mauled by the yeti. When they saw him return they became almost hysterical and clung to his robes. He told them “The wonderful yeti gave me a great gift – rilbus made by Guru Rinpoche together with the twenty-five siddhas of Chhimphu!” Everyone was grateful to the yeti after that and treated him with great kindness whenever he appeared.

Some time after this incident DoKhyentsé called to ’ö-Sel, who was accompanying him, and said “Now we will leave Zha-ra Lha-tsé – but I shall ride the horse and another will be brought for you. Are you a good rider?”

“I’m sort of… average” replied ’ö-Sel.

“That’s neither here nor there, ’ö-Sel – you will ride well today.”

So they set out down the rough track – each leaning backward to assist the horses in their descent. They’d ridden for somewhat less than an hour when DoKhyentsé said “It is a long journey and it would be better if we were already further on our way. D’you see that river way down there?”

“I see it, Rinpoche.”

“That’s where we should be.”

’ö-Sel did not know what to make of this comment and sat astride his horse wondering what would happen next.

DoKhyentsé looked ’ö-Sel in the eye and said “If you have confidence … and if you are the hero I take you to be … then you will dismount and drive me and my horse over the brink just here. My horse will not jump into the abyss on his own.”

After the yeti scenario, ’ö-Sel knew that he had to act with confidence – so he said “Yes, Rinpoche – I’ll do as you ask even though I don’t understand what will happen.”

With that he dismounted—tethered his horse—and approached his Lama whose horse was standing by the brink. ’ö-Sel had to startle DoKhyentsé’s horse in order to make him jump – but with a violent heave the horse—with
his Lama still astride—vanished over the ledge.

’ö-Sel looked at the river below and saw nothing. DoKhyentsé and his horse were evidently dead and submerged in the torrent. ’ö-Sel let out a gut-wrenching scream. He’d killed his Tsawa’i Lama and it was not worth his living another moment.

He untethered his horse—mounted up—and rode some way back up the track he’d just descended with his Tsawa’i Lama. When he’d gone a suitable distance he turned and galloped his horse to the brink. His horse didn’t see the brink—due to the lay of the land—and plummeted into the ravine.

“Oh yah … so … now … there is a large boulder by the river at the bottom of the ravine – and, to this day, there’s an imprint of a man and a horse on its surface …” [pause] “I have seen this …” [pause] “What do you think of this?”

“I’ve seen the island circumnavigate the lake here in Tso Pema – so …” I added “… ideas of ‘possible and impossible’ have no fixed meaning for me.”

“Yah—good … so … when ’ö-Sel landed, he found he was not hurt”…

… the boulder was like a pillow. DoKhyentsé and his horse were waiting downstream as if nothing particularly bizarre had happened.

“After that strange event – no one ever fell off that precipice again …” [pause] “There are many accounts like this of DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje …” [pause] “Do you think … it would help you, if you had seen wonders like this?”

I considered this question for a moment – because there were various answers each predicated on different aspects of my experience as a practitioner.

“Well, Rinpoche … I don’t think I need to see anything like this in order to have confidence in you or in Vajrayana …” [pause] “But that doesn’t mean that such experience could not be helpful …” [pause] “It strikes me that the Lama has to set the thing up in any case – it’s not just a matter of seeing something miraculous. In fact … wanting to see something miraculous could be a big obstacle. As far as I can understand … Vajrayana doesn’t require miracles in order to prove its efficacy and you … don’t need to manifest miracles to assure me that you know my mind and the nature of Mind.”

Rinpoche took a sip of his beer and wiped his moistened lips with his forefinger. “Some things in the way of your Western thinking are very good …” [pause] “… but maybe not this long beard” Rinpoche laughed.

“As soon as I can get my hands on a beard trimmer, Rinpoche, I’ll set to it—be assured—it’ll be gone before I come back to see you next year.”

“Oh yah – then many khandros will be coming! But … you must only take
one wife.”

“I think I can promise that, Rinpoche.”

“Yah … if you take more than one wife – this causes many problems. Always fighting and other problems …” [pause] “And anyway … I do not think it is allowed by law in the West.”

“No, Rinpoche, it’s not. I wouldn’t want more than one wife in any case – because my wife would also be my best friend.”

“Oh yah – this you say very well.”

The day had been darkening and Rinpoche showed no sign of concluding our time together. “Tonight we have mo-mos – and you will eat with me …” [pause] “I also have whiskey. It’s not—good—whiskey as you have from Scotland – but it is not so bad … anyhow … it is good to drink whiskey with mo-mos.”

That was just fine by me. I thanked Rinpoche and he said “I’ve already sent a message to Könchog Rinpoche to say that you will dine with me – so no need to be concerned.”

Rinpoche talked with me about all kinds of things that evening. He gave a long account of the miracles of DoKhyentsé – but he advised that I make no notes. Later I wondered why – but I can see that Rinpoche was only interested in my taking notes when there was some need in terms of principle and function. The miracle stories were presented to me—as far as I can see—purely out of his kindness and as a statement to the effect that he no longer regarded me as a goddamn idiot.
Rinpoche had been grinning quietly—off and on—for a while after we’d eaten lunch. Occasionally he’d nod or make some slight sound—as if he were agreeing with himself.

“Oh yah …” he suddenly commenced “There were wonderful madmen in Tibet! Some madwomen too—but very little has been written. This is not so good—but ’thom yors do not like to hear of women …” [pause] “When dualised people see people with nondual realisation they think they are mad …” [pause] “Have people ever said that you were mad?”

“A boy called me an imbecile at school when I was twelve—but that was because I didn’t like football.”

“Oh yah—ball-kicking …” Rinpoche shook his head with evident derision. “Why are people kicking balls? What is happening when they kick the ball?”

“It causes them enjoyment, Rinpoche.”

“Is there the same enjoyment when they kick rocks?”

“That’s hard to say, Rinpoche … I think idiots would probably enjoy kicking anything.”

“What are they doing with this—always—kicking?”

“The idea is that they kick the ball through posts with a net behind it. There are two teams. Each team defends its net from the ball being kicked into it. Then—at the same time—each team tries to kick the ball into the net of the other side. Whichever team kicks the ball into the other side’s net the most times wins.”

“And this makes them happy?”

“It seems to, Rinpoche.”

“Yah … ’thom yors … never mind. I am happy that ball-kicking does not make you happy.”

“No, Rinpoche—I’ve always avoided it whenever I could.”

Rinpoche thought this idea was entirely ridiculous and laughed heartily. “That they said—you—were a ’thom yor because—you—didn’t enjoy this! That is too funny!” [pause] “When ’thom yors see that others don’t like the things that please ’thom yors—they say others are ’thom yors.”

Rinpoche sat in silence for a while—smiling and simply seeming to enjoy the colours of the room. I did likewise. I’d told Rinpoche that sometimes I simply
sat and enjoyed colours and he’d opined that this was a worthy occupation.

After a while he recommenced. “Yah … anyhow … in Tibet there was Ngak’chang Kong Myon. [206] Then there was Kham Myon Dharma Seng-gé[207] – the Mad Dharma Lion of Kham. Also … there was Tsé-kyä Myonpa Chingkar Donyö Dorje – the Momentous Maniacal Thunderbolt Clad in White Felt. [208] He was a previous incarnation of Trülshik Rinpoche – and he is a very good monastic Lama now. Then … Myonpa Çe-tsün Seng-gé Wangchuk – the Insane Lion of Mastery Who Never Gossiped; and, Tsang Myon Héruka Ru-pa’i Gyan-čan[209] – the Madman of Tsang Festooned with Human Bone Cemetery Ornaments …” [pause] “These were all wonderful gö kar chang lo Lamas! It is good even to know their names!”

I told Rinpoche that I’d made note of all their names and would check the spellings with Pema Dorje later.

“Yah good … and then … Drukpa Künlegs …” Rinpoche added. “I will speak of him now as there are very many stories concerning him. He was another miraculous maniac …” [pause] “Drukpa Künlegs … decided at one time to subjugate the demon at Wang-gom Sar-kha. That’s in the country near Thimphu in Bhutan”…

… The demon had been killing people – to show that he was a power to be reckoned with. He usually lay up in an inaccessible valley high in the mountains to which he’d carry his victims. He’d carried on murdering folks ’til there was only one elderly lady left. Drukpa Künlegs climbed up into the valley and took his rest – with his bow, quiver, and sword as a pillow. When supine he positioned a pot of tsampa close to his side. He then pulled in his stomach, smeared tsampa on his buttocks, and contrived an erection. He then relaxed and awaited the demon, who arrived surprisingly quickly.

“A-dzi![210] A-dzi! What—is—this thing? I’ve never seen the like! Is it perhaps … edible?” the demon shouted to his minions, who’d just descended like a swarm of flies on rotten meat. Some thought Drukpa Künlegs was dead. Some thought he was alive. Others couldn’t make up their minds and said “Y’know … if we don’t know what it is … it might be better not to eat it.”

One of the other minions said “Sure … the body’s warm, so it can’t be dead – but it isn’t breathing, so it can’t be alive. There’s tsampa in the pot, so he can’t have died of hunger – but his stomach’s empty, so he can’t have eaten himself to death.” Then another minion piped up “There are weapons under his head, so he can’t have died of fear – but his schlong is still erect – so he must have been alive and having fun just before we arrived … but … he also has worms in his anus … so … he can’t have been alive for some days …”

“Yah …” the first minion concurred “… whoever he is … he looks extremely
—bad—eating … so we should just leave him here to rot.”

“Yah …” said the demon after consideration “… whatever … Anyhow, let’s go get the old lady. At least she’s not a mysterious glob of confusion – besides which that goddamn schlong of his gives me the willies.”

Once the demon and his minions had departed, Drukpa Künlegs departed. First he went to visit a yogini called Pema Ting’dzin who lived near the elderly lady in a cave called the Lion’s Victory-Banner. He told her that a demon would be coming to call on her – but she should not be alarmed because the demon would be merely seeking his help. “Just use your natural wit …” he said “… and send him to me for the cure he’ll require.”

Then Drukpa Künlegs legged it up the hill to see the elderly lady. He rapped on the door “Hey! Lady of the house! How are you doing in there? Here’s Drukpa Künlegs come to see you!”

“Welcome—welcome—welcome!” she called out.

“How the hell are you, my good woman!”

“I’m none too good right now, I’m afraid …” she replied sadly.

“What’s the deal? Tell me about it – and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Well—you know how it is—I was wealthy once – but there are no yogis hereabouts … and due to that there’s been a goddamn demon making free with folk for his dinner. I wasn’t expecting to get through the night until you showed – but … you needn’t remain. Go while you can or you’ll be eaten and that’s for sure. If I’m not here tomorrow – just take anything you like to support your practice.”

“Yah, yah, yah … sod the demon – he’ll not eat me” Drukpa Künlegs replied “I’m not in the habit of letting myself be eaten by demons. I’ll stay with you tonight … and—by the way—you wouldn’t happen to have any chang laid by, would you? I have the very devil of a thirst on me!”

“Sure” the elderly lady replied “I have plenty of good fresh chang – and you’re welcome to it.”

“That’s just the kind of thing I like to hear” Drukpa Künlegs laughed and they went inside.

That evening as they were both quaffing the chang … dusk descended – and it was then, as you’d expect, that the demon arrived and began beating the hell out of the door.

The poor lady was terrified—as you can imagine—but Drukpa Künlegs reassured her. “You just lie low and I’ll deal with the situation. I’m used to this kind of thing.”
Drukpa Künlegs went to the lady’s front door, summoned up an erection, and thrust his schlong through a hole in the door. The demon had been looking into the hole at the time – and such was the force with which Drukpa Künlegs thrust his schlong through the door, that it knocked out a fair assortment of the demon’s teeth. The demon wailed in pain—screamed—and disappeared down the valley. He didn’t stop ’til he came to Pema Ting’dzin’s cave where she was sitting in meditation.

The demon saw her and decided to beg for her help. “Naljorma! Some maniac bastard just smashed out my goddamn teeth! He whacked me in the mouth with an immense iron schlong!”

Pema Ting’dzin mused “Well now … tell me … where did this happen?”

“At the old woman’s house in Gom Sar-kha” groaned the demon.

“Was he a layman or a monk?” she enquired.

“Neither – I don’t know what he was – but he was a crazy bastard for sure – and as weird as hell into the bargain!”

“Ah …” Pema Ting’dzin responded “You’ve been mutilated by a miracle!”

“What’s that mean?” the demon moaned.

“Well, one thing it means is that you’ve got the kind of wound that never heals.”

“That’s terrible!” cried the demon “Are you sure?”

“Sure I’m sure – sure as I ever could be. If you doubt me, check this out …” At that she hitched up her shamthab and spread her legs wide. “The wound you see here was caused by—that very same weapon—and I can assure you there ain’t no cure.”

The demon took a closer look and saw that the wound bore signs of blood. “Argh! You are right! This wound has not healed! I guess mine’s going to be the same … this is terrible!”

“Yah … that’s about the way of it … but listen … I have an idea … Why not go back to the old lady’s house and talk with the fellow who whacked you with his miraculous schlong. He’s still there—I’m certain sure—and if I’m not mistaken, he’s called Drukpa Künlegs. I think … if you vow—never—to harm people again … he may be able to cure you.”

“Really? You think so?” the demon asked in desperation.

“I think so – I surely—do—think so. You just get your ass back up there – just as fast as you can.”

So … the demon—keen for his wound to heal—returned immediately to the
lady’s house and called for Drukpa Künlegs. “I’m real sorry! I’m real sorry I ate everyone … well … apart from the old lady that is …” [pause] “Drukpa Künlegs, d’you hear me?! I really—am—so—goddamn—sorry! If you’ll just cure me – I promise never to eat anyone again.”

Drukpa Künlegs heard and came out to see the demon. “Yah—yah—yah … here you are, you goddamn omnivore! But not so much of an omnivore that you’d have the courage to eat me when I was such easy meat yesterday!”

“That was you?!” the demon cried.

“Sure was!” Drukpa Künlegs said “I have many guises and I can appear anywhere at any time – so if you want to make a promise not to eat people —ever again—I’ll heal that wound.”

“I promise—I promise—I promise!” moaned the demon “I’m real sorry I ate everyone! Well … apart from the old lady, that is … and I never ate her … as you know.”

So that’s how it turned out that Drukpa Künlegs furnished the demon with a quick flick on the head with his schlong. He gave him the gé-nyèn vows of the five precepts together with the name Ox-Devil. He made him a protector of the locality – and, to this day, offerings are still made to him.

“Oh yah!” Rinpoche exclaimed “There are many stories of Drukpa Künlegs like this – and they mainly concern unconventional behaviour …” [pause] “Vajrayana is not conventional.

“Convention belongs to dualism – and, although there are methods and systems, Drukpa Künlegs shows that the essence of Vajrayana is beyond all systems.”

“Something struck me in this—along these lines—Rinpoche …” I decided I’d follow an idea that had occurred to me. Rinpoche nodded to me – indicating that I should say what I had to say. “Well … it’s the way the story begins … where Drukpa Künlegs confuses the demon and his minions simply by providing them with conflicting information. The demon and his minions are easy to confuse – simply because they can only think in categories …” [pause] “… categories like ‘what’s alive and what’s dead’. It’s dead for this reason – and alive for that reason. The end result is that there’s nothing about the body they can comprehend. Therefore they come to the conclusion that they can’t eat it. It’s perhaps like that with how people view the nondual state. It satisfies nothing that we—think—we want … therefore we don’t want it – even though we—say—we want it.”

Rinpoche smiled at me. “Oh yah! You—see—now—what Künzang Dorje does—not—see!” [pause] “Now Künzang Dorje becomes a ‘thom yor’” he laughed. “Now you must shout at me!”
I was about to protest this statement, when Rinpoche—aware that I was about to contest it—frowned in obvious mock severity. Then he laughed. “I will tell another story of Drukpa Künlegs”…

… Standing by the Lhang River, Drukpa Künlegs looked up into the hills and decided to take a stroll. He was not sure what direction to take or how far to travel; so he whipped an arrow from his quiver—fitted it into his bow—and shot it high into the air. “Guess I’ll go find it and stay the night wherever it’s fallen.”

He then started a long ascent up out of the Lhangtso Valley. After some hours Drukpa Künlegs saw the Lha Dzong Demoness approaching. She was dressed in bizarre raiment the like of which defied description. He whipped out his schlong—as was his wont—summoned up an erection and transformed it into a pillar that ascended into the sky. The Lha Dzong Demoness was aghast at the sight of such an immense schlong—and changed into a venomous snake in order to escape the sight of it.

Drukpa Künlegs summarily placed his foot on her head and her outer form was petrified. It can now be seen as a shape in the stone in the track that leads up from the river. He then oath-bound her to protect practitioners in that area, and today she is the protector of the Lhang River.

With this accomplished, Drukpa Künlegs continued on his way—and eventually arrived at the door of Töpa Tséwang’s dwelling. This is where his arrow had fallen. ‘Time to take a leak’ he thought and urinated against the wall.

“What an enormous schlong that ngakpa has!” some observant children commented in amazement “… and … check the size of his scrotum!”

Drukpa Künlegs laughed at their astonishment. “In the summer when the blue ku-jug bird sings, my schlong’s pretty long and my nuts hang low. In the winter when the purple stag rears its head, the head of my penis expands. All year ’round it’s an insatiable creature that cares little about the seasons!”

When he heard this song, Töpa Tséwang ran down to greet Drukpa Künlegs. “Thank you, Drukpa Künlegs, for ridding us of the demoness—and—for pissing on my wall! I have chang for you – please come in.”

“Yah—yah—yah …” Drukpa Künlegs replied “It’s thirsty work oath-binding a demoness.”

Once inside the house he asked “So—Tséwang—tell me, where’s my goddamn arrow?”

“Right here – please stay and rest at my home. I would be honoured.”

“Sure, good man—I’ll be happy to do that—but hey, who’s the—extremely—
lovely lady?”

“That’s my wife – Rig’dzin Norbu” the good-natured fellow replied.

Drukpa Künlegs took her in at a glance. “Well that’s as may be …” he smiled “… my arrow hasn’t gone astray – it’s taken me directly to this voluptuous emanation of wisdom-display. Tséwang—my good man—you’ll oblige me by leaving us in privacy for a while.”

Tséwang was not well pleased with this arrangement – Rig’dzin Norbu being his wife and all. “Damn your eyes, you riotous libidinous wretch!” he yelled, grabbing his sword from the wall. “I offer you hospitality after you piss on my goddamn wall – and then, you have the effrontery to tell me to get outta my own room so you can roger my wife! You may try this kind of trick in Tibet – but folks here in Bhutan don’t take none too kindly to it!”

Tséwang lobbed his sword – but Drukpa Künlegs caught it in mid-air and tied it in a knot and pitched it back. At the same time he caught Rig’dzin Norbu by the waist—flipped up her dress—and whisked her onto his lap. Rig’dzin Norbu had little or no say in the matter.

“Oh … I see …” Tséwang apologised profusely – having just witnessed the miracle of the knotted sword. “I didn’t actually—know—you were a realised being … had I understood that I’d not have acted like an ape … anyhow—you just go ahead—never mind about me … And … stay here as my Lama for the rest of my life … if you will.”

“Yah—yah—yah—I’ll stay a while and we’ll see what happens— but, in the meanwhile, as you can see – your wife and I are rather busy bonking, so we’ll see you later when I’m less preoccupied.”

During the time that Drukpa Künlegs stayed there Rig’dzin Norbu conceived and gave birth to a child who was the incarnation of a Lama.[211] He was named Ngawang Ten’dzin and he grew up to be a powerful ngakpa who founded a great hermitage.

“What do you say to this story?” Rinpoche asked.

“Sounds as if I’d better learn to tie knots in swords, Rinpoche.”

Rinpoche burst out laughing. “Yah! Now you make jokes with Künzang Dorje! This—I think—is your real character!” [pause] “But what else can you say?”

“It shows a world where Drukpa Künlegs is understood … and … it makes me think that life would be astonishing if that were still possible.”

“Oh yah … people like these stories – but they do not like it when these things happen in their own time. Then they are full of concepts and
pretensions."

“It also occurs to me, Rinpoche, that this story is like a … template.” I then had to describe a template. “I use that word because I really—don’t—want to call it an analogy – as if it had another meaning that was hidden in its form.

“It seems to me … that you could change each aspect of the story for another image or action and it would be equally as strange …” [pause] “I mean … the main point is that no one—understands—what Drukpa Künlegs is doing – rather like young children watching a parent changing a fuse or attaching a plug to the end of an electrical cable …” [pause] “The end result is that the light works again – and maybe the child connects the activity with the result and is amazed.”

“Oh yah! This you are saying well …” [pause] “Maybe then – there could be many like Drukpa Künlegs in the West who will act in many different ways.”

“The main thing—for me—Rinpoche, is that a Lama sets out to teach students and may have to orchestrate situations over a long period of time …” [pause] “… and during that time the students might not understand why the Lama does or says or wears … whatever …”

“Oh yah – maybe you think this is what Künzang Dorje does?”

“Definitely, Rinpoche.”

He laughed “Oh yah – now nothing is hidden from you in these stories …” [pause] “So … maybe now … I will tell something of his teaching”…

… Drukpa Künlegs was once staying in Ja-yul in the dwelling of the local prince. Now … there just happened to be a bunch of scholars there and they were doing what scholars do – picking words in the way that beggars pick nits. And they, too, were beggars in their own way because none of them had any real understanding – and this is why they were impoverished.

These scholars however weren’t averse to chang and so Drukpa Künlegs sat with them and shot the breeze awhile.

“Say, my good man …” one of the scholars asked “… how is it that you dress the way you do?”

“Well … it’s all there in the morning—I put it all on … and … there it is … It’s really quite simple. What method do you employ?”

“… what I mean …” said the scholar as if addressing an idiot “… is that you wear a to-nqa like a Lama – but you wear it over the coat of a brigand. You wear the skirt of a monk – but it’s white. You wear the conch earrings of a yogi – but the bow and arrows of a hunter. How d’you account for that – eh?”
“Yah—yah—yah, that’s easily explained” Drukpa Künlegs replied with an idle toss of his head. “I wear the to-ngā of a Lama because that seems to be what I am – but if I looked too much like a Lama there’d be problems.”

“If people took me for a Lama, I’d just become the servant of Lama-attendants who’d have me running from place to place babbling and ceremonialisng until I had no time to sit gazing into the sky. I wear a skirt like a monk’s because my discipline is perfect in every action. My skirt however, is undyed cotton – the unchanged, uncreated, unstained reflection of primal purity. If I looked too much like a monk there’d be problems. If people took me for a monk, I’d have to keep all the external disciplines when very few others keep them – and what would be the point of that? The external disciplines are merely there to support the inner disciplines – and I maintain those anyway. I wear the earrings of a yogi – because that seems to be what I am – but if I looked too much like a yogi there’d be problems. If people took me for a yogi, I’d have to endure people viewing me as some kind of celebrity – and what would be the point of that? I’d have to give transmission to aspirants on how to discover the nature of Mind – as if it weren’t already quite obvious.”

“Yes …” another scholar chipped in “… that’s all fine and good – but why do you go here and there like a stray dog never staying in one place and sniffing at the butt of every bitch you see? You get spiritual people like us a bad name with all this carrying on.”

“Yah—yah—yah … and so you say …” Drukpa Künlegs retorted. “Whether I’m a bad example or not depends entirely on the perspective of those who witness my behaviour. You see … if an exemplary scholar—like yourself—happens to be hell-bent on entering a dimension of confusion, characterised by contorted self-destruction … then assuming external pretensions that give the appearance of saintliness will not help.

“If a mercurial maniac wearing mixed dress happens to find himself in the nondual state … then assuming the appearance of saintliness is irrelevant. As for being a dog with an acute sense of smell – this is far preferable to sitting all day with your nose rammed into the rectum of righteously written reams – questing for quintessential quim, when it’s there—right under your nose—even as we speak. As for wandering here and there—as it pleases me—why would I want to stay in one place? Merely to gather wealth and hide it like a dog hides bones?

“Although the initial intention in establishing a gompa is highly commendable – the original purpose is often forgotten and the inhabitants of the place spend their days grumbling and growling like dogs. Like dogs they waste their time sniffing the turds of other dogs – to see whether they are as learned as the other famous professors of faeces. Can you honestly say this
isn’t the case?”

The scholars felt a little edgy at this point and asked what kind of vows he kept to maintain his singular view.

“Yah … fair enough – I will tell you …” Drukpa Künlegs sighed.

“I can’t say as I chant refuge to Buddha, Dharma, Sangha every day like you fellers – but I live the three secret oral instructions in every moment. Think on that a while – and take it to heart. I can’t say as I recite and visualise every day like you fellers, to gain the power of the yidam – but I sure refrain from blighting others with maledictions as if they were opponents. Think on that a while – and take it to heart. I can’t say as I spend much time on ritual and ceremonies like you fellers, to protect myself from nonexistent threats – but I sure abstain from wreaking vengeance on enemies I haven’t got.

Think on that a while – and take it to heart. I can’t say as I meditate on emptiness like you fellers – but I sure dwell in the state where emptiness and form are nondual and therefore have no need to empty mind of the movement of natural energy. Think on that a while – and take it to heart. I can’t say as I constrict, control, and contrive my behaviour like you fellers – but I sure steer clear of hypocrisy, duplicity, and self-deceit. Think on that a while – and take it to heart. I can’t say as people recognise me none too well, in terms of the usual spiritual criteria – I mean, I’m not like you fellers – but I sure have no yearning for realisation in the future.

“Think on that a while, my friends—these are my vows—and maybe you all can take them to heart.”

At this the scholars were dumbfounded – but appreciative. Each according to his own perspective asked Drukpa Künlegs to extrapolate a little further on the points he made – and all acknowledged him to be without peer.

“It seems …” I began “… that Drukpa Künlegs was always coming up against the ways in which the approach to Dharma was being distorted …” [pause] “I don’t have much to say about the content – because it’s pretty much self-explanatory … but … it makes me feel as if there ought to be a modern-day version of this for Western people. There ought to be a Western Drukpa Künlegs – who could point to problems of view in the same way.”

Rinpoche laughed heartily at this. “Oh yah – you become Drukpa Künlegs?”

“No, Rinpoche, that wouldn’t work – and not because I’m being a self-effacing groveller or anything like that. You know I’ve done with humile affectations …” [pause] “… it’s … just that a person would have to be able to have an audience. At least people would ask Drukpa Künlegs questions and listen to his answers. I think that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche is definitely a
manifestation of Drukpa Künlegs – and he certainly blows people’s distorted ideas apart …” [pause] “… but there’s plenty of resentment aimed at him from certain quarters …”

“Oh yah … I have heard this also – but the same was true for Drukpa Künlegs …” [pause] “I think … maybe one day you will say something … maybe not so loud … maybe not so strong … but one day you will say something.”

We talked well into the evening and it was late by the time I retired to bed – to dream about yetis and horses leaping from rocky crags. They were not dreams of clarity or anything of that sort – simply the after-image of inspiration – a mirage left in the eyes after catching a glimpse of the sun.
peculiar vestments

“Yah … and so … there is a story about Milarépa that I like—too—much. I will tell you this story – because again it concerns ’thom yors …” [pause] “You know … I have seen many thangkas of Marpa—the Lama of Milarépa—and in these he is most often shown with short hair … almost like a monk …” [pause] “This is not as he should be shown. Marpa was a ngakpa and —should—be shown with long hair. I have seen thangkas like this also – but not many …” [pause] “Also … he should be wearing white – and this I have also seen – but not often.”

“Why do they show Marpa in layman’s dress, Rinpoche?”

“Because he has a wife … and because monastic ’thom yors cannot stand to show gö kar chang lo’i dé costume. They have to revere Marpa – but they also want to show that he is a layman. This is the mixed thinking of ’thom yors who try to prove something that makes no sense.”

“Ah … I see … so some people wanted to venerate Marpa at the same time as disparaging the gö kar chang lo’i dé – and this is the result.”

Rinpoche nodded. “So … it is quite simple …” [pause] “Yah … anyway … Milarépa was sitting once—high in the mountains—and he was naked because his clothes had worn out”…

… Milarépa had no great concern about his nakedness. He felt no cold – besides which the weather was pleasant and so there was no need to leave the mountains just to find some clothing.

Now at the time—unbeknownst to Milarépa—his sister Pé-ta Gönkyi had decided to make a visit to her incomparable brother. Pé-ta travelled a long way to see him and walked a long way up into the mountains. It’s a virtuous thing to do—if you can’t meditate—and great merit is thereby accrued.

“The idea …” Rinpoche added, in an offhand way “… is that you can gain enough merit through this kind of act – that you can create causes for meditation in a future life.” Rinpoche snorted with derision. “If it’s so important to be able to meditate in the future that you have to walk half-way across Tibet – why not meditate in this life?!”

“Yes … certainly … I see that … but …”

“But what …?” Rinpoche asked with a mischievous grin “What do you say …?”

“That’s … Tibetan culture, isn’t it?”

“Oh yah … Tibetan culture … every culture has its blindness – and this is the
blindness of Tibetans …” [pause] “Western people don’t—have—to learn to be blind in this way. They have their own blindness already without having to be blind like Tibetans as well …” [pause] “It’s best for Western people to learn pure essential teachings and learn to see clearly.”

“Yes” I replied – somehow knowing that Rinpoche wasn’t going to shout ‘I didn’t ask for you to agree with me!’ Sure enough, he didn’t – so I continued. “I see that in most people who come to study Dharma here. There are those who accept Tibetan culture as if it were Dharma – and there are those who reject Dharma because of Tibetan culture … and … I find myself … unable to associate with either point of view …” [pause] “Or rather – they have no interest in associating with me.”

Rinpoche laughed “Oh yah – but this is good! It is not possible to be a yogi and have friends who are ’thom yors. A yogi must live alone. To be a real yogi you must be independent. You must be friendly with everyone but seek friendship from none. Maybe you will have no friends at all … that is possible.”

No friends at all … that was a somewhat ghastly notion. I sat silently with that – without being able to form any line of thought. There was just a brooding sense of doom …

“Yah … and so … what do you think?”

“I haven’t had any thoughts, Rinpoche – I’m just sitting here … feeling … I really don’t know.” Rinpoche let me continue to sit in silence – somehow aware that I would eventually frame a question—or answer—of some kind.

“I think that after what I’ve experienced of Western people in India and Nepal … I can probably survive without friends …” [pause] “I think that I’ve never really tried to change myself simply to have friends. Friends who will only accept me if I become like them or accept their views aren’t friends anyway. I learnt that at art school.”

“Oh yah – but you have friends anyway.”

“Yes, Rinpoche … I have some good friends.”

“Then you will always have friends …” [pause] “It’s good that you are strong in this way.”

“So … anyhow … Pé-ta arrives in the mountainous region where Milarépa lives – and sees him there sitting on a rock just outside his cave. He is sitting in the sun and the pleasant mountain breeze is wafting over his schlong – which is laid out comfortably, where it usually is”…

… Pé-ta is horrified and extremely embarrassed. She cannot look at him and hides her face. “Oy! Brother!” she cries out “Have you no shame! How can you sit here with your schlong hanging out on that rock for all to see?!”
“How can I sit here? Well that’s easy to tell, Pé-ta – I just located my old tuchas on this rock and … simply avoided moving for a while. You could do the same already.”

“Oy veh … but your schlong is laid out there in—such—an unaccountable manner!”

“It’s not so hard to account for it, dear sister – everyone’s got one, if they’re male …” he replied.

“But everyone will see it!”

“Well maybe … but as to everyone seeing this schlong – I’ve not seen anyone for a month at least …” [pause] “Apart from you, that is …” [pause] “Anyhow … good to see you, Pé-ta … even if it isn’t good for you to see my schlong …”

“But how can I look at you sitting there like that?”

“I’m sorry already … but my schlong has no interest in whether it’s seen or not seen – so why should it bother you?”

The philosophical proposal that schlongs were obscene and should therefore not be seen, was part of the world of conservative concept-ridden ’thom yors. The long and short of it was that Pé-ta walked back down the mountain where she begged for alms for a week to purchase a length of fabric, needle, and thread, with which Milarépa could address his state of undress. Having gathered everything that was necessary, she ascended the slopes in the direction of Milarépa’s cave. It was a long walk from which Pé-ta gained a great deal of merit. She presented her brother with the fabric and he happily accepted her kind presentation. “So now I’ll go make some circumambulations of the chörten in the village down there– and when I return I’ll no longer have to hide my eyes in shame.”

Milarépa bade Pé-ta goodbye and promised her that he’d set to immediately with needle and thread. He was as good as his word. After a week Pé-ta returned to visit her brother. She was happy that this time her visit would take place under more conventionally approved circumstances. It was another long walk from which Pé-ta gained a great deal of merit. When she saw Milarépa however, she was horrified all over again. He’d cut the fabric and sewn it into an assemblage of thumb-stalls and finger-stalls. Not only was there a cover for his offending schlong – but a similar cover for his nose – and for each of his fingers and toes.

“Oy gewalt! Brother! You meschugganah! What have you done already – with this fine fabric! I schlepped it all the way up here for you!”

“Well … Pé-ta” Milarépa replied “I thought … that as you were offended by my schlong … that you might also be offended by every other part of me that
looked like it … so … I covered it all …” [pause] “Are you not pleased?”

In that moment Pé-ta realised her error. Her brother was beyond all conventional constraints because he dwelt in the nondual state. He was like one of the mahasiddhas of ancient India and her absurd idea simply had no application to him.

“Yah … and so … Pé-ta became a good practitioner after that and no longer had to walk all over Tibet to gain merit. She became a meditator in—this—life …” [pause] “Tell me … can people be naked in your country? Is there a problem or not a problem?”

“In the right situation there’s not a problem, Rinpoche. You can’t take your clothes off in the High Street – but when I was at art school we’d often go swimming without clothes.”

“Men and women?”

“Certainly – men and women … but that—was—art school.”

“Oh yah! Maybe art students become ngakpas and ngakmas then!” [pause] “You know … in the first spread of Vajrayana in Tibet, practitioners wore the bone ornaments as they are shown in thangkas – with no robe underneath. Now brocade robes are worn because ’thom yors are ashamed of nakedness …” [pause] “This is Tibetan culture and not Vajrayana …” [pause] “Do you think people would wear bone ornaments in the West without other clothes or not?”

“Art students would – well … the art students I used to know would do that.” Rinpoche nodded. “Yah—good … anyway … that is for you and your life. I cannot say what will happen – you must discern carefully what is possible …” [pause] “Now … maybe … there is one further account I will give of Milarépa”…

… Milarépa had many excellent disciples and he told them all “I’ve never bothered myself with the tedious sophistry of word-knowledge.

“These conventional books have to be memorised by monks – but in reality they mainly lead to mental confusion. Me … I forgot word-knowledge long ago – even if I once knew it.” His disciples looked a little shocked when he said this – so he replied “I’m accustomed to meditation … so I’ve got good reasons for forgetting book-knowledge. I prefer to be far removed from quarrelling doctrine and systems of belief because I’ve forgotten the difference between myself and others. I’ve forgotten those who rule others with power. I’ve forgotten written and printed words because I’ve got no interest in artificial definitions and constructed meditations. Because of this I’ve forgotten the dread of birth and death.”
On hearing Milarépa hold forth on this, the academic Tsa-phu’á—who was a ’thom yor from way back—decided to feel slighted. The arrogant and conceited always make the decision to be slighted, and—when they do—someone has to suffer. “I thought you were a highly advanced yogi” he responded with a sneer “… but it turns out that I was mistaken …” Tsa-phu’a pootled off to sulk and skulk behind the others. He fell to petulant ruminations: ‘This Milarépa just acts eccentric and talks gibberish … and then he gets gifts lavished on him as if he were a great Lama. I think I’m really going to have to set this matter right.’ He worked out a strategy and went to work on its implementation.

On returning to his monastery, he collared one of the young monks he employed for buggery and cajoled him into taking Milarépa an offering of a bowl of curd that he laced with poison.

“Some texts …” Rinpoche commented “… say girlfriend – but whatever … girlfriend—boyfriend, makes no difference – a monk’s vow means celibacy so it does not matter whether it was a girl or boy. So … you can see that his academic knowledge was easily put on one side when he wanted to find a use for his erection.”

Now … Milarépa knew that his life was drawing to an end whether he consumed the poison or not – so when the young monk offered him the curd from Tsa-phu’a he said “At this moment … it’s not appropriate that I accept this curd – but if you come back later I shall be glad of it.”

The young monk went back to Tsa-phu’a—with some degree of nervousness—and told him what had happened. He explained that he was frightened and that he knew that Milarépa fully grasped the plot to poison him. Tsa-phu’a wasn’t well pleased but decided to play on the young monk’s greed.

“Look, young bonny buttocks … there’s a nice fat turquoise in this for you if you go back and deliver the curd to that turd Milarépa.”

The young monk wasn’t happy about the proposal – but he went back to Trö-dé Tashi-gang where Milarépa was staying. As soon as Milarépa saw him he called out “Hey young lad – have you got that bowl of curd?”

This was too much for the lad and he begged Milarépa not to eat the curd. “It’s poisoned!” he pleaded “Don’t eat it! Tsa-phu’a has poisoned it!”

“Yes … I know that, young lad – but that’s no terrible problem to me.”

The lad then knew that Milarépa was a real yogi – and that he was utterly beyond fear of death. He was so distraught that he volunteered to drink it instead – but Milarépa replied “My life’s almost over now … the time’s come for me to move on. There’s no use in hanging around beyond a certain point.”
At that Milarépa ate the curd—opined that it had a good flavour—and sent word to disciples from Ting-ri and Nya-nam to come and see him one last time. When they’d all arrived, Milarépa addressed them “I’m grateful for your confidence. Thank you for showing up.” Then he gave some final teachings and his disciples dispersed. A few days later Milarépa began to exhibit signs of malaise – but he refused medical treatment saying “A yogi who gets ill must use illness as the path. My time has come, so I don’t want treatment or ceremonies. And there’ll be no need for chörtens when I die. I have no monastic hall to consider so there’ll be no need to light butter-lamps either.”

The young monk—moved to tears—said “Please transfer your illness and rid yourself of pain!” but Milarépa replied “I could transfer this illness – but there’s no need for conjurer’s tricks.”

Tsa-phu’ā who was lurking to the rear—as was his wont—felt certain that Milarépa was incapable of such a feat and said “If you think you can transfer it – then by all means transfer it to me.”

Milarépa shook his head. “If I transferred my pain to you – you’d not be able endure it.”

“I’ll be the best judge of whether I can endure it or not …” Tsa-phu’ā sneered “… just cut the guff and get on with it—I’m bored with your pretentious posturing.”

“If you wish …” Milarépa sighed “… but I won’t transfer it to you … You may be a schlimazel but I have no desire to hurt you. I’ll transfer my pain to that door.”

Milarépa put his mind to it and the door began to groan with sounds of cracking, splintering, and splitting. At the same time Milarépa seemed to be free of pain. Tsa-phu’ā decided that this was merely magical illusion, and jeered “How—very—spectacular – so what’s that supposed to prove? Give me a break with these silly illusions! Transfer it to me or admit you’re a charlatan.”

“You’re not an easy man to convince, are you?” Milarépa replied. “As you say then … I’ll give you half the pain … and you can see what it’s like already.”

“Give it your best shot then, joker …” Tsa-phu’ā laughed and Milarépa transferred half the pain. Tsa-phu’ā immediately crumpled to the ground screaming – begging Milarépa to take the pain away. His pain was instantly relieved – and he lay stunned, gasping like a fish.

Tsa-phu’ā then repented—as they all do—and begged Milarépa’s forgiveness. “Happy to oblige, my friend – just do me a favour and maintain
the monastic vows you have taken and start acting like a mensch.” Milarépa then commented “The result of this course of events with the poisoned curd—
is that this ganzer-macher—this hardened schmuck—has changed his ways. That makes me happy. To me there’s no concrete reality in illness or death—so whatever transpires I’m fine with it. I’m off now—to die at Chu-bar.”

Milarépa then addressed his disciples. “Practise seriously now—and don’t act like schlemiels.” He then shared out his property—such as it was: a wooden bowl, a spoon made of yak bone, flint and steel, and his cotton shawl. “There’s gold too, if you want it. People gave me the stuff and I really didn’t know what to do with it. You will find it hidden here beneath the hearth in my cave—just try to do something useful with it rather than making more problems.”

As his death finally approached he had a few final words of advice for his disciples. “The normal religious hypocrisy of hankering after tchotchkes whilst outwardly affecting piety is nauseating—have no truck with it. If you do anything good for others—remember that it’ll come to a bad end if it’s not free of self-interest—so don’t be in any mad rush to look good in the eyes of others. Give what you can—when you can—and then forget it.”

“Not long after this …” Rinpoche commented “… having given essential pointing-out instructions to his closest disciples—Milarépa passed away in meditation …” [pause] “He was eighty-four … maybe I live that long … maybe not. It doesn’t matter—maybe eighty … that is long enough.”

I’d been listening intently to Rinpoche’s account—and had felt quite at ease—but this sudden mention of his death brought tears to my eyes. Idiot—I thought—everyone dies! This is central to everything I’ve been taught. My own death had been brought to my attention often enough and that—although I’d contemplated it seriously—had never whacked me ’round the head.

Rinpoche noticed my emotion and smiled warmly. “Yah … so it is …” then he laughed. “Be careful who gives you curd!” [pause] “There have been many poisoners in Tibet and sometimes they are very clever. They are ‘thom yors of course—but they have great skill …” [pause] “If you accomplish anything in the world there will be people who hate you—so it is maybe better to stay quietly somewhere and not show anything …” [pause] “But Düd’jom Rinpoche asks you to work to preserve and propagate the gö kar chang lo—so …” he laughed “… maybe you need good luck.”

Rinpoche reached over for the plate of kapsé that had been brought in earlier and prompted me to eat. “Oh yah … and so … now—soon—I go to Sikkim, so maybe you study with some other Nyingma Lamas until we meet again … maybe next year … I don’t know …” [pause] “There are good ngakpas … like Chatral Rinpoche, Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin, and also maybe Chag’düd Tulku
who can help you with what you must learn of mahayoga and anuyoga."

“What about Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche … I met him in McLeod Ganj and he has been teaching me aspects of the Tröma Nakmo cycle of the Düd’jom gTér.”

“Ya … possible … he has experience in mahayoga ritual. He received the Düd’jom gTér Tröma Nakmo from Chhi’méd Rig’dzin. Düd’jom Rinpoche asked Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin to give this empowerment to Yeshé Dorje. This was because Düd’jom Rinpoche had no time. As you know Düd’jom Rinpoche has a great many responsibilities now – which is why he sent you to me …”

[pause] “But … there will be a time when we will not see each other …

“So … if you can find Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin that would be very good …”

[pause] “… but … he lives in Santiniketan and … it is—very—very—hot there … it would not be good for you to go there. I think because you get sick in the heat …” [pause] “You are brave to come to India when the heat makes you sick.”

“Well, Rinpoche … I have no choice if I want to study Vajrayana.”

“Yah good. This is true. Maybe one day there will be Vajrayana in the West and people will not have to come here and get sick. Many Western people get sick here because of the water. That is why you must teach in the West …”

[pause] “Anyway … Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin is a very good Lama.” Then Rinpoche laughed and shook his head “Wrathful like me!” then he laughed again “But maybe … this is not difficult for you now?”

This was quite funny. The idea of seeking out another wrathful Lama gave rise both to excitement and apprehension. I rather thought I’d graduated from wrath – but maybe that was a severely improper attitude. “Maybe, Rinpoche … but I think it all depends on what the wrath looks like – or rather … whether I can understand the wrath …” I noticed Rinpoche looking quizzical at this point and it jolted my thinking “… but then – you said he’s a good Lama – so … I have no doubt that his wrath will be … most exciting.”

Rinpoche grinned “Yah—good.” Rinpoche always threw in the odd English word and ‘good’ was one of them. “I am happy …” [pause] “So … do you think you remember your past life?”

“If I had a memory … it must be hidden behind a lot of other ideas.”

Rinpoche nodded “Yah—good …” [pause] “… so … whether you remember or not – it does not matter. There are many ‘thom yors who say they remember – and what they remember is no better than an Indian tourist bazaar. All nonsense …” [pause] “Later you may remember – but it’s more important to remember the teachings you receive – and this you do, I can see …” [pause] “… and … also get rid of that dark maroon to-nga you love so much.” He chuckled.
“I—will—get rid of that to-nga, Rinpoche” I laughed.

“Oh yah! I am happy that you are no longer embarrassed. That is good!”
[pause] “If you become too easily embarrassed everyone has power over you – and that is not good.”

“Yes … I know that … only too well, Rinpoche – and … I’m not usually that embarrassable.”

Rinpoche looked at me to speak further – so I spoke further. “In the beginning—when I first came here—I was always … concerned not to be an idiot. I knew you had no patience with idiots – and so I tried all the time not to be an idiot. That of course made an idiot out of me …” [pause] “I don’t usually care if someone thinks I’m an idiot—especially if I have no respect for them—but with you it was vitally important not to be thought of as an idiot.”

Rinpoche nodded and made a humming sound. “So … what I saw … at first … was not so much like you?”

“Well, yes—it was me all right—but it was me-faced-with-you …and … my respect for you.”

“Oh yah – this I see …” [pause] “Maybe this angry Künzang Dorje should not have shouted so much?”

“No … Rinpoche … I think it was fine – but then I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t shouted at me. That’s impossible to know now …” [pause] “The only thing I can say is that I wouldn’t change anything …” [pause] “I think you helped me grow up. When I first came here I thought I was an adult. I thought I’d been an adult for a decade – but then I discovered I was still a child … that is … in terms of Vajrayana.”

“And now you are adult” Rinpoche commented – but I was not sure whether it was a question or a statement.

“Well … I have yet to see whether I’m adult or not … in those terms – but I’m no longer a child.”

“Oh yah! There is maybe more you should learn before you teach your own students …” [pause] “So … anyway … now we have some words of great beauty … and great meaning for us …”

Rinpoche called out to the mistress of the house and she came in with a tray bearing two glasses and two bottles of cold Eagle Indian beer. Rinpoche poured the beer – as always, with great care. “A La La Ho! Kêlpa Zang!” we both drank and Rinpoche fished around under his table. He found the book he sought.
The gö kar chang lo’i dé carry long hair of non-contrivance. Their bodies are adorned with white raiment of non-contrivance. Their minds have the natural state of non-contrivance. This is called the three non-contrivances of the gö kar chang lo’i dé. The following can be found—in the Künzang Ralpa Nakpo mDo[213] where it states:

“In the degenerate era, when red-faced beasts have ruined Vajrayana, those with white skirts will benefit sentient beings. Thence arises the need for longhaired practitioners. A carefree body donning a white skirt – a head adorned with braids – this is the sky-like appearance of the trülku. Carefree uncut hair – this is the sky-like appearance of the longku. Carefree view of pure Mind – this is the chöku. Achieving the three spheres of being within oneself – this is the practice of Dzogchen.”

We sat in silence for maybe five minutes after Rinpoche had read the passage—and then suddenly he shouted “Those with white skirts will benefit sentient beings …” Then he barked “There are some Westerners … I have seen them in Kathmandu. É Hong! They wear white garments – but they help no one!” Rinpoche yelled “They cause harm to Vajrayana by smoking tobacco and ganja!” Rinpoche looked disgusted and seriously displeased. “They also take opium and heroin! These people are not ngakpas! They are ‘thom yors who make a bad name for Vajrayana – and for Western people who are serious!”

“Yes … I’ve seen that, Rinpoche. It’s extremely sad to witness that.”

“Why do they do this?!” he chided – and I felt highly relieved that I was not the subject of his ire.

“Well … because they see Vajrayana as something that’s … beyond concept and they think that transcending pure and impure means you can do what you like.” [pause] “They think these drugs are useful for meditation.”

“And what do you say?” Rinpoche asked interestedly and with a gentler tone.

“I say they’re deceiving themselves. I saw a lot of this at art school and what I saw was people who didn’t do much with their time. It made them vague, slow, unreliable – and … lazy …” [pause] “It also seemed to make a mess of their lives. The places they lived were often pretty dirty and untidy …” [pause] “I don’t want you to think that I’m some kind of conventional conservative type …”

“No” Rinpoche laughed “I never have—this—idea … not with your extremely large beard and playing the electric music of Africans!” Rinpoche laughed again “… but anyway … Düd’jom Rinpoche has written and spoken very plainly about this disgusting degenerate tobacco and ganja habit!” [pause] “You have never smoked?”

“No, Rinpoche. I never liked the smell of it. My father smoked cigars and it
always made me sick in the car.”

“Yah! It is poisonous and creates terrible diseases! Even if you don’t smoke yourself and you breathe it from others it is bad! Westerners in Nepal learn this from some of the Hindu sadhus there! They see sadhus smoking ganja and think it is spiritual! Some sadhus also learn the heroin idea from hippies and you see them sleeping all day! They have no life left and are ruined! This is the habit of a degraded mind!” [pause] “You cannot trust someone who smokes! They forget the difference between truth and lies!”

“Maybe …” I commented “… that is because they have to lie to themselves about the damage that smoking causes?”

“Yah!” Rinpoche exclaimed with vehemence. “You must tell this to people! It is extremely important!”

I’d seen Rinpoche being wrathful before – but I was the subject of his wrath. It was … indescribably strange to see his wrath in another context. It even threw me for a moment – and I had to readjust my emotions in respect of the fact that his wrath was aimed elsewhere. Rinpoche turned his gaze to the window. “Oh yah – do you hear that beautiful bird singing?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – I love the birds here.”

“Khyéchung Lotsa—one of the twenty-five disciples of Guru Rinpoche—spoke with birds and taught them Dharma …” [pause] “Düd’jom Rinpoche and Chhi’méd Rig’dzin are both from the line that comes from Khyéchung Lotsa.”

Rinpoche smiled and all wrath was gone – as if it had never been there. It hit me immediately that Rinpoche’s wrath was nothing like any form of anger I’d ever seen. It was transparent. It seemed to have no history and no future. It was merely there in the moment and he was not conditioned by it. That was easy to see when I wasn’t the subject of that particular nondual display.

After a moment Rinpoche returned to the main subject matter. “So … there are many categories of gö kar chang lo’i dé because it is an ancient lineage and because it has suffered persecution at certain times.”

“From violent sectarian idiots.”

Rinpoche laughed “Oh yah … ’thom yors … you learn well …” [pause] “Yah … there are many ’thom yors and it is bad when ’thom yors get power in the world. There are intelligent ’thom yors too – and when ’thom yors are intelligent they cause much confusion. In Tibet in the second spread they made it illegal to translate any tantra that was not on the approved list. If you translated anything that was not on the list then the penalty was death …” [pause] “Do you think that it is acceptable for Buddhist hierarchs to act in
“It’s not acceptable for Buddhist lay people to break the precepts in this way.”

“Yah … and so … this is what the powerful ’thom yors did. That is why many lineages had to remain hidden and why many different gö kar chang lo traditions grew …”

Rinpoche paused and gazed at me intently. We sat silently for some five or ten minutes – and then he laughed “Maybe you find one of the female disciples of Guru Rinpoche – and marry her.” Rinpoche noted my bemused and vaguely soporific expression. “Oh yah … but maybe now you need to sleep.”
Rinpoche grinned broadly as I came through the door. He was still grinning when I’d offered my three prostrations. “You have slept well?” I had indeed – and soundly. “You have dreamed about khandros?”

“No … Rinpoche … well not exactly. I had some mixed dreams … about all kinds of things.”

Rinpoche nodded in a way that betokened that there was not much to say about this – but asked another question. “The last dream – what was the last dream before waking?”

“That was the strangest one, Rinpoche. I dreamt about an old girlfriend – someone from the time when I was at school … Lindie Dale …”

Rinpoche asked me about her and I gave him a short history of her and the termination of our relationship by her father – the heavy-handed Brigadier Dale. Rinpoche listened patiently and seemed interested in the details – so I probably said a little more than he required. He seemed particularly intrigued by her ginger hair.

“Yah … you must find a kind-hearted woman …” [pause] “I said last night – you will remember what I said?”

“You mentioned the female disciples of Guru Rinpoche … and of finding one.”

“Oh yah! Guru Rinpoche’s female disciples—there were very many—you remember …?”

“… yes … the twenty-five female disciples and the twenty-five ngakmas of Kha-chu.”

“Yah – many others, too. There have been many incarnations in Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim and maybe other countries … many in the West also. Maybe you will find such a khandro.”

“How would I do that, Rinpoche?”

Rinpoche laughed “There is no method …” [pause] “… yah, you can use Mo and mirror divination – but then what? You find someone and they know nothing. Then you look like ‘thom yor. You can only really know from awareness …” [pause] “I just speak of possibility. Such things are not uncommon in Tibet – and maybe … in the West it may become the same.”

In Vajrayana the woman is always the khandro and the man is the pawo. Khandroma means lady going in the sky and pawo means hero, or warrior –
like Ling Gésar. Then there is inner and outer. Women are externally khandro and internally pawo – and for men it is the opposite. When there is nondual realisation – these two are not separate. Before realisation, the khandro and pawo find the nature of Mind through union. This does not always mean sexual union – but through seeing and many different ways of contact. When you are in love you know something of this inner khandro as part of your own experience and for the woman it is the same.

“… this teaching can be found in every tantra.” Rinpoche took a sip of tea. “This is well known by anyone who has studied the tantras.” It was early in the day and beer came later. Rinpoche laughed as he always did when I drank cold water. I never could relate to pō-ja—Tibetan tea—with its salt and butter. Some Western people come to relish it – but I was never much of a tea drinker in any case. Give me espresso or give me death – or something like that.

“I will tell you about one big and beautiful khandro …” Rinpoche announced “I cannot remember her name—and I never met her—but she used to torment the monks at DoDrüp Gompa. You remember the ‘thom yors who drove DoDrüpchen away? … and who then requested him not to show miracles when he died?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – that was an extraordinary account … I was … a little shocked by it in a way – I mean … that people could be such idiots.”

“Oh yah! The world is full of ’thom yors – and in Tibet there were very many …” [pause] “Anyhow … there was this one big and beautiful khandro – and she decided to teach the monks at DoDrüp Gompa”…

… She used to wait until all the monks were chanting together in the great hall – and then she would appear completely naked and jump around between them in their rows waving her breasts at them and bumping them in the face with her buttocks. They’d try to catch her – but she was a good runner and very swift. They could never catch her – and when they looked as if they would succeed, she’d simply vanish through a wall and disappear. She’d wait until they all settled down again – then she would begin her antics all over again.

Rinpoche was laughing heartily about this story. “How did it all end?” I asked.

“I do not know …” [pause] “… but I think you would like this khandro to come jumping into your room tonight!”

“I’d certainly make her welcome, Rinpoche.”

“Oh yah – you have much fire element! Maybe too much thinking of khandros!” he laughed.
Rinpoche called for the lady of the house who sent her husband to Könchog Rinpoche to tell him I’d not be back for dinner. Within the hour a fine dish of noodles with goat meat sat before us. Rinpoche talked of Golok and the wonderful horsemen there. “There are other stories about khandros who tormented monks in this way. I like these stories. Also there were some women who rode – and some were better than the men. They were powerful women …” [pause] “Some were khandros …” [pause] “Maybe you need such a khandro.”

I agreed wholeheartedly – so wholeheartedly that Rinpoche laughed and kept repeating what he’d said. It became one of the funniest things I’d ever heard – and by the end of a few recitations I started believing that it was not only possible but that there was no avoiding it.

“Yah … you have heard of Shèl-kar Za Dorje Tso[214] … She was able to walk on water as if it were solid ground. The Christians say that Jesus Christ could also do this – is this true?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – and other miracles.”

“So this is not unusual for Western people.”

“No, Rinpoche – not if they are Christians … but … these miracles are not really spoken of a great deal – not as far as I remember when I was young.”

“Why is this?”

“Well … that’s complex … I think people like to ignore anything in the Bible that isn’t convenient. Most people are uncomfortable with anything that doesn’t fit with modern science or whatever their rationale dictates.”

“So they say these miracles of Jesus Christ are just stories?”

“No … it’s not as simple as that … they just pretend they’re not there.”

“Oh yah … I know this pretending. It’s the same when people pretend that there is no gö kar chang lo’i dé – or that there were never ngakmas. There are many people who say they practise Dharma – but really they practise buying and selling. They wear a smiling face but inside they are full of anger and greed …” [pause] “You know these ’thom yors?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – I’ve met plenty like that. They’re the ones who think the Lama is their personal property.”

“Oh yah … keeping others away and keeping everything for themselves – thinking they can own Dharma like owning money. There is no real devotion there.”

Rinpoche decided it was time for a walk around the lake at this point and so we set out. I noticed that—unlike my walk with Könchog Rinpoche—people
kept a respectful distance from Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. It seemed understood that he made the approach if an approach was to be made. He spoke to a few people and touched their heads – but they never required the same service of me. This was a relief – because I was somewhat on edge about that process.

Whenever I walked 'round the lake with Rinpoche there was some sense of history – or rather of the dissolution of history. To any Nyingma disciple, their Lama is Padmasambhava and their Lama’s consort is Yeshé Tsogyel. I don’t know how this functions for others – but with Rinpoche this was always true for me. How it was true is hard to describe. How this man who looked like Errol Flynn embodied the ninth-century Second Buddha who came to Tibet is not something that can be described. I’m not alone in viewing Rinpoche in this way – but I’m also not one of those people who becomes a born-again Tibetan. There were people I met in the East—and back home—who shed their culture and identity – but I never did that. Admittedly some who shed their cultures have now clad themselves anew in the mantles of their upbringing – but many fail to recognise the human problems inherent in transiting between significantly contrasting frames of mind. These changes are not a problem in themselves, but when those concerned judge others on their failure to be as full-on as they are – their intensity has to be called into question.

I’m not intending to be critical of the enthusiasm of socio-perceptual re-enactors. I think it’s amazing to hear War-between-the-States re-enactors talk about ‘period rush’ – the experience of suddenly feeling it’s 1864 and you really are a Confederate soldier … I wasn’t seeking ‘period rush’ on those walks around Tso Pema with Rinpoche – it just manifested from the ground up … and from the sky down. This was the very lake—and this the very place—and he was Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche, the embodiment of Padmasambhava … It wasn’t a colossal sensation – in fact it was quite subtle and it came in ripples – almost as if the lake were washing over me. Almost as if the same air that was breathed in the ninth century were wafting over me.

Now – I am not saying that an experience like this is important, necessary, or the result of practice – I’m simply telling a story. I think that experiences of this kind have fed into how I am today and how I teach. I do recommend that Western people make at least one pilgrimage in order to experience being a practitioner in a land where it is conventional to be a Buddhist.

Part of that normality consists of the way in which information is absorbed. This particular day was such a day. Rinpoche regaled me with a list of luminous ladies of the ninth century – and I took careful note … because he was telling me about ancient relatives within the Nyingma family.
We returned to Rinpoche’s room and took our ease. It was time for a glass of beer and a little lunch. I ate paleps for preference and also brought them with me. Paleps are Tibetan muffins and have an extremely slight mustard tang to them. I ate them hot with a little butter – and always enjoyed them immensely. Rinpoche was always amused by my diet. I was vegetarian at the time – but always ate whatever was offered – on the principle of being well-mannered. I also ate meat at the Tantric Feast[215] – as meat and alcohol are an essential aspect of the Tantric Feast. I was never a vegetarian by religion – I simply felt I shouldn’t eat what I knew I couldn’t kill. Rinpoche had no issue with this especially as I wasn’t fixated on my diet and had no health-freak inclinations other than avoiding junk food.

“Yah … some day … maybe soon – this also will change. Maybe better when you are in England again. Maybe better not to eat meat here – because you get ill …” [pause] “… but through eating meat you make a connection and for a tantrika – that becomes important …” [pause] “Now … it is a good discipline—and your motivation is good—but later there are other disciplines that are more important.”[216]

We sat for a while in silence and Rinpoche poured out two glasses of beer. “Yah … and so … I will tell you of a khandro … No” he laughed “Not for you! Anyway she is already too old for you – but, if she would have you, it would be perfect …” [pause] “Yah … but anyway she was married and will not marry again. Anyhow … her name is Golok Khandro, Drölma Lhamo.”[217] Khandro Drölma Lhamo was recognised as a powerful khandro at her birth.

“She is a gTértön – a discoverer of the concealed treasure teachings of Guru Rinpoche and Yeshé Tsogyel. “Her husband was Nam’trül Jig’mèd Phüntsog Rinpoche – but he died in prison when the Chinese came. Her three brothers also were incarnations and they also died in prison. Then there was a great shortage of food due to the Chinese, and her only son died before the age of ten.

“This is very sad. That such things happen is terrible … but anyway there is something important to tell. Khandro Drölma Lhamo and Nam’trül Jig’mèd Phüntsog Rinpoche wrote some extremely important texts on the married relationship of khandro and pawo. It is an important practice for the gö kar chang lo’i dé and so maybe this will be brought out of Tibet one day.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about this, Rinpoche?”

“Oh yah …” [pause] “… there is love between lovers who are ’thom yors – and there is love that makes a reflection. When this reflection occurs the couple become like mirrors and they reflect the nature of Mind for each other. Then transmission is possible in many ways …” [pause] “This is not
necessarily sexual – although sex can certainly happen” Rinpoche laughed. “There is no law that we can’t have sex – that is only the law for monks and nuns.”

We talked for some time and Rinpoche confided a great deal of highly interesting material on the nature of romance – which I came to think of as ‘vajra romance’. The khandro for men—and the pawo for women—are dramatic portals of realisation. They invoke wisdom and compassion from each other and act as an endless source of inspiration – if their relationship is based on practice.

“What Khandro Drölma Lhamo and Nam’trül Jig’mèd Phüntsog Rinpoche wrote about their relationship was the most marvellous poetry …” [pause] “You told me you wrote poetry?” I replied in the affirmative and Rinpoche nodded. “Yah—good. To explain Vajrayana it is necessary. Vajrayana is not ordinary and so ordinary language cannot be used. Vajrayana is the poetry of existence beyond space and time …” [pause] “Do you have poetry with you here?”

“I haven’t written any poetry at all since I have been in India and Nepal …” [pause] “Most people say that the Arts are just samsara …”

“Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche says this?”

“No, Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche never said anything like that … this is from Western people who’ve studied here longer than I have and I just assumed … that was the Buddhist view …” [pause] “So … I stopped writing poetry.”

“They are ’thom yors …” Rinpoche sighed “Vajrayana is every art and you must be practising every art. If you do not practise every art – how can you know the elements? And if you do not know the elements – how can you know the essence of the elements and open your eyes to great vision?”

That was a question that answered itself and I needed nothing more than this to begin writing poetry again. Rinpoche asked me to show him what I had written when I had completed a short piece on the lake at Tso Pema.

Through a hundred thousand meniscus leaves of sky-reflection – the darkness of space sings in the cold mud.

Through invisible veils of sky blowing in waves like an ocean of breath – the motionless mirror is self-mirrored.

Through the silent lightning of impossible distance – the roaring silence of volatile vision recreates the lotus lake.

Through a thousand years of winter-rain rippled water – the explosion of night is undifferentiated from noon.
The Lotus-born and the Lake Queen—immanent in their imminence—manifest in every facet of limitless light.

The piece proved impossible for Pema Dorje to translate.

Rinpoche laughed “Oh yah—good—good—good! Pema Dorje cannot understand! That is too good! Then you are a great poet!”

I resisted saying ‘No, Rinpoche – I’m just a great ‘thom yor’ but this time, not through any anxiety concerning Rinpoche’s reaction – I’d just grown tired of my rôle as the Woody Allen of Vajrayana. I was heartily inspired.
“Yah … and so … our time is over. Tomorrow you will come for the last time and then … I must leave for Sikkim …” [pause] “So—now—you are my son.” He looked at me with a kindly grin and took both my hands in his. “You are my son … but our time together here in Tso Pema is over for now.”

Rinpoche released my hands after some moments of silence in which he simply gazed at me. This was quite emotionally overwhelming and the interior of my skull seemed to leak out into the room as if it were helium. He then poured two glasses of Eagle beer.

“A La La Ho – Kèlpa Zang!” We pronounced together – Marvellous! We are Happy! Yes … I was happy. I was extremely happy that Rinpoche addressed me as his son. I was also slightly shocked – if such a word makes any sense. I was not sure exactly what Rinpoche meant – but whatever he meant, it was good beyond conception. It was also sad – because we were about to separate for some time. Perhaps six months to a year. I would have been happy to have lived in Tso Pema for the rest of my life seeing Rinpoche and talking about stories – or anything else he had in mind. As you will see—I was still an idiot—but that fact notwithstanding, I realised that situations such as mine could only be transient.

The words A La La Ho – Kèlpa Zang come from ‘The Drinking Song of Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche’ and we would recite this quite often.

Rinpoche told me a little of its history and it was a delight to hear about it. The ‘Drinking Song’ begins ‘Because some drinking companions requested it, I—the drinker—Jig’drèl Yeshé Dorje, sang this spontaneously.’

“The drinking companions …” Rinpoche explained “were Gyalwa Karmapa, Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche, and the Chini Lama.”

The Chini Lama[219] was an incarnation in a line of Lamas who were responsible for Bodha and the great chörten. The Chini Lama acted as governor of Bodha and liaised with the Nepalese authorities in relation to Tibetans passing through Nepal to India and returning to Tibet. Bodha in past centuries was an outpost of Tibet in Nepal and the population were at that time entirely Tibetan.

The current Chini Lama had a house in Bodha and used to cook evening meals for Gyalwa Karmapa, Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche, and Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche.

“They called him ‘Papa’ …” Rinpoche smiled “Maybe you will also read the ‘Drinking Song’ with your students … when they come …”
“If they ever come, Rinpoche … I will be sure to do that.”

We both took a sip of Eagle beer – and then Rinpoche commenced “I must be in Sikkim – and you also, must be living in your own land and becoming a father for your own children. You must have students so there will be more ngakpas – so that the gö kar chang lo’i dé will continue …” [pause]

“You must see Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche before you go home. He will have something to say for you – but you must get rid of that wealthy tulku’s dark maroon to-nga before you see him.” He laughed “It is not suitable for you to be wearing this.”

I laughed “I’ll see to it as soon as I can find a tailor to make something more appropriate.”

Rinpoche gazed out of the window momentarily and then returned his gaze to me with a smile.

“Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche sent you to me – and … at first … I could not see what to do with you …” He laughed shaking his head “… wearing this aristocrat’s to-nga …” He laughed again. “You—will—get another one soon – when you go to McLeod Ganj. They have good tailors there.”

“First thing I do, Rinpoche” I chuckled.

“Yah—good—I know this. I am just making jokes …” [pause] “You know this …” [pause] “Anyway …” [pause] “… and no matter how rude Künzang Dorje becomes, you would—not—go away!” [pause] “It was too funny. I thought sometimes—only at first—that you would never understand – but … you have a personality that I had not met before. You are quiet … but you are also brave. I did not know that your father died so soon before you came here … It would have been better if I had known that … I would not have been as forceful if I had known this …” [pause] “Anyhow – that is of no importance now. Now you are a strong yogi!” [pause] “… and … you will get another to-nga …”

“There’s nothing else I’ll do before I get a new to-nga, Rinpoche” I laughed. “You can rely on that. I won’t even eat breakfast before finding a tailor.”

“Not necessary” Rinpoche laughed. “Breakfast is very necessary for health …” [pause] “Anyway … then … maybe next year – we will meet again. I may be in Tso Pema at this time again next year. Then you must come and I will give you more Dzogchen teachings …” [pause] “What will you do when you go home to England? You go now …?”

“No, Rinpoche – I’ll stay in India ’til just before the Monsoon strikes – or before it gets too hot here. I don’t get on well with the heat … my eyes bulge and that’s not a pretty sight …” [pause] “Then … I’ll need to find work to earn money to come out and see you again.”
“Oh yah – but later … what will you do working? You cannot always be working as a manual labourer – this is not good as you become older.”

“I thought … that as the possibility of lecturing in art school required great commitment to something that now no longer means much to me … that I’d take a teaching qualification and teach art in regular school.”

Rinpoche twinkled at me quizzically. “Yah … maybe … maybe not …”
[pause] “… maybe for a short time that will be good – but… later your work will be to teach Vajrayana and propagate the gö kar chang lo’i dé. This is why we have talked together. This is why you have practised and studied. Not everyone can come to India and Nepal to do as you have done. It is not easy. I know this. I know it has required hardship for you to come here. Some injis who come here just waste their time – it’s just a holiday for them. Some inji ’thom yors come because they are lazy and will not have to work. Some come to take drugs and lie around talking nonsense. É hong! I have seen these ’thom yors’…” [pause] “But you are a working class man – as you have told me. Your parents were not rich – and now your father is dead. You are not rich because you have spent all your money to come here. You have no money unless you work – so when you come to India or Nepal, you must work very hard. You didn’t come here with your parents’ money – and you will have no money when you return …” [pause] “Here, Tibetans work on the roads when they have nothing. Can you do this in England?”

“Yes.”

“Kyé ma … That is very hard work…”

“Not as hard as factory work, Rinpoche – I’d rather work on roads or building sites than work in factories.”

“But in factories it is dry and warm in the winter.”

“Yes” I laughed “Sure is – but I’d rather be wet and cold than work under pressure. Factory work is high pressure and often quite inhumane. Roadwork and building sites are far friendlier than factories. They treat you without respect in factories – and … I don’t take to that too well.”

Rinpoche laughed “But this bad Künzang Dorje treated you without respect when you came here – much shouting and bad words.”

“That was totally different, Rinpoche” I grinned “Why should you respect an idiot? And why should I expect respect from you?”

Rinpoche was silent for a moment. It was as if he were thinking – but I could see that was not the case. It was as if he were dwelling on the felt quality of the time in which he’d known me.

“Oh yah – much has changed …” [pause] “Much more will also change …”
“You will have many experiences … and some will be very hard – but … I no longer worry about you because you are strong …” [pause] “But … is there no better work for you than roadwork?”

“Yes, Rinpoche, there is. But labouring work is temporary – and it gets me out to India and Nepal to complete my retreats. As I said earlier – I’ll probably take a school-teaching qualification and teach art in the long term.”

“Yah—good. Maybe school work is not so bad – but find a place where there are people who have interest in Dharma. Then you can help them. If they are not ’thom yors … they will see that you have something to say.”

“I shall do as you say, Rinpoche.”

“Oh yah …” [pause] “So …” Rinpoche looked around the room. “I have some things to give you.” Rinpoche called for the lady of the house and she opened up the cupboard on the wall behind me. She and Rinpoche engaged in some elaborate discussion of where something was. I picked up smatterings of what might have been the gist of it – but was none the wiser for the little Tibetan I knew. There was a deal of foraging around going on behind my back – and finally something was forthcoming. She presented it to Rinpoche who untied the string closure – and opened the newspaper wrappings. It was a shawl—a gö kar chang lo shawl—made of bu-ré. Two red panels and a white panel in the middle. The red panels had fine white and blue stripes at the edges, and the white panels had red and blue stripes at the edges. I’d seen these shawls before – and they’d always intrigued me in a way that I can’t describe. They’re rife with symbolism – but it’s not of the usual kind. There are no motifs or formal Vajrayana symbols – but there’s a meaning simply in the colours. They’ve never been easy to find in India or Nepal because very few are made. In Bhutan they are only worn by the heads of villages – and how they came to be worn by the gö kar chang lo’i dé in Tibet remains a mystery that I have never fathomed.

Naturally I’d always wanted one – but I’d had to content myself with a red shawl as these were easily obtained.

“This is from Bhutan” Rinpoche explained. “I always buy a shawl like this when I go to Bhutan. We must wear this. We are yogis of Guru Rinpoche’s white lineage.”

I was excessively appreciative, gratified, grateful, delighted, and elated. Rinpoche waved his hand as if to say ‘Calm down – it’s just a goddamn shawl.’

“This means more to me than I can say anyway, Rinpoche.”

“Yah good – but this is for you to wear not to put on the shrine. When you
wear it for a long time – it becomes soft. Now it is hard and tough…”

[pause] “It goes the opposite way to you!” Rinpoche laughed “First when you came here you seemed soft and weak – but now you are strong! Now you have a clear mind!”

Then Rinpoche opened up another wrapped object. It was an ivory phurba. “This you must wear in your belt. This is worn by those who practise Dorje Phurba and Dorje Tröllö. This is our practice – so we wear this as a sign. You place it within the knot of your shamthab sash.” Rinpoche grinned “Yah … it is easier if your sash is made of bu-ré.”[221] He added, watching me struggle “This material is too stiff – where did you get this sash?”

“I made it, Rinpoche – it’s cotton-drill fabric.”

“Yah … maybe good for now – but you should get one made of bu-ré—like this shawl—then it always fits well.”

I thanked Rinpoche for his advice – which was as complete as ever.

“Yah … so …” Rinpoche commenced “… Paltrül again … Paltrül was staying at a gompa once—I do not know which gompa—but that does not matter. Paltrül was staying in the visiting Lama’s rooms” Rinpoche laughed “… like you in Kyabjé Dūd’jom Rinpoche’s room at the Nyingma gompa” …

… The rooms were at the top of the gompa – and Paltrül had been loath to ensconce himself in them. The abbot had insisted and so Paltrül had acquiesced. He had no interest in forcing his wishes on others. One night—as it happens—strange noises were heard to issue from his room. Creeping closer, one of the attendant monks became aware that Paltrül was talking either to himself or someone else. But it couldn’t be someone else because no one had passed through Paltrül’s door – and there was no other means of access. The attendant’s curiosity overcame him – and he crept yet closer to Paltrül’s door in order to make out what was being said. When he had gotten close enough – he heard the most extraordinary speech. “Yes—yes—yes!”[pause] “Go on – you can make it!” [pause] “Just a bit further now and you will be there!” [pause] “Yes! Now you are there and it’s within your reach!” [pause] “Grab it quickly!” [pause] “Be swift now!” [pause] “Yes! Now you have it—now you have it!” [pause] “Quickly now! Make your escape!” [pause] “Good—good—good! Run away—run away—run away!”

The attendant was perplexed. There was no sense in the words he’d overheard. He wondered if he should mention it to the abbot – but decided that that was not a good idea as he’d have to admit eavesdropping outside Paltrül’s door.

The next morning a theft was discovered – and then a general clamour ensued. The gold gyaltsen[222] had been stolen from the roof of the gompa.
The abbot decided that it would be best to inform Paltrül as soon as possible in case the great Lama could give some indication as to the identity of the thief and what direction he had taken. “Rinpoche …” the abbot exclaimed as he entered Paltrül’s apartment “… the golden gyaltser was stolen from the roof of our gompa last night.”

“Yes!” Paltrül exclaimed punching his right fist into the palm of his left hand. “He wanted it—so—much!”

Rinpoche could hardly contain his laughter toward the end of the story and when he’d concluded, we were both rocking back and forth.

I had tears of mirth streaming down my cheeks and it was a while before we could have any kind of exchange on the story. Rinpoche sat at his ease and it seemed that it would have been fine with him if I’d said nothing about the story. We’d both laughed and that made sense of itself. Paltrül’s behaviour was by no means alien to me, and I was delighted by the way his attitude illuminated the sense I’d made of Vajrayana.

“Rinpoche …” I began “I really enjoy what this story communicates about the nature of desire. It seems to me that when desire is perfect … it becomes compassion. Paltrül wants the thief to have what he wants—precisely because—he empathises with his desire. He doesn’t look down on the thief from a position of indifference to desire. He joins with the thief in his desire – and desires as much as the thief.”

Rinpoche nodded “Oh yah! You can say more?”

“Certainly, Rinpoche” I replied “This is a subject to which I’ve given a lot of attention …” [pause] “It seems to me that compassion is not really possible unless you can desire – because if you can’t desire, you can’t have much appreciation of what arises in the sense fields. If you can’t appreciate what arises in the sense fields, you can have no communication with phenomena and therefore no capacity for compassion …” [pause] “In Sutrayana we’re taught not to grasp – but that’s because we delude ourselves with the idea that phenomena can cause happiness. With Vajrayana however, there is the understanding of emptiness – that phenomena are empty of the causes of happiness—or—misery.”

Rinpoche nodded and grinned “Oh yah – and more?”

“Well, various stories of Drukpa Künlegs come to mind. In several stories he’s given jewellery – and the first thing he does is to bedeck himself with it. He dances ’round for a while and then gives it back – saying that he doesn’t need it. He was able to thoroughly enjoy the jewellery without owning it …” [pause] “I have the feeling that owning or not owning has nothing to do with it. It’s whether there’s appreciation on the one hand or merely the desire to
possess on the other …” [pause] “When you know that happiness arises from appreciation rather than possession – you can either have or not have – it doesn’t matter which …” [pause] “… and as for Paltrül, he appreciates what the thief appreciates and enjoys the thief’s possession of what he desired.”

“… and more?”

“Yes, Rinpoche – there is more. I’d say that Paltrül established a connection with the thief through mutual desire – even though Paltrül had no desire for the golden gyaltsen itself. Paltrül’s desire was simply a resonance with the thief’s desire …” [pause] “I would think that this connection probably established a positive cause for the thief in terms of his eventually giving up on thievery.”

“Oh yah! Now you teach Dharma to Künzang Dorje!” he laughed “Yah—very good—very good!”

That was somewhat embarrassing, and I had no idea what he meant. Rinpoche could see that I was a little uncomfortable and so he commented “Yah … this is good … I like to hear how you see. This is very clear. You have good understanding of Vajrayana. It is often very hard for people to understand these things.”

“There’s an intriguing thing here, Rinpoche …” I said continuing the theme of desire. “I’m remembering the story of the silver horse’s hoof and how Paltrül played with the thief’s desire in that case. That was quite different – and it is interesting that Paltrül’s responses can be so different.”

“Oh yah … so … what do you think? What is the difference?”

“I’d say … that it was more to do with the mind of the thief …Gyalpo—the first thief—may well have had less desire.”

“Oh yah – and you can say more?”

“Well, Rinpoche … it seems that you have to have great courage to climb onto a gompa roof. It takes far more courage to do that than to waylay an elderly Lama out in the wilds. It seems to me that the desire of the second thief would have to be far greater to take the risk of scaling the gompa wall and climbing the slope of the roof to get that gyaltsen.”

“Oh yah—good. You are right … but … is there more?”

“Well, in this case … Paltrül could not speak with the thief and so there was no opportunity to show him anything about his mind.”

Rinpoche nodded “And more – maybe more is coming?”

“Well, Rinpoche … the only other thing I have to say is that the story doesn’t include any discussion with the abbot. The story stops with Paltrül’s initial
statement – so we never know whether Paltrül is asked about the identity or whereabouts of the thief …” [pause] “That could change the story completely.”

“… and this would be a better story?”

“No, Rinpoche …” I laughed “I prefer the story to end where it ends – because of the point it makes with respect to appreciation, desire and compassion.”

“Oh yah! I am happy.”

Rinpoche poured out the remainder of the Eagle beer. “Yah … and so … there is no need for more stories now – but … I will tell you one more … because it is important. There is nothing to ask when it is finished and nothing for you to say. You will understand that – when I have finished”…

… One night Dza Paltrül was lying up in the grassy crags above Dzogchen Gompa not far from the little black hermitage. He was easy and relaxed—practising namkha sum-trug[223]—staring into the night, as was his wont. Nyoshul was lying there with him—not too far removed—and, after what seemed like several years, Dza Paltrül addressed him. “Hey, Nyoshul m’lad … didn’t you once tell me that you hadn’t recognised the nature of Mind?”

“That’s right” Nyoshul replied “I’m a dolt—that’s for sure and for certain.”

“No need to be hard on yourself, m’lad …” Dza Paltrül smiled “… but there’s nothing much between you and recognising that.” A moment of silence followed after which Dza Paltrül said in a long languid voice “D’you see the stars?”

“Yes—I see them” Nyoshul replied.

Another moment of silence. “D’you hear the dogs barking down around Dzogchen Gompa?”

“Yes—I do believe I hear ’em.” The barking was far off and only discernible in the still night air.

Then—suddenly—Dza Paltrül snapped his fingers. “That!” he said—and then almost in a whisper “… is the nature of Mind.”

After that Nyoshul knew the nature of Mind.

Rinpoche raised himself from his couch—stood up—and beckoned me to follow him outside. On our way out he motioned Pema Dorje to remain seated – and I wondered what he had in store for me.

We left the house and stood just outside. I needed no prompt to look at the stars – as it’s my natural inclination. Rinpoche noticed. He smiled as he raised his hand and pointed at the stars with an elegant gesture that betokened
that he was welcoming me to what I saw. We stared at the stars together for some moments and then Rinpoche put his hand to his ear. Right on cue a dog barked—and … we stood there for five or ten minutes longer.

Then, somewhat seamlessly, we returned to Rinpoche’s room. I had no idea how that had happened – and it may simply have been that we both turned to the door at the same time. We returned to Rinpoche’s room where Rinpoche dismissed Pema Dorje.

We sat in silence.
just be natural

My last day with Rinpoche was utterly, brilliantly, joyful. It wasn’t too horribly overshadowed by its demise except toward the end. Rinpoche spoke of many things – most of which are too technical to describe in the context of a book such as this. Rinpoche gave advice on many subjects, and made occasional jests – as well as the ongoing tease about my aristocratic dark maroon to-nga. This had become an enormous joke – but it may not be obvious to most people what was so amusing about its repetition. You would have had to have been there, I suppose. I think the joke was a symbol of our closeness – the fact that he could tease me – and that I could enjoy being teased. The joke kept telling me that I was accepted and … more than accepted. He’d said I was his son – and that meant more to me than most things in the world.

I bade Rinpoche farewell that night and packed my rucksack for departure early the following morning. I hadn’t attempted to find the taxi driver—the one I’d threatened with a fictitious knife—because I needed to make my money last another six weeks or so. That rainy drive in Tso Pema seemed as if it had occurred a few years past at least – but it was a matter of months. I don’t know how the taxi driver expected me to seek him out in any case. He’d given me no telephone number, and I knew of no telephone in Tso Pema. This is not an uncommon state of affairs in India – a situation in which there is no clear sense to be made of anything.

I jumped a vegetable truck – as it was the easiest and cheapest way out. When I offered to pay the truck driver however, he said “You must not be thinking that every Indian wants to take your money. There are many greedy people – but not all Indians are like this.” He was right. That was my experience of India. I found outrageous dishonesty there. I also found outrageous generosity and kindness. I found that everything works out in India – if you keep your head and give everything your best shot. I caught the bus from Mandi back to McLeod Ganj to spend a short time with Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche and his sang-yum Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar. Khandro Ten’dzin was always extremely kind to me. I’d known her since 1971 when I first went to India. She treated me like one of the family – to the extent that I felt like a natural relative.

When I got to McLeod Ganj there were many more injis than I’d ever seen before and the Buddhists amongst them had started identifying themselves by wearing Tibetan shirts and jackets – and, of course, the ubiquitous teng’ar ’round the neck. They used the word ‘mala’—which is Sanskrit—and a lot of other words that seemed needless when there were adequate English
equivalents. Some had even taken to speaking in the strange broken English of their Tibetan Lamas. ‘Lama he say – we reciting 600,000 mani mantras, then Sukhavati going …’ I’d had nothing to say in response to such statements. I’d tried to make an approving nod or say something to the effect that it was wonderful to hear such things and they’d then sneer at me – knowing that I was not one of the nangwa – not an ‘insider’. They’d ask me “Why d’you wear robes when you’re not a monk?” I’d reply “Well … they’re not monk’s robes – they’re ngakpa robes.” They’d then cover the embarrassment of their ignorance by saying something complicated – or saying “Well I could wear those if I wanted to – but I’d find it pretentious.” Then I’d say “Thanks for telling me. It’s always useful to know what people think.” Then I’d bid them a pleasant day and leave.

I told Künzang Dorje Rinpoche about this whilst I was with him. “Oh yah … ’thom yors” he replied “This is why I avoid injis …” [pause] “Are—all—injis like this?” “No, Rinpoche … there are probably as many sincere injis … but …” Rinpoche laughed at my inconclusive statement. “… but you have met too many ’thom yors like this?” “Yes, Rinpoche …” I sighed “I’ve met too many like this – although, I must say, they like me about as much as I like them.” “Yah—yah … there are many Tibetans like this too …” he laughed. “Everywhere there are ’thom yors. Too many ’thom yors …” he laughed “… what is to be done …?” I laughed. “In the past … I’d have said ‘teach them Dharma’ but … I know that’s not a simple matter – because when idiots hear Dharma … they tend to understand ’khorwa[224] from it.” “Oh yah! This you have said well” Rinpoche sighed. “If you pour tea into a sewer it becomes sewage.”

That conversation felt like the distant past as I approached Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s door in March of ’76. I had no idea whether he’d be there or not – but if he wasn’t I’d stay a night or two and go on to Nepal to see Düd’jom Rinpoche. Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche was at home – and welcomed me in. Khandro Ten’dzin was there too and although I missed Künzang Dorje Rinpoche – I felt at home again. I’d stepped out of India and back into a timeless region of Tibet-as-it-was.

Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche was a highly skilled ritual master[225] and from him I gained a wealth of knowledge concerning the powerful theatrical repertoire of Tantra. He was known as ‘The Weathermaker’. [226] I have happy
memories of making gTormas with him.

We often sat in the dim guttering candlelight of his hut wrapped in blankets against the cold, while the winter rains dripped through a roof of flattened oil cans. From some of those oil cans we manufactured a set of ritual weapons. Cutting tin cans with Indian scissors is a precarious business and blood occasionally flowed.

The end result was always far less ugly than I’d anticipated – and the process showed me that anything is possible; if you have the determination. We painted the thin metal shapes with household paint and arrayed them on the shrine. Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche—resplendent in the to-nga I’d given him—said “Yes!” and burst out laughing. He loved that dark maroon to-nga. He obviously knew that the ritual weapons were far from perfect – but they were all that was possible with little or no money.

It seemed too soon before I had to move on again. I was running out of time and money – and the Monsoon was not far distant.

I bade farewell to Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche and Khandro Ten’dzin – and spent a week getting to Nepal by a series of buses and trains. It was something of a foul journey, and I was glad when I finally arrived at my destination.

On the way across the industrial North of India the train came to a halt in what seemed to be the middle of a swamp. It was none too fragrant – but the vividness of the greenery was spectacular. It was full of curious movement too. I gazed delightedly and suddenly realised that the area was teeming with marvellous lizards. How beautiful! Then to my horror some occupants of the train exited and began throwing stones at them.

I then made a spectacle of myself running up and down pleading with the idiots involved not to stone the lizards. “What have they done to you?” I asked – but it made no difference to them.

In the end, I sat down and wept at the barbarity of their behaviour. This however seemed to affect them more than my pleas and they desisted. I thanked them for ceasing the stoning and they made sheepish motions of regret as they boarded the train.

I arrived in Kathmandu too late to continue to Bodha and spent a vaguely wretched night on Freak Street[227] where some bombed-out hippie tried to rob me as I slept. “I’d prefer not to be robbed if you don’t mind” I said as I took hold of the arm that had been slipped into my rucksack. The man swore at me and accused me of being a ‘paranoid bread-head’. He assured me that he was merely moving my rucksack to get a little more room. “My mistake …” I replied “… and my apologies for impugning your character with a false accusation. I hereby rescind my unworthy imputation and wish
you a pleasant sleep.”

He gawped at me for a moment and said “Are you for real?”

“No …” I replied “I’m merely a figment of your imagination.”

He crept off to his sleeping bag and I buckled my rucksack to the bed where I could rest my arm on it. If he tried again he’d have to draw more attention to his felonious intentions.

The next day—bright and early—I quit the lugubrious lodgings in Freak Street and set off for Bodha. I left a note on the would-be robber’s pillow which read ‘Sorry about my misunderstanding last night. I hope it all works out for you.’ Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s accounts of Dza Paltrül had had an effect on me …

There was a bus to Bodha that left early in the morning and I was eager to leave Thamel behind. Thamel was a warren of freak shops, and cheap Indian incense blew everywhere from rainbow-coloured stalls. I ran the gauntlet of Tiger Balm salesmen and got on the road to the place where the buses pulled in. A young lad had followed me down the road to the place the bus departed — trying to sell me ganja. I declined politely and continued walking. He then dropped the price. I declined as before. He continued to drop the price ’til—in desperation—he said “Sir! You cannot buy cheaper than this!” He obviously thought I was the hardest bargaining hippie who ever rode the Magic Bus.

“I believe you” I replied “But you must also believe me when I tell you that I don’t use ganja or anything else.”

The bus arrived more or less on time and it was good to be aboard and leaving. I was heading out of the city into pleasant countryside. Bodha is situated in the Kathmandu Valley – and at that time it was marvellously peaceful. There was just the chörten and the ring of houses that surrounded it. Some had shops on the ground floor facing the chörten – but most were residences. The dirt road outside the chörten was graced by three or four shops that sold vegetables and such-like daily necessities.

I’d spend part of each day circumambulating the chörten, and I’d usually meet a legless leper at some point. He had a little cart that he propelled with his hands – using wooden pads to protect his hands. He spoke fairly decent English and I took to chatting with him as well as donating some currency.

One day when I was sitting with him, a Western Buddhist student passed by. I knew he was a Tibetan Buddhist because he wore maroon trousers and a maroon Tibetan shirt. He also had a teng’ar around his neck. He reprimanded me for associating with a leper. “He has his karma to work out – don’t you know you shouldn’t get that close to lepers?” he snapped.
“No … I didn’t …” I replied “… but it’s all right for me.”

“And why would that be?” he retorted.

“Because I’m a Buddhist leper – and no one wants to know me; therefore I’ve got nothing to lose.”

The maroon-clad belligerent strode off ‘round the chörten spinning prayer wheels in a devout manner. My response had made the leper laugh, and he asked me whether there was anything he could do for me. My first response was ‘no—I don’t need anything’—but then I felt I’d given the wrong answer. It occurred to me that he was trying to repay my donations in some way – and I was not doing him any favours by turning down his offer. “As a matter of fact … come to think of it – I do need a pair of sandals … You don’t know anywhere where I could get a pair made to my design, do you?”

“Oh yes, sir – you are coming this way with me and I am showing you.”

So off we went and sure enough – he took me to a street-side cobbler who made me the best pair of sandals I have ever owned. My friend the leper made sure that my instructions were followed to the letter and was there at each stage of the making to ensure that the sandals were exactly what I wanted. I wore those sandals for years ’til they were stolen at a Buddhist centre in Britain – whilst I was practising in the shrine room. I had to hitchhike home with bare feet. Be that as it may – I was happy to spend time in Bodha and loved being in the chörten precinct. There was a gompa at twelve o’clock according to the chörten and Düd’jom Rinpoche’s residence lay at nine o’clock. I went to see Düd’jom Rinpoche as instructed, and I explained why I had come. He seemed pleased to see me and welcomed me with a warm smile.

“Oh yah!” he laughed “Künzang Dorje did not eat you then?”

“Yes, Rinpoche … he did – but he spat me out again.”


“Yes to all three, Rinpoche” I smiled. “I liked Künzang Dorje Rinpoche very much indeed. I was frightened of him at first … and nervous for quite a while … but in the end – he became … like a father to me – that is to say … he said that I was like a son. I have extreme respect for him in every way …” [pause]

“I mean no disrespect when I say this, Rinpoche … but … he is just like you … I mean … I see him as no different from you.”

Düd’jom Rinpoche smiled and nodded. “Yah—this is what I wished—and it has become as I wished. You have done all things well …” Then he laughed “… even though … you have to speak of your knife.”
How—I mean, how—did he know that? I hadn’t told anyone about that. It was not some dark secret – but … how could Düd’jom Rinpoche have known? He saw me squirming slightly. “Do not worry—I have not become Künzang Dorje—it is very funny. Anyhow, it is good that you know how to be strong in the world. You will need this.”

“How did he know that? I hadn’t told anyone about that. It was not some dark secret – but … how could Düd’jom Rinpoche have known? He saw me squirming slightly. “Do not worry—I have not become Künzang Dorje—it is very funny. Anyhow, it is good that you know how to be strong in the world. You will need this.”

“How do you have any advice for me, Rinpoche … in terms of the future?”

“Yah – after some time coming here and to India … you must return to England to live …” [pause] “First you must complete practices and retreats – but then you must return …” [pause] “You will be asked to teach in the future, but—as much as you can—you must spend time with Künzang Dorje.”

“I did not meet him for as long as thirteen years.”

“Yah … this is one full cycle and one year … This means that you must complete something. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche will give you the indications for what is necessary.”

“So … do—you—have advice for me on Lamas with whom I should study in that time?”

“What did Künzang Dorje say?”

“He suggested Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche.”

“Yah … that is good. Then—after that time—you will meet Künzang Dorje again. You will also meet me again – but not as easily as before. I must travel all the time now and must teach in many places …” [pause] “You will have some difficulties, I think …” [pause] “Yah … you will have difficulties … We all have difficulties – but … for those who practise Dzogchen, difficulties are good. Take all circumstances with the same taste, but also be careful – as you were last night. You cannot trust everyone. You cannot trust everyone who tells you they practise Dharma. There are many bad people in the world and some do not like the gö kar chang lo’i dé …” [pause] “When you are father to your own children—like Künzang Dorje has been father to you—then you will need to have strength like Künzang Dorje …” He saw my expression and laughed. “No …” he shook his head laughing “You do not have to become wrathful like Künzang Dorje – just be natural, as you are.”

“Künzang Dorje Rinpoche also warned me of difficulties if I tried to propagate the gö kar chang lo’i dé in the West – but he was extremely happy that you asked me to do this.”

“You still wish to do this?”

“Yes, Rinpoche. I will do this whatever happens.”
“Maybe … you must study Tibetan history when you can, then you will know more what to expect from people who do not want to see the gö kar chang lo’i dé known in the West – and who want to press it down in the East …”

[pause] “Still … the West is very different and the powerful politicians of whom I am speaking have little power there. I will keep you in my mind and feel that maybe all will be well for you …” [pause] “When you are father to your own gö kar chang lo children you will see clearly what to do.”

I went to see Düd’jom Rinpoche as often as possible – but the time was fast approaching when I’d have to head back to Britain to avoid the bara baresh – the great rains. Just before I left, I found a statue of Garab Dorje. Düd’jom Rinpoche identified it for me as Garab Dorje in the form of ‘Teaching Buddha’. He looked quite like Shakyamuni Buddha but his hands were in the teaching mudra. The statue was inexpensive – but it took me down to the lining on my purse.

Time to go home.
Part III

d this is strange
On being asked to speak concerning the difference amongst the world religions, Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche said “Hinduism is the religion of the king. If you want something – you ask the king. Christianity is the religion of the prince. If you want something – you don’t go to the king, you ask the prince. Islam is the religion of the ambassador. If you want something – you don’t go to the king, you ask the ambassador. Buddhism is the religion of the manual labourer. If you want something – you do it yourself.” This answer bewildered most people – but it seemed evident to me that Rinpoche was making two points. He was defining Buddhism rather than defining the world religions – and he was pointing out that everybody seems to approach religion in order to get their heart’s desire – or to be protected, saved, cosseted, insured, or released from some kind of primal anxiety.

“Well I’ll be damned – this is strange” were the final words of Doc Holliday. He made this statement—it is believed—because he expected to die with his boots on, having received a fatal gunshot wound. As it was he died in bed at a sanatorium in Colorado Springs, and his last words related to seeing his bare feet as they protruded from the bedclothes.

In relation to Doc Holliday … I don’t know what I expected to happen during the time when I did not see Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche … but, it—was —passing strange …
In 1981, I went to see Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. I arrived at the end of February as I wanted to go to Tso Pema to attend the celebration of Padmasambhava’s birth. It turned out that Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche was not there – he was in Ladakh on a weathermaking mission. He often went to different parts of India either to alleviate drought or prevent hail. Drought and hail are the two main curses of the farmer.

Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar was there however, and also Lama Gyaltsen. Lama Gyaltsen had been lodging at Zilngön Ka-gyèd Ling during his stint as the representative of the Nyingma Tradition to the Tibetan Government in Exile. I made two errors of perception that were rectified after a couple of days – the first was that Lama Gyaltsen was a monk and the second that he was Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s son. Lama Gyaltsen held the same basic gé-nyèn vow as Könchog Rinpoche – and therefore just looked like a monk.

This has confused a lot of Western people who have imagined that the Nyingma Tradition allows monks to marry. This is distinctly not the case. Those who are married—yet look like monks—have simply not taken vows any further than the gé-nyèn stage – which does not require celibacy. This would seem to be a mode that has developed in order that noncelibate practitioners can avoid the persecution that seems to accompany the wearing of a white skirt and having uncut hair. These Lamas are therefore, incognito ngakpas and ngakmas.

I have always felt it to be a pity that the gö kar chang lo’i dé has had to obfuscate itself in this way – but then I would not wish to advocate martyrdom …

Anyhow – once we’d sorted out that misconception all was well. Lama Gyaltsen and I swiftly became good friends and it was soon agreed that we’d travel to Tso Pema together with Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar. Lama Gyaltsen and Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar revealed to me that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche would be in Tso Pema and that they both regarded him as one of their Tsawa’i Lamas. What astonishing good fortune! Also fortunate was the fact that I had sufficient funds to hire a taxi to take us to Tso Pema. I had an advance on the book I was writing – and so I was more comfortably situated than I had ever known. Money doesn’t last long when you spend it – but it’s made round to go ‘round and I was happy to be able to make this happen. There’d always been independently wealthy persons to whom everything was possible – but for me—sometimes—it hadn’t been easy to enjoy scraping by on minimal resources. I’m not envious by nature – but being a ‘Dharma Bum’ in the East lacks the romance it may have in the West. Be that as it
may – the taxi driver had family in Mandi and could ply his trade there whilst waiting to take us back to McLeod Ganj. I was especially glad of the taxi ride as ‘Delhi-belly’ had struck and I was feeling rather weak. It was nothing that wouldn’t pass in a week but it would have been grim to have ridden the buses in that condition.

It was an extremely easy journey in comparison with the first journey I’d made. No one had to be told of the nonexistent large knife I had about my person – although, as before, it rained heavily the entire journey. We arrived and went directly to find accommodation. That was not brilliant. Tso Pema was crowded and the rent of a room was commensurately exorbitant. There seemed to be one vacant room left and so we had to take it. We unpacked and were preparing to go see Könchog Rinpoche at the Nyingma gompa – when some monks from the gompa called in to see us. Sadly, Pema Dorje was no longer there – but the monks sat and chatted with us for a while before going to tell Könchog Rinpoche that we were on our way.

We waited for an interval in the rain and made our way over to the gompa. It was good to see that fine building again and I looked forward to seeing Könchog Rinpoche.

He came to meet us immediately—having caught sight of us from a distance —but he had no sooner greeted us than he enquired as to the cost of our room. We told him – and he came himself to extricate us. The monks who’d come to see us had apparently told him where we were and had seemed concerned about us and how we’d been accommodated.

The Indian rooming house proprietor was not well pleased when we vacated the room – however, Könchog Rinpoche made no beans about telling him that he should be glad we let him keep the deposit on the room, and that moreover, he was a goddamn avaricious son-of-a-rent-shark.

Tso Pema had changed since 1975 and the change was not pleasant. It was no longer an entirely Tibetan settlement and litter had appeared where no litter had been seen before. Still – there was the lake and that was the wonder that it ever was. Könchog Rinpoche directed us to the large room that I remembered and even with the three of us – we were comfortably situated. Lama Gyaltsen and Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar were taken aback that we’d been permitted to stay in this room – and even more astounded when I told them it was my second time. Suddenly Lama Gyaltsen became deferential – but I informed him my staying in the room was only because I’d arrived bearing a letter from Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche introducing me to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. I also told him about the dark maroon ‘important tulku waistcoat’ I’d been wearing. He laughed heartily about that – but as he did so, I remembered that I’d given it to Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche … and here was Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar … his wife … Before I could divert Gyaltsen
Rinpoche – he relayed the story to Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar. I sat there waiting for the bomb to drop – but strangely … Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar found the story as funny as Lama Gyaltsen found it. “Yah—yah—yah …” she laughed “My husband loves this to-nga too much … it is also very warm in the cold weather. It is too good—too good.”

It had been too late to call on Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche on the day we’d arrived – mainly due to the accommodation débâcle – but the next day we set out after breakfast.

I was completely delighted to see Rinpoche again and even more so as his wife Jomo Sam’phel Déchen was there with him. She was older than me – but how much older I could not tell. The one thing I did know was that she was incredibly beautiful. I’d experienced love at first sight before – and here it was again in a different guise. This was my Tsawa’i Lama’s wife. To look at the two of them was an extraordinary experience – and made me reflect on the siddhi of taking the nature of the sky as one’s sole nutrition like ’dzem-ma Za Lhamo[229] the Divine Blushing Mistress, who took her sustenance in the way of food and wine directly from the nature of the sky. It seemed that I could do that simply by gazing at Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel.

“This khandro is not for you!” Rinpoche laughed “You must find your own khandro!” [pause] “You found no khandro yet?”

“No, Rinpoche … I mean, I’ve had lady friends – but not as you’ve described. I am still looking for the right khandro.”

“Oh yah – soon … maybe khandro soon finding …” [pause] “Yah … I feel really … maybe soon.”

Then Lama Gyaltsen and Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar spoke with Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel. Occasionally Lama Gyaltsen translated and sometimes Rinpoche prompted him to translate. I listened intently and sometimes understood – especially when Vajrayana terminology was used. Rinpoche noticed my interest perk up whenever I understood the technical terms and whenever this happened he smiled at me. Then he’d ask Lama Gyaltsen to explain what he’d said.

It was a glorious week we spent together – and during that time the gar’cham of the Eight Manifestations of Padmasambhava was performed. It was requested of Rinpoche—as usual—that he preside as Padmasambhava.

He did so and I was astonished by him all over again. I’d seen gar’cham before – but it had never been as real. Rinpoche became Padmasambhava and everyone knew it.

There was another marvel in addition to Rinpoche – and that was Lama Ngawang. He’d been in retreat and had come out just for the period of the
gar’cham. He danced Dorje Tröllö – and his dance was both perfect gar’cham and the finest Western ballet. The difference between him and the other dancers was the distance to the moon. The thing that made it so evident was that Lama Gyaltse and I were playing rolmos in the tantric orchestra – and so we were almost sonically symbiotic with Lama Ngawang.

Later we walked up to the retreat caves and visited Ani Bumchung – an old friend of mine who’d let me use her retreat cave. Ani Bumchung is a Kagyä-Nyingma nun and a lovely person. She’s also a profound practitioner of Düd’jom gTér Tröma Nakmo. She made tea for Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar and Lama Gyaltse and chuckled as she gave me my glass of cold water. “Chu-dangmo” she wrinkled her nose laughing. “Yagpo mindu.” I understood that without need of translation: cold water – bad.

Once we’d taken refreshment—it had been a long hard climb—we went on to see Lama Wangdor, the retreat master who presided over the caves. He welcomed us and we dined with him before returning to the Nyingma gompa.

The next day we went to see Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen again. We enjoyed a marvellous day together and Lama Gyaltse performed a remarkable rôle in translating as much as he could of what I was unable to follow. After a deal of conversation, Rinpoche said “There’s a story I would like to tell you all about Drukpa Künlegs – as I feel it would be both interesting and valuable”…

… At one time Drukpa Künlegs decided he’d go into solitary retreat. The idea was he’d have no human contact whilst in retreat – and his patron made him pledge that he’d remain strictly within the confines he’d set.

His patron, knowing Drukpa Künlegs was fond of ladies and chang, said “Y’know, brother … I hope you’re going keep your vow of complete absence of human contact and never leaving your retreat.”

“Yah, yah, yah …” Drukpa Künlegs yawned “No need to remind me – I know how to stay in a meditation retreat.”

After some days however, his patron heard that Drukpa Künlegs was drifting around the town and engaging in all kinds of activities. He went immediately to town to find Drukpa Künlegs. When he found him, he was in a chang house singing songs. “What’s the deal?” his patron asked in agitated perplexity “I thought you promised me that you were going to live in total solitude! Yet here you are cruising ’round the marketplace – carousing, boozing, and generally carrying on like a wastrel!”

Drukpa Künlegs laughed “Well, dear benefactor … you seem to know very little of meditation. Your perception of my behaviour arises from the fact that you’ve too many goddamn concepts running through your mind about what it means to stay within the confines of a meditation retreat. Physical solitude—
you know—doesn’t equate to mental solitude. Meditation is seeing the body—as—an embodied Mind. The body is the locus within which Mind resides. If Mind resides in meditation – the body can roam where it will.”

Then Künzang Dorje Rinpoche gave us a teaching:

“The most important thing with Dzogchen is presence of awareness. There are all kinds of obstacles to presence of awareness. The first is the obstacle of laziness and the second is forgetfulness. Even having received pointing-out instruction – we tend to forget. The third obstacle is depression. Depression means blocking thought – the state where thought no longer arises. In this state, it is not possible to identify experiences. This state is one of total blankness. Another form of depression is agitation – when concepts move too quickly. If you see a person like this, they may appear to be sitting perfectly – but internally, they’re exhausted by travelling everywhere at once.

“As to how we should meditate – it’s important to break sitting into short sessions. Meditation doesn’t require sitting for long stretches – as if there were value merely in not moving. It’s better to meditate for short periods – rather than long sessions that have no result. When drops of water accumulate they gather momentum – but each drop is separate. Each drop is unique. Meditation sessions should accumulate in the same way.

“There should be no obsession with presence of awareness – as this merely leads to saturating mind with concepts about presence of awareness. The opposite is as bad – paying no heed to presence of awareness and letting your attention blow like litter in an Indian town.

“Don’t indulge in sensitivity …” Rinpoche concluded “… or allow yourselves to be assaulted by the weapon of emotions. If you become a victim of your own emotions … meditation is meaningless.” Rinpoche turned to me. “Is this common in the West?”

“Yes, Rinpoche” I nodded. “It seems that there’s little relation—with quite a few people—between meditation and their emotions. People often claim to practise Dzogchen – but their emotions run pretty wild … and they seem to see no contradiction in that.”

“Oh yah—but not just Western people …” Rinpoche shook his head – evidently wearied by the notion. “Maybe this is a good time to tell what Drukpa Künlegs said concerning such things:

As a free-roaming yogi I sometimes drop in on people who have a religious turn of mind.

Once I visited a Kagyüd gompa where every monk had a jug of chang somewhere.

As I didn’t want to be a common drunk – I stayed clear of the place.
Then I went to a Sakya gompa and found monks splitting doctrinal hairs in search of Dharma.

I was concerned about forgetting the essential teachings so I left – preferring not to argue.

Later I went to a large Gélug gompa where every monk was looking for young monks as lovers.

Fearful of the forcible entry of a monk’s engorged schlong I quit the place as quickly as possible.

I visited a shèdra for gomchens[230] – and in every cave each gomchen was pining for a woman.

Not wishing to become a father or householder, I moved on.

Next was a Nyingma gompa where every monk aspired to be the best dancer in the gar’cham.

So fearful of becoming a prima donna ballerina, I took to the road again.

I went to mountain hermitages – but there they just gathered possessions from excessive donations.

Fearing to break my vows, I hurried away as fast as I could – and visited a charnel ground.

In that deserted place the shamans were conjuring and chanting spells to become famous.

So rather than enslaving myself to demons, I kept walking.

I came up alongside a caravan of pilgrims discussing trade concerns – so I left the caravan.

The next place I found was a retreat centre where the incumbents merely basked in the sun.

Rather than lounging in the sanctuary of a small hut, I kept to myself.

I met a tulku preoccupied by religious treasure – but I’m not a collector, so I left him to his miserliness.

Having moved on yet again I grew tired and stayed a short while with the attendants of a Lama.

But as they’d made a tax collector of him, I took my leave and visited the house of a wealthy man.

He was refreshingly honest – but his dwelling was no place for me and I went to find poor people.
They’d pawned everything they had and spent their time pining over their loss.

I decided that there were easier ways of owning nothing and moved on.

Finally I went to Lhasa. There were hosts and hostesses there eager for gifts and favours.

But fearing to learn the art of flattery I made plenty of distance between myself and that city.

In this way was I wandering throughout Tibet, Bhutan and the outlying lands.

But wherever I went all I found were self-serving hypocrites.

The best policy—based on this experience—seemed to be, to remain on my own.

“Yah …” Rinpoche laughed. “And that’s why I—never—stay in one place for long.”

Rinpoche then turned to me and said “Oh yah … now … I have some words for you—because you are a good yogi—and, because I have confidence in you. I had confidence—years ago—that you will never become ’thom yor again. For six years now you have not been ’thom yor – and your practice now is strong …” [pause] “You’re going to be on your own now, so … I will ask you—as I asked you before—never to mention my name to anyone. I want to avoid many inji students knocking on my door.” He laughed. “They may not be special ’thom yor like you once were. There is no need to write to me when you are in England … I don’t answer letters. We—will—meet again – but not until some years have passed … maybe more than eleven years … I do not know at this moment how long it will be – but maybe thirteen years.”

That was not what I wanted to hear—not at all—but it was as it was – and I felt that Rinpoche knew something that I did not know. “This reminds me, in some ways …” Rinpoche began with a big smile “… of the first time you arrived in this room – here in Tso Pema.”

I had no idea where this was going so I said nothing. Rinpoche chuckled. “It was that aristocratic tulku’s to-nga you used to wear.”

“The dark maroon one?” I enquired.

“Yes—that’s the one—whatever happened to that to-nga?”

“I gave it to Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. It was just after I left you … the winter rains were still falling and it was really quite cold – so I thought Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche could make good use of it.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Good! It will suit him!” [pause] “Anyway it was—too—
large on you.” He laughed. “The elephant ears of that to-nga made you look like a dob-dob.”

“It was made for me in Bristol … The seamstress had a shoddy model to copy so I gave her a photograph of a Lama in Tibet which showed quite clearly how it should look … I suppose her sense of the size of the elephant ears was a little … exaggerated …”

“Oh yah! It looked magnificent!” Rinpoche exclaimed with great hilarity. “You looked as if you were some rich young tulku from a noble family! That’s why you got Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche’s room when you first came here.”

Yes. I was aware of that—and felt bad about it—and, of course, Rinpoche loved to tease me about it. “It is not a problem.” He laughed “It was not your intention – it is just Tibetan culture. This time monks at the gompa thought you were a high Lama!”

“Why, Rinpoche? I wasn’t wearing a fancy to-nga this time …”

“Ah!” he laughed “… this time it was because Gyaltsen—a Tibetan Lama—was looking after you. And Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar was there too, also looking after you. The monks thought they were your servants! They did not realise that they are your friends! Because you are not so well because of Indian water—and they were taking care of you—they thought Gyaltsen and Khandro Ten’dzin were your Lama’s attendants. This is—too—funny! That is why you were rescued from that rotten high-rent room in town!” he laughed “… and why they gave you Düd’jom Rinpoche’s room again!”

Suddenly it all made sense to me. “So this story reminds you of my to-nga and what happened in Tso Pema … because both stories were about misunderstanding externals.”

“Oh yah” Rinpoche laughed “This is what we are always discussing.”

“You know …” I commented — taking the risk in giving gratuitous explanation “… that I never—knew—what that colour meant when I bought the fabric in Britain. It was in the remnant box – where they keep the ends of rolls of fabric that cannot be sold. It was extremely cheap because there was such a small amount of it – but I figured there was just enough for a to-nga.”

Rinpoche roared with laughter “Only—now—you tell me!” and slapped his thighs repeatedly as if it were the best joke he’d ever heard “I am—too—happy! Now you speak with me like a great hero! This is—too—good!”

I bade Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen goodbye as I had yet to pack for departure early the next day. Lama Gyaltsen and Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar would follow me later. I went back to my room where I wept, because it
might be thirteen years before I saw him again.

… big hero …
cambazola and stilton

I’d read Albert Camus’ book *The Outsider* back in ’69. I enjoyed the book—but felt nothing like the character. He received ‘howls of execration’ prior to his execution. At the age of sixteen—a book like that has an appeal that it lacks later in life.

I had little experience of being an outsider. I had friends aplenty—extremely good friends. I understood them and they understood me—as far as anyone could reasonably expect. My two best friends died in 1970 and life began to close in somewhat. I was no longer the vocalist and rhythm-bass player of the hottest British Blues band since Cream. The lead guitarist and bass guitarist were my two best friends…I went to art school that autumn and then year-by-year watched an era dwindling. By ’75 all that was creatively exciting about the late ’60s was dead.

I first went to India and Nepal in ’71 and from that time on I’d hoped to find a Buddhist peer group in the same way I’d had Arts and Blues-music peer groups—but I found myself—more or less—to have become quite like the character penned by Albert Camus. It wasn’t the best fun I’d ever had—but it wasn’t terrible either. My Lamas had taught me not to make too much of praise and blame, meeting and parting, hope and fear, gain and loss, et cetera…so I bit the bullet and made the best of things. It would be gauche—if not puerile—to bemoan a fate I’d built with my own perspective.

Would I have wished to absorb the view of those around me? Would I have been critical of those aspects of my personality of which they were critical? Would I have learnt to be a ‘proper Western Buddhist’ who gave all the proper responses? The answer would be ‘no’ to all three. The prospect would’ve been far less appealing than being isolated. Enough with the kvetching already.

I’d kept the one photograph that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche allowed me to make of him[233] and tried to live the view according to the felt texture of his transmission. I always desired to see Rinpoche again—but he never lived in one place for long. He had residences in various places—but never gave any indication to anyone where he’d be at any one time.

The situation didn’t work out in terms of meeting Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche ’til 1978—so I studied with Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche in McLeod Ganj off and on, as time allowed. I met with other amazing Nyingma Lamas—but this book isn’t intended to be an autobiographical itemisation of my training. Suffice it to say that I completed my retreats and practice-commitments between 1975 and 1983.
In 1978—by complete fluke—I heard that Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche would be coming to Britain to stay in a house in Tintagel which had an atmosphere like something out of a Dennis Wheatley horror story. The circumstances were vaguely hideous vis-à-vis those who’d invited him—but hey, they’d invited him, so who was I to be picky? I made my connection with Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche—maybe all the better for the antipathy of those involved—and invited him and his daughter Nor’dzin Lhamo to visit on his way to Bristol where he was to teach for a few days before returning to London. Whilst in Tintagel, I had a marvellous time with Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche and Nor’dzin Lhamo as they spent a considerable time away from the outré abode in which they were quartered. Magic was the main interest in Tintagel—be it the Eastern or Western miscellany of misbegotten maundering Maharooni-isms.

Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg and howlet’s wing,
For a charm of pow’rful trouble
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.’

Apart from Shakespeare … there’s only so much of that that any sane person can handle—and it was thus that I spent a great deal of time in the local pub talking with Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche. It was there that he asked me why I was vegetarian. “Why you not meat eating and alcohol drinking? You Hindu yogi?”

“No, Rinpoche.”

“Then you must be meat eating and alcohol drinking.”

I went to the bar and ordered a steak and kidney pie—to nibble with my brandy—and never looked back. It’s true I always ate meat when it was offered to me by Künzang Dorje Rinpoche—and I always drank the alcoholic beverages that he was so kind as to lavish upon me—but other than that I’d been vegetarian and abstemious throughout. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche had told me that the time would come when I’d change my diet—and this was obviously the time.

I’d gone to see Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche on my motorcycle with a friend similarly equipped and one day we took Rinpoche and Nor’dzin Lhamo to the seaside for the day. They had expressed a desire to get a little more distance between them and their horror-story hosts and so we set off for the sea. My friend Reg took Nor’dzin Lhamo and I took Rinpoche. Having a
gTértön ride pillion was slightly nerve-wracking. The thought of having an accident seemed far more possible than it had ever been – and for no reason whatsoever.

Rinpoche—although he had never straddled a motorcycle before—was an utter natural, leaning into the bends and seeming to enjoy the experience. We got to the seaside and spent an excellent day in which Rinpoche spoke at length on many subjects.

The following week I borrowed a car and collected Rinpoche and Nor’dzin Lhamo. I’d arranged a Chinese meal and organised with friends to set the thing up for our arrival. I’d found out that Rinpoche loved cheese and so I got in a selection of splendid cheeses. I made sure I got a whole round of Cambazola – on the off chance that he might like it … and I wanted to make sure that I got to eat some of it.

We settled down in the living room after our Chinese repast – and after a while I made coffee and brought out the cheese and crackers. Of course … Rinpoche took one look the Cambazola and carved off a wedge. He ate it. He smiled. He carved another wedge. He ate that too. “This cheese is too good – I am much enjoying” he grinned. He picked up the rest of the round and it was eaten with unusual rapidity.

“Yes, Rinpoche …” I replied “It’s my favourite. I’m glad you enjoyed it.” It was then that I first suspected that Rinpoche was going to mess with me.

The other cheese that Rinpoche enjoyed at my place had been the Stilton – and so we took a whole round off to Bristol where he was to teach. He got the host to melt it down with some white wine for him and sent me off to buy some chillies. Now … I’d never eaten chillies—even though I’d spent long stretches in India—and so I had no idea what they were like. I knew they were hot – and so I’d avoided them. Once the melted Stilton was served up, Rinpoche began dipping the green chillies in and eating them one after another.

“You must be eating” Rinpoche said, passing me a chilli.

“Aren’t they very hot, Rinpoche?”

“No … not—so—hot … not like in India … and with cheese is very sweet to taste …” [pause] “You will like.”

I thanked Rinpoche and dipped my chilli in the Stilton. I took a healthy bite and the first sensation was sweet and pleasant. The pleasure lasted all of a second – and then all hell broke loose. The hosts were very kind and provided me with milk to hold in my mouth to calm the effect of the chilli. Now I’m not one of those people who make a hobby out of being allergic – but chilli brings me out in severe prickly-heat. I get a dry hacking cough and my
temperature rises. I didn’t know that at the time – but I knew it thereafter. I also realised that my earlier suspicion was accurate. Rinpoche was definitely going to mess with me. Now … if I’d reverted to being a ’thom yor again … I could have bailed out at that point. Life had been gloriously simple for a while – and I hadn’t been in any tearing hurry to plunge into the abyss of mind-altering mayhem. I was however, committed to following Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s advice with regard to studying with Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche – and so … I grinned as I usually did – just before I took the plunge.

Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche reminded me in some ways of Künzang Dorje Rinpoche—something in the eyes—but … he was entirely different. They were both wrathful Lamas – and so one could be forgiven for imagining that they would work in a similar way. That however, would be to misunderstand the nature of wrath in this sense. Wrath—with respect to a Lama—relates to energy – and energy can be manifested in endless modes according to precise circumstances. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s wrath was extremely direct and Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s wrath was oblique and multifaceted. Both could be severe and both were extremely warm and kind – but again, in radically different ways. Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche was unpredictably unpredictable rather than ‘angry’. He was stern sometimes—and severe—but also extremely gentle. He seemed to be able to gauge what anyone could handle.

My training with Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche was of a different order to that which I’d received from Künzang Dorje Rinpoche – but it was similar in that it was largely experiential. Most of what I received from him came in the form of informal symbolic transmission.

I did practise Chang gTér and ’Khordong gTér with him to some degree – but he did not press me to take on too much that was liturgically based.

By 1983, I had my first students. Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche got to know many of them quite well over the years. This was why he never encouraged me to practise with his students. I was an anomaly. I was possibly the only Western person to have students in the context of Vajrayana at that time – and it had occurred by accident. I was asked if I’d fill in at the Lam Rim Buddhist Centre in Wales when a yoga teacher double-booked himself. The idea was that I would give a slide show – because Gétsulma Tsultrim Zangmo knew me to have a large collection of slides on Tibetan art and ritual objects. I gave the slide show and was asked questions as to the meaning of the images. This inevitably led to my moving from the rôle of lecturer to Lama … I was invited back to teach Buddhism and the rest followed on. I’d suddenly become a person who had a small group of students.

One of Chhi’med Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s extracurricular pursuits in Holland
was to visit flea markets. He’d go once a week to gather clothes for Tibetan refugee children. He’d then bale ’em and ship ’em – back to India. One day however, he found an old slide projector and added that to his purchases. Now – one of the things I’d learnt from Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche was that I was not careful enough in my speech. I liked to please. I liked to be liked— by him—and tended to speak a little indirectly at times. I thought I’d avulsed my liking-to-be-liked idiocy – but Rinpoche went mining for more of that ore …

I was in Nieuwersluis, Holland – sleeping in a tent. I’d saved up the money to get to be with Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche and enough to pay the contribution for the teachings – but that was it. Bed and board were extra and I didn’t have the extra. A kindly local farmer let me pitch my tent free and I was faced with a month without food.

That was no big problem however, because I’d noticed an interesting phenomenon at the Amsterdam railway station restaurant. People would arrive—order a meal—take a few hurried bites and then leave in an urgent hurry. It occurred to me—quite quickly—that these people were afraid of missing a train. So … if I were to slide in quickly before being spotted by the waiter – I’d have a free meal. The meals had to be paid in advance there – so … I wasn’t going to be approached with a bill. My custom was to go to Amsterdam every time Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche made a flea-market expedition. There was no teaching being given so I was at liberty to assuage my hunger. I’d get a lift in with Rinpoche – and then hitchhike back to Nieuwersluis. I’d eat as many meals as I could manage—rather like a boa constrictor—and then live for a while on the nutrition thereby derived. It was a workable system—for a young man at least—and it enabled me to stay in Holland for the teachings and empowerments given by Rinpoche.

So – back to the old slide projector. One day I got back quite early from feasting in Amsterdam and was there in the living room when Rinpoche returned. He showed me the slide projector and asked what I thought of it.

“It’s worthless, Rinpoche” I replied – feeling that I’d learnt my lesson with regard to being mealy-mouthed.

“Why you say this?” he asked quite sharply.

“Because it has no lens – and no slide carriage. It’s not a professional model like my Kodak Carousel, in fact – it’s pretty low end and I doubt if you could even get a lens for it. Even so it wouldn’t be worth it – it would cost more than it’s worth to fix it and—even if you could—you’d just have a poor quality projector at the end of it.”

Rinpoche eyed me – and I started to feel slightly uneasy. I’d been straight and I’d been completely accurate in my assessment – so …why was I feeling
tentative?

“Yah … so you say this is worthless.”

“Yes, Rinpoche. It’s worthless.

“Nothing can be done?”

Then I made a hideous error. “Well …” I replied – plugging it in “… the fan works.”

“And so …?” he enquired brusquely.

“And so … maybe … something could be made out of that.”

“Yah … what making possible?”

Now … I knew that I couldn’t say ‘I don’t know’ because then he’d say ‘Then why you say this!’ Trapped. “Well, Rinpoche … maybe it could be turned into a desktop fan.”

“And you are all this doing?”

There was only one answer to that. “Yes, Rinpoche …” [pause] “… but I’ll need to buy some materials …”

“No” he declared with distinct resolution “Nothing spending—you ‘worthless’ saying—so not more money wasting.”

Damn – not even tools … What—was—I going to do with this vile assortment of grey plastic? I had no immediate idea.

“And you must be as much using as possible from this projector. There must be much saving – so less money is being lost.”

I grinned and agreed “Certainly, Rinpoche. It will be one of the wonders of the world.”

Rinpoche laughed “Yah—yah—yah … very wonderful.”

I worked all the next day—which was fortunately a day off—and part of the following day. I carved a semi-circular base from an old mahogany chest of drawers that had been thrown into the garden. I had to use a bread knife and hold the wood against a brick with my foot. The wood kept slipping – and when it did, I’d invariably nick the skin on my knuckles. There was enough of my blood in the wretched piece of wood to classify it as a close familial relation.

The wood then had to be ‘sanded’ with the edge of the brick and wire-wool kitchen abrasive. I cut the plastic cowling with a knife heated on the cooker gas-flame and made screw holes in it with a heated screwdriver. I perforated the back of the cowling in the same way and fitted a piece of old perforated
zinc into the front of the device.

I incorporated the on-off switch and the rubber grommet for the flex and it was finished. I cleaned the thing up as best I could with a kitchen-scourer and plugged it in. It worked. It was as ugly as hell – but the air moved in the right direction … I’d done what I claimed I was able to do. I was bleeding and aching – but content.

I gave it to Rinpoche with some small sense of pride. He plugged it in—saw that it worked—and tossed it into his suitcase “Yah—good.” And that was it.

‘Yah—good …’ I thought. Well … so why did I need praise – or even thanks? There was no cause for me to be sulky about it – and fortunately I decided not to indulge that feeling beyond the time it took me to recognise that there was no future in such indulgence. I was just about to go to my tent and sit in the dark for the rest of the evening when Rinpoche called me. “I ask Marga – and you eat with us now …” [pause] “She tells me you have no money to eat — because you spent all to come here.”

“Yes, Rinpoche, that’s true – but that wasn’t a problem. Thank you for inviting me to dinner – I shall enjoy that.”

This came near the end of the period of teachings – but I was grateful nonetheless. Rinpoche was always very kind to me and looked after me in many ways. He saw to it that I received a Doctorate from the University of Santiniketan—West Bengal—where he was the head of Indo-Tibetan Studies. The doctorate was based on two books, various writings,[238] and oral examination. Rinpoche was sorry that I’d been short-circuited at art school and had been unable to go to the Royal College of Art in London as I’d planned, and thought it would be good if I had some academic recognition for my work in the field of Vajrayana Buddhism.

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In 1987, Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche—Jig’drèl Yeshé Dorje—passed away, and the shock was considerable. I knew that I would have to lose him eventually – but when I heard the news I was stunned. It was almost as if someone pulled the plug on the life-support machine. An age of the world had ended – and I sat in a state of blankness, without thought – but humming like an electrical device whose circuits were about to blow.

Düd’jom Rinpoche was born in 1904—in Southern Tibet in the Hidden Land[239] of Pemakö. He passed away on 17 January 1987 in the Dordogne. His father was Kathog Tulku Norbu Ten’dzin from Pemakö – descended from Nyatri Zangpo and the King of Powo, Kanam Dépa. His mother—Namgyal Drölma—was descended from gTértön Ratna Lingpa.
The last time I’d been able to speak privately with Düd’jom Rinpoche was in 1983, and since then I had only been able to see him in large audiences. He always smiled when he saw me and always spoke when I went up to receive a blessing after a teaching – but private interviews were highly guarded and time was strictly limited.

Lamas become surrounded by people whose main job is to keep people away. There was no need for words any more – and no need for private discussions. The one glance Düd’jom Rinpoche gave me in the crowd was quite enough to let me know that I was as close to him as I ever was. I had no business requesting personal time with the lineage holder of the Düd’jom gTér and the head of the Nyingma Tradition on whom so many people relied.

The last words he spoke to me when I received his blessing in the Dordogne in 1986 were “You have all you need in Künzang Dorje. You will meet him again – but this may be our last meeting. You remember your promise to me. I see this. You have now started to establish the gö kar chang lo’i dé in the West.”

“You have now started to establish the gö kar chang lo’i dé in the West.” That statement was puzzling to me. No one at that time had taken ordination – but as on many other occasions it became clear to me that Düd’jom Rinpoche was looking into the future.

The students who were to take ordination were already my students and it was only a matter of time. The first person I ordained was Nor’dzin Pamo[240] – and I was glad this first person was a woman. This was a good sign and I was happy that I had begun to fulfil my promise. I did not know where it would lead – but I knew that all I had to do was continue.

In 1991, Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche passed away. He was born in 1910 in the Denhok Valley of Dér-gé, Kham. His family were directly descended from King Trisong Detsen. He was an incarnation of Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo.[241] His passing was—again—a shock to the system. The old world I’d known was disappearing with relentless rapidity. It’s not that I thought my Tsawa’i Lamas would live forever – but … the world seemed different. Emotionally, it was as if the Industrial Revolution had just commenced and the world of Jane Austen was beginning to slip away. Ridiculous analogy – but I know of no other way of expressing it. The difference it made to the world to have lost Düd’jom Rinpoche and Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche is impossible to explain to anyone who had not met them.
In 1994—when I had entirely forgotten the desktop fan I’d made for Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche—I happened to be in McLeod Ganj. I was there to attend a ‘Conference of Western Buddhist Teachers’ and was accompanied by Shardröl.[242] The conference was an ungainly cumbersome event in many ways.

I found I had little in common with anyone apart from Venerable Thanavaro—an Italian Theravadin monk.[243] I found him to be a delightful person and had considerable respect for him as a practitioner. Shardröl also liked him and he told her “I see you’ve been bitten by the Dharma dragon.” Meaning that she was lost to the ordinary world and was bound for an interesting life.

One day I happened to be in Upper Dharamsala—the Indian town below McLeod Ganj. I was looking for robe fabric and for a pair of Chamba mountain sandals to replace the ones that had been stolen at the Buddhist centre some years before. I’d just checked a shop called ‘Club Foot Wear’ in which the words ‘club’ and ‘foot’ had been placed so close that the sign read ‘ClubFoot Wear’. Only in India … I walked on and took note of the familiar sign ‘Please Do Not Allow Your Children to Ease-Off in the Streets and Lanes’.

There were obliquely worded advertisements that read ‘Sex and Stomach-gas Doctor’. I never enquired further as to the specific expertise of such doctors—so the subject remains a mystery. There were of course the ubiquitous Hindi film posters. They usually depicted a beautiful sari’d girl being protected by a clean-shaven podgy fellow—as a grim bearded psychopath approached with knife or axe.

As I was smiling at a poster—whom should I see but Gilbert Harris, a South African fellow with whom I’d had some exceedingly unpleasant encounters back in the ’70s. I had him more or less diagnosed as having an anti-social personality disorder. I wasn’t glib with my analysis and always figured I could be way off the mark— but hey, it can be useful to know what you’re up against with some people.

Anyhow … Gilbert caught my eye and approached me in what appeared to be a friendly manner. He wore a smile rather than a sneer. This was most unexpected. If I’d decided to make use of my past experience—I’d have said ‘Hallo’ in passing and left him standing there. I don’t warm to sociopaths— even though I try to remember that—they too—are beginninglessly enlightened. As canonically sanctioned, I bring to mind that—whichever sociopath it happens to be—beings such as Gilbert Harris were once my
mother in some long distant rebirth … Such a mother had lavished kindness upon me and therefore, et cetera … Such is the perspective of saints – so it’s not always easy … On that occasion however, I was feeling … free … and, something got the better of me. Charles Dickens’ book A Christmas Carol crossed my mind. The image of the cheerful nephew of Ebenezer Scrooge who invites his uncle to Christmas dinner – much to the incredulity of all …

Anyhow—all that apart—he was down on his luck financially – so … I stood him a meal. Why not? It was time to eat in any case. We sat down to a fine Indian repast. He told me where he’d been: Nepal, Sikkim, and – he’d been to stay with Chhi’md Rig’dzin Rinpoche in Santiniketan. Chhi’md Rig’dzin Rinpoche had thrown him out for reasons best left unexplained. He was indignant and had a list of complaints and accusations.

I made no comment. I simply listened and asked questions that were likely to get more interesting answers. “What was Chhi’md Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s shrine room like?”

“Oh very fine—small—but very fine indeed.” He gave some details – and concluded with a fascinating titbit of information. “He used to blow incense in my face every day with his desktop fan that he kept on his throne table.”

Curious … “And … what was it like … this … desktop fan?”

“Oh … some ugly misshapen homemade contraption knocked together out of wood and grey plastic – but of what interest is that to you?”

“Just curious” I replied – straining to hide all signs of mirth.

He asked me about Künzang Dorje Rinpoche with great interest, having heard by some means[244] that I’d been to see him at one time. I answered his questions as obliquely as I could. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche asked me not to mention him to anyone – so I had to be evasive. I think I succeeded and he accepted that I’d met him – but that there was not much to say. The sneer started to reappear. I’d failed to gain fantastic empowerments and I was therefore uninteresting. Then—with the meal eaten—we parted ways. I’d sponsored his meal – and thereby served my purpose. He’d clearly had enough of my spiritually impoverished conversation. I’ve never been a big one for discussing Buddhism conversationally. My experience of Tibetan Lamas and practitioners was that they talked of their families and everyday concerns – quite like people anywhere. The Western equivalents I met were quite different—apart from a few wonderful exceptions—and so the mention of art or literature, Bach or Bartok, Cream or Muddy Waters tended to alienate me from most occidental aspirants.

I paid the bill at the restaurant and waved goodbye to Gilbert. Waving goodbye was evidently démodé. It occurred to me—as I walked back up the
hill to McLeod Ganj—that stories have no end, in terms of their connection with Lamas.

As I walked up the hill in the direction of McLeod Ganj, I began to sing:

‘He’s Gilbert the filbert[245] the Knut with a ‘K’,

*The pride of Piccadilly, the blasé roué;*

*Oh Hades, the ladies who leave their wooden huts,*

*For Gilbert the filbert, the kernel of the Knuts!’*

I was staying at the Himalayan Queen Hotel—known locally to Indians by the oblique pronunciation of ‘Him Koon’—and gave the account of my dinner to Shardröl. She enjoyed the story and asked what it meant to me. “I don’t really know …” I replied “… but I get the feeling that it’s a story I’ll tell from time to time.” I told Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche this story later and it caused him much amusement. I admitted to him that I was not entirely proud of myself. Seeing my desktop fan as an element in a comic act of vengeance was unworthy for a Buddhist. Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche simply laughed even more – and said “Yah—maybe— but anyway, too funny. The incense made him cough very much!”

The Conference of Western Buddhist Teachers was a strange experience. I’d been alienated back in the 1970s by people whose approach to Buddhism was so unlike my own. Now, I was back with the same people—or some of the same people—and alienated again … but for entirely different reasons.

On the first go’-round I’d encountered romanticised devotionalism bereft of common sense: wishful thinking in turbo-drive. In the 1970s, these people were consuming Tibetan cultural superstitions along with Buddhism – as if there were no difference. They were in denial of their Western cultures as having any value. They looked to all Tibetan Lamas as if they were possessed of realisation – irrespective of their actual insight. Anyone with a robe was from ‘planet enlightenment’ and anyone who could not simper on cue was derided as déclassé.

In 1994, the reverse was true. The Western Buddhist teachers—who’d once been Buddhist students—were now gung-ho about Western psychotherapy and the value of their own cultures.

They were highly concerned with removing the parts of Buddhism they felt were culturally alien to the West – or rather to the new god: psychotherapy. Whatever they didn’t like about Buddhism was described as ‘culturally Eastern’. They wanted Buddhism stripped of Eastern culture. Most of them were still keen on rebirth and karma – because that fits well with New Age ideology. The general understanding of karma however, tended to be of the
Hindu fatalist variety rather than the Buddhist teaching of perceptual patterning. So ... from being an outcast on the basis of my failure to have faith in every aspect of the Tibetan cultural world-view – I'd become an outcast on the basis of having no argument with the fundamental tenets of Buddhism. I found no need to alter Buddhism according to the dictates of Western psychotherapy or to add Jungian sand-play to the Nyingma curriculum. I had no problem with the rôle of the vajra master in Vajrayana—on the basis that Vajrayana cannot exist without that rôle—and had no interest in creating laws to govern how a vajra master should work with disciples.

I had prepared a ten-minute dissertation on my work as a Nyingma Lama in the West – including the establishment of the gö kar chang lo’i dé. The conference committee informed me that there was no time for my presentation. I accepted that as cheerfully as I could – but found later that time was not actually lacking. One Swiss fellow—on hearing the Dalai Lama say that masturbation was not quite the-done-thing for monastics—decided to be outraged on behalf of certain therapy clients to whom the solitary art was apparently crucial for self-validation. The committee decided that he should be allowed to present his views and he spent half an hour doing so. The Dalai Lama sat patiently listening and agreed that if it was indeed vital to the mental equilibrium of such persons – then indeed it had to be seen as being of value. What was not of value was a ten-minute presentation on the gö kar chang lo’i dé in the West.

The subject of lay and monastic was one of the main themes of our discussions when we were not with the Dalai Lama. I attempted to introduce the idea that these were not the only two options. There was the gö kar chang lo’i dé.

“Ah yes ...” they replied “Lay tantrikas.”

“No ...” I responded “the gö kar chang lo’i dé are not lay – they are ordained. That’s why these robes are worn. As you’ll notice, they’re similar in form to monastic robes – but of a different colour.”

To them ‘ordained’ was synonymous with ‘celibate’ – and ‘lay’ meant ‘non-celibate’.

I pointed out that the definition of the word ‘lay’ in all European, Scandinavian, and Eastern European languages meant: not of the clergy; non-professional. “There is no dictionary—to my knowledge—that defines ‘lay’ as non-celibate. I have researched over thirty languages and multiple English language dictionaries – and so I’m confident that the fact is indisputable. As there is an interest at this conference in separating Dharma from Eastern culture – we could start by accepting that the use of the word ‘lay’ to mean
‘non-celibate’ is a cultural concept which has no place in describing the gö kar chang lo’i dé …”

This was greeted with silence apart from a few people who were not of the dominant mind-set – and therefore open to what I had to say.

“Also … I think we need to accept that this use of the term ‘lay’ is prejudicial in terms of other religions such as Judaism and Protestant Christian denominations. It would be aggressive toward those religions were we to employ it – so—even without considering the gö kar chang lo’i dé—it is inappropriate.”

I had the feeling that I was talking to the wall – apart from Venerable Thanavaro. He was a Theravadin monk – but he saw my point entirely. “Yes … I agree … it would constitute anti-Semitism to use the word ‘lay’ as we are doing.”

At that point it was deemed that we had come to the conclusion of the discussion and that my points would be borne in mind. The conference then continued to describe the gö kar chang lo’i dé as ‘lay tantrikas’ – as if nothing had been said.

I felt that Venerable Thanavaro was the one real tantrika there amidst the others who waxed knowledgeable on the subject. I found him entirely delightful. It was decided that Thanavaro should be allocated a set of ting-shar – and that he should clang them from time to time to facilitate short periods of silence.

He accepted the responsibility and proceeded to carry out his rôle with splendid aplomb. It was marvellous to observe him choose his moments. He’d ring those ting-shar just at the moments when the pontification looked likely to peak-out. Then he’d make the silence last just a little too long for those who were keen to talk. This—for me—was the most enjoyable part of the conference. Venerable Thanavaro approached me later and told me that he considered me an ordained colleague and that he could not quite understand why my presentation on the matter was found so difficult to understand.

I was delighted by Venerable Thanavaro’s support – and, not wishing to be boorish on the subject of the gö kar chang lo, I decided to give up and not mention it again. There was no point in pressing my case in the ‘Basement of Babel’ as I’d come to think of the conference room.[246] If people had no interest – I had no interest in boring them.

The conference rolled on and I tried to sit and listen. One of the main obsessions of the core participants was ‘placing limits on the vajra master’. To the credit of some teachers attending, this was deemed non-canonical –
but we were overruled by the weight of opinion which demanded that Vajrayana must of necessity conform to the remit of Sutrayana. Someone brought up the question of vajra masters of the past from the Kagyüd School—such as Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, and Milarépa—but it was deemed that such vajra masters only existed in the past. There was no one now with the realisation to act in the extraordinary ways of those of the past. Now … it was not possible for me to remain silent at that point. “I have to say that Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche, Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche, and Künzang Dorje Rinpoche are clearly their equal – so I cannot accept such an idea.”

Again my comment was ignored and some statement was made to the effect that the individual devotion of students for their Lamas did not change the view proposed. We were given to understand that the view had some kind of supreme sanction from somewhere …

One fellow read a paper to the group, which most people seemed to like. It was well researched in many respects – but had such an anti-vajra-master agenda that I found it … extremely difficult to appreciate. He spoke of the need to eliminate the ‘over-idealisation’ of Lamas if Buddhism were to survive in the West. Quite apart from his somewhat appalling linguistics – I wondered how such an aim would be achieved. It seemed that the only way to rid the West of the rôle of vajra master, would be to make Vajrayana illegal. They tried that in Tibet at the beginning of the second spread – and it failed. It failed even with the draconian measures they employed at the time —such as capital punishment for practising the inner tantras—so what was the idea for the West?

I was informed that Vajrayana was fine as long as it conformed to Sutra. Really … electric guitars are permitted as long as they’re kept below five watts. Cheese is permitted as long as it has no fat content.

“And so …” I asked “… would this require the editing of all Vajrayana texts?” I was asked what I meant. “Well … we’d need to remove all references to the vajra master if this ‘over-idealisation’ were to be avoided – so my question would be: how would you organise that, when no one who respected Vajrayana texts would agree to it?”

This question was met with a resentful silence. We were again given to understand that the view had some kind of supreme sanction from somewhere … The subject was then regarded as closed.

Then—just when I thought the situation was at its lowest ebb— one of the scholars present brought up another piece of ‘sanctioned information’ for the conference to digest. ‘Crazy wisdom’ was said to be a mistranslation of ‘nyon mong héruka’[247] which was held to mean ‘defiled héruka’. [248]

I had no argument with the translation – but pointed out that the Tibetan for
crazy wisdom was yeshé ’cholwa.[249] None of the scholars recognised that term and it was decided that too few of the conference attendees knew Tibetan – so it would not be useful to spend time on the subject. I had to point out however, that the term they’d used was in itself mistaken. The actual term for nondual madman is ‘myon hérūka’[250] – not ‘nyon mong hérūka’ … but … again I was informed that such a discussion was too technical for those who could not speak Tibetan. I pointed out that I couldn’t speak Tibetan either – but had a grasp of necessary technical vocabulary – so surely this was not too erudite a subject. I was told that my point had been taken and that the language of the discussion might warrant further research at some future point. That was the shape of things and there was nothing I could do without causing a rumpus. Again I let the matter drop. It would be possible to write a book with respect to how bizarre I found the Basement of Babel. Suffice it to say that it was my first and last venture into the world of Western Buddhist teachers. There was no peer group to be found there – apart from Venerable Thanavaro.

There were people interested in the gö kar chang lo in other spheres of Vajrayana. They were however, too often ‘mahayoga meschugganahs’ like the occultists in Tintagel – people who’d have done better in the Slytherin House of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.[251] They seemed fascinated by the correspondences between Western magic and Vajrayana – and made parallels between Satanism and the inner tantras that I found tedious to the point of nausea. They were often hirsute, cosmetically challenged individuals who preyed on women. They majored in polishing their jaded charisma and attempted to hold court wherever anyone looked as if they might be impressed.

I never challenged them or made comment – but they always seemed to guess that I was some kind of infidel. I’d strayed onto their patch without the operative occult ordinance. I was a minister without portfolio – a ngakpa sans grimoire. My sense of the gö kar chang lo’i dé was as alien to them as theirs was to me. What I loved was the free-spiritedness and the spaciousness of view. I loved the sense in which Vajrayana could be lived within the ordinary fabric of society. I had no desire to be a magician or ritualist. I had no desire to find power in arcane procedures – I simply wished to bring the wind from the mountains into the lives of everyday family people. Everyday family people were however, as much beneath the notice of those who wished they were celibate as those who seemed sexually incontinent.

As well as being a ngakpa sans grimoire, I was a Western Buddhist teacher sans psychotherapy. I was also sans a few other things: sans political correctness, sans neo-puritanism, sans ‘issues with Dharma’, and sans aversion to romance. A surprising number of Western Buddhist teachers—
who were married—admitted to wishing they were celibate – and what I said about the gó kar chang lo’i dé made no difference.

There was however, the lush vegetation of the Himalayan foothills in which I rejoiced. When the Basement of Babel was not in session – I took to rambling. I visited Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s gompa. He’d passed away in 1993, and a statue of him sat on his throne. It was a good likeness – and I made my prostrations. Three of my five Tsawa’i Lamas had now passed away – and I was beginning to see the sand in the hourglass in the world around me. The picture was dissolving.

I visited Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar and we were happy to see each other again. She and Shardröl made friends immediately. We ate together and talked of old times, current times, and future times. She would soon be moving to Yang-lé-shöd in Nepal where Lama Gyaltsen and I had established a Nyingma retreat facility called Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong. I was delighted that she would be moving there and we promised to visit her the following year.

I decided that the best use of my time lay in showing Shardröl around. It was her first time in India and she needed to take some stories home. There were goats to be met on narrow tracks. They sometimes appeared though wisps of cloud and gazed at us with patent curiosity.

We went to see the huge statue of Padmasambhava in the Dalai Lama’s temple in McLeod Ganj and called in daily on Zilngön Kagyèd Ling – the Nyingma gompa near the seismological observatory out on the Bhagsunath road. The practitioners there welcomed us and it felt marvellous to escape from the Basement of Babel. There were undoubtedly some fine people at the conference – but the subjects that interested them held no joy for me. It was a relief to get some distance from McLeod Ganj as the place had become horribly crowded. The beautiful chörten that once held pre-eminence in the little British hill station was now overshadowed by lugubrious Indian hotels.

Up on the ridge where Zilngön Kagyèd Ling was situated there was a fine breeze and a wonderful prospect to the south where the hills melted into the distance. We were offered refreshment and—remembering my penchant for cold drinks—Ngakpa Sonam, the son of Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche and Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar, brought me a bottle of Sprite. Zonga Tong-gyal—an old student of Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche—presented us with white scarves and we handed over a present and some money sent by his sponsors Nor’dzin and ’ö-Dzin. I was glad that part of a world I remembered still existed – and that ngakpas and ngakmas, monks and nuns, together with lay adherents could live together in community without there being a problem of any kind. This was the Nyingma world I loved.

At the conclusion of the conference I returned to Britain, and Shardröl set out
on her own adventure in Tso Pema. I hoped fervently that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche would be there – but that did not prove to be the case. C’est la vie. Shardröl wrote an extensive diary of her time in India – and I hope one day that she will publish it.

It makes highly entertaining reading and is full of pertinent insights into human nature. One of her first experiences of just how strange India can be occurred on the way up to McLeod Ganj by taxi. Before ascending into the foothills there was a long straight run of road.

A tree had taken root in the middle of the road and no one had seen fit to remove it. The taxi driver honked his horn at it continuously from 500 yards distant. The tree obdurately refused to move—in spite of incessant honking—and the taxi driver swerved at the last moment to avoid it.

“Why … did he do that?” Shardröl asked. “I don’t know …” I replied “… but things like that happen in India … you’ll get used to it.”
I’d like to drift back some years ... to Cardiff in the early ’80s – when Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche was staying with me in Roath. It was a celebratory period and students came every day to eat with us and generally help out. There were teachings and empowerments. We made shawls and various other Lama-necessities. Whilst thus engaged, Rinpoche asked me if I could make him a larger version of an apron I had made for him on his previous visit. It turned out that he didn’t really want to use it as a kitchen-apron – but as a cunning device to enable him to surreptitiously take far more carry-on on an aircraft than would normally be allowed. I got the idea immediately and said that I could make the pockets on the apron gusseted so they’d hold more.

He was pleased but asked “When ready possible?”

“I can have it completed by September, Rinpoche.”

“Not sooner coming?” he replied.

“Maybe, Rinpoche – but I can only promise it for September.”

“Yah ...” he said in an offhand way. “You cannot be earlier making?”

“No, Rinpoche—I am not sure—and I can certainly try ... but I can only promise it for September.”

Rinpoche shook his head with a look of dissatisfaction, so I said “My promise is my promise – and in that I will not fail unless I die before September. I will try to finish early – but I cannot promise it before then.”

Then Rinpoche grinned at me. “September fine. No problem.” The whole thing had been a set-up – but this time I’d been able to stand firm. As it was, I sent the apron—he called it ‘the kangaroo’—at the end of July – with a note: ‘Promised in September – Delivered in July’. Rinpoche telephoned in as soon as it arrived. He thanked me for it – and never sought to challenge the nature of my communication thereafter.

I have many stories concerning Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche. Some of them are hilarious – but only mean something to me or to others who were there. Some stories are extremely personal and some involve people in a way that would do them no credit in a book. I have no desire to censure others – however much they may deserve it. I deserve enough censure myself. Maybe when all concerned have passed away such stories could be told – and maybe it should be left to others.

One event however, needs to be told – because miracles are not ancient
occurrences. Neither are they only to be found in Tso Pema with its circumnavigating island. Remarkable events also occur right on your doorstep – under the right circumstances.

‘I can show you … that when it rains and shines … It’s just a state of mind …’ That’s what John Lennon sang in the Beatles song ‘Rain’. I was shown a tract recently by a Western Buddhist teacher. It told of how he’d witnessed Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche fail to control the weather back in the early 1970s. Apparently the other Western people in his group were overwhelmed by the magic and mystery of Tibet and affirmed that it had been pelting down until he blew his kangling.[252] The author says he went along with the group in their belief. He recounts that he even told the story of Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s wondrous weathermaking to others over the years and affirmed having witnessed it. His was an eye-witness account. Now—of course—he writes of his regret at having been complicit in a fabrication and having disingenuously purveyed a group illusion to others. I admire his recent honesty – but I cannot help but wonder … concerning the convenience of such admissions.

When faith is in vogue a person believes – but when doubt is in vogue they admit, with regret, to having perpetuated an illusion.

I’m sure there must be more charitable views than mine – but I must also be honest. I witnessed Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche’s failure twice as often as that author had … that is to say – twice. I witnessed his success however, at least a dozen times. The alternation of failure and success, of course, proves nothing. It could have been a matter of luck on those dozen occasions. The rain might have stopped whether a kangling was brandished or not. I wouldn’t like to make a definite statement about those instances – apart from the fact that any expert in any field experiences failure and success. Doctors don’t always cure their patients. Financial advisers don’t always predict changes in the stock market correctly. These failures do not however, cause us to doubt their skills – and we still avail ourselves of their services. Why then … should someone cast doubt on Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche for one perceived lapse?

It’s a question worth asking of ‘rational fellows’ who favour ‘Buddhism without beliefs’ and who describe themselves as ‘Buddhist atheists’ – as if most other Buddhists were theists. The Buddhism I’ve studied and practised doesn’t require beliefs – it requires openness. The alternative to belief does not have to be active disbelief. In terms of Buddhism – you either know or you don’t know. If you’ve practised enough, you will know what holds true in your own experience – and will therefore have no need of belief or disbelief. Knowing what holds true – you can then view the realm of what you don’t know as a good working hypothesis. That’s been my approach all
along – and it’s worked well for me. I’ve therefore not vacillated in my relationship to Dharma. Show me a yeti and I’ll believe in yetis. If you can’t show me a yeti, I won’t know either way – but I won’t actively disbelieve in them. Active disbelief involves the same degree of faith as belief. It’s merely the flip side of the same coin. I see no purpose in disbelieving anything – simply because it lies outside my experience. That doesn’t mean I’m not sceptical or that I’m devoid of cynicism. I actively disbelieve in a whole range of absurdities – but in terms of Buddhism I am content to be agnostic where I have no gnosis.

This is called ‘learning faith’ or ‘intelligent faith’ and we all apply this in our daily lives. If a good friend tells me “You’ll enjoy this movie” then the chances are that I’ll enjoy the movie. Going to see the movie on recommendation however, is an act of faith – an act of intelligent faith.

Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche was visiting me in 1984. It was spring and the weather was wet even for Wales. The weather report indicated solid rain for three days. It had been decided that we were to have a picnic on the beach at a place called Southerndown. Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche would give a Dzogchen transmission which required us to look at the sky and the sea.

An excellent array of food was brought by students and as they arrived—out of the pouring rain—they each questioned the likelihood of the picnic. It was one of those Welsh days where the ubiquitous grey informed anyone who recognised it, that the rain had set in. There’d be no remission. Students put the question to me. I put the question to Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche – who replied “Oh yah – we picnic having. No problem.”

“Rinpoche says we are going to go to Southerndown for our picnic” I announced.

“In spite of the rain?” our students enquired with incredulity “Wouldn’t it be better to …”

“No …” I replied “… it wouldn’t.” And with that the cars set out in a convoy that chugged slowly through the driving rain. The rain was thrashing down so violently that for parts of the journey—even with the windscreen wipers on full—it was hard to see the road ahead – and we had to drive at twenty miles per hour and less. What people were thinking in the other cars, I had no idea – but the atmosphere was ever so slightly crazed in the vehicle that held Rinpoche, Khandro Déchen, Rig’dzin Dorje and myself. Rinpoche was silent for the extent of the journey and we felt somehow unwilling to intrude into that space – especially with any comment on the weather.

As we approached the cliff tops before descending the hill to the beach at Southerndown, the rain slackened. It continued to slacken every few hundred yards. We began the descent to the beach as the clouds parted.
By the time we got to the car park, the sun was shining through a faint drizzle and a vivid double rainbow arched across the sky. I alighted first in order to open the car door for Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche — and by the time I opened his door the rain had ceased.

I’d seen Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche stop the rain in McLeod Ganj on various occasions. He’d blow his kangling at the sky, and the clouds would begin to move away. He’d usually have performed rites around the event — but the main thing seemed to be blowing that kangling at the sky. The thing I’d never seen however was turning the rain on and off like a tap. It reminded me of a story that Kyabjé Kunzang Dorje Rinpoche had told concerning Drukpa Kunlegs …

… Drukpa Kunlegs was passing through an arid region of Tibet. There’d been no rain for so long that the farmers were in pretty dire straits. They’d asked every monastery in the area to perform rites to cause rain — but they’d all failed. One day Drukpa Kunlegs rolled into town—as was his wont—and someone recognised him. “Aren’t you the famous Drukpa Kunlegs?! ”

Drukpa Kunlegs laughed and acknowledged that he was indeed Drukpa Kunlegs “But for what am I supposed to be famous?”

“For miracles!” the local farmer replied.

“Oh yah, well, never mind about that — just bring me some chang will you, there’s good fellow.”

“I-would-if-I-could-but-I-can’t” replied the man. “There’s been no rain d’you see … No rain — no chang.”

By this time folks had started to gather around and they were all busy with the ‘Aren’t you the famous Drukpa Kunlegs?’ number.

“Yah—yah—yah — and this is the place that’s famous for its lack of chang” Drukpa Kunlegs answered.

The village head then appeared and implored Drukpa Kunlegs to cause it to rain. “Sure” replied Drukpa Kunlegs “Anything to get a drop of chang on a hot day.”

“Please let us know what you will need to perform the ceremony — you will be needing monks to play the tantric orchestra and …”

“No” Drukpa Kunlegs interrupted “I won’t need anything like that.”

“But everyone knows that these things are indispensable — and all the others required many materials and accoutrements.”

“Oh yah—sure they did—but they all failed, didn’t they” Drukpa Kunlegs stated matter-of-factly.
“But how can it be possible to perform a ritual with nothing? We must at least provide you with an assistant.”

“Yah—yah—yah …” Drukpa Künlegs yawned “D’you want rain or not?”

The village head merely stared nonplussed.

“Look here—if it has to be that way—I’ll take you as an assistant. As for material – I’ll need a small sack of tsampa flour. As for ritual equipment – I’ll need a large ladle.”

The village head—obviously unhappy with such an eccentric arrangement—began to prevaricate. Drukpa Künlegs cut him off in mid-circumlocution “Look – it’s either this or nothing and I’ll go find a place where they can give me a bowl of chang.”

The village head reluctantly agreed – and a singular ceremony followed. Drukpa Künlegs lifted his shamthab and exposed his posterior. He then instructed the village head to scoop up a ladle of tsampa and to hold it just below his buttocks. Each time a ladle was held in line with his anus, Drukpa Künlegs farted and blew the tsampa into the air. This process continued until all the flour was gone. As the flour swirled in the air and into the sky, the villagers noticed clouds accumulating and once the ceremony was over the rain began to fall. The village head—delighted yet confused—exclaimed “This was a most unusual ceremony!”

“Yah …” Drukpa Künlegs replied “… and also entirely unnecessary.”

“How can we ever thank you enough – we shall give the weight of the flour in gold!”

“No thanks, I don’t need it. Just collect some of that rain! Start making some goddamn chang before I expire from thirst!”

The story was interesting because it led to Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche teaching on the elements with respect to Dzogchen. He then imparted practices of the elements such as zér-nga and the moving elements. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche said “If your awareness is integrated with the nature of the elements then rituals are irrelevant – but people do not understand this. This is why you always have to show rituals. If you show no rituals people think you are ignorant …” [pause] “This is because most people are ’thom yors.”

So … what happened next? Well … the other cars had followed us – and the occupants were bemused yet jubilant as they emerged from their vehicles. We unloaded the picnic hampers and set out across the escarpment of flat rock toward a place that Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had indicated to be ideal. By the time we arrived on the wide area of flat rock, the sun was bright in the sky and—apart from some wispy clouds—the sky was entirely blue. We ate
our picnic. There was much hilarity as Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche regaled us with stories. After a while—when the picnic was more or less consumed—the entire group slipped into silence. Nothing had been arranged but everyone seemed to be gazing either at the sea or sky.

Then Rinpoche began to speak. “The ocean is not defined by waves” he stated, pointing at the sea. “Waves, you can study forever – but you will find no definition of ocean there …” [pause] “Waves arise in the ocean. They are limitless like thoughts in Mind …” [pause] “If you don’t try to define ocean by studying waves – you will see waves and ocean are indivisible.”

No one moved. The scene was silent even of seabirds. Rinpoche pointed up at the sky to a point where there were a few clouds moving. “Sky is vast—beyond limits—but there is endless movement. Clouds arise and dissolve – but sky is not affected by clouds – even when raining. Whether we see sky or not – it remains. It is unaltered by clouds as the nature of Mind is unaltered by thoughts.”

We sat in silence for a further twenty minutes – as the clouds reassembled themselves and the blue diminished. Then Rinpoche suddenly announced “Now we leave.”

The picnic hampers were packed up and we made our way back to the cars. I opened the car door for Rinpoche. He took his seat. I closed the door. The rain fell almost exactly on the click of the door. By the time I’d taken my seat the downpour had recommenced.

Rinpoche stayed a few nights more and we enjoyed his presence immensely. Many people came to visit and Rinpoche enquired of all of them as to their personal situation. I was always impressed by the personal attention he gave people and by his unstinting kindness. His rôle as wrathful Lama was something that he employed with consummate skill.

One night he regaled us with a childhood story. He’d had a rather dry and crusty gékor—master of discipline—who seemed to live to catch him out in the acts of mischief he loved to perpetrate as a young boy. One day—after a long period of drought had blighted the area—he asked Rinpoche “Your previous incarnation was a great char-chöd pa[254] who could bring rain. Can you also do this – or can you only make mischief?”

“I can rain making possible” Rinpoche replied casually.

“Can you show me and your monks how to do this?”

“There is no doubt” Rinpoche replied – and proceeded to give the directions “You must be visualising you are very tall standing! “Rising up straight as blushing-fair[255] yidam. Around your feet are many minions shimmering in form of black curling rays. When visualising is
complete – you must be radiant transparent halo having; descending over head – and all body covering. Then you must be up and down—with strong rhythm moving—and Om Ba Donga Swaha[256] chanting until much rain is coming.”

So … the gékor and monks began to practise in this fashion until the gékor stood up and stalked out of the shrine room in disgust. The gékor—being more suspicious of Rinpoche than the monks—realised the implications of the visualisation: a penis sheathed with a condom, moving as if in coitus. The monks however, had no such ideas and continued with the practice until they achieved the result. Ample rain fell and the farmers were all extremely well pleased. The monks—thereafter—were always able to procure rain when requested – but the gékor was never able to do so.

Rinpoche had many stories about jokes that transformed circumstances – and although I have never accomplished anything paranormal, I have always made the most of an ability to make people laugh. Rinpoche loved to make people laugh and could derive humour from almost any situation. Humour is extremely important with regard to teaching – because when people laugh, they tend to remember the nature of what was imparted far more than if the presentation were dour. There was no limit to his humour and nowhere that he wouldn’t go with it. On one occasion in London there was a lovely gentleman called Ajitta who was dying of cancer. He was a dear disciple of Rinpoche and had come to the teaching in spite of being in an advanced stage of debility. Everyone there knew that Ajitta was dying. When therefore Rinpoche announced “Ajitta does not die!” – some people took it as a sort of miraculous revelation of recovery.

Most of the others were perplexed – apart from Ajitta – who knew that his Sanskrit name meant deathless.[257] It was moving to observe Rinpoche making such a harrowing jest – and seeing that the jest was received with appreciation of the love that Rinpoche felt for his disciple.

Rig’dzin drove Rinpoche back to London and the same thing occurred vis-à-vis precipitation as had occurred at Southerndown. Every time that torrential rain slowed the traffic down to a crawl—and it came to Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s attention—the rain eased to the point where Rig’dzin could slide back to his habitual ninety miles per hour.

Rig’dzin was famous for driving like a bat out of hell – and Rinpoche was concerned that Rig’dzin should not have to drive home in the dark.
‘Crazy wisdom’ is a term that entered the English language in the ’70s – courtesy of Rig’dzin Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Although I never met Trungpa Rinpoche, he had an enormous influence on the way I teach. It was his books, which first showed me that Dharma could be taught in contemporary English – and that the essence could be shown through ordinary everyday situations. If a person understood the essence it could be extrapolated in many ways according to the audience. In this, Trungpa Rinpoche gave me a gift that supplemented my training with Künzang Dorje Rinpoche.

Künzang Dorje Rinpoche hammered home the nature of ‘principle and function’ from which standpoint Dharma could be seen in everything. He stressed the natural poetry of Dharma and encouraged me to be creative with language. He told me that to be a tantrika, one had to be an artist – and so I have always tried to teach as a poet. It’s on this basis that these two Lamas are—more than anything—responsible for the way I communicate. Sadly Trungpa Rinpoche passed away in 1987 and the loss to Vajrayana Buddhism is inestimable. There is no Lama like him now – apart from the mahasiddha Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche – son of Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche.

The Tibetan for crazy wisdom is yeshé ’cholwa. According to Trungpa Rinpoche, it means ‘wisdom gone wild’. Yeshé means primordial awareness and ’cholwa means thrown into chaos.

This is the quality of nondual realisation which offends conventional spirituality. Crazy wisdom offends conventional spirituality because of the compromises that conventional spirituality makes with duality. Where socially controlled, organised, regimented, religious pedestrianism corrupts the essence of nondual teaching – crazy wisdom can be manifested to clear the decks.

Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche was the third incarnation of Dro-phan Lingpa Tröllö-tsal.[258] His last name refers to Dorje Tröllö – the crazy wisdom manifestation of Padmasambhava. Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche often cleared the decks. He built the decks and destroyed the decks – and those who climbed from the wreckage always learnt a great deal. Those who failed to climb from the wreckage were those who had invested too much in themselves – and regarded themselves as big cheeses and high scorers on the spiritual Richter scale.

Crazy wisdom is uncomfortable for most people – especially the politically correct and spiritually correct. I explain this, not because I’m a wild card of
some sort – and not because I like to boogie all night long. I explain this because current social trends in the world of Western Buddhism would neuter Vajrayana. The following chapter gives some glimpses of the world of crazy wisdom and also … the world of psychological dysfunction. They wove in and out of each other in Rinpoche’s sangha. He worked with the warp and weft of every situation from the position of yeshé ’cholwa – and, as you will discover, created a situation in which open space was the only fixed position.

One day—sometime in 1990 in Cællepa[259] where I lived with Pema Zangmo and ’ö-Nyi Dorje—the telephone rang. It was Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche, calling me up … from Germany. “On Sunday we are picnic having. We must be good weather having. So you must be making sure that there is no rain coming.”

That was something of a surprise. “But, Rinpoche … I’m not a char-chöd pa …” I replied.

“So … you never char-chöd from Yeshé Dorje receiving?”

“No, Rinpoche … I never asked him to teach me char-chöd.”

“Yah—yah—yah … but anyway – you strong yogi! So no problem to you! I want that there must be no rain coming! So I am asking you! Why else I phone?”

Why else indeed … It seemed that my agreement could not be withheld.

“Yes, Rinpoche – if you say so … but … the last time we picnicked—you—stopped the rain … so … why … would—you—ask me to do what—you—can do extremely well and extremely easily?”

“Yah—yah—yah … Too much ‘this and that’ saying. Maybe no confidence having in Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin?”

“No … I do have great confidence in you, Rinpoche – but … I don’t have—that—kind of confidence in Ngakpa Chögyam.”

“Yah—yah—yah … anyway – you must be char-chöd making on that day.”

“All right, Rinpoche … I will do my best … and … if it doesn’t work …” I chuckled “… you can give me a good beating.”

“Oh yah!” he laughed. “Much beating possible—much—beating possible.”

With that he put the receiver down.

So … what was I to do about that? Well … naturally, when the day came I spent it in retreat in my room practising integration with the water element – and … visualising Rinpoche. That was not char-chöd—because I had never learnt that—but it was the nearest activity which bore any relationship to it.

No word came back to me as to whether I’d failed or not. A month later I was
teaching in Austria and decided that I’d call in to visit Rinpoche in Frankfurt. An aunt of mine lived in Wiesbaden and my mother was staying with her – so it all seemed to fit together rather well.

I met with Rinpoche in Frankfurt and he gave me the empowerment of Seng-gé Dradog which I’d requested. It was a marvellously surprising occasion because he gave me the empowerment on my own. I was overwhelmed by his kindness in offering me this and we spent a wonderful afternoon together.

Rinpoche then asked me to accompany him to the teachings he was giving for the Frankfurt Ring. I’d taught for the Frankfurt Ring before and so they knew me there quite well.

There was an evening talk followed by a weekend seminar. The evening talk was attended by over three hundred people, and Rinpoche had been booked to talk on Tibetan Medicine. He did talk somewhat on that subject – but made many detours through all manner of fascinating subjects. Occasionally he’d ask me to teach and I did so. On one occasion however, he decided to pick me up on my semantics. I’d employed the word ‘I’ a few times too many.


This caused something of a rumpus in the audience. Some people were delighted by his statement. Some were shocked. Some were bewildered. Some were confused. Rinpoche then organised a debate on the subject as to whether Ngakpa Chögyam had a big ego or not. Some said this. Some said that. Some asked “What does this have to do with Tibetan Medicine?” Some people were quite annoyed on my behalf. Some said they found it unacceptable that Rinpoche should be humiliating and belittling me ‘for no good reason’. Rinpoche simply sat there smiling and refused to answer them. They then asked me whether I minded being humiliated. I thanked them for their kind concern on my behalf but said “Whatever Rinpoche wants to say is fine by me. He’s my Lama and … can therefore say whatever he pleases about me” I replied “Theoretically … of course … there’s no ‘I’ to be humiliated … so … if there’s some kind of illusion that insists on remaining with respect to Ngakpa Chögyam … it would be the perfect time for him to wave it goodbye.”

This upset some people who decided that—if that was my attitude—I had what was coming to me. I thanked them for their support nonetheless and said that I had not intended to sound churlish in respect of their kindness.

Some minutes had passed in which various segments of the audience argued with each other – when suddenly Rinpoche raised his hand and silenced them. It wasn’t quite clear how he did that – he just made that movement and
the room fell quiet. Then he announced – in fact, almost shouted “Big ego—little ego—is not mattering!” [pause] “He powerful weathermaker!” [pause] “Ha! I ask him to be rain stopping – and rain stopping!” [pause] “Ha! What you say now!”

Some of the audience decided they’d had enough and left. Others settled down and waited for what would happen next. Rinpoche turned to me with a grin. “Now you Dorje Tsig-dun[261] singing” … and … that’s exactly what I did.

Some time later that year, I had an unusual dream about Rinpoche. In the dream he said “You must write some verses of devotion.” I replied that there were already many such verses. “No, not like this” he replied “Like you write rock songs in your culture.” Then I said what I always said to him “Really? You want me to do this, Rinpoche?” and he replied as he always did “Why not?” There was never an answer to that question other than rolling with whatever it was. I awoke suddenly from the dream and grabbed my notebook. I always keep a notebook by my bed in case lines of poetry occur to me. On this occasion I set to and wrote a song – pretty much in one stream. Little editing was required and then I had to find a melody. The melody also came quite quickly once I’d hit the chord Jimi Hendrix uses in ‘Foxy Lady’. The rest just flowed out in a series of strange chords that sound just right on a twelve-string guitar – including Em7⁹th and D⁹add4suspended⁴th.

The chorus ran like this ‘Well he’s the Doctor of Tantra—honey ain’t that grand—he’s the Doctor of Tantra; don’t you understand?’ and the verses are as follows:

Well he walk in the room with a lover on his arm – he got a look in his eye, like a fire alarm.

He sit down at the table with a glass in his hand – gotta whole range of bottles under his command.

Then he sit by your side with a phurba in his belt – it’s not the way that he tells it, it’s the way that it’s felt.

When he ask you a question, don’t give him no lies – or he’ll ravish your answer without compromise.

When he walk in your house, and he pass through the door – there’ll be some kind of madness for you to explore.

When he look in your eye, he might set fire to your brain – burn holes in your concepts, or drive you insane.

When he reach in his robe and pull out a text – you’ll wonder what’s doing or what’s coming next.
Then he’ll lay down some secrets from way back before – and have wrathful dakinis come knock on your door.

He’ll reach into vision from limitless skies – and he’ll make some decision that’s quite a surprise.

And he’ll organise chaos wherever he goes – so you’ll feel your confusion like a fist on your nose.

He can look in the future and he can look in the past – and he knows that the present just ain’t gonna last.

So he’ll give you a teaching when he sit in his chair – that whatever you’re thinking there ain’t nothing there.

I recorded the song—‘Doctor of Tantra’—and sent it to Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche on a cassette tape. I wondered what would happen. I’m not really a person who makes much of dreams – so this was an unusual departure. As soon as I’d posted the package I started feeling as if I’d perpetrated an act of monstrous idiocy. Still a goddamn ’thom yor … Why on earth would Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche ask me such a thing in a dream? More to the point – why did I imagine that the dream had any actual connection with him anyway? Anyhow … after a short period of squirming I decided that there was no point in being other than I was – as Rinpoche knew how I was. I was the kind of maniac who’d write a Dylanesque rock song about Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche. Some days later I received a telephone call – it was Rinpoche.

“I receive your tape” he guffawed “You think Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin is crazy man?” he continued with great good humour.

“No, Rinpoche … I think you’re … an extremely—interesting—man …”

“Oh yah!” [pause] “Anyway … you are accomplishing this as I say you …” [pause] “You Switzerland coming possible?”

I agreed immediately—hang the cost—and Rinpoche sent me details of where he’d be. I booked the flights and started looking around for something to sell.

There were all kinds of radically strange characters on that trip. I became aware that Rinpoche was developing a sangha like no other I’d ever seen. There were—over a period of time—people who included ex-criminals, ex-mercenaries, wheeler-dealers, lap dancers, prostitutes, an erotic masseuse, a dominatrix, and an entirely affable honest-to-goodness punk rock musician. There were all manner of singularly extraordinary personalities – some of whom were unusually aggressive. The only thing most of them had in common was a fervent attachment to Rinpoche. I should call it devotion and
in some ways it probably was. Devotion takes many forms. What was obvious was that Rinpoche attracted those who walked on the wild side – as well as those who simply wanted to practise Nyingma Vajrayana. Fist fights were not unknown between them. High volume sexual forays in the early hours of the morning were also popular – as were screaming matches between cuckolded suitors.

My bête noire—Gilbert Harris—was back. Rinpoche never threw anyone out on a permanent basis. He’d thrown Dave Mathews out the year before – but he was back, too; grinning like a fiend as usual. I got on well with Dave—most of the time—but he was a madcap Cockney gent whose alcohol intake was staggering. An evening with Dave took its toll, and I avoided a second round whenever I could. I enjoy a drink – but I’ve never been given to masochism.

Rinpoche had kindly asked someone to pick me up at the airport – so I arrived in surprising comfort. I was introduced to the hosts who were an exceedingly charming couple. I liked Geneviève and Édouard immediately. They were evidently of several social classes beyond mine – but they had no pretensions or hauteur.

Rinpoche did have a number of fairly normal and pleasant students– but they tended to keep a safe distance from the ‘denizens of the demimonde’ – as I thought of them.

Geneviève and Édouard told me that I was to reside—with Rinpoche’s other students—in the granny annexe. So—after an excellent cup of coffee and a fine croissant—I made my way there. As I walked across the courtyard one rather tall and menacing fellow—dressed in paramilitary clothing and black knee-high lace-up boots—came barrelling past. He was snarling—at considerable volume—completely unaware of my existence. “Rinpoche’s got me—by— the balls! He’s got me by the—fucking—balls!” He had his right hand extended as he strode by – in an upturned claw-like gesture, as if he were demonstrating the grip that Rinpoche had employed. I watched him as he passed and wondered what other marvels I would witness whilst I was lodged in the granny annexe.

I didn’t have to wait long for further marvels. The first night I awoke with the awareness that I’d be favourably commoded by a visit to the bathroom. To get to the bathroom I had to pass through the kitchen – and on my way through I was confronted by an unusual spectacle. A naked man and woman were engaged in a raw minced-meat fight. They were hurling the bloody stuff at each other, scooping up what they could find on the floor that had fallen off their bodies – and hurling it back again. They were streaked with blood from the meat and laughing hysterically. They hardly noticed me as I passed through and passed back – and I decided it was probably better not to
draw too much attention to myself. The next morning the mess had been cleared up and nothing was mentioned concerning the event. I decided to pass on the meat balls should any be served for lunch or dinner.

One fine morning I was sitting with Rinpoche in the garden of the house where he was teaching. There was a fellow there—a philosopher—and he was explaining that plants were sentient—on the basis that they reacted to injuries caused to other plants around them. This could be detected by faint electrical pulses in the plants.

Rinpoche was teasing the fellow by saying that machines also made movements—and had observable reactions—but that didn’t make them sentient. The discussion went back and forth for a while and then Rinpoche turned to me. “What you saying? Plants sentient or non-sentient?”

I replied cautiously—not wishing to contradict Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche “I don’t know, Rinpoche.” Right, you guessed it. I could still be an idiot on occasion.

“Yah … you one big diplomat …” he sighed and shook his head. Then he fixed me with wide eyes. “You tantric man! You—must—be knowing!” he exclaimed—but not with a fraction of the wrath of which he was capable.

“All right, Rinpoche—as you request—I’d say they’re sentient.”

Rinpoche smiled ever-so-slightly and asked “Why this saying?”

“Well you mentioned that machines make movements in reaction to causes …”

Rinpoche nodded his agreement.

“So … machines are made by people and they are engineered and programmed to act exactly as they act …” [pause] “As I’m a tantric man … I don’t believe in God as the ‘uncreated creator’ …” [pause] “Because I don’t impute the existence of an ‘uncreated creator’ who made the universe – I have to say that no one designed plants to respond as they do. Because no one designed plants to react as they react – they must be sentient. It’s only possible to say that plants are non-sentient if you believe in an ‘uncreated creator’ who designed them.”

“Yah!” Rinpoche burst out laughing. I laughed along with him. The philosopher then asked “So Rinpoche – do you now agree then that plants are sentient?”

“Oh yah … you heard what Chögyam is saying?” [pause] “He is tantric man” he laughed. “I am nothing more saying.”

Later Rinpoche gave an empowerment into the Bardo Thödröl. This is often
referred to as ‘The Tibetan Book of the Dead’ – but Bardo Thödröl means ‘liberation through hearing in the bardo’.

It was marvellous to experience such an elaborate empowerment with Rinpoche – and, as usual with these occasions, I found myself in some kind of timeless reference of non-reference. After some hours on the first day Rinpoche suddenly stopped mid-chant and sniffed his armpit. “You think I am smelling? Someone once say Chhi’méd Rig’dzin smelling.” Then—without missing a beat—he continued chanting. At the conclusion of the day I turned to Dave Mathews and began to speak “Did you …” but he didn’t let me complete the sentence “Yeah, mate … not seen—nothin’—like—that—before! Bloody brilliant!” I never saw anything like it before or since. Rinpoche was unpredictably unpredictable.

He gave us all a piece of kusha grass[263] to place beneath our pillows. We were to recall our dreams and relate them to him the next day. My dream was bizarre to say the least. I was sitting in some alpine meadow by the side of a narrow winding road that led higher into the mountains. There was a roar like thunder and suddenly Rinpoche appeared riding a very fine motorcycle. He was dressed in deep maroon leathers with wonderful stitching work that ran up the legs and sleeves. It was of variegated colour—rather like that found on Western boots—and took the form of flames. Rinpoche rode into the distance and disappeared over the edge of a ridge into the sunset. I was alarmed by the spectacle of Rinpoche apparently plummeting to his death and sat feeling deeply saddened by his loss. Then—suddenly there was an explosion like the sound of a plane breaking the sound-barrier and he appeared again flying out of the heart of the sun. He skidded gently to a halt next to me and said “Do not worry – Gilbert has been eaten by a sheep!” I responded that I was sad to hear it—I wouldn’t wish anyone to be eaten by a sheep—but he simply laughed “Yah! Sad for the sheep! It will have a bad stomach!” He then roared back in the direction from whence he’d initially come.

When I recounted my dream, Rinpoche nodded for a while “Yah … maybe not so much meaning coming – but … anyway – this good dream.”

Gilbert had been absent on this occasion. He’d been suffering in certain ways as a result of Rinpoche’s sudden liaison with the rather stunning Swiss lady on whom Gilbert had set his hopes. Someone found him lying amongst dustbins drunk and splattered with vomit. I felt sorry for Gilbert. No matter how obnoxious he’d been – I couldn’t help feeling sad that his romantic dream had been shattered. I’d had romantic dreams shattered – and I knew how painful that could be. The next time I saw him I greeted him warmly, ready to lend my ear and offer him some kind of emotional support – but he just plied me with his habitual word games. I said “Goodbye, Gilbert, and … good luck to you” and left him where he stood. Rinpoche’s sudden liaison
was however, illusory – the lady simply spent a great deal of time with Rinpoche. I got the distinct impression that he was protecting her from Gilbert. Rinpoche had been aware of Gilbert’s predatory intentions and had spared her whatever might have been in store for her.

Some days previously Rinpoche asked me “Where passport keeping?”

“In my satchel, Rinpoche … in the flat back-section that opens up …” I indicated its exact location “… and … my satchel is always with me.”

“Yah good, this intelligent – then passport never losing possible.”

“It’s not just that, Rinpoche. By law, foreigners are supposed to keep their passports with them at all times. If the Swiss police wanted to see my passport and I didn’t have it – there’d be all kinds of inconvenience that I’d rather avoid.”

Rinpoche said nothing. He simply nodded with approval. Then he chuckled slightly as if something had amused him. I didn’t enquire – as personal questions such as ‘What’s amused you, Rinpoche?’ are not appropriate in Tibetan culture – and I was nothing if not polite. I was not sure why Rinpoche had enquired about my passport. Again – I never asked. I supposed he was just checking to see if I was the kind of goddamn ’thom yor who’d mislay his passport and get into all kinds of ridiculous trouble.

Since I’d been in Switzerland, I’d been working on a text for Rinpoche. Some helping person had slapped white-out all over it in an effort to make it more legible.

Then Rinpoche had it photocopied – with the result that the dark Tibetan paper had merged with the text due to the unnatural contrast provided by the white-out … My task was to re-write the text. This required my painstaking examination of every letter, and that was a monumental task. It was only possible because of guesswork based on my knowledge of Vajrayana technical language. Mostly I struck lucky and recognised a syllabic mess as yeshé or kyil’khor – but sometimes I had to ask Rinpoche. He always knew immediately – and never chastised me for getting stuck. He could see how hard I was working and he liked my Tibetan handwriting. Sometimes I worked in Rinpoche’s room and sometimes on my own. Often when I worked on my own, Keetje Wouters—a brawny Belgian girl—would burst in and shout “You! You’re still here, you pig! You’ve been here too long! Nobody wants you here! When are you leaving?!” She actually employed violently obscene expletives – but these need not be transcribed. I’d reply “Sorry I’m here, Keetje … I’ll leave as soon as my work for Rinpoche is completed. My return flight isn’t so far off – but it will take me right up to my return flight to finish the work – even if I’m not interrupted.”
Then she’d swear at me a little longer and I’d say “If you want to speak to Rinpoche about it – it could be possible to have me removed earlier – but …” I pointed out “I can’t make that decision myself. I’ve committed to completing the transcriptions of the text.”

She’d usually then shout obscenities at me a while longer before leaving and slamming the door behind her. This happened almost on a daily basis. It was not a big problem because I regarded her as being of an emotional age of four years. She was just having tantrums. I always replied in a calm slow voice and gave her no fuel for abusing me further.

One night just after I’d retired to bed, Keetje burst into my room naked and yelled “All right! You have wanted this all week! So we may as well have sex — now — and finish it!” She was quite a spectacle. My bed was a futon on the floor, so Keetje—towering above me—was a fearsome sight. Now … I’m not usually slow with words – but this was a little out of the ordinary.

I should have declined and made my apologies immediately – but as it was, I was stunned – like some goddamn deer caught in the headlights. Before I knew what was happening, Keetje leapt forward with vehement salacious intent. I suddenly understood my predicament and flipped out of the bed like a greased eel – only just evading her licentious onslaught. I was lucky it wasn’t an English sheet-and-blankets situation or I’d have been trapped. As it was, I span out onto the floor—hit the ground—and leapt to my feet – fast as a baby wildebeest. They have to hit the ground running or they’re dead – and that’s just what I did. Being pinned to the floor by that terrifying termagant was to be avoided at all cost. Keetje was flying over quite fast enough to have rendered me severe damage on impact.

“I’m dreadfully sorry, Keetje …” I began “… I mean no slight on your … generosity — but I can’t do this — I’ve got a lady friend back in England — who would—not—be pleased — so … I hope you’ll understand …” My final word was cut short as Keetje slapped me across the face with remarkable force – screaming obscene invective as she did so. Then in a flash she was gone …
Wonders never cease … Keetje—having nearly lobotomised me with the palm of her hand—needed to be kept at bay. I hurriedly seized a chair and wedged it in front of the door – with the back lodged underneath the doorknob. I then wedged my suitcase in front of the chair, so that it was hard against the bed. The idea of her making another entrance at some later point needed to be avoided by all means possible. My face was still stinging from the slap – but that was of little concern. She’d left – and that cured all ills. I slept soundly in the certain knowledge that entrance to my room was debarred – unless … Keetje equipped herself with a ten-gauge shotgun. Hey, nothing’s impossible.

Damage to my face was not evident the next morning – and I was not entirely unamused. I considered myself to have escaped lightly. I approached the incident with Rinpoche. “You have … most—interesting—students, Rinpoche …”

“Yah … like before …” Rinpoche smiled “… you one big diplomat …” [pause] “Now what situation coming?”

I smiled somewhat sheepishly and told him about Keetje. Of course, I explained that I’d lied about having a lady friend back in England. He found—that—extremely amusing – and nodded with a grin. “Yah … maybe wrathful dakinis are knocking on your door … like this song you are writing for me.”

A sense of dread stole over me … as the words of my song slipped into mind:

\begin{quote}
When he reach in his robe and pull out a text – you’ll wonder what’s doing or what’s coming next.

Then he’ll lay down some secrets from way back before – and have wrathful dakinis come knock on your door.’
\end{quote}

Had Rinpoche sent that termagant to pay me a nocturnal visit? Rinpoche was certainly quite capable of making a suggestion like that – even though I’d never heard of him doing such a thing. He was unpredictably unpredictable – that’s all I knew. So … there was nothing for it but to ask “Was Keetje’s bedtime visit—your idea—Rinpoche?”

Rinpoche laughed a mighty laugh “No.” He’d not organised it “… but I can again be sending—if—you now ‘no’ saying—much—regretting.”

“Thank you, Rinpoche—but no—if you don’t mind … I’ll decline that offer if I may – I need my sleep if I’m to finish writing the text for you. It’s been slow
going — but I can promise it completed before I leave.”

Rinpoche eyed me suspiciously. “Ha … now you become like Indira Gandhi” he chuckled “Yah—yah—yah … now you thinking ‘text-writing’ is protecting you from sex with Keetje?”

“No, Rinpoche … if you really—want—me to have sex with Keetje, I will … but it wouldn’t really be something I’d like too much … in fact I’d rather eat more of those chillies-in-Stilton that you once got me to try.”

“Yah—yah—yah …” he scoffed “… you too much pure and impure thinking!”

“Nothing so profound, Rinpoche … it’s just that I need to be—in love—with the lady in question – or it would be … rather … well … I’d rather bed down in an abattoir.”

“Oh yah! You not beautiful thinking?”

“She’s not physically unattractive, Rinpoche, when she’s not snarling. It’s her mind I find off-putting … that’s not … something I’d like to encounter in such a … situation.”

Rinpoche roared with laughter at that. “Yah … you frightened no large vajra having!”

“No, Rinpoche, that’s the least of my concerns” I laughed. “I don’t have the kind of ‘male dignity’ that would be concerned by an idea like that…” [pause] “In fact … the inability to manifest an erection would be ideal because it would definitely keep me safe from Keetje … and—that—would make me extremely happy.”

Rinpoche laughed again. “Worrying not necessary. Keetje idea I am not having …” [pause] “I am—other—idea having.” Then—without qualifying this ominous statement—Rinpoche returned to the subject of his students. “Yah … like you say … some students too much crazy …” Rinpoche dwelt some moments in silence – in which he gazed at me in a kind-hearted way. “Yah … also too much drinking …” [pause] “… but maybe not always like this in future.” A flight of birds erupted from a tree at this point and Rinpoche turned his head to the garden. He smiled as he watched them spiral off into the heart of the sky and head south. Once out of sight Rinpoche turned his attention to me again. “… but — all are Big Rig’dzin[264] practising— every morning—so … all may be staying. If not practising — then they must be leaving!”

I glimpsed an aspect of Rinpoche’s method there. He simply disciplined a portion of their day – and gave them an amazing gTérma practice to recite. The Rig’dzin Drüphthab was a rare privilege to read and a veritable treasure
trove of Vajrayana. Anyone who studied that text would come to know core Vajrayana inside out. I could see somehow, how it would work. These ‘interesting students’ could be transformed – not by forcing them into another form of behaviour – but by cramming two and half hours of every day with the condensed efflorescence of Vajrayana.

It turned out—in short order—that Rinpoche did have other ideas for me.

That night I was invited to move to the main house. Geneviève and Édouard had been informed of the events of the previous night and they’d been happy to accommodate me in their house. I was to sleep in the daughter’s room – as she was away at university and the room was unused. Geneviève and Édouard talked with me about how difficult it was to have some of the more outlandish of Rinpoche’s students staying there. They weren’t exactly complaining – but they obviously wanted to sound me out. “What do you think happens with them?” they asked “… and why do you think he accepts people like this as students?”

“Y’know …” I sighed “I’ve often thought about that …” [pause] “I can’t pretend to answer your question – as if I really knew what it all meant. All I can do is tell you how it seems to me.” Geneviève and Édouard assured me that they wouldn’t presume to understand my answer as being authoritative – and so I supplied them with my dubious conjecture. “Who would take them on if he didn’t?” [pause] “That’s my main conclusion …” [pause] “It also seems to me that they could be viewed as … being something like the eighty-four mahasiddhas – before they became the eighty-four mahasiddhas …” [pause] “I mean … it’s no good reading about the thief, prostitute, liar, lazy man, and moron who became mahasiddhas – and not expecting Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche to be able to work the same wonders with people …” [pause] “He also makes them chant the Big Rig’dzin every day – and that must be quite a catalyst.”

Geneviève and Édouard grinned at that idea – and Geneviève said “That is a very good way to see it – and I hope it will be so.”

When Geneviève said that, I felt a little peculiar … maybe fraudulent would be a better word – because that had certainly not been in my mind when Keetje came a-knocking on my door. How could I suggest that these people were all primed to be mahasiddhas when I’d retreated from Keetje as if she was some kind of leviathan who’d wriggled up from the depths of outer darkness? Why hadn’t I seen—her—as a wrathful dakini? And as I hadn’t … why was I telling Geneviève and Édouard this bunch of mealy-mouthed parboiled drivel? I loved the tantric stories – but was obviously shy about the possibility of recognising that I might have found myself within such a story.

Would cavorting with Keetje have shown me the nature of Mind in some
irredeemable manner? I decided I was a dilettante and goddamn ‘thom yor to boot. I knew—even with these recriminations—I was not going to say ‘Hey Keetje … honey jus’ allow me one mo’ chance to git along with you …’ No … I knew I wasn’t going to do that … goddamn hypocrite … I could only excuse myself on the basis that I was trying to give them a more positive outlook. I decided to change tack. “Anyhow … as I said before, they all practise the Big Rig’dzin for two and half hours every morning – and so … whatever else it is that they do … they do—do—that. That is one—hell—of a lot of chanting – and to get through it in that time must be quite a challenge …” [pause] “I think they all have an effect on each other too – and I have the feeling that they’ll all become less crazy over time. Rinpoche accepts them and works with them as they are – without judgement … and maybe they’ve never known that before.”

Geneviève and Édouard nodded. “Yes … that makes sense. It should have been obvious in some way that Rinpoche must be working with them to a good result …” [pause] “… but it is difficult for others – we are not complaining but you must know what it is like. Rinpoche told us about the other night – it was a little … shocking.”

I laughed at that. “Yes … I guess it was … but I have no complaints … I escaped with my maidenhood intact.” They laughed at that and it eased the tension considerably.

“This did not make you angry?”

“No …” I grinned “… it was just … rather surprising, that’s all.” I didn’t mention the hearty slap across the breezer, or my self-recriminations about the fact that she might have been a wrathful dakini. “I don’t make a habit of being upset by things that have no lasting effect … and even then … I’ve never gone in for being angry. My father had problems with anger and so I’m kind of antithetical to it …” [pause] “Y’know … there’s another thing about Rinpoche’s teaching environment that occurs to me …” [pause] “It’s like a dur-trö[265] – a charnel ground. I think he’s created an emotional / psychological charnel ground.”

I explained the idea of the charnel ground to them and they were most interested. “In the East, dur-trö are pretty frightening places – but not frightening in the spooky sense that’s portrayed in movies … There was simply some kind … of ‘raw reality’ there …”

When you read descriptions of the eight great charnel grounds, they’re horrific – but not ghoulish … there’s no cold grey mist. They’re extremely energetic – infested by lions and tigers, jackals and carrion crows. Vultures descend – grab lengths of intestine and fly into the air. Globs of gut drop from a height. There are groves resplendent with luxuriant trees – where
Gaudíesque parrots speak in tongues or squawk stridently. There’s death there – but it’s not stopped moving. Death in the West is a static affair – much in the style of a mortuary or graveyard. The bodies are inert. In the charnel ground however, bodies wriggle with maggots. They convulse as they’re torn apart. Wolves gnaw on stray limbs. Eyeballs fall from sockets and slither across the ground. The animals however, are all alive and extremely healthy. They spring with vigour – snarling, growling, howling, or bellowing as it pleases them.

This … is a symbol for the way in which practitioners could approach the nondual state – inasmuch as the charnel ground is chaotic. This is the orderly chaos of emptiness and form, where birth and death occur simultaneously. There are dead bodies – but maggots are eating them. Maggots are born in them—live in them—and die in them. It’s not possible to understand whether we’re seeing birth or death.

“So … where do we find solid ground there?” I asked “The ground’s always changing …”

“Right …” Édouard commented “So … from that perspective … Rinpoche has conjured a charnel ground for our practice?”

They both looked a little stunned – so I reassured them that this particular charnel ground—within the greater charnel ground of life itself—was temporary.

“And … that’s how you see this …?” Édouard asked.

“No … it’s how I—try—to see it. If I really saw it that way it would be a great accomplishment. I just have to continually remind myself that I’m living in a charnel ground.”

“I see … that makes some kind of sense to me …” Geneviève responded tentatively “… but I am happy it is temporary … I don’t think I could live like this for very long.”

“Nor could I …” I smiled, feeling somewhat contrite. “… but … it’s useful to remember the charnel ground when things get out of hand …” [pause] “I see it as ‘living the view’ … recognising that the charnel ground is in itself the practice of accepting chaos. Chaos is any situation that’s out of control.”

“Does that mean one gives up any kind of control over anything?” Geneviève asked.

“No … not exactly. We just have to accept that the situation is—fundamentally—out of control. We can however, dance with the situation.”

“Dancing means?” asked Édouard.
“Dancing means being without hope of completely controlling anything. That doesn’t mean that certain aspects of the picture cannot be modified – but only when the modification lies within our power. Dancing just means that we cease to panic about what lies outside our power to modulate. We can change some aspects of what happens within the chaos – because order can arise out of chaos …” [pause] “… but order is form and form is emptiness.”

“It seems then …” Édouard commented “that every moment is chaos – and that every moment can be seen as charnel ground?”

“Yes … it’s like that when people marry—have children—and get divorced.” This was on their minds because a couple in the sangha had just gone through a painful divorce. “The relationship’s dead – but not static. It’s dead – but it’s still … jerking and convulsing. It is being eaten by maggots—like a body—but the maggots are lawyers … If you have children, the relationship never quite dies. Children get married, and we have to attend their weddings. We cannot break free of these ex-spouses … The charnel ground is full of ghosts who haunt us – just as we’re haunted by the past.”

“This is an extremely powerful kind of practice …” Geneviève commented “I am grateful to Rinpoche for it … but I am also grateful that it does not last too long.”

I concurred – and we laughed. They told me that we’d be going to an extremely fancy restaurant together with Rinpoche on my last night staying with them. They said I was to come with them – and told me that three other students would also be going. “We hope they will behave themselves with decorum – as you do …” [pause] “Maybe—as our friend the philosopher will also be there—they will be … a little more calm … and it will make a nice holiday from this charnel ground.”

“That’s certainly what I’d wish … if only for your sake” I replied and bid them good night.

The days passed relatively peacefully and Keetje kept her distance. She just glowered at me across the courtyard. Dave and ‘the merry mercenary’ were always good humoured with me – and so I was well contented. Eventually my last evening arrived and we set out for the illustrious restaurant. Rinpoche’s students were reasonably well dressed and there was no sense of rancour amongst them. I was not with them however. They were with the philosopher – and I was with Rinpoche in the back of Geneviève and Édouard’s Mercedes Benz. The line ‘Oh Lawd wontcha buy me a Mercedes Benz …’ tickled my fancy – but I thought it an inappropriate jest. We appeared to be heading out into the country – and after a while we began to climb into the hills. We finally approached what seemed to be a border post and I noticed the customs and immigration signs. “You will need your
passport now” Édouard said.

“It’s always with me.”

“Yah …” Rinpoche added with a chuckle “… always in satchel he is keeping this.”

The occupants of the philosopher’s car were evidently having problems with immigration – and we soon found out why. Rinpoche’s three students had no passports with them. They had no idea we were leaving Switzerland to go to a restaurant in France. I had no idea either. Rinpoche was asked what should be done.

The philosopher volunteered to take them back to Geneva – but Rinpoche would not hear of it. “They must—always—be carrying passport! This is law if you are not Swiss. Every foreigner must be carrying passport all times! They must be knowing this! They must not law breaking!”

Rinpoche’s students asked him what they should do. He shrugged and indicated that they’d have to go back to the house. They had brought no money – so they’d just have to walk. They couldn’t expect the philosopher to miss the special meal merely to take them back – and, there’d be no point in his trying to take them back and returning for the meal because the meal was booked for a specific time. They’d made the reservation with difficulty and had only been accommodated by special request as it was. The three students glowered at me as my passport was handed back by the immigrations official.

“Merci, Monsieur.”

“A votre santé” I replied and the officer offered me a smile mixed with a slight wince in respect of my appalling French accent and my use of a drinking toast. The students eyed me with unmistakable resentment. Was it my fault that I carried my passport in my goddamn satchel? I said “I’m really sorry … y’know it’s an easy mistake to make …”

Rinpoche interrupted me. “No. You passport keeping – I passport keeping. Everyone must be knowing this!”

That was the final word – and the three—all in high dudgeon—began their lugubrious trudge … some fifteen miles in a light drizzle.

Geneviève and Édouard expressed regret for the departed. They were concerned for the plight of the three having to walk so far – but Rinpoche professed no sympathy. “They all adult and must be knowing Swiss law for foreigners. I am knowing this. Chögyam is knowing this. They must also be knowing this.”

This was a peculiar situation – and I was mighty glad that I was leaving the next morning. The three hikers would probably still be fast asleep by the time
I got to the airport – and so there’d be no ugly scene at which my rôle as ‘one big diplomat’ would be required.

If the truth were known, I was growing weary of being ‘one big diplomat’ – but there always seemed to be some extremely good reason why being forthright seemed problematic. I had no desire to give offence, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Be that as it may, we alighted from our cars—some short way into France—and entered the restaurant. I’ve never seen the like before or since. This was a place that had probably never seen a fellow like me – or Chhi’ümèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche for that matter. I was aware of eyes observing us – but before long disdain was replaced by smiles. We’d obviously been explained as visitors from the Land of Snows – and so all was well. Through some error of translation the head waiter thought Rinpoche was the Dalai Lama. The meal was fabulous – but need not be described. A new wine was brought with every course and the silver cutlery receded from each side of the plate in perspective. I knew I had to start from the outside and work inwards – or was it the other way ’round? This was another kind of charnel ground for a working class lad – and there were demons for good measure. Rinpoche turned to me at one point when the attention of the others was not on us and referred me to the situation with the students on their trail of tears “Now, they will much hating Ngakpa Chögyam … much hating.”

“Yes … Rinpoche … I can well imagine. It wasn’t—too—good before … apart from a few – and of course Geneviève and Édouard who’re utterly delightful – but now, it’ll be … even … more … interesting …” [pause] “It’s perhaps good that I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Yah … as you say …” [pause] “… because, in this sangha you—cannot—be staying. Too much difficulty for you – too much difficulty … Keetje too much hating, Gilbert too much hating, Theo, Waltraut, Jimmy, Reinhold, Gottfried, Ulrich, Walburga, Hildegard – all hating, too much hating …” [pause] “Your own sangha you must now be teaching – so no need time spending with Chhi’ümèd Rig’dzin …” [pause] “I am never forgetting you …” he added with an affectionate smile “… but our time is finished now.” I could see quite clearly what Rinpoche meant. I had nothing to say in response, apart from the fact that I understood.

The dessert came and went, and in another interval Rinpoche said “Now time for you to be with your students – not with mine. You are not Big Rig’dzin practising – and this angry making from my students. You are also white skirt wearing – and this also—very—angry making for Gilbert. I say – why angry? Every ngakpa white skirt wearing allowed – but he angry anyway because he is red skirt wearing …”[266] [pause] “Takdröl[267] also hating. I say I this takdröl giving – but still hating …” [pause] “Anyway … you have
your own work and there is no need to spend time with me any more …” [pause] “We are yogis! So we are—never—separated. No matter where going or what situations coming. No matter what people are saying. People always too much nonsense saying and too much gossiping …” [pause] “Anyway … not so long now and you meet Künzang Dorje again … then … all well for you and much Dzogchen systems teaching …” he laughed “… no more need to be practising Seng-gé Dradog!”

“You know, Rinpoche – I didn’t ask you for that Seng-gé Dradog empowerment to protect myself from gossip and slander …” I laughed. “I’m not—that—worried about what people say.”

“Yah … this is good – because people always too much this-and-that saying …” [pause] “We meet again … maybe you are coming to see me in London when I am empowerment giving …” [pause] “Then you come … but … now much working, much book-writing – and you must be khandro finding in England. Maybe is such a khandro in Cardiff living – and you must be finding. Too much always everywhere going and Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin seeing, not necessary for you.”

And so we parted for the last time – in terms of private discussion.

I saw Rinpoche a few times in London – the last time being shortly before he passed away. It was in Conway Hall and Rinpoche simply sat and observed as the audience chanted the text. The usual suspects were there and largely ignored me. Shivam O’Brien offered me a tot of Jameson’s Irish whiskey. Although it’s not my custom to drink in the day – I was happy to toast good health with him – especially as he was one of the few students of Rinpoche who remained friendly. Chhi’mèd Wangpo—a Glaswegian student—was a good friend but he’d died of cancer a few years earlier. I missed him. I missed his exceptionally good cheer and profound common sense. I exchanged words as Rinpoche entered in his wheel chair. He smiled in the most completely kindly manner I’ve ever witnessed from him and said softly yet effusively “You are shining.”

“It’s my receding hairline, Rinpoche” I jested – and he laughed.

“You are shining” was not a statement to be understood conceptually – but those words made the day-return by train worth more than a journey to the Himalayas. If anyone was shining on that day however, it was Rinpoche. He seemed extremely frail physically – but he had a lightness and transparence that made him entirely otherworldly. His voice was still strong however, and his eyes were liquid fire. Light seemed to emanate from him and his presence filled the room.

Rinpoche[268] passed away in 2002 – in Shiva Mandir, West Bengal. He was the Holder of the ’Khordong gTér and the ’Khordong gTérsar. Although not
the head of Dorje Drak,[269] Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche—as an incarnation of Rig’dzin Go’dem—was considered by many to be the Holder of the Chang gTér[270]—the Northern gTérmas—the lineage of Dorje Drak.

Due to his wrathful wisdom-demeanour and ruthless annihilation of mundane appearances, his fame was not widespread among Western people seeking teachers. His fame tended to manifest in the disquieting rumour of rigpa – born from accounts of the manner in which he devastated the self-obsession of those who sought him out with self-serving intentions. He wreaked havoc in the neat gardens of domesticated religious observance. He wrought perplexing disorder in the realms of conventional spiritual organisation and the codified proprieties of mundane comprehension.

Zilngön Lingpa was Rinpoche’s name as a gTértön – as the discoverer of the ’Khordong gTérsar and the incarnation of Khalden Lingpa. Rinpoche’s incarnation line goes back to Shariputra, the foremost disciple of Buddha Shakyamuni. The next in the line was Dorje Hung-dzé.[271] Then came Khyéchung Lotsa, one of the twenty-five closest disciples of Padmasambhava and after him a long succession of Lamas.[272] This is also the lineage of Kyabjé Dü’d’jom Rinpoche – but the line bifurcated in the 1800s with Dü’d’jom Lingpa and Nuden Dorje Dro-phan Lingpa.

When I got the news of Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s passing I wept. I never could rest in any kind of equanimity about the loss of my Lamas. The grief I felt was by no means interminable – and I found that I could imbibe it like a shot of single malt.

The Joni Mitchell song came to mind ‘Oh I could drink a case of you – and I’d still be on my feet …’ And as always, I was still on my feet – headed for the next exit on the highway of circumstances. I sat down on my bed and pulled out some letters that Rinpoche had sent me. There was an ærogramme he’d written in ’85:

… as I write to you in Cardiff, I am watching the birds that are coming from Siberia to the local river and are now returning home. They have large wings and as they fly towards their home in the evening the sound is like the noise at the time of storm. It is fantastic to watch them and I make the wish that you will be here to watch them with me.

I was never able to travel to Santiniketan – but I was able to spend time with him in Cardiff, where we sat and watched the birds on Roath Park Lake. Rinpoche enjoyed throwing bread to the birds. They became unusually tame – taking the bread from his hands.

When Rinpoche visited with our students in Cardiff, the situation always differed markedly from the situation amongst his own students. It showed me that he had no investment whatsoever in creating charnel grounds. Rinpoche
had as many miens as it was expedient to have – and with our students he never orchestrated any kind of mayhem. He gave teachings and empowerments and taught us how to make all manner of tantric ceremonial clothing. Whilst he was with us, we made a number of Dorje Zahorma hats. Two were especially remarkable as he formatted them spontaneously as revelations. He asked me to go to the art shop and buy coloured papers of many different kinds and then proceeded to make a mock-up of the hat. I then found a milliner prepared to make two hats in a matter of days – and there they were. Rinpoche wanted me to have one and we wore them together when we practised Tsog’khorlo together. This may not seem too unusual to most people – but a hat of this kind is not something that any Lama could conjure up in an instant. Vajrayana is not a religion of ‘free inventiveness’ and only Lamas—who are also gTértöns—summon up new forms in this manner.

Johannes Frischknecht came over to see him on the last occasion that he visited me in Wales – as did a group of Rinpoche’s students from London. They came for an evening of wonderful empowerments: Seng-gé Dongma; Tröma Nakmo; and Dorje Tröllö.[273] An evening such as this had not occurred in Britain since Kyabjé Dü’djom Rinpoche gave Tamdrin, Dorje Phurba, and Dorje Tröllö on one evening. After the empowerment, all personal differences were put aside, and good humour, delight, and inspiration reigned – and the only casualty was a gallon demijohn of home-made port that I was glad to provide.

In Holland—back in ’82—two enormous ravens landed on Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s shoulders and sat for a surprising period of time. There is so much more to tell – but … this is as good a place to conclude as any.
Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had advised me—directly, yet kindly—that I was now on my own. It was a sad moment when I left that French restaurant in Édouard and Geneviève’s Mercedes Benz – but it was also a wide open space. It was simultaneously an end and a beginning. I understood there was no other choice. I also knew it made good sense. Rinpoche had made the right decision for me – and for all concerned. Further study and practice of Chang gTér and ’Khordong gTér was not the direction I needed to take. The times they were a-changing …

*The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast, the slow one now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past, the order is rapidly fading. And the first one now will later be last, for the times they are a-changin’.*

Bob Dylan – ‘The Times They Are a-Changin’’

The old order was rapidly changing – and in all kinds of ways. *A spectre was haunting the West – the spectre of politically correct and spiritually correct Buddhism.* It seemed to have its inception ’round the time of the Western Buddhist Conferences in India. The first such event had been the year before and so I imagine the seeds must have been there for a while. I certainly wanted to teach Dharma in contemporary English and to make it absolutely pertinent to everyday life – but the *spectre* was something else. Psychotherapy was the new rule – and the new demand was for safety and comfort.

From this perspective I was an anachronism – but in another view I was something else for which there was no name. People sure weren’t shy of giving it names. I was off to the side somewhere—neither one thing nor another—but I was *endeavouring to persevere* in the promise I’d made both to Düd’jom Rinpoche and Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. I was to propagate and preserve the gö kar chang lo’i dé by any means I could. I’d written two books. A third and fourth were well on the way to completion. There were now nine ordained gö kar chang lo practitioners – with some in the wings who were in process and about to take ordination once their practice commitments were completed.

All was proceeding well – but I soon became aware that I was in an ambivalent position and never really knew how Western Dharma people would react to me. There were those who’d relate with me as a ngakpa with something to teach – and those who’d relate to me as some feral fellow in frivolous fancy dress. I find that I can be of use to people in accordance with exactly what or who they perceive me to be. Whilst teaching at Tharchin
Rinpoche’s retreat land in Santa Cruz in the ’90s there was a noticeable difference in the attitude of students there to the attitude of those in other places. Where I am perceived as having something to offer in the spiritual category, people seem to appreciate the answers they get much more than when I am perceived in any variety of other ways.

A woman down in Florida invited me teach to her ‘meditation group’ on the subject of my first book Rainbow of Liberated Energy.[274] Not long after I arrived she pressed me to give her information on Dzogchen.

“That’s certainly possible …” I replied “… but it might be better coming from your own Lama. He is close at hand – and it would be preferable to receive his own lineage. Each lineage has its own characteristics – and as you’ll be continuing in your studies with him, it would be best to get it directly.”

She looked shifty at that point. “Well, yes—I know that—but my Lama told me I’d have to wait until I have completed ngöndro.”[275]

“Well…” I said – not knowing quite how to reply without appearing rude “… if your Lama has declined to give you the information you want – then … so must I … for the same reason.”

The lady was not at all pleased with my response and told me exactly how much she failed to appreciate it.

“The problem is …” I continued “… that if the Lama you revere so highly is unwilling to give you Dzogchen teaching then you should respect his advice. You can’t respect your Lama and disrespect his advice at the same time.”

This did nothing to discourage her in her persistence or rudeness of manner – so further elucidation proved necessary. “There’d be no purpose in me explaining what you want to know … because you do—not—respect me. I think you’ve made that quite clear.”

She jumped on this with full sarcastic fervour. “Why do you need to be respected? A real Lama shouldn’t be concerned about being respected.”

“True … and … in any case—unlike your Lama—I’m not particularly worthy of respect” I replied.

She sat pondering me with a demanding sense of expectancy.

“Lack of respect for me, is not a problem as far as I’m concerned – although … staying in your house would be more pleasant if we got on better.” I’ll omit her description of her lavish hospitality – apart from saying that she did provide some rather fine bagels and coffee. “The problem is that it’s not possible to receive Dzogchen teachings from anyone you do not respect – because transmission is essential. How can a person like—me—give—you—
transmission?” [pause] “How can you see me as being able to give transmission?” [pause] “To imagine such a thing is possible is to equate Dzogchen with any other kind of information.”

“That’s just playing with words” she retorted. “I don’t regard Dzogchen as the same as any other kind of information. That’s just trying to put words into my mouth. You’re just avoiding answering my question. I asked about your self-importance in refusing to teach.”

I explained again “I don’t consider myself any more worthy of respect than the average Joe …” [pause] “Believe that or not as you like – but I have too much respect for Dzogchen—and my own Lamas—to deal in Dzogchen as educational information.” I heard her snort at this point – but I continued “This is a case of your own respect and understanding of Dzogchen – and your respect for the advice of your own Lama. The teaching of Tantra and Dzogchen can only be given through transmission. They’re not merely a matter of getting hold of ‘secret information’. If you were to receive Dzogchen, merely as information, from a person who had little more experiential understanding than yourself – there’d be no transmission …” [pause] “Besides, out of personal respect for your Lama, if nothing else, I will—not—go against his wishes.”

This created a great deal of tension in which she alluded to the cost of bringing me to Florida. I apologised for the inconvenience and assured her that I was quite happy to clarify any aspect of the teachings I had agreed to give. Then an idea occurred to me. “I recognise this is an important issue for you – so I think I might see a way out of this …” At that point I saw the ‘I’ve won face’ with which she was obviously familiar from a lifetime of such bullying behaviour. “If your Lama were to give his approval to my giving you Dzogchen teaching – I’ll gladly pass on the information you want. With his blessing, you can consider the transmission as being his. Just telephone and ask.” The Lama lived an hour away, so this was a viable proposition – but there, our discussion ended. She realised she’d reached an impasse. She couldn’t go to her Lama with this request and appear to be keeping good faith with him at the same time. By the time it came to leave Florida – I was glad for many reasons.

I thought back to the stories that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche had told me and wondered what Dza Paltrül would have done. It occurred to me that there were many advantages in appearing ignorant.

I’d made the mistake of accepting that I knew something of Dzogchen. I should have said I knew nothing worth discussing. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s stories have served me in so many ways, and continue to serve me especially in the rôle of Lama.
My friendship with Lama Gyaltse was a great support. He introduced me to his friend Lama Tharchin Rinpoche, who’d settled in California. I went to visit Tharchin Rinpoche a week before he established his retreat land—Pema ’ö-Sel Ling—in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I spent a few delightful stretches of time at Pema ’ö-Sel Ling and gave frequent teaching retreats there. I found Tharchin Rinpoche to be a wonderfully kind and generous host. He introduced me to other Tibetan Lamas and made me most welcome. I travelled ’round with him a little whilst I was there and sat with him on some of his evening talks. Sometimes he fielded the questions to me – and he was intrigued by the way I answered. We talked a little of how I approached audience questions and I put it all down to the teaching that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche had given on principle and function. It turned out that he also regarded Künzang Dorje Rinpoche as one of his Lamas.

Pema ’ö-Sel Ling was an island of sanity in the maelstrom of mishegas that existed elsewhere – and I discovered that there was a veritable family of Düd’jom gTér Lamas on the West Coast who welcomed me wherever I went. Students of Tharchin Rinpoche accommodated me on my teaching trips to California and often attended the teachings I gave.

One of the Lamas I met was Chag’düd Rinpoche – and by some quirk of circumstance he came to teach ’phowa in Wales. He’d been invited by the ‘Open Gate Trust’. As the organisers knew me, they asked me if I’d attend the retreat in order to act in an interpretive capacity. They knew I had some facility with expressing Dharma in contemporary idiom and were concerned that their clientele should not be culturally bewildered. I was somewhat chary of the rôle – but was informed that Chag’düd Rinpoche was happy for me to provide that service. There’s not so much to tell of my participation other than it would appear to have been adequate – but the first evening remains in my memory as a great delight.

Having assembled in the shrine room of an ancient Welsh cottage – Chag’düd Rinpoche said “Does anyone know a good ghost story?”

No one did—or no one was prepared to tell one—so I said “I have a story that—might—amuse …”

Chag’düd Rinpoche nodded and I commenced. I was housesitting for a short time in Ston Easton, Somerset. It was an old house surrounded by fields. Ston Easton’s a nowhere place and exists in what could be described as the Somerset Triangle.[276] It’s bleak. It’s desolate. No one goes there. One excruciatingly hot and airless summer’s night I was lying in bed having just taken a cold bath to take my temperature down … when … I heard a horrendous roar – the like of which I’ve not heard before nor since. It was hybrid between a tiger and bear—or maybe a wolf and walrus—but otherwise impossible to describe. The sound made me feel slightly uneasy and I fell to
speculation. I’d heard of demons from the stories of Drukpa Künlegs – but I’d never encountered one. I’d never expected to encounter a demon … but that didn’t mean it would never happen. I decided that whatever it was – there was no point in lying in bed awaiting its arrival. I’d meet it face to face – and … see what happened next. So I took my phurba—the one that Künzang Dorje Rinpoche had given me—and began to search the house room by room, leaping into each room with monstrously ridiculous bravado. Every once in a while I’d hear that horrendous roar and spin ’round to face the demon – but, wherever I was, the sound was always coming from somewhere else. I stalked ’round stark naked brandishing my phurba in vain.

At the point in my narrative where I seized my phurba – a certain expression settled on Chag’düd Rinpoche’s face. His expression revealed the opinion that I was a goddamn lying son-of-a-charlatan who was out to sound like a big shot. That was slightly uncomfortable for me – but I continued the story nonetheless. He’d stop me if he didn’t want me to continue – and unless he did so, I was going to tell the tale to its end.

Having found no demon in the house I decided to try outside – at which point the demons revealed themselves. They were cows—of all things—in the field behind the house. I learned later that cows eat all day – then fart and belch all night. The sound had appeared to come from within the house because every window was open. I’d been desperate to scoop any cool air into the house from any direction. The sound of the belching cows thus echoed in every room whilst appearing to come from everywhere and … nowhere in particular.

When Chag’düd Rinpoche heard the punch line he roared with laughter – and made his reassessment of me at the same time.

The next time I saw Chag’düd Rinpoche was at the Mondavi Winery in California where a charity luncheon had been arranged by Mr Mondavi in order to raise funds for Chag’düd Gompa. I went with Tharchin Rinpoche and two of his senior students. It was a curious event—extremely pleasant—but almost none of the prospective sponsors were Buddhist. This led to some lively conversations in which I tried to make myself useful in providing information. I tend to find wealth far stranger than the relative poverty of India and Nepal – so it proved a practice in feeling normal. I was relaxed enough – although it all felt like a dream. Suddenly however, I understood why Chhi’mdé Rig’dzin Rinpoche never did anything to endear himself to wealthy people. I am sure that all wealthy people are not self-possessed to the point of self-satisfaction – but it seemed to me that being rich could be as much a handicap as being poor in terms of accessing the essence of Dharma. Everyone meant very well and everyone was extremely charming – but the Bob Dylan line sprang to mind: ‘… when you ain’t got nothing, you got
nothing to lose …’[277] Yes … that’s why Künzang Dorje Rinpoche never stayed anywhere long and why he never encouraged sponsors.

I went back to Pema ’ö-Sel Ling with Tharchin Rinpoche and we made momos together. I was impressed by his culinary skills. He made two in the time it took me to make one – and his were all perfectly shaped.

Pema ’ö-Sel Ling was much more my kind of environment than the Mondavi Winery – even though I enjoyed myself there. We sat up late telling tales of India and Nepal. Tharchin Rinpoche gave me many valuable insights into the gö kar chang lo tradition – answers to questions for which time had run out with Künzang Dorje Rinpoche.

Tharchin Rinpoche came to visit us in Cardiff in 1995 and gave a series of teachings. It was a great pleasure to see Tharchin Rinpoche in our living room in Penarth with our gö kar chang lo students: Rig’dzin; Nor’dzin and ’ö-Dzin; Pema Zangmo and ’ö-Nyi. Tharchin Rinpoche settled into an armchair when he arrived and we prepared dinner. Whilst taking his ease he found a handgun magazine in the rack and began perusing it avidly. It was at this point that we found Tharchin Rinpoche in discussion with Rig’dzin Dorje. “I have like this …” he commented with a smile “… but … I don’t tell people – because Americans don’t like guns.”

Rig’dzin laughed “You know the wrong Americans, Rinpoche!”

A funny moment. Khandro Déchen and I showed Tharchin Rinpoche our guns – a Colt Python and a Smith & Wesson. Tharchin Rinpoche was delighted to see them – and said that it was a shame that there was no time to go to the shooting range on this visit. “That problem—can—be solved …” I suggested “… we also have a Brocock air-revolver and we can shoot in the garden.” Tharchin Rinpoche agreed with enthusiasm and we spent the hour before dinner target shooting. Tharchin Rinpoche proved to be an excellent shot. He told us about his father Shérab Dorje Rinpoche, who’d always carried a rifle like DoKhyentsé. He told us that he would cure people of illnesses by shooting them. The bullet would apparently disintegrate like mercury on hitting the sick person and they’d recover pretty damn quick from whatever it was that ailed them. Tharchin Rinpoche told many stories whilst he was with us and I was extremely glad that our students had this opportunity to catch a glimpse of the gö kar chang lo world – as it was in old Tibet.

Tharchin Rinpoche gave teachings on the Seven-line Song of Padmasambhava – and spoke of how it could be taken as one’s sole practice.

It contained all levels of practice within itself. I’d made this comment in the past – but it had been met with some suspicion in certain quarters – but on hearing Tharchin Rinpoche speak of it in the same way, it was suddenly quite
acceptable to those who’d previously been suspicious. Tharchin Rinpoche laughed when I mentioned this to him and said “Yah … racial prejudice in every direction going. One time at Pema ’ö-Sel Ling, Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche is saying ‘What difference between Tibetan Lama and Western Lama? Tibetan Lama having flat nose and Western Lama having Rocky Mountain nose.’ What is important is Dharma – and, whether people know Dharma or not.”

It was after that event that Tharchin Rinpoche told my students that they should call me ‘Rinpoche’ and that I should be known as ‘Ngak’chang Rinpoche’ rather than ‘Ngakpa Chögyam’. That was somewhat startling. ‘Rinpoche’ as a form of address had always been what I had used in respect of my Lamas – so to hear students addressing me in that way took some acclimatisation. I continued to use Ngakpa Chögyam on my books because changing names seemed ungainly … and … after all, I am a ngakpa. I have great respect for Tharchin Rinpoche and so I made no objection to the name change. I had some vague sense of why he advised it – and so to have made an unseemly humile fuss would have been to have acted like a ‘thom yor. Of course much unseemly fuss—was—made in certain quarters – but I rode that as I seem to have ridden many things … of which the best – is my horse.

Khandro Déchen rode horses as a child – but I came to it late in life. I remembered what Künzang Dorje Rinpoche had said about the importance of firearms for the gö kar chang lo’i dé – and also about my needing to be a rider. Obtaining revolvers was not easy – but neither was it that difficult. Horses, on the other hand, proved a considerable challenge. They came eventually however, when Tharchin Rinpoche told us a story about Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche. One of his students had asked Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche if there were Hidden Lands of Padmasambhava in the United States, and he’d answered “Bring me a map.” A map was duly brought forth and laid out for view.

“Here and also here” Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche pronounced, pointing to an area of Oregon and to the Northwest of Montana. That was the turning point for us. It was no longer possible to take off for many months at a time to make pilgrimages to the Hidden Lands in Tibet and Bhutan – and so the idea of a Hidden Land in a place that was easily accessible was a massive inspiration. This however, marked the juncture where I had to learn to ride. The Hidden Land of Northwest Montana would best be explored on horseback.

This is not the place to provide an account of my equestrian training – suffice it to say that I discovered that I was still a ’thom yor. After having spent two years learning to canter, I asked my riding teacher, Melissa Troup, whether she’d be absolutely honest and direct with me if I asked a question about my
riding. Melissa said that she would – and so I proceeded “Am I the slowest person you’ve ever taught?”

“Yes” she replied after brief reflection “… but you’re also the most persistent – and … that will pay off later because of all the work you’ve put in. You now have a solid foundation which will serve you well for jumping – that’s where we’re going next.”

That was a proud moment – because persistence is the only personal attribute I can acknowledge. I may be a ’thom yor – but I’m a relentless ’thom yor. It’s my hope that other ’thom yors out there may be encouraged by that. I firmly believe that if a person persists – almost anything is possible.

Target shooting came more naturally to me than horse riding – but Tharchin Rinpoche was right about Americans not liking guns …well American Buddhists, that is. On one of my early teaching retreats at Pema ’ö-Sel Ling, I happened to give an explanation concerning silent sitting. I used handgun target practice as an example of awareness and presence – and several people began to look edgy. “Why would a Lama want to shoot guns? Guns are violent instruments of death.”

I decided—not—to validate my interest by speaking of DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje – but rather to approach the thing directly in terms of principle and function.

“So … for me … it’s a peacefully pleasurable device which I employ as an aspect of meditation practice. For a gun to be intrinsically violent it would have to have been a fabrication within a Judæo-Christian vision of reality – where it would be designated as ‘the work of the Devil’. Lacking God as ‘the uncreated creator’ – and lacking his antithesis—Satan—we’re left with a world of objects that are innocent of our projections …” [pause] “What we are looking at—really—is a perceptual hangover from a philosophical framework that—in some important respects—is entirely different from Dharma.” They listened politely—begrudgingly accepting my explanation—whilst fidgeting uncomfortably. It was apparent that they’d rather that I loathed guns as much as they did. It was almost as if I were some clever lawyer who secured the release of a major criminal on some technicality.

I tried another approach. “What about Zen in the Art of Archery?” I asked. Oh, that was fine – that was completely peaceful. “Right …” I grinned
“… and I suppose they were all just practising that ‘peaceful art’ at Agincourt?” [pause] “Y’know … the bow is a fine instrument of war. It’s also an excellent weapon for an assassin as it’s more or less silent.” After some further discussion of intention and motivation being the central point with Buddhism, they conceded with good grace – and I caused them all to laugh by asking “Anyway …” I paused – drawing attention to my naked upper limbs “… have you never heard of ‘the Buddhist right to bare arms’? I believe it’s the Second Amendment to the American Constitution.”

The peak point of this period of time was a wonderfully unexpected meeting. It was brought about by an unlikely assortment of causes – the first being the Conference of Western Buddhist Teachers and the unseemly brouhaha made concerning the rôle of the vajra master. I’d written to our students about this in a yearly dispatch called ‘the vajra letter’. Some time later Shardröl wrote to me with an email address of a certain Sangye Khandro who was asking for anyone who wanted to write in defence of the vajra master. Well, that was not difficult so I sent her a section from the vajra letter in question. This is a condensed version:

_We have no issue with the fact that the vajra master rôle may be a difficult paradigm for the West – but if one is to practise Vajrayana, one has to encounter the vajra master in a personally meaningful way. We have some sympathy for those who are attempting to deal with the cultural mismatches which occur between the cultural forms of Eastern and Western countries – but these are early days and we need to proceed with great care and respect for tradition. We are concerned with defining cultural Vajrayana as distinct from essential Vajrayana – but not by removing essential mechanisms from the vehicle. Petrol / gasoline may well be dermatologically harmful – but without it, one’s Harley Davidson can only roll down convenient hills. A vehicle can be stripped down to expose its engine in the creation of a dragster – but if working parts of the engine are removed even the most fabulous Rolls Royce will not serve its intended purpose._

Now … what neither Shardröl nor I realised was that this request from Sangye Khandro was a private letter to friends which had been inadvertently posted in a public forum. I had no idea that there was any connection with a particular Lama – so I was surprised when I received a letter from Sangye Khandro telling me that Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche had liked what I’d written and wanted to speak with me. I was, of course, amazed that Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche should find anything in my words that was worthy of his attention – and rather overwhelmed when the telephone call was set up. We spoke and I was overwhelmed in some other way again – because he spoke with me completely cordially. His responses and questions had the
character of speaking with me as if we were on equal terms. I simply tried not to be too much of a ’thom yor.

Some time went by and I was invited to visit with Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche. A date was arranged and I went with Khandro Déchen, and our students Yeshé and Shardröl. I shall give no account of our discussion, in respect for Rinpoche’s privacy – suffice it to say it was one of the most memorable events of my life. Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche gave Khandro Déchen and myself gö kar chang lo shawls as a parting gift and we have remembered the day ever since. I wore the shawl that Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche gave me on that occasion – because he was Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche’s father – and I felt it was propitious. I told Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche about the shawl and about the promise I made to his father – to preserve the gö kar chang lo’i dé in the East and to establish it in the West. Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche seemed pleased by this and smiled on our endeavour.

This period of meeting Lamas sparkled with accidental meetings, mainly in Nepal—where I met Lama Chökyi Wangchuk Rinpoche[279]—but also in New York where I met Lopön Ögyen Ten’dzin. Lopön is a Tibetan Lama of my age who also made a promise to Düd’jom Rinpoche to propagate and preserve the gö kar chang lo’i dé. We have worked to establish a gö kar chang lo orphanage school in Pemakö and we are now involved with efforts to keep that school running.[280] It’s not quite time for me to die yet – but I now feel as if my promise has been kept to the point that it will continue to unfold; either with me or without me.
Part IV

tales from somewhere beyond time
“Scholars are of no importance to us … We do not need such 'thom yors. What is important to us is dam ngag—the quintessence teaching. Philosophy is for 'thom yors—so why should Ngak’chang Rinpoche have anything to say about philosophy? Why should you have to say anything? Why should we debate with 'thom yors? Knowledge that is merely information is useless— it’s only the knowledge-of-direct-experience that’s important.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

“If you hear the sound of the birds outside—if you really hear them—then you’ll hear Guru Rinpoche’s mantra. If you hear this way, you will know the result of the development and completion stages – and Dzogchen is possible.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

“These ’thom yors with teng’ars in their hands and pious faces – what’s the meditation they are so proud to speak about? They speak of it with every other ’thom yor who will listen. It is only babble. Without contemplating the nature of Mind—what is their drüptab? They’re reciting gibberish. This is called mantra-clinging. This is called making projections and counting discursive thoughts. They’re accumulating treachery rather than contemplation – and this has no good purpose.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

“There is much that is good in Tibetan culture – but our culture is not more important than Vajrayana. Western culture also is not more important than Vajrayana. You must—all—know the difference between culture and Vajrayana. Tibetans do not own Vajrayana. Vajrayana belongs equally to all people who are seriously practising in every country.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche
I would like to introduce Khandro Déchen. Khandro Déchen Tsédrüp Rolpa’i Yeshé is my sang-yum, wife, and dearest friend.

We met in the autumn of 1981 – a bare month after my last meeting with Künzang Dorje Rinpoché in Tso Pema. He’d said “Oh yah – soon … maybe khandro soon finding … Yah … I feel really … maybe soon.” And – he was entirely correct. I didn’t know that when I first met her. I knew that I both liked and respected her. I also trusted and valued her as a student. She was one of the first three people to ask me to be their Lama. The other two were Nor’dzin and ’ö-Dzin.

Khandro Déchen and I met at the Lam Rim Buddhist Centre in Raglan, Wales. I’d been asked to teach there by Gétsulma Tsultrim Zangmo, a Karma Kagyüd nun of Cockney extraction. She and her mother had both taken nun’s ordination from the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa – and they were fine ladies, both. They’d brought Geshé Damchö Yönten over from India and established the centre for him. Khandro Déchen was attending a weekend there – and saw the notification of a weekend retreat that I was to give.

She was unaccountably interested in the name Padmasambhava that appeared on the retreat information. She attended her first retreat and became a student immediately thereafter.

Then … after some years had passed we discovered that we were extremely good friends. There’s a story here—as you can imagine—but it’s not one that needs to be told here. Suffice it to say that we married and lived happily ever after. One of us will die at some point—and that won’t be joyful—but in the meantime we’re everything two people could be to each other. We now teach as a teaching couple.

Khandro Déchen has become a highly skilled thangka painter – and teaches thangka painting to our students. My only sadness was that she’d never met Düd’jom Rinpoche. She received Dorje Phurba empowerment from Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche – but was never able to speak with him directly. She met Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche briefly at the teachings and empowerments he gave in Cardiff in ’84 – but her experience was not what mine had been in McLeod Ganj. She’d not been able to make vajra weapons with Indian scissors as hail pelted down like frenzied castanets on a roof made of hammered-out oil cans. Perhaps that doesn’t sound like an experience to be envied – but sometimes discomfort is of no great consequence when it’s combined with inspiration.

With Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche however, the situation was different. Khandro Déchen was able to spend intimate time with him. She has fond
memories of him. That Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche had passed away before she had a chance to meet him could not be remedied – but Künzang Dorje Rinpoche was still out there in the world somewhere. He was probably sitting in some small room in an ancient wood-frame house that smelt of burning pine needles … Maybe he was in Tso Pema. Maybe Bodha … maybe Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Gangtok, Tashi Ding, Gyal-shing, or Pema Yang-tsé … who knows where. There was just no clue as to where-that-was and how I would ever find him again. I wanted to say “Rinpoche – it was just as you said it would be! I’ve found my khandro!” I did indeed say it – but I spoke my words into space.

By 1992, the possibility of ever seeing Rinpoche again had become nebulous. It was a possibility that existed wistfully in my waking state – and hovered within my dreams. I’d grown accustomed to the notion that I’d probably have to wait ’til some other life. At that time however, Khandro Déchen and I decided to make a pilgrimage with our students. Our destination was Leh in Ladakh. We’d travel—by foot from a point at the end of the road beyond Manali—to Padam in Zanskar. From Padam we’d hire a bus to take us to Leh. If things worked out extremely well … we might just find Künzang Dorje Rinpoche in Manali or Leh. We walked through Lahaul, Spiti, and Zanskar into Ladakh visiting Nyingma and Drukpa Kagyüd gompas en route. It was quite an adventure.

The joke amongst our students was that this was the trip ‘that put the grim in pilgrimage’ – as far as the walking was concerned. Now—of course—everyone who endured the hardships of that journey revels in reminiscing about it. They now delightedly recall the song parodies we sang. Humour is a great balm when Delhi-belly makes the going rough. Try singing—this—to the melody of Desmond Dekker’s song ‘Israelites’:[285]

Greasy omelette for breakfast and plate of cold rice – the issue of my bowels is a terrible sight, oh—oh—Dioralyte.

Or maybe ‘… Imodium – the wonder drug …’ to the melody of ‘Champion the Wonder Horse’. [286]

Our pilgrimage had been organised by monks of the A’pho Rinpoche Gompa[287] in Manali. Those monks were really fine fellows – and we liked them a great deal. They were hardy, humorous, and inspired. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche told me that there were good monks to be found as well as ’thom yors – and these monks were the proof of it.

The A’pho Rinpoche monks practise gTummo and really accomplish the result. I had extremely good connections at the A’pho Rinpoche Gompa, as I’d known Sé Rinpoche[288] when he was a teenager in Manali.

I had fond memories of riding on the back of his motorcycle. We had some
wild rides on which I’d had trouble keeping my shamthab under control. I was accustomed to riding motorcycles from my teenage years – but I’d never tried it with billowing skirts before. Sé Rinpoche was the son of the amazing yogi A’pho Rinpoche, after whom the gompa was affectionately named.

We began our pilgrimage at A’pho Rinpoche Gompa where we met with Gégen Khyentsé Rinpoche. He was a superb Lama. He had no claim to fame in terms of lineage history – but he received fantastic respect from most of the great Lamas simply for being who he was – a profound yogi. At that time he was physically experiencing senility – but it had no effect on his mind – in terms of the nature of Mind. His brain no longer operated as effectively – but he was able to override its deficiencies with respect to expressing the nature of reality. He couldn’t remember the names of the monks who served his meals – but when he taught, he was impeccable.

We sat in the shrine room with him for a group audience prior to our departure. There was not much to say and the atmosphere was a little vague. Then it occurred to Khandro Déchen to ask everyone to introduce themselves by name and from whence they came. This was ideal—of course—because that makes ideal Tibetan conversation.

One of the first to speak was a fellow called Roland and this caused Gégen Khyentsé Rinpoche great mirth. Roland sounds pretty much like rolang[289] – which in Tibetan means zombie.

Gégen Khyentsé Rinpoche said he’d never met a rolang before – but that he was pleased to meet with one on this occasion. “It is told that DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje used to have a zombie as his porter” Gégen Khyentsé Rinpoche remarked. “The rolang was very strong and carried all DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje’s luggage. You will be very useful on this pilgrimage to Leh.”

We set out and eventually crossed the Rohtang Pass into Zanskar. It was a long journey. It was arduous, delightful, and strange. Crossing the Rohtang Pass an Indian gentleman—in another party making for Leh—died of altitude sickness. He should have turned back. Anyhow … they’d strapped his corpse to a horse – and the horse was getting the jitters about what was on its back. In the end the whole party got the jitters and then dumped the body ignominiously some twenty yards off the side of the road. I knew my duty … and therefore I went over to sit with the corpse. The members of the other party were full of dire warnings: “Keep away, Rinpoche – that man has become rolang! He will kill you!” I was, after all, only an inji Lama. “It’ll be all right” I told them. “It’s my duty to help him … if I can.” Indeed it was fine – for me at least. I sat with him for twenty minutes – and they were somewhat amazed that I survived. Whether I was of use to him or not, I don’t know – but my prestige rose notably – even though I’d done nothing but sit with the corpse. I did perform ’phowa[290] but the outcome is anyone’s
guess. As in all things – I merely try to do my best. They used to tell me quite often at school “… but ‘your best’ is not good enough!” So … the Indian gentleman may not have received perfect help in his condition. The least that can be said is that everyone seemed contented with my efforts.

They could all sleep soundly because there’d be no goddamn rolang to nibble ’em in the night. The poor fellow concerned was considered to have been highly fortunate the inji Lama was on hand.

After some days of gruelling foot slog amidst fabulous mountains we arrived in Padam. Khandro Déchen and I gave an empowerment in the Great Charnel Ground near Padam in Zanskar with ritual appurtenances lent by the Sa-ni Gompa, which was of the Drukpa Kagyüd School in the lineage of Shakya Shri. We’d been introduced by Sé Rinpoche – so all went perfectly. The empowerment of Yeshé Tsogyel was ostensibly for our students – but word got ’round beyond our pilgrimage group. This resulted in some fifty local villagers attending the empowerment. We had to open up the tent flaps so that they could all see the stages of the empowerment. We were substantially moved by that experience. It gave us the real sense that Vajrayana is universal – beyond time, place, and nationality. It took me back to the time I’d first stayed in Tso Pema and circumambulated the lake with Könchog Rinpoche. Suffice it to say that it caused me to look at my life from a different perspective – one in which the familiar and unfamiliar oscillate. ‘Ordinary’ is whatever happens to be happening – for long enough to get used to it.

As soon as we got home – we began to plan the next pilgrimage. This time it would be to Nepal. On the 1995 pilgrimage we were to stay at the Vajra Hotel near the Rangjung Chörten in order that we could employ our time every day imbibing the atmosphere of that marvellous place. The Vajra Hotel was a good base from which to make our daily expeditions. This was to be the pilgrimage which supplied the ‘pill’ that ameliorated the ‘grim’.

As it turned out however, the Vajra Hotel was the epicentre of canine cacophony. Scores of stray dogs lived in the environs of the hotel – and they barked all night long. An American guest at the hotel had reached the end of her tether in respect of the nightly noise. We observed her remonstrating with the desk clerk “You—have—gotta—do—something about those goddamn dogs!”

‘Such as what?’ I silently mused ‘… hire a Gatling gun?’ I felt sorry for the lady and for the desk clerk. I avoided saying ‘… only cure I know, lady – is leaving Kathmandu.’ When you’ve spent years in India and Nepal you tend to take these things in your stride – but for newcomers, it’s … an experience. If you ever happen to meet me, ask me about the dogs of Dehra Dun – you might be amused.
The bridge that leads to Kathmandu from the Vajra Hotel crosses a sewer which posed unconvincingly as a river. The stench—heavy, greasy, and acrid—was enough to make the eyes water. In ’95 a herd of pigs lived under the bridge in a festering morass of mouldering detritus. They ate it, defecated on it, and slept on it. The fumes—little short of lethal—caused even the locals to wrap their faces in shawls as they crossed over. Nepal is a wonderland of contrasts. You can be ankle deep in dung whilst surveying the peaks of the Himalayas. You can pass through Bedlam and arrive in some small room where—having met someone utterly marvellous—you’d be unable to stop smiling.

Our main aim was to make visits to Yang-lé-shöd. We were to visit our friend Lama Gyaltsen at the Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong Nyingma Retreat Centre which we’d helped him establish in 1991. It lies near Dakshing Kali which is a twenty minute walk from the caves in which Padmasambhava meditated. Kyabjé Chatral Rinpoche has a Gompa there – and the entire area hums with history. The last time I’d seen Lama Gyaltsen was in ’91 when he lived near the Vajra Hotel. Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar had taken up residence at Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong some years after Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche passed away – and we were delighted to see each other again after such a short interval – I had visited her with Shardröl in ’94. It was sheer pleasure to introduce Khandro Ten’dzin to Khandro Déchen and to see them smiling at each other – without need of words.

We ate a delicious lunch with Lama Gyaltsen and his charming sang-yum Khandro Tséring Wangmo – who was like a youthful version of Khandro Ten’dzin in terms of practice history.

We talked of many things and laughed a great deal. The practitioners of Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong had prepared a feast for our entire group – and everyone was exceptionally happy to be there. It was a home-from-home. We were a Nyingma gö kar chang lo family and I marvelled at the situation. It was not possible to be more contented or glad. Once we’d eaten our fill, Lama Gyaltsen said “Would you like to go up and see Künzang Dorje Rinpoche?” A simple question – but one which caused me a frisson of bewilderment.

“Yes … indeed …” [pause] “… of course we would …” [pause] “Lead on, Carruthers!” I couldn’t resist the last comment. Khandro Déchen poked me in the ribs and chuckled.

Now … Künzang Dorje is not an unusual name in the Nyingma Tradition. It’s a little like John Smith – so although I felt a certain frisson, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. If it was Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche – surely Lama Gyaltsen would have mentioned it as soon as we arrived – so surely this was some other Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. It was too much to hope that this was
the Lama I so longed to see again – and so I willed myself into a noncommittal frame of mind. No, I’d not allow myself to be disappointed—not—not me. I was no longer the kind of ‘thom yor who’d get as excited as a five-year-old school boy about an anticipated Yuletide gift. All nonsense of course – but I knew—and—hoped in spite of myself.

Khandro Déchen and I climbed the stairs not entirely knowing who we were going to meet – but somehow tingling with the possibility that it might indeed be Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. As we ascended the stairs Lama Gyaltsen confided “You maybe remember Rinpoche—extremely wrathful—but he is complete change! No more wrathful! Now—very—kind and friendly! He will be—too—glad to see you!”

It was then, that I was sure that this ‘Künzang Dorje’ was indeed Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. My mood expanded from the pleasure I’d felt, enjoying a splendid repast with old friends. I was suddenly twenty-three years old again — although somehow steadied by experience of life as a Nyingma practitioner. I was no longer unsure of anything – and yet the old tremor of the unknown washed through me like a tide in a nameless sea.

After climbing the stairs I entered a sunlit room – and there he was. The Lama I’d missed so much. “Oh yah!” he exclaimed and grinned broadly. I was in mid-prostration when he caught my hand and pulled me onto the raised couch where he sat. The story of Paltrül flashed through my mind. It was the story that I didn’t understand — and the one about which Rinpoche had interrogated me back in 1975. Suddenly twenty years vanished … I was sitting next to the wrathful Lama – but he was no longer wrathful. When we’d parted he was no longer ferocious with me – but he’d still been … innately intimidating. Now he rubbed my back with his hand. He placed his hand on my knee and said “Ngak’chang Rinpoche—ya-po’du—very good—very good.” Then he laughed and called for Jomo Sam’phel Déchen his wife and consort. I was delighted to see Jomo Sam’phel again. She was older but still beautiful. Her face had changed in some ways and become more beatific. They were both overjoyed to meet Khandro Déchen. “This khandro …” Rinpoche beamed “… is the best possible khandro! In every way she is perfect!” Rinpoche exclaimed “I have been waiting for you both to come to see me.” He held us both by the hands and alternated between laughing uproariously and saying, in English “Very good—very good!” Then he hugged us both again. “In 1990, I saw photographs of you when a student of Tharchin Rinpoche came to visit me. You were with Chhi’méd Rig’dzin. You were wearing a takdröl and a shawl with brocade. Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had a shawl with vajras. This was a good photograph.”

I knew that photograph. It had been taken in 1988 in Shaftesbury, Dorset. Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had wanted a formal photograph of the two of
us together – and Rig’dzin[295] had taken us to a professional photographer. I wondered how the photograph had made it out to California where Tharchin Rinpoche lived – but remembered that I sent some photographs to Tharchin Rinpoche in 1989 when he first established Pema ’ö-Sel Ling. “Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche very fierce looking in this photograph – but you are also looking—very—strong.” Rinpoche laughed. “With very big eyes!” [pause] “I liked this photograph—too—much.”

Then he reached into his bag and pulled it out. He had other photographs too – it was almost as if he’d hired a journalist to keep tabs on me. The laughter and embraces and exclamations of ‘very good!’ cycled for an unusual length of time – and it occurred to me later that I could have continued with it the rest of the day.

The fearsome personality I’d known was nowhere to be found in the beaming smiles and laughter of the Lama who suddenly treated me as if I were an old friend rather than a student.

When something closer to everyday reality resumed, he turned to Khandro Déchen “Scholars are of no importance to us … We do not need such people. What is important to us is dam ngag – the quintessence teaching. Philosophy is for ’thom yors – so why should Ngak’chang Rinpoche have anything to say about philosophy? Why should you have to say anything? Why should we debate with ’thom yors? Knowledge that is merely information is useless – it is only the knowledge-of-direct-experience that is important.” Rinpoche went silent and cupped his hand to his left ear for some moments “If you hear the sound of the birds outside—if you really hear them—then you’ll hear Guru Rinpoche’s mantra.” Silence but for the sounds of birds twittering “If you hear in this way, you will know the result of the development and completion stage. Dzogchen is then possible. Ngak’chang Rinpoche is the only guide you need. These ’thom yors with teng’ars in their hands and pious faces – what’s the meditation they are so proud to speak about? They speak of it with every other ’thom yor who will listen. It is only babble. Without contemplating the nature of Mind—what is their drüpthab? They’re reciting gibberish. This is called mantra-clinging. This is called making projections and counting discursive thoughts. They’re accumulating treachery rather than contemplation – and this has no good purpose.”

This was an amazing dissertation. Khandro Déchen had hardly known Rinpoche for ten minutes before he was treating her as if he’d known her for years. It was delightful. It made me smile about the way I laboured under the appellation of ’thom yor. Khandro Déchen was patently no ’thom yor – and Rinpoche knew that immediately.

It’s certain that there was never a pilgrim who wasn’t prepared for hardship and discomfort – but it is equally certain that concepts of hardship vary
among individuals. My own hardship was minimal – but took the form of illness.

I’d contracted food poisoning on the aeroplane flight and added amoebic dysentery for good measure not long after I landed. It knocked two weeks out of the pilgrimage for me, and caused me to miss the journey to Maratika. It also caused me to miss visiting the Padmasambhava caves at Yang-lé-shöö on this occasion. I was too weak for the walk, and I took doctor’s orders. I was to remain at Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong whilst Khandro Déchen accompanied our students to the caves in the company of Khandro Ten’dzin and Khandro Tséring.

I decided to sit in the shrine room for the duration. I sat gazing at the statue of Dorje Tröllö. I’d not been there long however, before Rinpoche appeared. Lama Gyaltsen had told him that I was down there and he’d come down immediately to see me. He burst into the room in the most extraordinary way – performing a series of impossible bounds. First he leapt a low table, then—without a pause—he leapt up onto the lower throne. Then—again without a pause—he leapt onto the high throne. Three easy bounds – occurring almost as if in slow motion. It was like something out of a Kung Fu movie. It was as if time had stopped. He then performed gar’cham of Dorje Tröllö on the high throne. Once completed – he sprang down from the throne and landed right next to me – with hardly a sound. It was as if he had no physical weight.

Rinpoche was not far off seventy years old at the time – so I was somewhat more than amazed. I knew he was a rTsa-rLung master – but I never expected him to be able to leap like an Olympic athlete at his age. Rinpoche then demonstrated a series of trül’khor exercises interspersed with explanations – almost none of which I could understand, there being no translator. My Tibetan is fairly rudimentary – and, although I could follow to a certain extent due to my knowledge of technical terms, the situation was mercurially unfathomable … and yet … there was no need to know anything more than was apparent. I knew the trül’khor exercises – so that was nothing that needed explanation. It seemed that Rinpoche was deploying these methods as a vehicle of transmission – and all I had to do was sit and wordlessly observe.

It would have been possible to have called Lama Gyaltsen to translate – but Rinpoche waved the idea aside. The entire afternoon was transmission of the most extraordinary, referenceless poignance. Rinpoche simply talked incessantly and I sat gazing at him as the words rolled like soft thunder or the sound of wind. His eyes were fixed on me and mine on his – and it was impossible to recall how much time was spent in this way. It turned out to be three hours – but I have no concept of how the time passed. Once Rinpoche had concluded his verbal communication – we sat in silence until Khandro Déchen, Khandro Ten’dzin, and Khandro Tséring returned with our party of
students.

We heard Khandro Déchen’s voice, and Rinpoche and I turned to each other and smiled. “Oh yah – khandro returning” Rinpoche grinned knowing he had no need to be translated.
as if it were for the first time

When Khandro Déchen led our party of students to the caves of Padmasambhava and Mandarava at Maratika – I remained in Kathmandu. Getting up to the Maratika caves required an entire day’s walk uphill. I still wasn’t in good enough health to handle that – the effects of the food poisoning and dysentery lingered. I was sorry not to have accompanied Khandro Déchen – but it gave me the opportunity to spend more time with Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel. I saw them every day and apart from Rinpoche’s constant high cheer and exorbitantly loving demeanour – it was as if I were back in Tso Pema toward the end of our time together in ’75. He gave me a series of Dzogchen transmissions over that time – but mainly, we sat together gazing at the sky. Sometimes we went for short walks and sometimes we sat in the garden admiring the flowers and listening to bird-song.

One afternoon Rinpoche had some specific personal advice to offer – so he called for Lama Gyaltsen to translate. “I saw you at a distance in McLeod Ganj in 1982 …” Rinpoche laughed “… but … you were too far away – and I didn’t know where you might be living …” [pause] “I asked where the injiangkpa lived … but no one could tell me. They said ‘maybe here – maybe there’ and so I did not consider a meeting would happen at that time.” Rinpoche laughed again. “Maybe it was not auspicious then.” I found this revelation funny – but asked him why it was not auspicious, nonetheless. Rinpoche’s answer wasn’t given in words.

Between bouts of huge laughter, he gave riotous pantomimes of playing cymbals and performing other aspects of tantric ritual.

“D’you feel these studies were a waste of time, Rinpoche?”

“No …” he replied in a matter of fact way “All—too—necessary—too—necessary …” but burst out laughing and cackled “Dönpa ya-po’du.” He made this ‘Dönpa ya-po’du’ quip repeatedly until we were both in tears of laughter. After a while neither of us could say anything without having convulsions of mirth.

He confided that he considered liturgy and ritual to be secondary practices “Ati!” he exclaimed, and proceeded to enter into a long-dé posture. I watched as his eyes grew progressively larger and more spatial. Then suddenly he shouted “Bang!” and we both started laughing again. ‘Bang’ was one of a collection of English words that Rinpoche knew – and I remembered the first time I’d heard him shout that word. The echo of our first meeting came back to me: ‘Yah … this you must always know. Without
—this—Dzogchen men-ngag-dé can never be understood. You must know what is in your mind and you must know how you see. You must know everything — but not by learning. Bang! Like this … you must—see—clearly what is there …’

Once our laughter had subsided, there followed some moments of silence. We sat looking out of the window at the glorious burgeoning mass of yellow flowers in the garden below. It was an uncultivated garden — a space that had simply filled itself with flowers. A sense of immense and unbounded quietness settled in the room. It was an autumn afternoon. We were sitting in one of the few remaining countrified reaches of the Kathmandu Valley. The sun was slanting through an open window and a slight breeze was stirring. Jomo Sam’phel Déchen poured out two glasses of Indian beer. Suddenly Rinpoche took a deep breath, displayed the palms of his hands; and in a soft, slow, æthereal voice—again in English—said “… everything …”

I knew what he meant — without a conceptual framework of any kind. It was simply space within Space.

The first intimation of dusk darkened the room by a degree. In the distance I heard Khandro Déchen’s voice as the party of pilgrims approached Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong. We both smiled and sipped our beer.

The next day—when we’d returned from a short walk to Chatral Rinpoche’s gompa—Rinpoche reached under his table and pulled out a handwritten folio. “This … I could never find when you were with me in Tso Pema …” [pause] “I wrote this down many years ago when I was in Golok. These are verses of Drukpa Künlegs and I will read them to you. Drukpa Künlegs at one time condensed his realisation in this way:

If you fail to see nonduality — what use is there in following religious regulations?

If you lack a Tsawa’i Lama — what use is there in intelligence and scholarship?

If you can’t love all beings as your children — what use is there in liturgy and ritual?

If you’re ignorant of the central point of the Three Vows,[299] what’s gained by not breaking them?

If you fail to realise the Buddha within — what can be found of reality without?

If you can’t practise the natural stream of meditation — what’s to be gained by dominating thought?

If you can’t order your life according to seasons and times of day — what
are you but a ’thom yor?
If you have no intuitive sense of nonduality – what’s to be gained by methodical study?
If you waste your life living on borrowed time and resources – who’ll repay your debts later?
With scanty clothing that causes discomfort – what’s the profit in freezing your ass off as an ascetic?
Practising but lacking specific instructions accomplishes nothing – like an ant climbing a dune.
Gathering instructions but ignoring the nature of Mind, you starve next door to a burgeoning larder.
Acting the Lama whilst refusing to teach – you become as useless as the jewel in a snake’s brain.
Ignoramuses blathering persistently just proclaim their stupidity to anyone unwise enough to listen.
If you understand the essence, practice it! Or accept that you understand nothing.

“This is an important teaching – that every gö kar chang lo practitioner should know” Rinpoche smiled “It’s good that you’ve written it down – because you can show it to your own disciples when you feel they are ready to hear it…” [pause] “Because we are here alone together again I will tell a few stories of Drukpa Künlegs that I enjoy”…

… Drukpa Künlegs just so happened to find himself on the road to Lhasa – and so he decided he might as well keep walking. Eventually he arrived in the crowded marketplace. There were all kinds of people there from India, Nepal, Ladakh, and China. There were Tibetans from the Chang Thang, Kham, Golok, Tsang, Dakpo, Kongpo and Mongolia. Amongst them there were ngakpas and ngakmas; nomads and farmers; Lamas and official dignitaries; monks and nuns; traders and pilgrims.

“Listen, you all!” he shouted “I’m Drukpa Künlegs! I’ve walked here today, from over there a ways—without prejudice—to be of some use to you all … So—tell me, people—where can I find some goddamn chang? And—while we’re about it—a generous bevy of beautiful girls!”

The crowd were unused to this kind of announcement and started saying the kinds of things people say when someone speaks from an unlikely direction. Some oaf shouted “This meschugganah says he’s walked here to be of use to us – then he asks where he can find chang and women of easy virtue! What
kind of religion is it that this pervert preaches? Shouldn’t he be asking ‘Who’s the best Lama? Where’s the best monastery? Where’s practice thriving?’ But he doesn’t ask anything like this. I think he’s a deranged schmuck who needs a good whupping!”

There just so happened to be a white-faced hunch-backed cretin in the crowd who shouted “You may tell us you’re a mensch – but you’re just a homeless ’thom yor. You sing like a bird – but where’s your perch? You may shit like a deer wherever you please – but where’s your forest? You look like a bear – but where’s your lair? You say you’re a practitioner – but where’s your monastery? You say you’re a Lama – but where’s your throne? You dress like a monk – but you have long hair. Your skirt’s white and you’re full of shite. You’re just a bumptious, insolent vagrant! By day you pick nits! By night you just get drunk and fuck! A real yogi would have a lineage – but what’s yours, eh?”

I interrupted the story at this point. “Rinpoche … I can’t help feeling that this ‘white-faced hunch-backed cretin’ must have been someone in particular?” [pause] “I mean … I have the feeling that it must refer to some ecclesiastical idiot of the time.”

“Oh yah – very possible … but I do not know …” [pause] “Anyhow … Drukpa Künlegs answered the cretin as follows – and it is interesting that the answer is quite formal.”

“Lineage, eh … what do you know of lineage, you pasty hump-backed cretin? Sit down—shut up—and let me tell you a thing or two. You want to know lineage? Well I’ll tell you about my goddamn lineage!” Then Drukpa Künlegs spontaneously composed this verse:

This vagrant’s lineage is glorious! It comes down from Dorje Chang – the thunderbolt holder. This vagrant’s Lama is also glorious – and his name’s Palden Drukpa! This vagrant’s yidam is glorious – and his name is ’khorlo Demchog! This vagrant’s khandro is glorious - her name’s Dorje Phagmo – the thunderbolt sow! This vagrant’s protector is glorious – his name’s Gönpo Chag-zhi – the Four-armed Great Blackness![300]

“D’you have any burning issues with any of that, my dear cretin? If not, be content with your goitre and don’t take up good drinking time with your dreary desultory drivel.”

At this the surly cretin slunk away scowling – and, as he did so, an old fellow from Lhasa came up to the front of the crowd.

“Hey—glorious Drukpa Künlegs—I live in this here burg. It’s awash with fabulous ladies – so many that I couldn’t name ’em all. Here are some that immediately spring to mind: Pretty Palzang Tsomo; Beautiful Bhuti Pamo;
Wondrous Wangchuk Tséwang; Sexy Sang-gyé Zangmo; Cuddles Kèlsang Pamo; Smiling Sonam Drölma; Dancing Dé-kyi Wangmo; and … the Lamp of Lhasa—Lé-kyi—A-dzé! There are a whole bunch, I—do—assure you – and y’all will find good chang hostelries in Lhasa. I hope y’all like it here and that y’all will stay a right long time.”

Drukpa Künlegs smiled “That’s what I like to hear, my friend! Seems Lhasa’s brimming with beauty and overflowing with good chang. I’ll stay and enjoy this place a while.”

Then an old fellow from Sakya chimed in “Yo—glorious Drukpa Künlegs—I’m from Sakya where beautiful ladies are renowned. Seems like I should give you the Sakya list: Attractive A-Sèl Pema; Gorgeous Gakyi Pumo; Lascivious Lha-chö Wangmo; Titillating Tséring Drölma; Desirable Dé-kyi Sèl-dön; and … Dreamy Dé-sèl Yang-kyi. This is just a succulent soupçon – but … there are a whole bunch more—not to forget the excellent chang in Sakya. I hope y’all will come and spend some time with us, too.”

“Oh yah! I’ll definitely drop by some day – Sakya sounds real fine.”

Not to be left out, a fellow from Ladakh elbowed his way forward. “Yo—Drukpa Künlegs, righteous dude! I’m from Ladakh where luscious ladies are held in great honour. Here are a few that I remember—very—well: Tempting Tséwong Lhadrön; the Charming Chö-kyi; Alluring A-tsong Pumo; Lovely Lha-chö Pumo; Adorable A-kyi Déchen; and … Sensuous Sonam Gyalmo. These would be right good names for y’all to remember – aside from all the fine chang houses. I hope y’all will visit our land so as I can show ’em to yer!”

“Oh yah, my friend – I’ll definitely come to Ladakh one day!”

Next, an old lady from Bhutan stepped forward. “You Tibetans prattle too much! This Lama’s name is Drukpa[301] Künlegs not Tibetan Künlegs!” Then she stamped her foot and addressed Drukpa Künlegs. “I am from Bhutan—the Land of the Dragon—and as you know, we’re replete with stunning beauties. I can’t name ’em all but here’s a sample: Gö-kyi Palmo is the Khandro of o-ché; Lady A’dzom is the Khandro of Gom-yul Sar Chörten; Namkha Drönma of Pachang is the Khandro of Zhung Valley; Palzang Buti is the Khandro of the Zhung Highlands; Chö’dzom is the Khandro of Wangyul, Samten Tsémo—the daughter of Lama Nyida Drakpa—is the Khandro of Paro; and … Marvellous Mistress Gyal’dzom is the Khandro of Shar Khyung-tse’i Chan-den. Please come and check us out! There are many more ladies besides – and wonderful chang.”

“Oh yah, mistress of Bhutan! I’ll certainly check out Bhutan, drink your chang, and make love with all your right fine ladies!”
Last in time for her speech was an elderly lady from Kongpo. “Daring Drukpa Künlegs, I’m from Kongpo and this is my list: Lively Lha-chö Pemo; Perfect Palzang Rinchen Gyalmo; Stunning Sé-wang Gyalmo; Ravishing Rin’dzin Zangmo; Delectable Déchen Lhamo; and … Superb Sumchog ’ö-Sel. These names come quickly to mind – but there are a whole bunch more. There’s unparalleled chang to boot. I hope y’all will not forget Kongpo.”

“Oh yah! Seems even Kongpo’s worth a visit – but it’s not sufficient to be acquainted with their names – I need to be personally acquainted …and … in particular … who’s this Sumchog – and how old would she be?”

“Sumchog’s fifteen” replied the lady from Kongpo.

“Not a moment to lose then! I’d better high-tail out – so you folks just rest up and take it easy ’til I get back – I’m off to Kongpo.”

Drukpa Künlegs made his way on foot to Nyé-rong – and thence southeast to Kongpo. As he strode along, he ran into five rather nice girls on the trail.

“Where might you be from, handsome fella – and … where might you be going?”

“Well, delightful damsels – that’s easy to answer” Drukpa Künlegs grinned “I’m from way back yonder and way down yonder’s where I’m headed.”

“That’s funny” they giggled “Please tell us why are you travelling …because —as like as not—we could make the journey more pleasant.”

“Yah—yah—yah … maybe, maybe not – Anyhow … I’m looking for a sweet li’l chickadee by the name of Sumchog.”

“What’s she like?” they asked.

“Well … fair complexion, soft silky skin; fine sweet sugar-bowl; and a round smiling face. She’s beautiful, flagrantly fragrant, and has sharp insight. She has all the signs of a khandro.”

“So what about us girls then – aren’t we khandros too?”

“I don’t think so …” Drukpa Künlegs sighed “You don’t appear to be—from what I can see—but there are many types I suppose …”

“So what are they, mister smooth-talking yogi? We’d really like the low down on this.”

“Well there are yeshé khandros, sang-gyé khandros, lé-kyi khandros, pema khandros, dorje khandros, and rinchen khandros. There are also cannibal khandros, world-woven khandros, ashen khandros, peaceful khandros, joyous khandros, wrathful khandros, and innumerable other kinds of khandros.”

“How can we recognise these khandros?”
“Not so easily …” replied Drukpa Künlegs “… but … since you ask … here are the particulars: yeshé khandros are blushing-fair and radiant. Sang-gyé khandros have a faint bluish complexion and a radiant smile. Lé-kyi khandros have aubergine skin and a broad forehead. Pema khandros have bright pink skin, lustrous complexions. They are short with wide hips. Dorje khandros are pale with long eyebrows and sweet voices.

“They are voluptuous and supple. Rinchen khandros have blonde hair, beautiful faces with a warm complexion. They are slender and tall. World-woven khandros have pallid yet radiant faces – constantly given to smiling. Cannibal khandros have dark ashen complexions, wide mouths, and protruding teeth. Ashen khandros have ashen-yellow complexions and vague expressions.”

“So … what sort are we?”

“Mmmm … you’re needy and greedy, randy and reckless, frustrated and friendless khandros.”

“That ain’t no way to talk to us! You ain’t no gentleman, mister yogi.” And with that they went off in high dudgeon.

I was looking quizzical at that point and Rinpoche noticed. He grinned at me.

“Oh yah … no need to be concerned about your khandro. She is most wonderful. She is the most perfect kind of khandro.”

“What it—is—Rinpoche …” I mused “… is that I’m wondering how this relates to people generally … I realise that this material is visionary. I understand the symbolism – but I’m wondering about how this might work out in everyday situations for men and women. I suppose there must be reflections of the five elemental khandros in ordinary people.”

“Oh yah! This can also be seen …” [pause] “There are many circumstances which make men and women suitable and unsuitable for each other.”

Rinpoche and I talked for a while about the way in which some relationships seem to damage the people involved – as if two people met the exact person to fuel their neuroses. I told him I’d seen this quite often – but that there seemed little possibility of helping the people involved – because they appeared addicted to each other. Rinpoche then concluded the story of Drukpa Künlegs.

It was long and complex and contained many songs of realisation which would be too technically subtle and complex to relate. Suffice it to say that Drukpa Künlegs found Sumchog and conjured with whatever circumstances presented themselves. Sumchog entered retreat after her encounter with Drukpa Künlegs and gained nondual realisation.
“One reason I tell this story of Drukpa Künlegs is because an American woman came here wanting sex with me. She said she’d heard I was a karmamudra master” Rinpoche laughed “… and so she’d come to have that … experience …” [pause] “I told her I was not a prostitute and that she did not have the right qualifications of a khandro anyway. Still she came back many times asking and in the end I told her to go away. There are many ’thom yors now … It is strange now that I—ever—thought—you—were a ’thom yor. Some of these ’thom yors are so very—very—stupid and self-important that it is most dreadful to see. I feel very sad for them.”

I was a little shocked by this story – especially remembering how it had been when I first met Rinpoche. “That’s really quite appalling, Rinpoche” I replied “I know you always wanted me to be more forthright – but it seems that a lot of people have lost all sense of courtesy, let alone realistic self-assessment.”

“Yah … there are many ’thom yors always …”

“Rinpoche … now that we are speaking about Drukpa Künlegs … you were once joking that I could be like Drukpa Künlegs in terms of speaking against distortions of Dharma.”

“Oh yah … I remember in Tso Pema we talked of this.”

“Well … I wrote some poetry—as you said I should—and I have some of that poetry with me … if you would like to hear it …” [pause] “It’s called: ‘Marvellous Not to Have a Bigoted Mind’.”

“Oh yah – maybe Lama Tséring will translate.”

So I launched in. I had to simplify it somewhat: removing Italian wines; replacing ‘hit man’ with ‘assassin’; and, dealing with other untranslatable terms. It sounded more-or-less like this:

Marvellous to attend Buddhist courses and listen to teachings but with a bigoted mind,

Teachings are merely collections of complex information delivered in an unusual syntax.

Whatever you hear, you’ll only have to hear it again-and-again – and write it down in notebooks

To which you’re never likely to refer – better go wherever; and listening with awareness and kindness

At any theatre you please—to hear any play—with an open heart – as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to be vegetarian—and to live in a gentle non-violent manner—
but with a bigoted mind,
The deer park is emptied through insatiable blood-lust – and the meaning of Dharma is slaughtered.
Every raku-bowl of bean-sprouts and tofu you devour spills the life-blood of authentic commitment.
Better to eat with gusto and genuinely savour whatever comes your way with awareness and kindness
Relishing the Prosciutto di Parma and pepperoni pizza of perfection – as if it were for the first time.
Marvellous to have clear perception—to be mindful and avoid inebriation—but with a bigoted mind,
You become intoxicated with the virulent venom of your prurient pusillanimously puritanical concepts;
Whatever the substances are from which you abstain, there’ll always be something to get uptight about.
Better to bathe your brain in the bountiful Barbaresco, Barolo, or Brunello of awareness and kindness
Drinking whatever you’re offered by Lamas or vajra brothers and sisters—as if it were for the first time.
Marvellous to maintain the vinaya and to uphold the tradition of the Buddha—but with a bigoted mind,
The physical contact from which you abstain shrivels your heart—and you’re more-or-less fucked anyway
Whatever it is you avoid with your hands, tongue, anus, or genitalia, has already been mentally committed.
Better to experience a natural loving relationship and to celebrate the senses with awareness and kindness,
Delving the sensuous mystery of spacious-passion in passionate space—as if it were for the first time.
Marvellous to visit Buddhist friends and communicate what you know—but with a bigoted mind,
It’s just a sallow excremental excuse to slander other disciples, their Lamas, and their lineages.
Every loathsome sectarian view you express only leaves room for another one to fill its place.
Better to sit at home in your own bathroom—on your own toilet—with awareness and kindness

Loosening your bowels—and emptying your bladder with ease as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to go to Buddhist centres and participate in Tsog feasts – but with a bigoted mind,

It’s just a ritualised method of passing time, eating sugar and starch – and getting heartburn.

Every time you leave, you only go back again – in case there’s more backbiting to enjoy

Or gossip to spread—about people you’ve never met—better to have awareness and kindness

To eat steak—and sip heavy tannic red wine with an old friend as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to practise full prostrations together with the recitations of refuge and bodhicitta,

But with a bigoted mind, it’s merely a tiresome enervating catalogue of repetitive movements;

Every time you get down, you only have to get up again – and then it’s just back down again

Better to really get down—or go down—or do whatever you like with awareness and kindness

Participating freely with enthusiasm, integrity, and an open mind – as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to chant sadhanas of the awareness-beings and protectors – but with a bigoted mind,

You may as well recite the telephone directory—forwards or backwards—it makes no difference,

Even if you occasionally call someone up – no one’s going to want to converse with you anyway

Because you’re just another sales-call from samsara – better to give voice to awareness and kindness

Singing Blues—or simply listening to the glorious music of life as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to fulfil mantra obligations—reciting a bum[305] for each
syllable—but with a bigoted mind,

It’s merely an obsession with numbers that doesn’t add up to much – you may as well just babble.

Every Sanskrit word whose mispronunciation you mangle is merely the-one-before-the-one-that-comes-after

Or something in-between – better employ your tongue in cunning linguistics with awareness and kindness

Tasting the nature of bountiful badinage—in reciprocity with others—as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to spend time in the shrine room of one’s tradition and to sit silently – but with a bigoted mind,

It’s merely biding time before plunging back into the sleazy frenzy of malicious tea-break gossip-mongering;

Every rumour you hear is just another piece of tittle-tattle with which to defile the atmosphere yet further.

Better to regale others with whimsy – or say whatever comes into your head with awareness and kindness

Attempting to bring laughter into the lives of friends and acquaintances – as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to spend unmeasured time in the presence of the Lama – but with a bigoted mind,

It’s merely an opportunity to extract information with which to feed your anal-retentive intellect;

Every detail you’re given only makes you hungry for other versions of precisely the same thing.

Better to have a basic level of honesty and reveal your real condition with awareness and kindness

Being open, truthful, and unreserved in the presence of anyone – as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to acquire extensive knowledge of the outer tantras but with a bigoted mind,

It’s merely interminably involved information and recondite terminology that congests your brain;

For every category you know, there’ll just be another sub-category and subdivision to absorb.
Better to see the pattern of delusion—or what’s in front of your nose—with awareness and kindness

And to enjoy the presentation of infinitely-variegated phenomena-display— as if for the first time.

Marvellous to receive empowerment for practices of inner tantra – but with a bigoted mind,

It’s merely a way of disguising your neediness with the camouflage of esoteric oriental ritual;

Every wang, rLung, tri[306] you receive gives you the opportunity to experience boredom

And to break commitments – better to sit silently without pretensions with awareness and kindness,

Free to enjoy yourself spontaneously, generously, and authentically – as if it were for the first time.

Marvellous to receive direct, symbolic, and oral transmission of Dzogchen – but with a bigoted mind,

It’s merely a fatuous inane waste of time – the ultimate glamorisation of conceit and self-deceit,

It does you no good just to sit in the dark[307] – with a mind and mouth like a goddamn shark,

Better to own your violence as a ‘hit man’ – or be a regular mensch with awareness and kindness

Working at an ordinary job— in an accepted way, with regular pay—as if it were for the first time.

Rinpoche—as the piece was being read—nodded fervently at the sentiments that pleased him and as it went on he began to chuckle. By the end he laughed almost continuously “This!” he announced “Yah! This you—must—translate into Tibetan.”

“You don’t think it’s too oriented towards people in the West, Rinpoche?”

“Maybe one place … ritual to Tibetans is not exotic – but there is otherwise not much difference …” [pause] “No … maybe I will tell you one last story of Drukpa Künlegs – because this has an important meaning. This you will see”…

… Drukpa Künlegs arrived in Gyantsé at one time and strolled into the middle of the town. There was a large chörten there and many were performing prostrations. Drukpa Künlegs however, just sat in the sun
admiring the beautiful construction and gazing at the sky. No one paid him any mind – but for a voluptuous young lady who gave him a friendly smile. As he was thus occupied with the sheer pleasantness and perfection of all existence the gékor[308] approached him with a scowl that was practically tattooed into his visage. “Have you no respect, you worthless beggar! You should be making prostrations like the devout laity and monks!”

“Yah, yah, yah … but I’ve done with prostrations a long time ago – it’s how I spent my childhood …” [pause] “… but … if you are asking me to offer prostration as a personal favour to—you—then I’d be right glad to oblige.”

So – Drukpa Künlegs began his prostrations and chanted these lines as he did so:

\begin{quote}
I prostrate to the beautiful rounded belly[309] of the Gyantsé maiden – adorned with the circle of emanation.[310]

I prostrate to the ample buttocks[311] and curvaceous thighs[312] of the Gyantsé maiden – adorned within with the secret lotus circle of bliss.[313]

I prostrate to the bountiful beatific breasts[314] of the Gyantsé maiden – adorned with circles of manifestation.[315]
\end{quote}

Drukpa Künlegs arose from his third prostration and turned to face the gékor. “Have my prostrations satisfied your need to dominate others with your control-freak neuroses?”

“You salacious depraved pervert! How dare you profane this place with your lecherous litany of lewdness?”

“There’s nothing lewd in my litany …” laughed Drukpa Künlegs “It’s merely your perseverant prurience that sees it as such. You seem to be unaware that the greatest Lamas in this land arose from the sublime focus of my first prostration. The womblike nature of dharmakaya and the belly of the maiden are of the same nature – and every Lama was born from such a womb. The miraculous nature of sambhogakaya and the secret lotus are of the same nature – and every Lama was therefore lotus-born. The wish-fulfilling jewels of the breasts are the nirmanakaya – and every Lama was thus suckled. The glamorous Gyantsé maiden is therefore a focus of refuge beyond all others.”

At this the gékor strode off in disgust but the monks who’d listened to Drukpa Künlegs’ words gathered ’round him and asked for further instruction on the teaching he had given as to the nature of the three spheres of being.[316]

Then—right on cue—Khandro Déchen returned with many stories of Maratika. Stories of inspiration. She laughed heartily about sitting in inches of bat guano “… but it was worth it – the cave was marvellous.”

We bade Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel farewell and promised to return. They gave us wonderful parting gifts and we took our leave.

A vulture got sucked into one of the engines of the plane on the way out of Kathmandu and we had to land in Frankfurt. We felt sorry for the poor bird – but somehow … it didn’t feel incongruous. How could any journey involving Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen end conventionally?
Between 1995 and 2000, I made several trips to Yang-lé-shöd to see Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen – but the situation was made difficult by the political turmoil. There were assassinations, riots, and subsequent curfews. The authorities were not entirely content with the idea of white-skirted fellows wandering ’round the hinterland.

It’s been difficult from time to time in Nepal – but that’s what you have to expect there. The overnight bus from Khakabita[317] is occasionally attacked by armed bandits. It arrived—with me aboard—on one occasion with a few bullet holes in the bodywork. The driver was a courageous man and saved his passengers from robbery and worse. The same thing happened to our student ’ö-Sel[318] – and she also lived to tell the tale.

The general tourist-runs to places like the Taj Mahal, Goa, Agra, Jodhpur, and Jaipur don’t entertain people with the same possibility of imminent death at the hands of insurgents or brigands. Still …although being in the line of fire is not comfortable at the time, it makes a fine story later – as the young Hobbits sit around one’s furry toes.

There are many stories I could tell. Some are merely amusing – and therefore, best told in person.

In November 2002, I was accompanied by a small group of ordained disciples – Bar-ché,[319] Dzü’drül, Trögyal, Trö-rig, and Shé-zér.[320] Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel had moved to Bodha where they rented an apartment in a house about ten minutes’ walk from the chörten.

When we arrived, we were met immediately by Jomo Sam’phel. She’d seen us approaching from a distance because their apartment was on the top floor. She beamed at us—welcomed everyone effusively—and took us to Rinpoche who awaited us in the shrine room. The look of delight when Rinpoche saw me was extremely moving. I have no words for such an experience. I don’t lack vocabulary – but, however I phrase my feelings diminishes the experience rather than explaining it. I was overjoyed to say the least. I was still not entirely used to Rinpoche treating me like a loving mother. His only disappointment was that Khandro Déchen had been unable to accompany us due to the fact that the birth of our daughter Ræchel was not far distant. I attempted prostrations – but Rinpoche diverted them by pulling me onto his throne-cum-bed. Rinpoche stroked my face and arm as though I were his child and I became aware that there were tears in his eyes. There were soon tears in my eyes – and it seemed impossible to contain the searing gladness I felt. “I am so happy to see you again” Rinpoche beamed – and I couldn’t
Everyone received a glass of single malt whiskey and we recited The Drinking Song of Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche:

Because some drinking companions requested it; I—the drinker—Jig’drèl Yeshé Dorje, sang this spontaneously: Within the supreme self-existing skull cup of happiness, are swirling oceans of shining essence thig-lés.

Above – the five seed syllables appear and become the yab-yum Buddhas of the five elements. A flood of blessings flows from their ecstatic union. They move in great joy, melt in light, and dissolve into the spatial essence.

Om A’a: Hung: The three syllables rain from the dimension of space – and the precipitation manifests as düd-tsi – a treasury of desirable qualities whose colour, taste, and fragrance are powerful.

Om A’a: Hung: Ha Ho Hri: Offerings multiply. Happiness arises on perceiving the wondrous unsurpassed düd-tsi of the heroes and heroines of the world. I offer this to: the pervading Masters – my most kind Lamas; the Holders of the Six Lineages; the Three Jewels; the Three Spheres of Being; the Peaceful, Joyous and Wrathful Yidams; Mamos and Dakinis; Protectors of the Inner Tantras; gTerma Protectors; Protectors of the Treasuries of Phenomena; Protectors of the Ground of Being; the sang-gyé kyil’khor of my body; duality and nonduality; and, to the infinite purity of the phenomenal world.

A Ho: Wonderful: In this way – nobody becomes unhappy when drinking. A La La Ho: Marvellous: Shè su sol: Please drink:


We drink happily – without reference points to cause dissatisfaction. Because this apparitional banquet—free of referentiality—is offered to the illusory body, what we drink is a sacred feast. Anxiety is therefore unnecessary, and we remain relaxed. Because appearances are infinitely pure – discrimination is unnecessary, and we remain serene. Because self-existent wisdom is total – effort is unnecessary, and we rest with cheerful minds. The path of happiness we follow arises due to the kindness of the Lamas. A La La Ho: Kèlpa Zang:
With this, we all drank a sip together – and a light, joyous laughter broke out.

“I will say something about the meaning” Rinpoche explained. “This first line ‘Within the supreme self-existing skull cup’ means the uncreated beginningless enlightened nature …” [pause] “The swirling oceans are gyamtso – the ocean and waves of the nondual expanse of Mind. Primal iridescence arises out of emptiness as light essence – the thig-lés. ‘The five seed syllables appear and become the yab-yum Buddhas’ – a description of emptiness giving rise to form, then form dissolving into emptiness. This is endless. Om A’a: Hung: Ha Ho Hri: are the Tsog’khorlo syllables. ‘Offerings multiply’ – means that the Tsog’khorlo is becoming magnificent in the atmosphere of pure vision. ‘Happiness arises on perceiving the heroes and heroines of the world’ – because everyone is an enlightened being. ‘Protectors of the Treasuries of Phenomena’, is meaning mountains, rocks, stones, trees, and rivers—everything—is innately wonderful. From the point of view of Dzogchen everything is wonderful as it is – so we are drinking to ‘the infinite purity of the phenomenal world’.

“‘A Ho:’ means marvellous. In this way we make connection. If we are drinking alcohol in this state of mind – nobody becomes unhappy. Also, there is no negative aspect to our drinking. Monastics are drinking secretly because they are drinking the secret offering at Tsog’khorlo. This may just be a drop on the tongue. This does not mean that they are drinking alcohol when no one is watching – but sometimes this does happen.

“The gö kar chang lo’i dé are drinking openly. This means they are drinking within the ground of primordial awareness.

“‘Anxiety is unnecessary’ because we are relaxed. Drinking in the presence of the Lama, we could become too anxious not to get drunk – but if we drink within the meaning of this song – we are not becoming drunk. ‘Appearances are infinitely pure’ and ‘discrimination is unnecessary’ because we do not judge how anything or anyone is acting. We are all pawos and khandros together. Everything is pure because – self-existent wisdom is total …” [pause] “Oh yah … this is Dzogchen men-ngag-dé – if you understand this as ‘mere indication’ then you rest in the space of that understanding … but this is not merely intellectual understanding – this must be taken into meditation.”

Then came the time to offer our gifts. Amongst the gifts we brought for Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel was a photograph album compiled by Trö-rig. It contained pictures of our sangha. Rinpoche was interested in a photograph of Rig’dzin as it showed his takdröl and Rinpoche spent some time telling us about different varieties of takdröl. “Where did he get this takdröl?” he asked.
“I gave it to him, Rinpoche – I wore it for some years. I first had it when I was studying mahayoga with Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. He said I should make one like his, so I did – but about half the size. Now I can’t wear a takdröl any more because—as you see—I have very little hair … up there … to which I could attach it.”

Rinpoche laughed. “Oh yah! Grass does not grow on the highest mountain!”[326] Rinpoche rooted around under his table and pulled out a small silver tube. It was a miniscule takdröl. “You should wear this takdröl instead – tied to your gomtag.”[327]

We then returned to the photographs. There were many of Khandro Déchen and our son Robert – and each of these he examined carefully before touching them to the top of his head.

We’d been sitting quietly for some while when Rinpoche startled us “Yah … I met Khyungchen Aro Lingma.” He told us this in a matter-of-fact manner – as if he were speaking about having met her whilst circumambulating the chörten in Bodha that morning. It was clear however, that he didn’t intend us to understand that this had been within the realm of ordinary experience. Aro Lingma passed away attaining rainbow body in 1923 – and the year of Rinpoche’s birth was 1929.

“I was a young man—maybe twenty-three years old—when I saw her … and she said I should look for her in the guise of a young man with white hair.”[328] This statement was astonishing, not least because of its unexpectedness – but because no one had asked Rinpoche about Aro Lingma.

Rinpoche addressed most of his comments to our students whilst I sat and listened – delighted by what he was imparting to them. He stressed to us all the importance of ‘direct essential practice’ for those following a Dzogchen lineage. Shé-zér asked him what advice he had concerning the maintenance of the Aro gTér. “Aro gTér is Dzogchen” he replied “It must remain so – without prayers or chants being added …” [pause] “Always there are—many—marvellous prayers … but, you—must—keep to the essential tradition. This must not be lost – because now the Nyingma have become so much a mahayoga tradition and much Dzogchen is lost.”

Then Trögyal asked about the tradition and the importance of maintaining the gö kar chang lo’i dé. Rinpoche nodded “Oh yah – there are different types of ngakpas and ngakmas, and those of the Dzogchen category—who take the non-symbolic spaces of the sense-fields as their practice—are now extremely rare …” [pause] “Because of this – it is most important that the lineage of Aro Lingma must be maintained in its pure essential form as a stream of non-ritual yogas.”

We gave Jomo Sam’phel a white shamthab—which she received delightedly
—but she told us she would only be able to wear it in the house.

Rinpoche shook his head sadly “Yah … this is not good …” [pause] “It is not good that she cannot wear this publicly. She has every qualification to dress as a Lama – but Tibetan culture does not allow it. If she wore this white shamthab outside it would be bad for her. The 'thom yors would be angry and shout at her.”

Dzü’drül said “Really?!” with some degree of offended surprise. “Why would this be, Rinpoche?”

“Because this is how 'thom yors think. 'thom yors have no knowledge of Vajrayana – they only know Tibetan culture and think that this is the rule …” [pause] “But this view is not Buddhism—it is not Vajrayana—this is just Tibetan culture. There is much that is good in Tibetan culture – but our culture is not more important than Vajrayana. Western culture also is not more important than Vajrayana. You must—all—know the difference between culture and Vajrayana. Tibetans do not own Vajrayana. Vajrayana belongs equally to all people who are seriously practising in every country.” Then Rinpoche turned to me “All—your—ordained female disciples—must—be white shamthab wearing. There is nothing that can be done to them because they are not Tibetans and they do not have to live here. Women are free in the West—you do not have to listen to 'thom yors—so both men and women are free to show the correct gö kar chang lo appearance.”

We spent the afternoon listening to strange accounts of Nepalese ‘Mafia’ activity in Yang-lé-shöd. Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel had left Yang-lé-shöd because of it. It was no longer a reliable place to remain. Khandro Ten’dzin had been assaulted and several of the old ngakpas and ngakmas at Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong had been robbed.

The next day, Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel decided to take us all out for a meal at a small restaurant called ‘The Yak’. It was run by the daughter of Khandro Ten’dzin. The restaurant however, wasn’t really quite large enough for our group – so Rinpoche took charge of the situation and we moved out into the area of wasteland behind the restaurant. He arranged for blankets to be assembled and carried – and these were duly laid down on the ground where the picnic was then prepared. The site brought to mind a subtle blend of Apocalypse Now and ‘Desolation Row’.

Right now I can’t read too good – don’t send me no more letters, no.

Not unless you mail them from – Desolation Row.

Bob Dylan – ‘Desolation Row’

There were piles of burning rubbish. It smouldered like a recently bombed area of a town – emitting a thick yellow-grey smoke. Over in the upper
reaches of the area some grubby looking fellows were butchering a buffalo. Dogs were fighting close by over the bones that were being thrown in their direction. The dogs—one with a missing eye—emitted fiendish howls and snarls. A grizzled old man over in another corner was desultorily chipping concrete from old bricks. Next to him was a huge pile of unspecified detritus—where a few lepers were sleeping in the sun. The area also served as a shortcut from one street to another—so occasionally groups of people would walk right through the middle of our group. They were polite—inasmuch as they avoided treading on our blankets—but not polite enough to walk 'round us. Flies settled on everyone and everything—but none landed on Rinpoche or Jomo Sam’phel.

We sat, drank tea, and ate a fine meal together—as if the situation were entirely normal. Sure, we always banquet in some suburb of hell. Shé-zér wrote of that event for our sangha news:

… I was sitting amongst chaos; my senses were being assaulted by noise, smells, sights, and textures. My mind could not keep up with the concepts that were flooding in. I found myself in a charnel ground as Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen speak of it. There was no possibility of controlling the situation, all that could be done was to relax into the kyil’khor of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen.

Somehow Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel transformed this place simply by their presence. There was a sense of immense dignity in their bearing—and that in turn infused the picnic party with dignity. It brought to mind the teachings I’d received—and given—on the nature of the charnel ground. This was the charnel ground. There were no corpses—as are spoken of in the texts—but the interwoven chaos and order were a brilliant reflection of the key that the charnel ground offers in terms of recognising the nondual state.

On this occasion we presented Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel with a gTérbum. Rinpoche was delighted. “This is rare now—to make like this. Everyone makes these from metal—but earth is the correct element for the gTérbum.”

Rinpoche held the gTérbum on his head for a moment. This caused a ripple in the group—and Trö-rig asked whether Rinpoche could authenticate his phurba. Suddenly there were more phurbas than you could shake a stick at. Rinpoche took them all and rolled them in his hands, one by one. It was moving to observe him take them one at a time—rather than dealing with them as a job lot—in order that everyone felt their phurba had his individual attention.

It’s highly unusual for a Lama to take so much care on behalf of people so
recently encountered – even though they were disciples of ours. Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel’s generosity pretty much moved everyone to the brink of tears.

Whilst circumambulating the chörten—which is the heart of Bodha—we went to a small shop which we have all frequented for years. We nicknamed the place ‘The Temple of Doom’ with reference to the effect the place tends to have on the bank account. The proprietor is friendly and knows us well. He understands that we are not collectors – and that we only buy items for our own practice.

We have no interest in antiques for their own sake – but there are many things that are no longer made—or not made particularly well—so it’s valuable to have examples that can be copied by local metal workers. One such item was an ancient sword of the kind that Ling Gésar would have carried and we felt that we should purchase it and present it to Bar-ché. He’d gone to Nepal in advance of our party and worked hard to make our visit optimal – and it seemed a good time to introduce him to the Ling Gésar gTérma of Rang-rig Togden.

Bar-ché had been a Pencak Silat[332] exponent before he became a student of ours – and he was one of two ordained disciples[333] whom we’d selected to teach the Gar-tak martial art of Rang-rig Togden.[334] The sword was purchased and presented to Bar-ché. His first wish was to show it to Rinpoche – and this more than confirmed our choice of Bar-ché.

As soon as Rinpoche saw the sword he called for a costume to be brought out. It was his own Ling Gésar costume which he wore when he performed the gar’cham of Ling Gésar. It comprised the hat and robes. Lama Sonam assisted Bar-ché in dressing … after which Bar- ché performed a swirl – as if he already knew the dance.

In 2005, we made another pilgrimage to Bodha to visit Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen with our students. This time we brought Robert and Ræchel. Rinpoche named Robert, Düd’dül Dorje – *Demon-slaying Thunderbolt*. He named Ræchel, Künzang Tsodrön – * Entirely Complete Lamp of the Lake*. Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel were delighted to see our children and hauled the entire family up onto his throne-bed for a photograph.

Rinpoche gave Düd’dül Dorje a hat and shawl – which he was immensely happy to receive. It was curious that he could sit for hours hardly understanding a word that was spoken – but was never bored or fidgety. We were proud of him.

We went every day with a different selection of students in order that they’d all have a chance to meet Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel. On each occasion Rinpoche regaled us with stories and answered questions our students put to
him. Students asked if we would not like time alone with Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel – but we felt quite happy watching the scene. We’d had our time and this was a precious opportunity for them. Khandro Déchen and I were content to sit and listen or sit in silence. Mainly we were all there simply to spend time with Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel. Nothing more was required of the situation.

There are three important considerations in terms of relating to one’s Lama: presence display, personality display, and life-circumstances display. These qualities are informal and have to be understood non-conceptually. These three modes represent the most powerful and most subtle form of transmission. We’d explained this in depth to our students and so they knew how to deport themselves. We simply imbibed the ambience of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel. There was no sense of being gozzy or gaga – no blissed-out rapture. The situation was quite ordinary in many ways. We were all able to be natural in not wanting anything to be other than it was. Then we’d eat mo-mos.

Rinpoche laughed. “Yah … these days I do not teach or give empowerments any more. I am too old …” [pause] “Maybe to some people I give something – but not when they are greedy ‘thom yors …” [pause] “Several people have come here asking for teachings … I tell them I do not teach any more – but that if they want to sit and drink with me they are welcome. I invite them to do this – but then they go away because they are ‘thom yors …” [pause] “This is what I like about your students – they ask for nothing. They are happy to come here and sit with me and Sam’phel Déchen …” [pause] “Then … I give all kind of teachings – as you know …” [pause] “Your students are not avaricious like many who come here now.

“These kinds of people care nothing about having a relationship with us – they just want to take something that will make them feel important later – when they can say ‘I got this big secret teaching from Künzang Dorje’. In reality even if I taught these ‘thom yors something – they would get nothing because they do not understand transmission. They cannot receive transmission because their minds are so full of greed and covetous grasping …” [pause] “I think your students want relationship and so transmission comes naturally. They come here with you – happy for whatever happens. This shows a good mind – so you have taught your students well. They are becoming like you and Khandro Déchen – so Sam’phel and I are very happy to see this.”

On the final day Jomo Sam’phel presented Khandro Déchen with a full-sized khatvangha – a tantric trident of marvellous manufacture. Only five had been made. Of these, one was presented to Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche, one to Kyabjé Chatral Rinpoche, and one to Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel. The
gift was at once a great honour and a fantastic act of generosity as it couldn’t be replaced. I was delighted that it had been presented to Khandro Déchen by Jomo Sam’phel – as it was given as a token of their complete acceptance of her as my sang-yum and teaching partner. I’d had more than I could ever need or desire from my time with Rinpoche – so I could be overjoyed for her. Once this presentation was over however, Rinpoche presented me with his Zha-nak[335] costume and hat. He first wore it himself and performed the seated form of the Zha-nak gar’cham. Then he asked Lama Tséring to attire me in the outfit in order that I should perform it for the assembly.

It was a remarkable day amongst many remarkable days – over a period of fifteen years. Parties of our students went to see Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel annually in the winter months. Bar-ché[336] went every year at Rinpoche’s request. It was wonderful to see one of our close disciples have such an extremely close relationship with Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel – and to see him adopted as son.

I could see certainly similarities between Bar-ché and myself. We’re both quite simple people – and both quite emotional in terms of our loyalty to friends and to our Lamas. We’re both keen on honour – and neither of us is easy to subdue. An officious monk—replete with Rolex wrist watch—accosted Bar-ché in the ‘Double Dorjee’ restaurant in Bodha – asking him “What is your name and what vows are you taking that you are this white shamthab wearing?!”

“My name’s Bar-ché Dorje” he replied. “What’s your name?”

The monk—bristling with hubris—answered “In the gompa they call me Khenpo Rinpoche.”[337]

“Good for you” replied Bar-ché. “I won’t ask about your vows – but I’ve nothing to hide. I’ve taken the fourteen root vows and the branch vows which are specific to my lineage.[338] These—as you will know—are secret – but one applies to my white shamthab. I also wear a white shamthab because it’s the direct instruction of my Lamas – and of their Lamas, Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen. Is there anything else you want to know?”

No … there wasn’t – and that concluded the interrogation. Khenpo-such-and-such decided he had nothing further to ask and waddled off—with pronounced indignation—to inflate his vanity elsewhere. He’d expected Bar-ché to be intimidated by his monastic authority – and his assumed title. He’d been entirely thrown by the fact that Bar-ché wasn’t impressed. He answered the Khenpo’s rudeness without ire – but also without fear. He’d spoken plainly and in perfect accordance with Vajrayana.

Bar-ché has had several such discussions in and around Kathmandu. The
discussions always seem to take this form and the discussions are always ended when Künzang Dorje Rinpoche is mentioned.[339] It’s sad to see that prejudice against the gö kar chang lo’i dé remains unabated – and that it has increased noticeably since the passing of Düd’jom Rinpoche. We hope that things will change when the two incarnations of Düd’jom Rinpoche rise to a point where they have the influence of their predecessor. The antagonism doesn’t originate in monks per se – but in a certain sector of the monastic hierarchy which isn’t exactly easy to identify. The antagonists are careful not to identify themselves too precisely and nothing is ever presented in documentary form. It is thus difficult to address the nature of the intolerance and prejudicial behaviour that we occasionally witness.

There are many excellent monks and nuns – who have no axe to grind and who have no sense of the gö kar chang lo’i dé as being unwelcome. The Nyingma nuns in particular always seem delighted to see our ngakmas – especially as some of our ngakmas are rather tall and ample.[340]

We receive feedback on how we are perceived in Bodha – and it has been interesting to observe the shift there. Lama Sonam told Bar-ché that we were viewed with some suspicion at first—as possibly crazy Westerners—but that our reputation has grown over the years. We are now seen as kind and courteous people – who take their practice seriously. Some questions had been asked of Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and he had let people know that we met with his entire approval. It’s sad in a way that we had to be checked in this way – but there’ve been a few too many mystical meschugganahs and psychopathic pietistic poseurs who’ve donned robes to make themselves look special.

It’s the same with monastic robes. We saw a group of Rolex-wristed Tibetan monks in the Hyatt Hotel one evening when we went to pay a call on someone who’d taken a room there. They were ‘business monks’ – and I was surprised that they had no sense of the impression they gave. Why would one renunciate—let alone five—wish to sport a Rolex? It was almost like the badge of their calling.

It was curious to be sneered at by such people – but I suppose I was making my own judgements … they could have been thoroughly decent fellows … Good luck to them, I say.

Bar-ché and Shardröl led several pilgrimages to Bodha and remained there for several months as parties of our students came and went. Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel got to see Nor’dzin and ’ö-Dzin, Rig’dzin, Bar-ché, and Shardröl – all with their own students. They were able to see their great-grandchildren in terms of the gö kar chang lo’i dé and Rinpoche said “You have kept your promise to Düd’jom Rinpoche—and to me—and now, everything is accomplished.”
There is no need to provide detail of every pilgrimage because they were similar in most respects. Unless one had been there on those pilgrimages, a detailed account would entail a great deal of repetition. To those who have met Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel these accounts would be fascinating in themselves – but they are too personal and specialised to convey beyond what is related here. There are many stories to tell—whimsical, humorous, hilarious, mysterious, poignant, and conventionally inexplicable. Khandro Déchen and I are likely to tell them, interwoven with what we teach. Each story has its time and place and each serves a purpose that arises in the moment.
entirely dressed in white

In December 2009, I went to Nepal with my son Robert – Düd’ðül Dorje. He went wearing robes – as he wished to begin to make a commitment in terms of Vajrayana Buddhism. Ræchel—Künzang Tsodrôn—was no longer an infant in arms – but too young for the adventure, so Khandro Déchen remained at home with her. Khandro Déchen’s elderly mother had some health problems – and that made the decision simpler – yet no easier.

As always, it was marvellous to see Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel again – but on this occasion he looked much older than before. My mind went back to seeing Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche for the last time and how he looked at that point – the shining transparent appearance. I wondered immediately if this would be that last time I was to spend time with Künzang Dorje Rinpoche.

Rinpoche was as happy as ever – especially to see the thirteen-year-old lad he’d named Düd’ðül Dorje. We had a series of joyful meetings. Bar-ché was there with us – as were Nor’dzin and ’ö-Dzin and their ordained students. We were a smaller group than usual – and this worked out well. Rinpoche gave me advice about the future. He also gave me remarkable artefacts and personal practice items. Although the Lama’s accoutrements were wonderful – they came from Rinpoche and they would have been wonderful whatever they had been.

That they’d been his put them beyond price – but they also carried a sense of foreboding. Rinpoche was giving things away and that seemed to mean something.

He gave Düd’ðül Dorje his name officially by writing it on his headed stationary – and asking us to photograph each stage of the event. It was clear that he wanted us to have a record of the occasion – and I wondered what it could betoken. I made no enquiry because the situation was too joyful and I didn’t want to detract from that experience for Düd’ðül Dorje.

One lunchtime, Rinpoche showed me a photograph that I’d given him several years earlier. It was a photograph that Johannes Frischknecht had sent me from Bhutan. The photograph showed an apparently albino Tibetan wearing an emerald green chuba – and Johannes gave it to me because he thought it might be Aro Yeshé. Rinpoche nodded intently and said “Aro Yeshé.” It was a strange moment. I was looking at a previous point in a continuum with my present moment experience at one end – and a sea of mystery at the other.

In the following summer Rinpoche’s being became increasingly rarefied. His health began to decline in August and it became clear that my last visit had
really been my last – and I would never see him again. Kyabjé Trülshik Rinpoche had performed rites of longevity – but Rinpoche was not thus to be detained.

Jomo Sam’phel Déchen was unable to find our email details amongst Rinpoche’s papers and so I was unable to go to see him at the end. I finally heard through Bar-ché—and Lopön Ögyen Ten’dzin—that Rinpoche had passed away. I would have gone immediately had I known – but as it was, the moment passed. I shouldn’t have gone to Nepal at that time of year anyway – due to my peculiar physical reaction to heat. Rinpoche might even have called me ’thom yor if I’d attempted it. It wasn’t so bad when I was young – but now it causes my blood pressure to rocket. Dr Trögyal advised me strongly not to go to Nepal other than during the winter – so Khandro Déchen and I contented ourselves with sending an emissary: Bar-ché.

Bar-ché—as ambassador for the Confederate Sanghas of Aro—wrote to us by email every day telling us every detail of what occurred and relayed our messages—in return—to Jomo Sam’phel. I shall quote from his emails rather than re-word what he had to say.

On Monday the sixth of September Jomo Sam’phel saw khandros arriving and departing throughout the day and night. “Whether my eyes were open or closed, I saw them” she said. “They came to Rinpoche’s side and touched him. Rinpoche told me that he was happy and enjoyed ’ö-sel. [341] He said that he would soon stop talking but his mind would remain clear.”

Rinpoche didn’t want to be attended by doctors as he was in full possession of his dying process. Early on the morning of Tuesday the seventh Rinpoche asked for a small glass of whiskey. He drank it and recited Padmasambhava mantra three times. Moments later his breathing ceased and he merged with space at the invitation of the khandros. Rinpoche had rested in meditation for the week prior to his passing – and knew exactly what was unfolding. Jomo Sam’phel said “Rinpoche had a beautiful expression on his face.” Reports arrived of rainbows at Tso Pema and the other places that Rinpoche had lived.

On the Saturday morning of the eleventh of September, Rinpoche’s ku-dung[342] was placed inside a box, decorated with the Vajrayana symbols. The five-lobed crown of the five Buddha-families was placed on his head and a dorje and drilbu were placed in his hands – crossed at his heart. Rinpoche’s ku-dung was placed on his throne in the shrine room. The funeral ceremonies then commenced and will continue for forty-nine days.[343] The Dorsem[344] rites were led by Tulkus Tsépag Rinpoche and Gyalsé Tulku Rinpoche, with the assistance of Rinpoche’s closest students.
A group of Lama Dawa Chhodak’s students were there – and he was represented by his Western consort Künzang Déchen Chödrön. We had some nice talks and I liked it that two gö kar chang lo sanghas could talk in such an easy friendly way.

Gyalsé Rinpoche was very nice and joined us for meals – where we all sat on the ground on cushions together. He made me feel very welcome and had a completely easy and relaxed presence. I remembered when Künzang Dorje Rinpoche introduced you both to Lama Dawa Chhodak and gave you both alcohol-curd to drink – saying how he wanted you to keep in touch with each other. That was so nice.

On Monday the thirteenth of September—as decided by Kyabjé Trülshik Rinpoche[345]—the Ku-dung zhug’bul[346] took place. An open-topped cremation chörten had been built on the roof of Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel’s apartment by Lama Damstig Dorje[347] – and it was he who led the cremation rites. The cremation services were presided over by Tsépak Rinpoche and Gyalsé Rinpoche and their retinue of Lamas and students.

Until this time it had been continuously raining in Kathmandu – but when the Ku-dung zhug’bul—cremation—began, the sky cleared completely. There were many amazing signs – like tashi da-ré[348] cloud formations, rainbow clouds, and all kinds of other sky phenomena. There was very little smoke from the Ku-dung zhug’bul and the cremation was completed very quickly. Jomo Sam’phel was entirely dressed in white—white shamthab and zèn[349]—with a white waistcoat just like Rinpoche used to wear. It was amazing to see her in this costume as I have never seen her dressed like this in public.

It really looked to me like she was the vajra master there – and presided over everything. Everyone deferred to her – which was really how it should be.

Jomo Sam’phel asked about you and about Düd’dül Dorje and Künzang Tsodrön. I told her what you wrote and she said that it made her very happy indeed to hear the news.

She told me how much Rinpoche had loved you. Then she took my hand and I had to help her up. It seemed she wanted to take me up to the roof. Some people wanted to help her up the stairs but she declined assistance as I think that she wanted to be private with me at Rinpoche’s cremation chörten. She held my hand and walked three times around it with many breaks where she looked into the sky. It was a beautiful sky and she pointed things out – so the three rounds took a long time. We both felt the chörten which was still hot. Then she made it clear that I could stay for a
while. So I sat there and sang ‘Flight of the Vulture’ for a while. The clouds started moving in extremely fast and dark. I sat a little longer – then went down to rejoin the others. Jomo Sam’phel gestured for me to sit next to her. I said out of the blue “I want to offer whiskey every day.” Jomo Sam’phel really liked that idea – so now I have every day an hour of private time where I offer whiskey and sing ‘Flight of the Vulture’.

Tsépak Rinpoche and Gyalsé Rinpoche said that there was no need to wait until the last week of the forty-nine days before the cremation chörten was opened. It was opened a week after the cremation due to the fact that Rinpoche was an enlightened being. They said that the forty-nine days of bardo thödröl practice was simply for the benefit of students – Rinpoche did not require it.

I wished that I could have been there – so Bar-ché’s daily letters were a great resource for Khandro Déchen and myself. I printed them out every day so that we could read the letter together each evening.

*I’m going to a funeral dressed in white / I’m going to a nightclub, to sleep with night / and I’m not going with you.*

Why the words of this song came up for me, is easier to tell than why I decided to quote it. The allusions are obvious—with regard to Jomo Sam’phel wearing white—but what’s not so obvious is the fact that I seem to see resonances everywhere.

I’ve never divided my life as an artist or Blues musician from my life as a practitioner or Lama. I see resonances in so many things. The song concerns feelings of sadness – and these abound in plenty at this time of writing. The sadness is not always present – but swells in waves.

When we received the news that Rinpoche had passed away, I was unable to speak or move for some time. I shan’t dwell on this – as it would be meaningless to anyone who doesn’t know me. Rinpoche was eighty-one years old and so his passing was not unexpected. One would always wish for another final meeting – but the only cure for that wish is immortality, for the person who has gone on to another life.

When I was re-united with Rinpoche in the autumn of 1995 he encouraged me to speak about our relationship. He also urged me to write about our time together in a way that people could understand. He said that I should write it as a story – so this is what I’ve done. He encouraged me to recount the style of teaching he gave me – and to use it for the benefit of the gö kar chang lo’i-dé in the West. Having lifted the injunction of secrecy that he placed upon me in 1981, I was free in 1995 to tell these stories as they were told to me in Tso Pema – with all their extraordinary twists and turns.
I began to commit the stories to writing in 1995 – but it proved difficult. I was not a story writer and I was not satisfied that I could do justice to the task. I was a Buddhist textbook writer and a Western poet – but neither style worked in terms of breathing life into my account. I shelved the idea for more than a decade.

I had to wait ’til I’d written my art school memoirs before I had sufficient experience of writing dialogue. I found the experience of writing narrative and dialogue for my art school memoirs, ideal in terms of presenting Rinpoche’s yogic tales.

He didn’t tell these stories to entertain—or even to educate me—but to facilitate experiential understanding. These stories functioned as methods of transmission – and the profound shock of each one has in no way diminished with the passing of years. The unfoldment of teaching tales is a vital ingredient of all religious traditions, so these stories have the necessary power to touch a wide range of people. Although a variety of these accounts will alienate a variety of people for a variety of reasons – they’ll also communicate in various ways that cannot be predicted.

This is the end of my story—and the end of a thirty-five-year relationship—and its conclusion leaves me with tears in my eyes.
Part V

the portal of potency: describing the indescribable
“Guru Rinpoche said ‘… the gö kar chang lo’i dé should base their practice on yeshé.[353] They should employ all that exists as practice – because the senses and fields of the senses are all means of nondual realisation.’ If we take alcohol—for example—if we drink alcohol with awareness, it increases access to yeshé. At the time of Guru Rinpoche in Tibet, many practitioners obtained the same realisation that the eighty-four mahasiddhas obtained in India.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

“In Golok and Amdo we use the word ‘ngakma’. Some ’thom yors say there is no word ‘ngakma’ simply because they have never heard it or never read the word. This is like saying that aeroplanes do not exist just because we have never seen one – or that buildings with a hundred floors do not exist because we have never been to New York.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

“The Mistress of Blazing Melody—’bar Za Lha-yang—pacified the perceptions of disciples without need of activity. Merely to see her was to have one’s confusion resolved and one’s relationships with others harmonised. This siddhi is wonderful. Such a khandro would be of great benefit for the many idiots in the world. When there are too many ’thom yors – there is too much suffering in the world. There is suffering anyway as long as there is ‘khorwa – but ’thom yors make this suffering worse and then it is difficult for people to find good circumstances to practise.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche
I’m now back in the spring of 1975 again – and … glad to be there, if only in my memory. Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche is of course alive and well—whenever I write of this period—so I am always happy to recount anything from this time.

I’d foraged around Tso Pema and found a place that had broad-ruled writing paper. I had a few pens and made sure that at least two of them functioned. Indian ballpoint pens are—or were—vaguely capricious. I wished I’d brought my fountain pen – then at least I could have made sure that writing was always possible.

Today was the day when Rinpoche was going to give me some detailed information. We’d done this before vis-à-vis the Dzogchen men-ngag-dé teachings – but then my little notebook had sufficed. Today was going to require more writing and I wondered what new marvel was going to be presented to me.

“Oh yah—good!” Rinpoche exclaimed as I entered. “Now there must be writing all day.”

I hauled out the writing pad and had my pen at the ready. Rinpoche began: “Today … I will tell you about the gö kar chang lo’i dé – and you must know everything. Too many people now, are ignorant of the gö kar chang lo’i dé and they speak foolish drivel. That will not do. You will go home and people will ask questions of you. People will also criticise – and speak badly. You must ignore this nonsense – and always tell people correctly about the gö kar chang lo’i dé.”

Gö means the lower garment or skirt. Kar means white – so, gö-kar means white shamthab. We wear the white shamthab—monastics wear red—but both are of the same design. The folding of the shamthab is different and with the gö kar chang lo there are various styles according to tradition. Ours has the pleat at the front and back which represents the indivisibility of emptiness and form. The six panels of the shamthab are the six classes of Tantra. The doubled bands at the top and bottom are the same taste of samsara and nirvana. The white cotton shamthab is uncontaminated by the stain of duality – as the lotus is uncontaminated by the effluvium of the swamp in which it grows. White is the colour of undyed cotton and it represents kadag – primal purity.

The word chang comes from gya-chang. Gya-chang were the weeping willows planted by princess Gya-za Kong-jo when she came from China to marry King Srong-tsen Gampo. So chang-lo therefore means ‘long
hair like a weeping willow’. Gö kar chang lo’i dé[356] therefore means the assembly of those who wear white raiment and have uncut hair.

“Oh yah” Rinpoche announced with some satisfaction “I think you have kept these hair vows since you were young …” [pause] “Is this true?”

“Yes … I stopped cutting my hair when I was about fifteen years old, Rinpoche” I replied with some amazement that he should know this about me “… but there was no vow … and … at that time I didn’t know about the vows. I only learnt that when I came to Nepal in 1971.”

Our topknots are the Buddha of the space element with consort.[357]
The phurbas in our waistbands are the Buddha of the air element with consort.[358]
Our ornaments are the Buddha of the fire element with consort.[359]
Our conch earrings are the Buddha of the water element with consort.[360] Conch earrings are also the outer symbol of hearing extraordinary instructions; the inner symbol of hearing all sound as mantra; the secret symbol of realising the nature of sound as unborn; the most secret symbol is the realisation of all sound as self-liberated potency.

Our silk sashes and golden copper amulets are the Buddha of the earth element with consort.[361]

“So … we become the Buddha families through our dress and through the practice of our lives …” [pause] “Then … gDang, rolpa, and rTsal[362] … in terms of Dzogchen … gDang is shining emptiness, rolpa is the clear and unimpeded play of energy, and rTsal is the radiance of energy which is pervasively compassionate as the purity of the phenomenal world.”

Unadorned hair symbolises gDang – the Lama manifesting as vast space. Adorned hair symbolises rolpa – the Lama manifesting as rolpa – realised display. Matted locks symbolise rTsal – the Lama manifesting within the sphere of realised manifestation.

The left-hand ring-finger bears the bell-emblazoned ring of wisdom. The right-hand ring-finger bears the vajra-emblazoned ring of compassion.

“The gö kar chang lo begins with the tantric vows. We hold these vows as ngakpas. Historically the gö kar chang lo’i dé began in India with the eighty-four mahasiddhas. There were two traditions in that time: those with partners[363] – and those without. Normally Tantra is practised with a partner – but it is also allowed without.”

In ancient India both systems were found. It was at this time that the gö kar chang lo’i dé started wearing hair on the top of their heads and the white
“Guru Rinpoche founded the gö kar chang lo’i dé in Tibet – although it actually had a small beginning with Srong-tsan Gampo. In that time, twenty-one texts of Chenrézigs were translated and introduced. Dharma was not spread in a complete way at that stage – but there were ngakpas then, even so. Then at the time of Trisong Dét sen, Dharma was spread in a vast way by Guru Rinpoche and Yeshé Tsogyel.”

Trisong Dét sen established the religious code laid down by Guru Rinpoche. The code concerned the appearance and comportment of the monastics and the gö kar chang lo’i dé.

“Concerning clothing …” Rinpoche said shaking his head “… only monastics should wear yellow … but now some ngakpas wear also yellow …” [pause] “This is not good. Yellow is the colour of the vinaya – the colour of monastic discipline …” [pause] “Of course … this special bright yellow became popular in Tibet because it’s the colour of the Chinese court. Only the emperor and the highest in the court are allowed to wear it – so Tibetan nobles started imitating that. Then of course religious dignitaries started wearing it rather than wearing the common yellow of Shakyamuni’s monks.

“Ngakpas—unlike monks and nuns—may wear all colours. They may even wear yellow in the gar’cham – or if they are giving an empowerment of Dzambhala – but otherwise it’s reserved for monastics.”

The gö kar chang lo’i dé—according to Guru Rinpoche’s advice to Trisong Dét sen—should wear white, red, and blue. They can also wear black and the five colours depending on their activity. The black robe is for the phurba master and it is usually worn with a green shirt.

Concerning food, monastics were only allowed to eat the three whites and the three sweets. They should not drink wine or eat meat.

The gö kar chang lo’i dé on the other hand were advised to drink wine and eat meat in order that their lives would be no different from the Tsog’hkhorlo. It was advised thus because in tantric practice you visualise yourself as the yidam; at that time you do not think dualistic thoughts about wine or meat or whatever. The gö kar chang lo’i dé could enjoy things considered as ‘impure’ within Sutra because the inner tantras transcended the pure-impure dichotomy. So they must relish the five objects of sensual pleasure and make it the path of bliss which brings them to yeshé.

Guru Rinpoche said ‘… the gö kar chang lo’i dé should base their practice on yeshé. They should employ all that exists as practice – because the senses and fields of the senses are all means of nondual realisation.’ If we drink alcohol—for example—with awareness, it increases access to yeshé. At the
time of Guru Rinpoche in Tibet, many practitioners obtained the same realisation that the eighty-four mahasiddhas obtained in India.

There were excellent practitioners at that time: King Trisong Détsen; the twenty-five siddhas of Chhimphu; the twenty-five female disciples; the one hundred eleven siddhas of Chu-wo ri; the eighty ngakpas of Yérwa; the fifty-five togdens of Yang-dzong; the thirty ngakpas of Shèldrak; and, the twenty-five ngakmas of Kha-chu. Of the hundreds of gTértöns, almost all were gö kar chang lo.

When Guru Rinpoche left Tibet, Yeshé Tsogyel continued establishing the gö kar chang lo. There were then thousands of female practitioners – thousands of ngakmas. Guru Rinpoche and Yeshé Tsogyel established the gö kar chang lo'i dé tradition, where the female practitioners and male practitioners practised together. We have the word ngakma as well as ngakpa.

“In Golok and Amdo we use the word ngakma. Some ’thom yors say there is no word ‘ngakma’ simply because they have never heard it or never read the word. This is like saying that aeroplanes do not exist just because we have never seen one – or that buildings with a hundred floors do not exist because they have never been to New York…” [pause] “Then … some other ’thom yors say ngakmas exist but that they should be called ‘ngakmo’.

“This is just stupidity – because there existed thousands of ngakmas in the time of Yeshé Tsogyel.”

Yeshé Tsogyel practised in the area of Sang-chö La, and also in Amdo, where thousands of ngakpas and ngakmas gathered. These days there are fewer practitioners than before – but still the tradition was handed down to the present day. The two divisions of the ordained sangha renowned in Tibet during the time of the Khen-lob-chö-sum were the monastics with shaven heads and saffron robes;[366] and the sangha of white shamthabs and long plaited hair – the gö kar chang lo’i dé. Both sanghas had equal sovereignty. This was clearly specified during the reign of Trisong Détsen.

“King Tri Ralpachen—who ruled after Guru Rinpoche left Tibet—was a great king who respected both sanghas. To show this—and to show that both were more important than himself—he laid out his long hair across the place where the monastics and gö kar chang lo’i dé sat. He then tied silk ribbons to the end of his hair in order to extend his hair along the entire seating area of all the ordained practitioners. He placed the monastics on his right side and the gö kar chang lo’i dé on his left.

“This is clearly stated in reliable histories of the Tibetan monarchies – so it is widely known and indisputable. Let no one say there is no gö kar chang lo’i dé as an authentic ordained sangha. One day I will write this in Tibetan so that Tibetans cannot be ignorant of their history.[369]
“Guru Rinpoche established these sanghas himself in Tibet, Bhutan, and many areas over the Himalayas – so there is no reason to lack confidence that the gö kar chang lo’i dé are Guru Rinpoche’s ordained tantric sangha.

“In Tibet—in the upper and lower regions of Kham[370]—those ngakpas are known as A-mé. In Ngari, the far-western region of Tibet, they are known as Jopa,[371] and in the Ü-tsang region they are called Ngak’chang.[372] In Bhutan, Sikkim, and other bordering kingdoms, these practitioners are known as Ser-khyimpas.[373]

“In the Tibetan histories, four Jopas are described who, in service to Dharma Kings of Töd Gugé and Gungthang,[374] reversed harmful forces causing illness. Similarly, for the Dharma Kings of Nangchen and Dé-ge,[375] there were four A-més in the low part of the valley. The four A-més were renowned for dispelling illness.[376] In Central Tibet, at the time of Drogön Chögyal Phakpa,[377] there were four great ngakpas in the four directions of Drogön Tsang.”[378]

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of ngakpa. There are those of family lineage and those without family lineage. Family lineages are connected father and son lineages passed down through generations.

At this time the main family lineages are these: In the Nyingma Tradition there is Kyabjé Minling Trichen Rinpoche.[379] In the Sakya School there is Sakya Tri’dzin Rinpoche.[380]

They are called Family Lineage Ngakpas Who Hold Succession. There are many others who hold family lineage—especially within the Nyingma Tradition—but Minling Trichen Rinpoche and Sakya Tri’dzin Rinpoche are the most important.

Ngakpas without family lineage exist in both the Nyingma and Sarma traditions. It is not necessary however, to have ngakpa family lineage – because anyone who received the gö kar chang lo vows can enter the kyil’khor of whatever yidam through receiving the wang, rLung, and tri from their Tsawa’i Lama. It is then only necessary to demonstrate the accomplishment of practice.[381]

There is a custom of describing the gö kar chang lo’i dé as white, multicoloured or black. “Those who primarily practise Dzogchen are of the white category. They are those whose entire lives are indistinguishable from practice. Whatever they do is practice – so we are of this category …”

[pause] “Those who primarily practise anuyoga and inner mahayoga are of the multicoloured category. They are those who have accomplished practice in retreat but then devote their lives to retreat and the performance of drüphab.”
“Those who primarily learn the outer rituals of mahayoga are of the black category. They are those who make amulets, perform exorcism, make predictions, look into mirrors for divination, and prevent hailstorms for the benefit of farmers. Black ngakpas are sometimes known as ‘village ngakpas’ – but, just because a ngakpa is poor and lives in a village, does not make him a village ngakpa. In any case there are many monastics whose work it is to be administrators, accountants, bursars, traders, policemen, cooks, cleaners, and so forth.

They all wear monastic robes – but they may not be any more practitioners than the average lay person. Some lay people are more devout than people who wear monastic robes. There is therefore no reason to speak ill of village ngakpas – as if there were no equivalent within the monastic system.”

In Tibet, there were only three ngakpa dratsangs that were highly exalted. They were situated in Amdo, Chakri Phurdrak, and Shangzab Phuling.[382] In Amdo there was Repkong[383] – and there, the ngakpas either left their hair long-flowing or allowed it to become matted. They wore the multicoloured zên. At Chakri Phurdrak where there is a self-arising letter ‘A’ on a rock cliff, the clothing of the ngakpas was the same. In Shangzab Phuling – on the border of Ü and Tsang[384] were zabphu (zab phu) ngakpas.[385] They had long, free-flowing hair, the multicoloured zên and the nambu karpo.[386]

“In Tibet, there were so many small ngakpa dratsangs that I can’t really list them all – and there would be no purpose even in the long list that I could make if we had time. This is just for you to know—and tell other people—that the gö kar chang lo’i dé was widespread in Tibet and that it has a rich and powerful history.

“Finally I should say that it is perfectly proper—in terms of the gö kar chang lo’i dé—to be a father or mother with children and a home – but cutting hair through fear of what people will say is vow breakage. You should never be ashamed or fearful about wearing the robes for which you hold vows. There are bigoted ’thom yors, of course, who will say all kinds of nonsense.”
sky dancers

It was March 1975 and a faint drizzle was descending just outside the window … Rinpoche took a sip of beer as he eyed me wafting some cool air into the armhole of my waistcoat.

“Oh yah – you have much fire element! Maybe too much thinking of khandros!” Rinpoche laughed. We’d previously been discussing the female disciples of Padmasambhava and Rinpoche always spoke of them as khandros[387] – ladies who travel in space.

“Oh yah … but not all. Many are forgotten now …” [pause] “Khandro Chenmo Yeshé Tsogyel[388] was the disciple who not only received every transmission and teaching Padmasambhava gave – but mastered everything without exception”…

… Yeshé Tsogyel became the living embodiment of Guru Rinpoche’s lineage in Tibet. Through her siddhis she could bring the dead back to life. Her memory was unfailing – and it was she who transcribed every word of teaching which Guru Rinpoche uttered and codified them into khandro-cypher to be discovered as gTérmas in future generations.

After Guru Rinpoche’s departure from Tibet, she encoded further gTérmas, both as texts and as Mind-transmissions. Together with Nubchen Sang-gyé Yeshé she transcribed many more volumes of Guru Rinpoche’s teaching. She spent the rest of her life wandering throughout Tibet teaching many thousands of gö kar chang lo disciples. Yeshé Tsogyel has taken many incarnations in Tibet – within the Nyingma lineages and within the lineages of the Kagyüd and Sakya. Yeshé Tsogyel was the living embodiment of every manifestation of Yangchen-ma.[389]

Rinpoche took a sip of beer and smiled. “Then … Mandarava[390] … she was born in Zahor, and passed through the cremation fire with Guru Rinpoche. She gained the siddhi of longevity and wandered throughout the Himalayan regions giving transmission and instruction into the practice of the Vajrayana. Unlike Yeshé Tsogyel, she manifested ‘secret activity’ and so little is known of her accomplishments in terms of her effectiveness in the world …” [pause] “Yah … then … Tashi Chhi’drèn[391] born in the region of Mön, on the Nepalese border at a place called Mön Tsa’og.”

Tashi Chhi’drèn had spontaneous visions and memories of previous lives. She was first given empowerment and transmission by Yeshé Tsogyel, who then brought her to Guru Rinpoche. He took her as one of his major consorts.
in the practice of the Buddha-karma of destruction. When Guru Rinpoche manifested as Dorje Tröllö[392] it was Tashi Chhi’drèn who manifested as the tiger.

Rinpoche sat for some moments gazing into space “Kala Drüpchen[393] … now … her parents were weavers – and she was taught Vajrayana from an early age through the analogy of weaving”…

… Tantra is connected with the idea of weaving and the loom of lucency. The image concerns the warp of form and the weft of emptiness.

When both her parents died, she was taken with them to a cemetery where they were left. She was found by Mandarava who had manifested as a tiger. The tiger cared for Kala Drüpchen, gave her instruction, and later brought her to Guru Rinpoche who gave her transmission. She assisted Yeshé Tsogyel in the concealment of gTérmas and at the end of her life took rainbow body. [394]

“You wish to hear all?” Rinpoche asked.

“Yes, Rinpoche—if you don’t mind—I find this quite important because there is little information about women in Vajrayana and women would be happy to know this information.”

“Oh yah … then I must remember … next … comes Shakya Lhamo.”[395]…

… She was the daughter of the Queen of Nepal. The Queen died in childbirth, and Shakya Lhamo was also abandoned at the cemetery where she was fed and cared for by animals. She was discovered there by Guru Rinpoche, who took her as one of his major consorts and gave her all necessary teachings and transmissions. At the end of her life she manifested rainbow body.

“Oh yah! Then … comes a most important khandro! Mélong Za Rinchen Tso.”[396] Rinpoche fixed me with a knowing expression and his eyes seemed to grow larger and wider.

“If you meet the incarnation of this khandro then you will live very long and be happy. She was the Mistress of the Jewel-Mirror Lake. She hung her white robes on the rays of the sun and danced naked in the mountains – never to wear clothes again other than coloured light.”

“Rinpoche … you said ‘If I meet her’ …?” [pause] “How would I meet her? How would that be possible?”

Rinpoche laughed “Same way you meet me …” [pause] “Meeting is always possible. There are many incarnations of these khandros. If your practice is good then … you may meet her. This would be very good for you …” [pause] “… anyway … just continue. Simply practise as we have practised together
… and keep your good mind. Don’t be involved with ’thom yors – and you will have good circumstances.”

There was not much I could say about that. I was itching to ask ‘how, when, why, where …?’ but I realised that Rinpoche was not going to be specific. This was obviously something that he knew – but not in the way that things are normally known. Something had just appeared in his mind and he’d spoken of it directly. If I pushed for anything specific, it would ruin the atmosphere that had evolved. I always had to be sensitive to that. There’s always the tendency to make everything concrete and if a person’s too persistent – then they cease to hear such statements. Of course this sometimes leads to enduring mystery – but I have always relied on Rinpoche to give me information when he assessed the time as being conducive.

Rinpoche poured a glass of beer for both of us. “Yah … then Tshan-ma Za Dorje Tso[397] – Mistress of the Hot Vajra Lake realised the siddhi of gTummo and could cause the lake in which she bathed to give rise to steam as if it were a thermal spring.” Rinpoche looked at me and chuckled at this point. “Maybe you can do this without gTummo.” Rinpoche was accustomed to the fact that I couldn’t tolerate heat very well and seemed to suffer no ill effects from drinking cold water. He often teased me about having some form of naturally arisen gTummo because I was too hot most of the time. “Maybe you will have to sit in the lake and make steam!” he laughed.

“Now that would be entertaining for the local people – but I don’t think my heat would last that long at this time of year.”

Rinpoche chuckled and shook his head. “Yah … possible. Anyhow Mélong Za Rinchen Tso … at the end of her life she attained rainbow body …” [pause] “You have practised gTummo?”

“I began, Rinpoche … but I don’t have the legs for it. My legs are too short for lotus posture. I tried quite hard to perform the exercises – but only succeeded in hurting my ankles …” [pause] “Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche said I should practise ’phowa instead.”

Rinpoche nodded. “Yah … I can see this …” [pause] “This will be good for Dzogchen men-ngag-dé – you will need to shout the Phat!” Rinpoche shouted a sudden ‘Phat!’ and I felt myself splatter across the room. I didn’t jump as I had done on many previous occasions. I probably flinched as my autonomic nervous system reacted involuntarily – but the effect was still violent. I sat there as my self of reality reassembled – as if disassembled particles of ‘me’ slowly came back into focus as something self-recognisable as ‘the person sitting in front of his Lama’. Rinpoche grinned at me and continued his account as if nothing had happened. “Then … Tshom-bu Za Pema Tso[398] – Mistress of the Kyil’khor-clustered Lotus Lake,
accomplished such mastery of her rTsa rLung that she was able to materially manifest the body of her yidam.\[399\] And then … Tshé-nam Za Sang-gyé Tso[400] – Life-sky Mistress of the Indestructible Lake, attained rainbow body. It was said of her that after abandoning both physical clothing and the clothing of delusion she entered into the naked expanse of being in which, whether she swam like a fish in water or flew like a bird in the sky was incidental – both elements were her natural home."

Rinpoche peered out of the window into the night. “It has become dark …” [pause] “Another day has gone … but still … we have some days together …” [pause] “There are various Lamas who have manifested this appearance of the yidam – but mainly this happens during empowerments.

“Düd’jom Lingpa was always able to do this and so too, Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche and his son Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche. This I have seen …” [pause] “Yah … and so … then there is Shèl-kar Za Dorje Tso[401] … She was able to walk on water as if it were solid ground …” [pause] “This siddhi I have seen in Tibet. There was one khandro called A’dzin Namkha in Golok who manifested this siddhi. I saw her once – but she was far away and she had reached the shore before I came close – but others were closer and they had seen her out on the water …” [pause] “I never saw her again because she was not pleased to meet too many people. She was a great master and practised mainly Dzogchen long-dé …” [pause] “Anyway … Shèl-kar Za Dorje Tso had such devotion to Guru Rinpoche that it was as if she were a river plant moved by currents of water according to the suggestion of Guru Rinpoche. Through her devotion she realised all siddhis and attained rainbow body.”

Then Rü thog Za Thönrüpma[402] – Mistress of the Thunderbolt Clan. She subdued the protectors by her mere gaze. And Shubu Za Sherpa-ma[403] had perfect insight into every text and commentary without the need of study. She gave transmission of everything within the nine yanas.

“Yah …” Rinpoche smiled after dinner had been cleared away “Yah … next is ‘ö-ché Za Kar-Gyelmo[404] – Mistress of Primordial Starlight.”

“That’s a remarkable name, Rinpoche” I exclaimed.

“Oh yah – she was remarkable for referring all her questions concerning the teachings to her yidam and receiving answers to everything without need of other teachings.”

“Which yidam did she practise?”

“It is not recorded. With most of these disciples very little is known …” [pause] “This is because there was much persecution of the gö kar chang lo’i dé in the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet. The new monastic powers at
the beginning were antagonistic to the Nyingma lineages which had continued from the time of Guru Rinpoche. They outlawed some tantras and made it punishable by death to translate them. So … much was lost. And now … after the Chinese invasion, many Tibetan texts are no longer available. Maybe some can be found – but it will now be difficult to find them.”

“Maybe later in my life … I can try to find some of these texts – if the situation in Tibet ever changes.”

“Yah … good … maybe—maybe not—but anyway, if possible – then please try …” [pause] “And so … Yamdrok Za Chökyi Drölma, Liberated Mistress of the Turquoise Lake,[405] gave teachings to all beings and whenever she spoke her words were greeted with joy from every aspect of existence. Then … ’dzem-ma Za Lhamo[406] – The Divine Blushing Mistress.”

“Blushing, Rinpoche?”

“Oh yah – blushing. This means the mixing of the red and white thig-lés – you know this, I think?”

“The pink complexion which is the sign of integrating the male and female aspects of one’s being?”

Rinpoche nodded and proceeded. “Oh yah … She took her sustenance in the way of food and wine directly from the nature of the sky.”

“Is that like chu-len,[407] Rinpoche?”

Rinpoche shook his head. “No, this is fruitional – this is the result, not the practice. With chu-len one still drinks water.”

“Is this something that I should practise, Rinpoche?”

“Maybe … not so necessary for you …” [pause] “I have practised the three chu-len – but only because these practices are valuable for retreat where there is no provision. I think you will always have provision …” [pause] “Maybe you could practise the longku chu-len – as that would be valuable for vision. I will give you the rilbus[408] for the longku chu-len – and then … maybe in some years … you can try this. You will know when that will be. There are three forms of chu-len. The first is the trülku chu-len – when you eat only rice and eat less everyday until you only eat one grain. The second is the longku chu-len – when you have three rilbus a day. The third is the chöku chu-len – when you only suck a stone. In all you can drink water – and the time of the retreat is three weeks …” [pause] “Yah … I think if you practise chu-len at all – you should practise the longku chu-len.”[409]

Rinpoche and I sat in silence for some time after he concluded his instruction of chu-len. This often occurred after he imparted some specific instruction. He never told me why we sat in silence and I never asked – but it made sense
to me in terms of transmission. I’d been given an important teaching and I
needed to sit with what I’d been given.

“Then …” Rinpoche resumed “… ‘bar Za Lha-yang[410] – Mistress of
Blazing Melody. She pacified the perceptions of disciples without need of
activity. Merely to see her was to have one’s confusion resolved and one’s
relationships with others harmonised …” [pause] “This siddhi is wonderful.
Such a khandro would be of great benefit for the many idiots in the world …”
[pause] “When there are too many idiots – there is too much suffering in the
world. There is suffering anyway as long as there is ‘khorwa – but ‘thom yors
make this suffering worse and then it is difficult for people to find good
circumstances to practise.”

Cha-rog Za Changchubma[411]—Compassionate Mistress of Ravens—
through the Dzogchen men-ngag-dé practice of integrating with moving
elements gained the siddhi of transforming her physical body into the moving
elements: wind, fire, or water, in order to benefit her disciples.

“Ha ha!” Rinpoche exclaimed rather loudly. I’d not heard him raise his voice
for quite a while and so the hair on the nape of my neck prickled with it.

“Aro Za Druk-tsal Shèldrakma[412] … this means … she who knows the
taste of the primordial ‘A’. She has radiance like the Dragon. She was the
Mistress of the Crystal Crags …” [pause] “This one … I will speak of later …
maybe now is not the best time to speak of Aro Za Druk-tsal
Shèldrakma[413] … she had the siddhi of commanding thunder in the sky.
She was able to experience her mind as identical with the sky and what arose
in her mind manifested in the clouds for all to see.”

Drom Za Pema-sèl[414]—the Lotus Light Mistress of the Drom Clan—had
the siddhi of flight. She was a daughter of the Prince of the Drom clan. She
died at the age of sixteen, and her parents were so stricken with grief that
Padmasambhava took her to Chhimphu, where he brought her back to life by
writing the letter Hri in red vermilion on each breast. He then gave her
transmission into Men-ngag Khandro Nying-thig[415] and authenticated her
as a future gTértön. He concealed the treasure within her Mind-stream and
she later revealed this gTérma in her incarnation as Pema Le’drél-tsal.

Rong Za Siddhi[416]—Mistress of Siddhis—could live on stones as
nourishment.

Trum Za Shel ma[417]—Mistress of Crystal—arranged flowers in the sky
and inspired visions to arise within other practitioners.

Khu Za Peltsun[418]—Mistress of Glorious Wrath—could make her phurba
vibrate merely by resting her attention on its outer form.

“Oh yah … now …” Rinpoche yawned “I am tired …” He shook his head
with a grin. “Too many khandros!” he laughed “You are young – so it is not a problem for you. Maybe you will dream now of khandros – so it is time to sleep.”
In 1975, I asked Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche if he would ever consider writing a namthar—an account of his life and liberation. “Yah…” he replied “…possible – but … maybe no purpose.” Rinpoche said he’d think about it.

In 1995, I asked again. “Oh yah … now possible!” [pause] “You made this request—I remember—in Tso Pema … and—you—still remember. Maybe—you—also write something one day.”

That was a slight shock. “I would like to write about our time together and re-tell the stories you told me.”

Rinpoche laughed. “Oh yah—that—you—must—tell …” [pause] “This will be of value to Western people …” [pause] “How well do you remember?”

That was easy to answer. “It was as if it were yesterday, Rinpoche. My memory for some things is fairly average – but my time with you remains vivid. I can still remember many of the words you used – especially the word ’thom yor.”


Somehow I was back in Tso Pema again with an unanswerable question – or rather, with an answer that added up to a book.

Fortunately—although I probably still had crevices where the propensity to be a ’thom yor lurked – I knew I could be humorous with him. “I think I stayed, Rinpoche – because you liked my aristocratic tulku’s dark maroon to-nga so much.”

Rinpoche slapped his thighs laughing at the mention of that to-nga. “Oh yah! Where is that to-nga now?”

“I don’t know where it will be now, Rinpoche – but I gave it to Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche when I left Tso Pema that first time.”

Rinpoche smiled “Yah—good—good—good! Yeshé Dorje passed away and your to-nga passes away, too …” [pause] “He has one incarnation now.” [pause] “Maybe your to-nga has new incarnation, too!”

We both rocked back and forth with laughter – and eventually I answered Rinpoche’s previous question. “I stayed, Rinpoche …because I knew you were my Tsawa’i Lama …” [pause] “You showed me the nature of Mind …” [pause] “… you showed me so many things. You helped me to see principle
and function in everything – and without that … I’d have nothing to teach to anyone anywhere …” [pause] “Now I think I can be of use to people. Before that I was no use to anyone – not even myself.”

Rinpoche wrote the text I requested – and I present it here as a testimony to the extraordinary life of this most extraordinary Lama. I was touched that he mentioned my name at the end of the text— as having been the one who requested it to be written—because I’m sure that many others must also have made the same request. He names me as ‘Aro Tulku Chögyam’ because he knew me to be the incarnation of Aro Yeshé – the son of Khyungchen Aro Lingma, the female gTértön who revealed the Aro gTér.

This short autobiography gives details of his family lineage, the Lamas with whom he studied, the places he resided, and practices in which he engaged. It may not prove easy reading – but it provides a glimpse into the world to which I still had access from the ’70s through the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. That world has gone now – and, although the Tradition remains, the unique ambience of an ancient culture entering the modern world has passed away.
Namthar of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

My father’s ancestral lineage was Horsog Déma. My family clan is the Jya-rig Tse’phel Chawo – the Bird Tribe, which is descended from the lineage of Cha-rig A-sé’i. The Bird Tribe inhabited Sangzhung Magyo Gaden in the province of Nagchu Dzong. Magyo Gaden was the province where the powerful Mi-nak Tobchen lived. He was the chieftain of Lhothri Dé-gu – and he was known as ‘King of Tigers and Leopards’. During the time when Mon and Ling were at war, Mi-nak Tobchen manifested as Pawo Kulhathok in order to help his people.

After his victory in battle, the enemy of Mi-nak Tobchen’s tribe boasted “I am the Protector Dorje Bérnakchen[420] of Druga province!” On hearing of this, Mi-nak Tobchen—in the guise of Kulhathok—rode forth to vanquish him. In this Mi-nak Tobchen depended solely upon the prophecy of his yidam and Lama. He dispensed with all conventional weaponry and protection – and girded himself with neither sword, armour, nor helmet. Mi-nak Tobchen was transformed into Pawo Kulhathok by the protector Nyènchen Thanglha[421] – and Kulhathok arose wearing the black hat and triangular-sleeved gown of Dorje Bérnakchen, carrying a meteorite iron phurba in his belt sash.

In the southern continent of Dzambu Ling[422] there were the four powerfully athletic male heroes[423] – and also Nyènchen Thanglha from Dru-dag province. I am of the lineage of Mi-nak Tobchen who manifested as Pawo Kulhathok in order to help his people.

In the Iron Horse year of the sixteenth Rabjung,[424] before dawn on the twenty-fifth day of the fifth month – I was born as a son to my mother Dung’dok and my father A-Dok. One month after my birth, Dzigar Potrül Rinpoche arrived in our village. He was asked to give me a name. Dzigar Potrül Rinpoche was happy with this request and said “This boy is the incarnation of Charong Drüpchen” and named me Künzang Dorje. Dzigar Potrül Rinpoche said “I have named thirteen children ‘Dorje’ and, of these thirteen, Künzang Dorje is the foremost.”

When I was engaged in play as a five-year-old, I saw a blue goat the size of a mountain. It was a terrifying spectacle. I called to my mother—who came immediately to my side—but when she came, the goat was no longer visible. Later, some Lamas informed her “This is the goat that Damchan Dorje Legpa[425] rides.”

When I was seven years of age, I saw a beautiful girl wearing a dress completely ornamented with turquoise and coral. In her right hand she brandished a gri-gug. In her left hand she held a skull bowl. She also carried a lasso. I told my mother and father of this and they told a Lama – who said
“This was Palden Lhamo.”[426]

When I was nine years old, I saw a red man the size of a mountain. He was stepping from one mountain peak to another. I told my mother and relatives. When asked, the Lama told us “That is the Protector Zangs Ri-tên Dam Rolpa Kyadun.”

When I was fifteen years old, I went to the major teaching centre of Gomang to begin my studies. I resided for seven years in the presence of Ngawang Palden and Gendun Yeshé, with whom I studied logic and philosophy. After that, I received the ‘Four Mind Turnings’ teachings from the supreme Drigung Bu-lob Balog Tulku Rinpoche.

I requested oral transmission from the supreme Drigung Khandro Chöden Zangmo – and whilst in her presence, I received many teachings and advice. At that time I also received many teachings from Tö-long Ding-ka Tulku Rinpoche.

From there, I went to Tö-long Tsurphu where I requested teachings from the sixteenth Gyalwa Karmapa, the supreme Rigpa’i Dorje. Whilst at Tö-long Tsurphu I also received many teachings from Khandro Ögyen Tsomo – the consort of the fifteenth Karmapa, Kha’khyab Dorje. I then requested—and was granted—the empowerment and transmission of the Phung Po Zankyur Gyi-dampa gCôd from Chi’gang Tshampa, a disciple of the fifteenth Karmapa who stayed in life-long retreat.

From there I went to Lhasa to visit Khyungpo Gyatön Tulku, from whom I requested the empowerment and transmission of the ‘ja’tshon Kön-chi’i – ‘The Essence of the Three Jewels of the Rainbow Body’. [427]

At Shugsèp, I requested the empowerment and transmission of gCôd from Drüpcchen Dawa Dorje. From Jetsün Chungwa Thrin-lé Chödrön, I requested the Nam’gyür of Milarépa and the Empowerment of the Wish-fulfilling Wheel of the White Liberating Lady. I received many teachings from Lodrag Namkha’i Nyingpo Senior.

In Lhodrang, at Banpa Samdrüp Gompa, at the abode of Drüpchen Cha-tshang I requested the empowerment and transmission of the ‘ja’tshon Kön-chi’i from Lopön rDo rJe Rig’dzin.

From there I went to Bhutan where I received many teachings from the Dzogchen Khenpo Ngawang Norbu’s student Kha’ ’gyur Rinpoche, and also from Shakya Shri’s student Lopön Rig-nga.

On the borders of Central Tibet, at Jomo Gang-gar Lung, I received many teachings from Dza-go Tshampa Rinpoche.

In Golok, I received the Longchen Nying-thig teachings from Lama Chatral
Changchub Dorje.

At ‘u-Yug Ling, in the province of Kardzong Dzara, I received the 'ja’tshon Kön-chi’i from Shakya Shri’s son A’pho Tséwang Rinpoche. At Kyidrong, also I received the 'ja’tshon Kön-chi’i from Lopön Rig’dzin Rinpoche in his remote retreat place.

In the area of Shang Tö, in the district of Lha-bu Dzong, I received the Lha Tsun Chö-kor teachings from Karma Ngawang Rinpoche, the great meditator of Jambu Lung.

I then went to East Khumbu where I received the Minling cycle of teachings from Trülshik Ngawang Do-ngak Chökyi Lodrö Rinpoche. In East Khumbu, I received the Chang gTér Dorje Phagmo Zab-gya empowerment and instructions from Lhagpa Rinpoche, the Lama of Kyarog Gompa.

From there I went to Tso Pema, where I received the Nyingma Gyüd’bum and other teachings from the supreme Ga’wang, Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche – Jig’drèl Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. Whilst in Tso Pema, I went to the retreat place of the Repkong Lama, Shérab Dorje Rinpoche. There I received teachings from him as well as from Dzigar Wangdor Rinpoche.

I received many teachings from the tulku of Taklung Matrül Rinpoche.

At Tsib-ri, I received teachings from Seng-drag Tulku.

At Ngédön Ga’shal Ling I received the complete empowerment and transmission of the Rinchen gTérdzöd from Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche.

In Sikkim, at Né-nang Drak-kar Tri-ling, I received the Rinchen gTérdzöd from DoDrüpchen Rinpoche – and from Gönchang Tulku Rinpoche I also received many teachings.

I received transmission and instructions on the Lhatsun drüphthab cycle from Kyabjé Chatral Sang-gyé Dorje Rinpoche.

I received both the Chenrézigs empowerment according to the Sakya tradition, and the empowerment, oral transmission and instruction of Thangtong rGyal Po from Sakya Tri’dzin – the Drölma Phodrang Rinpoche.

At Kapung Zangdok Palri Gompa in Kalimpong I received the gTérma cycles of both Düd’jom Lingpa and Düd’jom Jig’drèl Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche from the new incarnation of ’Jamyang Khyentsé. I received teachings from the Bhutanese master Longdröl Rinpoche, and the supreme Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche.

In this way, without discriminating, I received the maturing empowerments,
the liberating instructions and the reinforcing transmissions at the feet of the great masters. I was filled to overflowing with their inconceivable kindness.

I put their methods into practice as follows: the common outer and inner preparations; the development stage of mahayoga; the activities of approach and accomplishment of the Three Roots; the five supplementary gTummo practice cycles of anuyoga Dzog-rim which function through rTsa, rLung, and thig-lé; the ’Khor’dé Rushan Dzogchen atiyoga cycle of practice; the Primordial Trèkchod and the spontaneously arisen Togal practices from Dzogchen sem-dé, Dzogchen long-dé, and Dzogchen men-ngag-dé.

I have practised in Tibet, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sikkim – in all the places where the mahasiddhas in India and Tibet lived or visited. I have practised in the Hidden Lands blessed by Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel. I have practised in snow retreats, rocky caves, charnel grounds, and lake-islands. In all those places I have endured heat and cold. In order to make connections I have resided wherever Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel stayed. In these places I have completed year-long, month-long, and week-long retreats.

Knowing of my life, my Dharma friends requested the history of my life and liberation. Furthermore, my English friend Chögyam—the Aro Tulku—(Ngak ’chang Chos dByings rGya mTsho) sincerely requested an account of my life and the Lamas with whom I have taken refuge. He asked me to describe the places I lived and practices in which I engaged. At his request I composed this brief history in the seventeenth Rabjung, the Fire Rat Year[432] in Nepal, written on computer whilst living at Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong near Yang-lé-shöd.
Amideva is the lord of the pureland of always flawless ecstasy. The light of his compassion emanates to the heart of the lotus bud beings with merit. May the self-occurring second Buddha, Padmakara,[433] who is renowned in the universe, protect you.

Never affected by the faults of samsara or the qualities of nirvana, there is not even an atom of happiness or suffering. Ever-abiding in evenness, it is always called noble Samantabhadra.[434] Self-elements do not exist. Not even one particle of substance is formed, so it is called ‘always-indestructible vajra’, the nature of the great empty stainless sky of Dharmakaya. From that state my Tsawa’i Lamas manifest. I bow to you.

The three deities of Tibet—Padmasambhava, Shantarakshita, and King Trisong Détsen—assembled in the glorious inconceivable qualities of Sam-yé. In order for the Sutra and Mantrayana teachings of Buddha’s tradition to flourish in Tibet, they established the two categories of those with red robes and those with white clothes and long plaited hair.[435]

There is the long path of the Sutra tradition and the short path of the Vajrayana tradition. From the Vajrayana tradition, there are the three special sections of the mahayoga, anuyoga, and atiyoga. Those who predominantly practise these three yogas are of the category of those who wear white clothes and keep long plaited hair.[436]

Practising the tradition of those who wear white clothes and keep long plaited hair, holding this lineage from inspiration, may the lotus feet of the Tsawa’i Lama Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche be unshakeably firm.

Relying on practice with signs of the channels, airs, and the thig-lé of the visualisation and completion stages; carrying the three kayas into the path so they become obviously apparent in self-phenomena; and ‘the completion stage without signs’, in the stainless awareness of beginninglessness, flawless great emptiness and its display of simultaneous light phenomena of Buddhas – may you turn the wheel of this teaching.
From that fully accomplished quality of the four stages, the existence of the universe of samsara, and the pure enlightened phenomena of Buddhas, becomes evenly pure – which is the state of Samantabhadra. In one life and one human body, may I have the power to attain the teaching of Mahasandhi.

The display of the five wisdoms, the five great elements of space, the quality of display – from that quality, the immeasurable five wisdom dakinis appear. The principal wisdom queen of the innumerable mandalas of wisdom dakinis and supreme consort of Padmasambhava, called Jomo Yeshé Tsogyel – I bow to you.

The one who has unshakeable faith in you, and is practising you – who is your follower and serving Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche from the activities of the three rejoicings like a wishfulfilling jewel – consort of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche, Jomo Sam’phel – may you live long.

Whatever you wish for the benefit of the teachings of the Buddhas and for sentient beings – whatever you do, may it be accomplished. And may all beings be sustained in the phenomena of pure Dharma.

Colophon

Thus, the world of the five great continents melodiously resounds. Residing in the Western continent of Europe, an honourable, holy hero Chöying Gyamtso and his consort, holy heroine Khandro Déchen—who have unshakeable, reasonable faith in the general teachings of the Buddhas and especially the priceless teachings of the Vajrayana and their lineage holders—are fearlessly shooting the cannonball of logic with great compassion in order to annihilate, and put on the correct path of enlightenment all those wild beings who are misunderstanding—with a reverse point of view and with intention—the teachings of the Buddhas and lineage holders of the teachings of the Buddhas. From their request through the path of letters, I, Thinley Norbu, immediately wrote this in front of dakas and dakinis.
Glossary of Tibetan terms

a-dzi (a dzi) means something like ‘argh’.
ajo uncle.
A-mé Venerable Ancient (form of address).
amji doctor.
bara baresh the great rains.
bhaga’i kyil’khor (bha ga’i dKyil ’khor) also sang-né (gSang gNas) secret cortex.
bu-ré (bu ras) spider-silk, made in Bhutan. The word literally means Bhutanese cotton.
bum one hundred thousand – pronounced to rhyme with book.
chal (phyal) also dro-khog chenmo (grod khog chen mo) rotund belly.
chang Tibetan barley beer.
changchub sem (byang chub sems, Skt. bodhicitta) awakened heart-mind of empathetic-appreciation; active compassion.
changchub sempa (byang chub sems dPa’, Skt. bodhisattva) awakened heart-mind warrior.
char-chödpa (char gÇod pa) literally, ‘rain-cutter’. Usually translated as ‘weathermaker’.
chhi’mèd (chhi ’med, Skt. ajitta) deathless or undying.
chog-sé Lama’s ritual table.
chota baresh little rains.
chuba the Tibetan coat/jacket.
chu-len (bCud len) extracting the essence.
da-gyüd (brDa brGyud) symbolic transmission.
dam-ngag dongpa’i sum (gDam ngag sDong pa’i gSum) the three secret oral instructions: the spontaneous self-liberation of body, speech, and mind.
Damchan Dorje Legpa (gDam chan rDo rJe legs pa, Skt. Vajra Sadhu) one of the three main protectors of the Nyingma Tradition. He is shown riding either a goat or a snow lion.
dob-dobs (rDob rDob) the ‘monastic police’ in the largest of the gompas.
They wore to-ngas with outsize elephant ears – the squared points of which had outsize loops in which they held their thumbs to enhance their authoritarian swagger. They also carried large wooden staves with which to break up any form of disorderly behaviour.

donpa sum (sDom pa gSum)  The Three Vows: the five precepts, the Bodhisattva vow, and the vows to the Lama.

Dön-yö Drüp-pa (don yod grub pa, Skt. Amoghasiddhi) and Damtsig Drölma (dam tshig sGrol ma, Skt. Visvapani, or Green Tara)  the Buddha of the air element and consort.

Dorje Bérnakchen (rDo rJe ber nag chen)  the great black cloaked protector, a form of Nagpo Chenpo (nag po chen po, Skt. Mahakala).

Dorje Drak (rDo rJe Brag)  one of the Six Ma-gön, the six ‘Mother Gompas’ of the Nyingma Tradition.

Dorje Lopön (rDo rJe bLo pon, Skt. vajra guru)  the specific class of Buddhist teacher required for the transmission of Vajrayana.

Dorje Tröllö  the crazy wisdom manifestation of Padmasambhava.

Dorje Tsig-dun  the Seven-line Vajra Song of Padmasambhava.

Dorsem (rDo sems – a contraction of Dorje Sempa: rDo rJe sems dPa, Skt. Vajrasattva)  a yidam connected both with Dzogchen and bardo practice.

drangdröl (dran grol)  liberation on remembering.

dré  ghost.

dri (bri)  the female of the yak (gYag). It is common in the West to speak of yak-milk and yak-butter – but this is equivalent to our speaking of bull-milk and bull-butter. Westerners who travel to Nepal also mistake dzos for yaks and dris. The dzo (rDzo) and dzomo are cross-breeds with cattle and are smaller than the yak and dri. Dzomos prefer the lower altitudes, and produce creamier milk than the dri.

drokpa  herdsman of either sheep or yak.

drolwa druk (grol ba drug)  the six modes of liberation.

drong (‘brong)  the wild prototype of the yak. Drongs stand up to seven foot at the shoulder, and can be a dangerous proposition when roused. The horns of some drong come into the category of ra’dzab (ra ’dzab – mantra horn) and turn black on contact with poison.

druk-ké (‘brug sKad) or druk-ngar (‘brug ngar)  the voice of the dragon; thunder.

Drukpa (‘brug pa)  inhabitant of Bhutan. Druk-yul (‘brug yul) Land of the
Dragon. Drukpa also signifies the Drukpa Kagyüd Lineage, which is the closest lineage to the Nyingma Tradition and has many similarities. The same is true of the Drigung Kagyüd Lineage. Both lineages have gTérmas and Dzogchen lineages within them.

**drüpchän** (*grubs chen*) one who has complete yogic accomplishment – a siddha.

**drüphthob** (*Skt. siddha*) accomplished practitioner.

**dungchen** (*dung chen*) the large horn – usually over five feet in length.

**dur-trö** (*dur khrod, Skt. smashana*) charnel ground or cremation ground.

**Dzambu Ling** (*dzam bu gLing, Skt. Jambudvipa*) the world.

**Dzogchen** (*rDzog pa chen po, Skt. mahasandhi, atiyoga*) utter completeness.

**Dzogchen men-ngag-dé** (*rDzogs chen man ngag sDe, Skt. maha sandhi updesha*) the series of implicit instruction.

**dzong** (*rDzong*) fortress.

**É Hong** a sound which signifies disgust, and could be translated as ‘blech’ or ‘yuck puke’.

**ga’kyil** (*dGa ‘khyil*) circle of joy: three-sectioned spiral representing essence, nature, and energy according to Dzogchen.

**gar** (*sGar*) encampment.

**gar’cham** Tibetan meditational dance; a symbolic ballet enactment of realisation. Commonly known in the West as ‘Lama dance’.

**ga’u** (*ga’u*) amulet, receptacle, reliquary box, or pendant for religious objects.

**gDang** (*gDang*) sheer radiance. Symbolised by an unfaceted crystal sphere. One of three ways in which nondual energy functions as the display of the nature of Mind. See rolpa and rTsal.

**gékor** (*ge dKor*) master of discipline.

**gélong** (*dGe sLong, Skt. bhiksu*) fully-ordained monk with vows of celibacy.

**gé-nyèn** (*dGe bsNyen, Skt. upasaka*) the first level of monastic vows, which do not require celibacy. These vows are followed by the gé-tsül (*dGe tshul, Skt. shramanera*) and full gélong vows.

**gö kar chang lo’i dé** (*gos dKar lCang lo’i sDe*) the tradition of those who wear white skirts and have uncut hair.
gomchen (sGom chen)  great meditator.
gomtag (sGom thag)  meditation strap or belt.
gong gyūd (dGangs brGyud)  direct transmission.
gön-khong (mGon khang)  protector house.
gTérbum (gTer bum)  treasure vase. A ceramic vase filled with 111 precious substances and empowered. These vases restore vitality to the elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space) which have been depleted by pollutants in the environment. They have the power to magnetise wealth and abundance, improve health, remove obstacles to long life, pacify anger and warfare, and increase wisdom and realisation in those who are within its mandala. Traditionally, a treasure vase is kept in one’s home or buried on a mountain top at the source of water, in a field, or garden.
gTorma (gTor ma, Skt. balingta)  offering ‘cakes’ ceremonially presented to awareness-beings (yidams / yi gDam, Skt. ishta devata) as a symbol of connection and consequent nondual attainment. As an implement used in tantric ceremonies it also refers to symbolic gestures toward the protectors (chos sKyong and srung ma). gTormas can be made of various materials and can be either edible or permanent.

Guru Rinpoche  how Padmasambhava is better known by Tibetans. It means ‘Precious Teacher’.
gya-chang (rGya lCang)  the weeping willows planted by Princess Gya-za Kong-jo when she came from China to marry King Srong-tsen Gampo.
gyalpo  king – but it is also used as a personal name and a class of demon. Gyalpo demons are often the rebirths of spiritual practitioners who have perverted the teachings to uncompassionate ends.
gyaltsen (rGyal mTshan)  victory banner.
gyèling (rGya gLing)  Tibetan oboe or shawm related to the Indian shenai. Used for the practice of peaceful awareness beings.

haku mindu  ‘I don’t understand’.
he-dé-wa  shock amazement. This state can be yogically induced in order to find presence of awareness in the dimension of sensation.
inji  a Tibetan corruption of the word ‘English’ – but it means anyone who is not Tibetan and also not Asian or Oriental.
ja’lù (’ja’ lus)  rainbow body.

Jétsun Drölma’i Trülpa Gya-za Kong-jo (rJe bTsun sGrol ma’i sprul pa rGya za kong jo)  a manifestation of Drölma (Tara).
**jigten chö-gyèd** *(jig rTen gyi chos brGyad)*  the ‘eight worldly dharmas’ or ‘mundane concerns’. 1-2: *nyèdpa & ma-nyèdpa* *(rNyed pa & ma rNyed pa)* gain & loss. 3-4: *gö’dod & ’jigs* *(dGos ’dod & ’jigs)* hope & fear. 5-6: *töpa & mèdpa* *(bsTod pa & sMad pa)* or kha dran & lé-lan’drèd *(kha dran & le lan ’ded)* praise & blame. 7-8: ’du & ’dral *(’du ba & ’bral ba)* meeting & parting.

There are different versions of the jigtèn chö-gyèd. In others, *nyén-drag & ma-drag* *(sNyan grags & ma grags)* fame & shame, is an alternative to *töpa & mèdpa* *(bsTod pa & sMad pa)* praise & blame. Déwa & dug-ngal *(bDe ba & sDug bsNgal)* pleasure & pain are also listed in many versions.

**kale ju-ten ja-go** ‘sit in comfort’ – a polite salutation on leaving, couched in honorific language.

**kam pu’i tar** the Tibetan phonetic rendition of ‘computer’.

**kangling** human femur trumpet used in various wrathful Vajrayana practices.

**kapsé** Tibetan fried biscuits, knotted into various designs.

**Karma Gyalpo**  King of Nondual Action – one of the names of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche.

**kar-sum** *(dKar gSum)* the three whites: milk, butter, and yoghurt.

**kar-zèn** *(dKar gZan)* white shawl.

**kèlpa** happy.

**khandro** *(mKha’ ’gro, Skt. dakini)* an abbreviation of khandroma *(mKha’ ’gro ma)* which literally means *female sky-goer*. Keith Dowman, who translated the biography of Yeshé Tsogyel which was published as *Sky Dancer*, coined the term ‘sky dancer’ – and it has passed into popular usage because it is a highly expressive term.

**’khorwa** *(Skt. samsara)* the self-defeating cycle of duality.

**khyung** *(khyung, Skt. garuda)* the space eagle: a horned, armed bird which emerges full grown from its egg. A symbol of Dzogchen.

**ku-dung** *(sKu gDung)* the physical vestigial existence of a Lama who has died with full awareness.

**ku-dung zhug’bul** *(sKu gDung bZhugs ’bul)* cremation rites.

**ku jidpo** *(dKu lJid po)* heavy belly.

**ku-lumpo** *(dKu zLum po)* round plump buttocks.

**Küntuzangpo** *(kun tu bZang po)* the primordial Buddha.

**kusha grass** *(khrus kyi rTswa)* *poa cynosuroides*, grass with long stalks and
numerous pointed leaves used in ceremony.

**ku-sum** (sKu gSum, Skt. trikaya)  the three spheres of being: chōku (chos sKu, Skt. dhyānakaya), the sphere of unconditioned potentiality; longku (longs sKu, Skt. sambhogakaya), the sphere of realised visionary appearances; and, trülku (sPrul sKu, Skt. nirmanakaya), the sphere of realised manifestation. These also relate to emptiness, energy, and form.

**kyé ma**  alas.

**kyil’khor** (dKyil’khor, Skt. mandala)  literally, ‘centre and periphery’. The atmosphere in which something takes place – the entire field of events and meaning.

**kyil’khor thig-nyi** (dKyil’khor thig-nyis)  the thig-lé cosmogrammes.

**Lama**  signifies both a *celibate monastic* teacher and a *non-celibate non-monastic* teacher of Vajrayana.

**lhakhang**  shrine room of the peaceful awareness-beings.

**long-dé** (rDzogs chen kLong sDe)  one of the three series of Dzogchen: Dzogchen sem-dé; Dzogchen long-dé; and Dzogchen men-ngag-dé.

**lug mindu**  no sheep.

**lung** (rLung)  tantric empowerment; transmission through the sound of the voice.

**ma-rigpa**  dualistic derangement. See rigpa.

**ma-za-dor sum** (Skt. vajra sadhu)  the three main protectors of the Nyingma Tradition: Mamo Ékajati, Za Rahula, and Dorje Legpa.

**Men-ngag Khandro Nying-thig** (man ngag mKha’ ’gro sNying thig, Skt. Upadeshavarga Dakini Hridayasara)  ‘The Implicit Instruction which is the Heart Essence of the Khandros’: an essential transmission of Dzogchen.

**mi-gu** (mi rGod)  literally, ‘wild man’ – yeti or ‘abominable snowman’.

**Mi’trugpa** (mi ’khrug pa, Skt. Akshobya) and **Dorje Ma-ma-ki** (rDo rJe ma ma ki, Skt. Mamaki)  the Buddha of the water element and consort.

**myongdröl** (myong grol)  liberation on tasting.

**myon héruka** (sMyon he ru ka)  nondual madman.

**nambu karpo** (gNam bu dKar po)  white woollen shamthab.

**namkha sum-trug gongpa** (nam mKha’ sum phrug gi dGongs pa)  ‘the self-realisation of the three skies’; involves staring into the night sky.

**Nampar Nangdzé** (nam par sNang mDzad, Skt. Vairochana) and **Ying-**
chugma (dByings phyug ma, Skt. Dharmadhatvishvari) the Buddha of the space element and consort.

namthar (rNam thar) hagiography: life story, work, example, and complete liberation.

nangwa (sNang ba) insider.

ngakma, ngakpa (sNgags mo, sNgags pa, Skt. mantrini, mantrin) members of the gö kar chang lo’i dé (gos dKar lCang lo’i sDe), the noncelibate ordained sangha of Vajrayana Buddhism. The sangha is not a renunciate sangha – even though its individual members may employ renunciation as a method. Vajrayana is the path of transformation, whereas Sutrayana is the path of renunciation.

ngar-sum (mNgar gSum) the three sweets: sugar, honey, and molasses.

ngöndro (sNgon ’gro) preliminary practices.

nutog padmo (nu tog pad mo) nipple lotus. Also numa yati (nu ma ya ti) breast circle or kyil’khor (dKyil ’khor, Skt. mandala).

Nyènchen Thanglha the Protector of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s homeland.

nyèn gyüd (sNyan brGyud) oral transmission.

Nyima ’ö-Zér (nyi ma ’od zer) Rays of the Sun: one of the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava.

Nyingma Gyud’bum (rNying ma rGyud bum) literally, ‘The 100,000 Nyingma Tantras’. This is a collection belonging to the inner tantras, gathered by Ratna Lingpa and edited by Jig’mèd Lingpa. It contains ten volumes of Dzogchen, three volumes of anuyoga, six volumes of the inner section of mahayoga, thirteen volumes of the drüþhab section of mahayoga, one volume of protector practices, and three volumes comprising historical catalogues.

nyon mong héruka (nyon mongs heruka) defiled héruka. See traktung. Not to be confused with myon héruka (nondual madman).

’öd pa’mèd (’od pags ’med, Skt. Amitabha) and Gö-kar mo (gos dKar mo, Skt. Pandaravasini) the Buddha of the fire element and consort.

’ö-sel (’od gSal) the clear light phase prior to death.

Palden Lhamo (dPal lDan lha mo, Skt. Sri Devi) the female consort of Nagpo Chenpo.

paleps Tibetan muffins with an extremely slight mustard tang.

pal-gyi (dPal gyi) splendid, splendorous, or possessed of splendour.
pawo (dPa bo, Skt. daka or vira)  hero.
pé-yul (be yul)  hidden land.

’phowa  the practice of dying with awareness and of the transference of the mindstream at the time of death. This practice can be performed for others – if one has gained the ability oneself through retreat.
rabjung (rab ’byung)  sixty-year cycle in which the twelve animals and five astrological elements cycle. The first commenced in 1027 and this is currently the seventeenth Rabjung, which commenced in 1987.
rekdröl (reg grol)  liberation on touching.

Rig’dzin Drüptab (rig ’dzin la ma’i grubs thab, Skt. Vidyadhara Guru Sadhana)  called the ‘Big Rig’dzin’ in Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s sangha. It was Padmasambhava’s transmission to Khyéchung Lotsa, one of his twenty-five closest disciples – and it was the first gTérma of Nuden Dorje, another of Rinpoche’s previous incarnations. It was predicted that it should be practised secretly for five generations before dissemination. Khaleden Lingpa and Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche received it independently. Rinpoche was the first to reveal it and give transmission for its practice.

rigpa  nondual awareness. See ma-rigpa.
rilbu (ril bu)  Tibetan medicinal pills compounded of many different herbs and minerals.

Rinchen gTérdzöd (rin chen gTer mDzod)  The Great Treasury of Precious gTérmas. This is a collection of the most important gTérmas of Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, Vairochana and their closest disciples. It was gathered by Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tha-yé and Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo.

Rinchen Jung-né (rin chen ’byung gNas, Skt. Ratnasambhava) and Sang-gyé Chanma (sangs rGyas sPyan ma, Skt. Locana)  the Buddha of the earth element and consort.
rolang (ro langs, Skt. vetala)  zombie – a human corpse which has been re-animated by a demonic entity. The term can also mean vampire.
rolmo  cymbals with a large hemispherical boss. Silnyen are larger than rolmo and have a much smaller boss.
rolpa (rol pa)  play. Symbolised by a circular mirror. One of three ways in which nondual energy functions as the display of the nature of Mind. See gDang and rTsal.

rTsal (rTsal)  radiance. Symbolised by a faceted crystal. One of three ways in which nondual energy functions as the display of the nature of Mind. See gDang and rolpa.
rTsa rLung  spatial nerves and spatial wind.

rTsa sum (rTsa gSum)  three roots of Tantra: Lama, Yidam, Khandro / Pawo (bLa ma, yi gDam, mKha’ ’gro / pDa bo, Skt. guru, deva, dakini / daka).

sang  a Tibetan copper coin of minimal value.

sang-yab (gSang yab)  secret father.

sang-yum (gSang yum)  literally ‘secret mother’, but ‘mother’ in this sense pertains to the empty quality of wisdom which gives birth to method. ‘Sang-yum’ is therefore often translated as ‘mystic consort’.

Seng-gé Dongma (seng ge gDong ma, Skt. Simhamukha)  the lion-headed khandro or dakini.

shamthab (sham thabs)  the pleated skirt which is worn by spiritual practitioners. The white pleated skirt (dKar sham thabs) worn by the gö kar chang lo’i dé. Monks and nuns wear maroon skirts (dMar sham thabs).

shèdra (bShad gRwa)  a college.

silnyen (sil sNyan)  a pair of large cymbals. Used for the practice of peaceful awareness-beings.

takdröl (bTags grol)  liberation on wearing.

tashi da-ré (bKra shis dar ras)  clouds like multicoloured scarves.

tashi delegs (bKra shis bDe legs)  auspicious goodness; good luck.

thig-lé (thig le)  manifestations of the essence of the elements that appear in visionary practices. They are the atomic structure of being, and familiarity with that level of experience is what leads to the accomplishment of the rainbow body. Often depicted as concentric circles of infinitely variegated colours.

thödröl (thos grol)  liberation on hearing.

’thom yor (’thom yor)  idiot, idiotic.

thongdröl (mThong grol)  liberation on seeing.

thor-chug (thor tshugs)  is the word for the coiled ropes of matted hair that togdens wind up into a turban on their heads. Sometimes these grow to be surprisingly voluminous.

ting-shar (ting shag)  diminutive cymbals—made of cast rather than beaten bronze—employed in various rites for the purpose of establishing connection with beings in other dimensions.

togal (rDzogs chen thod rGal)  the practice of integrating with the light
essence of the corporeal form.

togden (*rTogs lDan*)  holder of realisation. A yogi or yogini – typically with coils of uncut matted hair.

traktung (*khrags mThung, Skt. héruka*)  blood drinker. Applies to wrathful yidams. The idea is that one drinks the hot blood of the elemental neuroses and transforms them into the five nondual wisdoms.

tri (*khrid*)  tantric empowerment; transmission through explanation.

Tröma Nakmo (*khro ma nag mo, Skt. Khroda Kali*)  Black Wrathful Mother.

trülku’i ’khorlo (*sPrul sKu’i ’khor lo, Skt. nirmanachakra*)  the navel circle. Also tè-wa’i padmo (*lTe ba’i pad mo*)  the navel lotus.

tsampa  barley flour that has been roasted, ground, and roasted again.

Tsawa’i Lama (*rTsa ba’i bLa ma, Skt. mula guru*)  root teacher.

tsèn  a protector who is still within the bounds of duality.

tsé-zha  a hat crested with stiffened woollen strands worn by monastics in monastic rituals.

tshan-thun (*mTshan thun*)  night session.

Tsog’khorlo (*tshogs ’khor lo, Skt. Ganachakra*)  the Tantric Feast, which functions through all the sense fields – centring on ‘taste’ as an offering to the liberation of everyone and everything everywhere. The participants actualise themselves as yidams.

wang (*dBang*)  tantric empowerment; transmission through the power of symbol.

Yangchen-ma (*dByang chen ma, Skt. Sarasvati*)  the Buddha of Knowledge and Eloquence. Yangchen-ma’s manifestations are as follows: Rinchen Yangchen-ma (*rin chen dByangs chan ma*), Melodious Ratna Buddha; Dorje Yangchen-ma (*rDo rJe dByangs chan ma*), Melodious Vajra Buddha; Padma’i Yangchen-ma (*pad ma’i dByangs chan ma*), Melodious Padma Buddha; Thrinlé-kyi Yangchen-ma (*’phrin las kyi dByangs chan ma*), Melodious Karma Buddha; Sang-gyê Kün-ngö Yangchen-ma (*sang rGyas kun dNgos dByangs chan ma*), Melodious Embodiment of all Buddhas; and Ngawang Yangchen-ma (*ngag dBang dByangs chan ma*), Melodious Buddha of Powerful Speech.

ya-po’du (*yag po ’dug*)  good.

ya tsan  marvel, marvellous.

yeshé (*ye shes, Skt. jnana*)  primordial wisdom, uncreated knowledge.
yeshé ’cholwa (ye shes ’chol ba)  crazy wisdom – literally, primordial wisdom chaos.

yidam (yi gDam)  meditational deity – the nondual anthropomorphic form employed for self-identification in visualisation practices of Tantra.

yung-drung (gYung drung)  swastika. The anticlockwise form symbolises the sky and Dzogchen. The clockwise form symbolises the earth and mahamudra. The word swastika is derived from the Sanskrit word svastika, meaning auspicious. It is composed of su meaning ‘good’ and asti, ‘being’. The suffix ka intensifies meaning. The Nazi emblem, the harkenkreuz (German – meaning ‘crooked cross’) which was derived from this ancient symbol sat ‘diamond-wise’ and was used in both directions without reason. The Eastern forms always sit square.

zèn-tra (gZan phra)  multicoloured shawl.

zér nga (gZer lNga)  the five nails – a Dzogchen practice involving the visualised dissolution of the elements into space.

zha-nak (zhwa nag)  the black hat dance. It is practised by most of the gö kar chang lo’i dé in order to overcome obstacles to practice for oneself and others.
History and Future of The Confederate Sanghas of Aro

In 1977 Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche—Jig’drél Yeshé Dorje—gave the name Sang-ngak-chö-dzong as an inspiration for the establishment of a non-celibate non-monastic sangha in the West. In Tibet this was called the gö kar chang lo’i dé. Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche was widely regarded as one of the most accomplished and influential Tibetan Lamas of the twentieth century and until his death in 1987 was the head of the Nyingma Tradition in exile. Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche was one of Ngak’chang Rinpoche’s five principal teachers (Tsawa’i Lamas).

In 1993 a registered Tibetan Buddhist charity was established in Britain with the name Sang-ngak-chö-dzong (№ 1019886). Subsequently, under the direction of Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen, a series of other charitable and not-for-profit organisations have been established in North America and mainland Europe to support the accomplishment of Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche’s vision. The Confederate Sanghas of Aro who practise the teachings of the Aro Buddhist Tradition has now grown to include six distinct sanghas under the guidance of individual Aro teachers and teaching couples (see arobuddhism.org).

The work of the charities has included the establishment of the world’s largest online library of material on the ngak’phang sangha (aroencyclopaedia.org), the creation of two publishing houses (arobooks.org and aro-books-worldwide.org), the provision of housing and medical treatment for Tibetan Nyingma Lamas in exile, and the funding of a school for Tibetan children in the remote Pemakö region of Himachal Pradesh.

In 2006 Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen led a pilgrimage to Nepal to visit Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and his wife Jomo Sam’phel Déchen – their last living teachers, in part to discuss their ideas for the future of the Aro gTér Lineage in the West. Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche responded:

*I am an old man. I have never been interested in having a centre of my own in the past – but centres are very important in the West; very important to help firmly establish traditions such as yours. You find a way to raise money and build your own centre in the West.*

With this instruction, the project to build a permanent home for the Aro Tradition in the West was born. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche continued to teach students of the Aro Tradition until his death in 2010. In particular he
emphasised the importance of Dzogchen, the ngak’phang tradition, and Ling Gésar. The residential retreat centre, to be based in the UK, will be named Drala Jong.

*Drala Jong innately exists in human beings. Drala is the appreciative faculty which exponentially enlivens people the more they engage with the world. Appreciation is the key to enjoyment and to the delighting in the enjoyment of others. When we learn to appreciate phenomena our sense fields—Jong—begin to sparkle and a sense of generosity is born which connects us with others. Although Vajrayana Buddhism is by no means unknown in the West – the sense in which enjoyment and compassion are mutually interdependent remains unexpressed. We would like Drala Jong to be a place where human beings could discover the pleasure of existence—the pleasure that animates the sense fields and revitalises the Arts—and the art of living.*

Ngak’chang Rinpoche, 13th September 2006, Penarth, Wales

Drala Jong will become the permanent home for the style of teaching and practice for which Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen have become known. Once Drala Jong has been established, annual summer open teaching retreats will be held in the style of yogic encampments, where it will be possible to study thangka painting and a wide variety of arts and crafts; as well as the meditative practices of the inner tantras.

Drala Jong will have a shrine room for the practice of yogic song and inner vision, and a yogic exercise hall for the practice of the Aro Tradition trül-khor, sKu-mNyé and a-tri, along with the physical practices of the Ling Gésar gTérma of Rang-rig Togden. It will become the focal point for the Aro Tradition teacher training programme.

Sang-ngak-chö-dzong has already acquired a collection of Nyingma texts of the ’Khordong gTér, Chang gTér and Düd’jom gTér, plus an extensive library of English language books. We have assembled a collection of statues and thangkas of the major Nyingma and Aro Tradition awareness-beings. Among the sa gTérs (earth gTérs that are physical objects as well as actual texts) that are the treasures of Sang-ngak-chö-dzong, Drala Jong will house the shrine of the many fabulous spiritual heirlooms including: the sacred meteorite-iron nine-prong gTér vajra of Padmasambhava which was discovered by Guru Chöwang; the bell and dorje of Jomo Menmo; and, the empowerment vase of Ratna Lingpa.

Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen wish to establish Drala Jong as a happy creative environment in which the qualities of human warmth and friendliness are paramount – and extended to all who wish to participate in the enactment of vision. Once the land is acquired, Ngakpa Trögyal—phurba-
master of the Aro Tradition—will supervise the construction of a giant iron phurba to complete a trio of giant phurbas matching those already established in New York State and Forchtenstein, Austria. It is planned that other Lamas of the Nyingma Tradition—who have specialised in art and craft skills of the inner tantras—will be invited to come and teach. Complementing the strong emphasis on art, music and dance, will be training in Buddhist counselling and psychotherapeutic skills.

At the time of publication, we have raised more than 10% of the funds necessary to establish Drala Jong in Britain. Any contributions towards this exciting endeavour are warmly welcomed – however small. To help this project, for further information on local teachings and retreats in your country or region, or for information on the apprenticeship programme with the Lamas of the Aro Tradition, visit arobuddhism.org/community/contact.html.
The son of Düd’jom Jig’drél Yeshé Dorje (bDud 'joms jigs 'bral ye shes rDo rje).

The word ‘Lama’ signifies both a celibate monastic teacher and a non-celibate non-monastic teacher of Vajrayana.

Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche (kyabs rJe kun bZang rDo rJe rin po che). Hereinafter often called ‘Rinpoche’ after the initial use in each chapter – for ease of reading.

See Surya Das, The Snow Lion’s Turquoise Mane, HarperOne, 1992, for other versions.

Extract from an aérogramme letter sent to Derek Crowe (mentioned in the chapter ‘The Tiger’), the Head of Illustration at Bristol Art School – concerning the manner in which the author’s Tibetan pen friend, Yeshé Khandro, was smuggled into Nepal (described in ‘Speaking in tongues’).

A ‘new town’ in Britain humorously famed for its lack of character.

Young monks often begin as children under the age of ten.

Tony Lama is a US Western boot manufacturer. The company bears the name of its founder. Tony Lama (1887–1974) learned his cobbling skills while serving in the US Cavalry in Texas.

A Tibetan settlement in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal which spreads outward from the Great Chörten. This area used to exist as a semi-independent Tibetan region with its own governor.

Ya-po’ du – good.

Chuba – the Tibetan coat/jacket.


Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche – Jig’drél Yeshé Dorje, was the head of the Nyingma Tradition at the time and the holder of the Düd’jom gTér.

See An Odd Boy.

Johannes Frischknecht is a disciple of Gangten Tulku Rinpoche (incarnation of Pema Lingpa).

And to a lesser extent—time-wise—with Kyabjé Dilgo Khyentsé Rinpoche.

Tsawa’i Lama (rTsa ba’i bLa ma, Skt. mula guru) – root teacher.

Ngak’chang Rinpoche also received profound instruction on Dzogchen from Namkha’i Norbu Rinpoche on his earlier visits to Britain (1982–1984).

Dorje Lopön (rDo rJe bLo pon, Skt. vajra guru) – the specific class of Buddhist teacher required for the transmission of Vajrayana.


This is not intended to be an essay in oriental semantics – merely a fumbling attempt, on my part, to explain a fragment of what Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche means to me.

Küntuzangpo (kun tu bZang po, Skt. samantabhadra).
Rewalsar is the Indian name of the village.

This may be of more interest to the cognoscenti than to the general reader – but even so it does not provide a detailed account of my studies, as this would make tedious reading.


*See* An Odd Boy.

Dzogchen (rdZog pa chen po, Skt. mahasandhi, ati yoga) – utter completeness.

Tibetan barley beer.

I strolled ’round the church and graveyard when there was no one to see me and be offended by my foolhardiness.

Ngakpa (sNgags pa, Skt. mantrin). Ngakpas and ngakmas (sNgags mo, Skt. mantrini) are members of the gō kar chang lo’i dé (gos dKar lCang lo’i sDe) the noncelibate ordained sangha of Vajrayana Buddhism. The sangha is not a renunciate sangha – even though its individual members may employ renunciation as a method. Vajrayana is the path of transformation, whereas Sutrayana is the path of renunciation.


Photograph of Ajo Répa Rinpoche (A jo ras pa rin po che) in *The Way of the White Clouds*.

Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche was also known as Khamtrül Yeshé Dorje or Ngak’chang Rinpoche.

Gangchen Kyishong—Tibetan Library of Works and Archives—situated between McLeod Ganj and Upper Dharamsala.

‘Inji’ is a corruption of the word ‘English’ and applies to all Western people – whether English or not.

Mi-num (mi’i sNum). Alexandra David-Neel gives an account of this in her book *Magie d’Amour et Magie Noir*, Libraire Pion, 1938. Heat is not employed as the means of extraction in her imaginative account.

Johnny Conqueroo – John the Conqueror Root, an ingredient of African American Hoo-doo charms.

Willie Dixon, ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’.

Tsog’khorlo (tshogs ’khor lo, Skt. ganachakra) – tantric feast.
‘Dharmite’ is a term the author employed for people who adopted an artificial Buddhist personality.

Rolmo are cymbals with a large hemispherical boss. Silnyen are larger than rolmo and have a much smaller boss.

Yiddish: *shul* equates to synagogue and *rebbe* to rabbi.

Guide to the genealogical history of the major royal, aristocratic, and historical families of Britain, Ireland, and the United States of America.


Humile – an artificial form of humility (*author’s coinage*).

*gTorma* (*gTor ma, Skt. balingta*) – offering ‘cakes’ ceremonially presented to awareness-beings (*yidams* / *yi gDam*, Skt. *ishta devata*) as a symbol of connection and consequent nondual attainment. As an implement used in tantric ceremonies it also refers to symbolic gestures toward the protectors (*chos sKyong and srung ma*).

Freak Street runs south from Basantapur Square in Kathmandu, Nepal. Its actual name is Joch-né.

The surname ‘Lama’ is common in Nepal amongst Newari families and does not betoken that the person is a Lama in the Tibetan Buddhist sense.

Amji – doctor.

Shamthab (*shams thabs*) – the white pleated skirt worn by the gö kar chang lo’i dé or the maroon skirt worn by monks and nuns.


Mandi was the seat of the King of Zahor.

The boot of a car is termed the trunk in US English.

Tashi delegs (*bKra shis bDe legs*).

Haku mindu – I don’t understand.

Elephant ears are the flaps of material that obtrude on each side of the waistcoat around the fronts of the armholes. They are called elephant ears because elephants are said to have long memories – and memory is a valuable quality in practitioners.

Fully ordained monk (*dGe sLong*) with vows of celibacy.

In this context khandro (*mKha’ *gro*) means female consort, wife, or sexual partner.

Könchog Rinpoche was not a fully ordained monk. He had taken the gé-nyèn (*dGe bsNyen, Skt. upasaka*) vows and so he was not abstemious. The gé-nyèn vows are the first
level of monastic vows and do not require celibacy. These vows are followed by the gé-tsül (dGe tshul, Skt. shramanera) and full gélong (dGe sLong, Skt. bhiksu) vows.

[65] ‘Khordong gTérchen Tulku Chhi’méd Rig’dzin Rinpoche – gTértön (gTer sTon) and lineage holder of the ‘Khordong gTér and Chang gTér.

[66] The Chinese undermined their own propaganda by issuing so many falsehoods that no intelligent person would credit their statements. They created a statue depicting a monk burying a child in the cornerstone of a monastery. The statue was so obviously not of Tibetan origin that it was laughable. It resembled Soviet sculpture of the 1950s.


[68] The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definition of ‘idiot savant’: ‘A person with generally impaired intellectual and social functions who is extremely gifted in a particular way, frequently as a musician … Hence in weakened sense: a naïve or simple person who displays natural wisdom or insight.’ I can’t speak for being gifted as a musician—or for displaying natural wisdom or insight—but I have been an artist all my life. I chose this chapter title because I have an IQ which averages at sixty-six. My lowest score was forty-nine and my highest – eighty-four. I was a poor performer at school apart from English and Art and although I went on to obtain a first class honours degree in Illustration – I only seem to be able to excel in what I love. Maybe some aspect of this will reveal itself as the chapters unfold.

[69] Dzogchen men-ngag-dé (rDzogs chen man ngag sDe, Skt. maha sandhi upadeshya) the series of implicit instruction.

[70] Karma Gyalpo (kar ma rGyal po) – King of Nondual Action.

[71] ‘Guru Rinpoche’ is how Padmasambhava is popularly known by Tibetans. It means ‘Precious Teacher’.

[72] Gar’cham is commonly known in the West as ‘Lama dance’ – this is a symbolic ballet enactment of realisation.

[73] Dorje Tröllö (rDo rJe gro lod) – the crazy wisdom manifestation of Padmasambhava.


[75] ’thom yor – idiot, idiotic.

[76] Kyé ma – alas.


[78] In subsequent discussions with Rinpoche, Pema Dorje—as translator—will not be mentioned, in order not to disrupt the flow of the narrative.


[80] DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje (mDo mKhyen brTse ye shes rDo rJe, 1800–1866) was the mind incarnation of Kun-khyen Jig’mèd Lingpa (kun mKhyen ’jigs ’med gLing pa, 1730–1798).

[81] Dzong (rDzong) – fortress.

[82] DoDrüpchen Jig’mèd Thrin-lé ’ö-Zēr (’jigs ’med gPhrin las ’od zer, 1745–1821) was a
Nyingma gTértön who was the heart-son of Jig’méd Lingpa for whom he became the main lineage holder (tTsa ba’i chos bDag) of the Longchen Nying-thig. Jig’méd Thrin-lé ’ö-Zér was recognised by Jig’méd Lingpa as the mind incarnation of Prince Murub Tsenpo (mu rub bTsan po), a son of King Trisong Détsen. Murub Tsenpo was also known as Yeshé Rolpa’i rTsal (ye shes rol pa’i rTsal), a son of King Trisong Détsen and Queen Tépong Za. He took thirteen incarnations as a gTértön – the last in the line being gTértön Cho’gyür Déchen Lingpa. Jig’méd Thrin-lé ’ö-Zér authenticated Paltrül Rinpoche as a boy and gave him his name.

Drokpa – herdsman of either sheep or yak.

Nyènchen Thanglha (gNyan chen thang lha) is a mountain which is also the dimension of the protector of the same name.

Golok (mGo log) – the Northeast of Tibet.

Rabjung (rab ‘byung) – sixty-year cycle in which the twelve animals and five astrological elements cycle. The first commenced in 1027 and this is currently the seventeenth Rabjung which commenced in 1987.

The Yellow River.

Ra-nyag Gyalsé was also known as Ra-nyag Drüpchen.

Barley flour that has been roasted, ground, and roasted again.

É-Hong is a sound which signifies disgust, and could be translated as ‘blech’ or ‘yuck puke’.

On the tenth of the sixth month of the Iron Dragon year.

rDza chu kha.

1802–1861.

1908.

Gö kar chang lo (gos dKar lCang lo) refers to the costume of ngakpas and ngakmas. Gö kar means white skirt, and chang lo means long hair. This contraction covers all items of dress including conch-shell earrings, waistcoat, shawl, and various other details such as bell and vajra rings and takdröl hair ornament. Chang lo is etymologically connected to the way that willow branches hang down. Originally the gö kar chang lo’i-dé (gos dKar lCang lo’i de), the sangha of non-celibate non-monastic tantric yogis and yoginis, wore their hair loose as well as having a top knot.

Kun-khyen Longchen Rabjampa (kun mKhyen kLong chen rab ’byams, 1308–1363). Kun-khyen means ‘all-knowing’ but not omniscient in the theistic sense. It means ‘knowing reality – in every aspect of duality and nonduality’.

Dza Paltrül was recognised by the great gö kar chang lo Lama, Togden Do-la Jig’méd Kèlsang. Togden Do-la Jig’méd was executed in China in the late 1920s, under highly unusual circumstances. A man accused of theft was about to be killed in a side street of some unrecorded town, when Togden Do-la Jig’méd passed by. Already quite old, he ‘confessed’ to the authorities that he himself was the thief rather than the man they were about to kill. His disciples arrived on the scene too late to do anything about the situation.

Kun-khyen Jig’méd Lingpa (kun mKhyen ’jigs ’med gLing pa, 1730–1798, Eng. lord
of the dimension in which there is no fear). Jig‘méd Lingpa was the incarnation of Longchenpa (kun mkhyen kLong chen rab 'byams, 1308–1363).

This includes ‘life circumstances display’ (body), ‘personality display’ (speech), and ‘presence display’ (mind).

Ye shes bLa ma (Teachings on the Nature of the Primordial Lama) and rTsa rLung (Spatial Nerves and Spatial Wind Teachings).

‘Jigs med rGyal ba’i mYu gu (1765–1843). It was this Lama’s oral teachings which Dza Paltrül transcribed and presented as the famous Künzang Lama’i Zhaling (kun bzang bLa ma’i zhal lung), usually translated as The Words of My Perfect Teacher.

Dza Paltrül was the disciple of Jig‘méd Gyalwé Nyügu, Min’gyür Namkha’i Dorje, and DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje.

Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (kar ma pa rang byung rDo rje, 1284–1339) the Third Karmapa, disciple of Ögyenpa Rinchen Pal (or Gyan pa rin chen dPal). The Karmapas are the heads of the Karma Kagyüd School. The author studied with the Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpa’i Dorje (Rang ’byung rig pa’i rDo rJe, 1924–1981).

Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (kar ma pa rang byung rDo rje, 1284–1339) the Third Karmapa, disciple of Ögyenpa Rinchen Pal (or Gyan pa rin chen dPal). The Karmapas are the heads of the Karma Kagyüd School. The author studied with the Sixteenth Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpa’i Dorje (Rang ’byung rig pa’i rDo rJe, 1924–1981).

Dzu Paltrül was the disciple of Jig‘méd Gyalwé Nyügu, Min’gyür Namkha’i Dorje, and DoKhyentsé Yeshé Dorje.

Gangchen Kyishong (gang chen kyi shong – infinite comprehension) is the Tibetan Library of Works and Archives where the author studied Madhyamaka philosophy with Geshé Ngawang Dargyé (dGe shes ngag dBang dar rGyas).

Drüpchen (grubs chen) one who has complete yogic accomplishment – a siddha.

Gangchen Kyishong (gang chen kyi shong – infinite comprehension) is the Tibetan Library of Works and Archives where the author studied Madhyamaka philosophy with Geshé Ngawang Dargyé (dGe shes ngag dBang dar rGyas).

Shabkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl (zhabs dKar tshogs drug rang grol, 1781–1851) was regarded as an emanation of Jampal Shényèn (jam dPal bShes gNyen, Skt. Manjushri-mitra), one of the lineal Lamas of the Nyingma Tradition. He was the incarnation of Ngülchu Gyalsé Thog‘méd (dnGul chu rGyal sras thogs ‘med, 1295–1369) and also Chenza Lodrö Gyaltsen (sPyan sNga bLo gros rGyal mtshan – disciple of Milarépa).

The term ‘village ngakpa’ is derogatory. It was used in Tibet to distinguish between the gö kar chang lo Lamas who were practitioners or teachers with elevated religious status – and those who were more shamanic in their orientation. It displays the monastic-supremacist attitude toward those non-monastic practitioners whose work was to help people in their ordinary living situations. No distinction is made between monastics according to similar criteria – i.e. between practitioners/teachers and the monastics who were merely liturgical labourers with scant understanding of the texts. There were also many monastics who were cooks, cleaners, and bureaucratic officials. Many village ngakpas and ngakmas were profound practitioners. The fact that they may have helped people through shamanic activity does not actually make them different to the monastic Lamas who performed similar services. The term ‘village ngakpa’ in this book, will simply apply to poor or little known ngak’phang Lamas who were more accessible to ordinary people.

A Tibetan copper coin of minimal value.

Gé-nyen (dGe bNyan, Skt. upasaka) – the first level of monastic vows. It applies mainly to robe wearing, head shaving, the precepts, and other particular vows that relate to
monastic life. It is not uncommon for Nyingmas to take these vows and never become gé-tsuls (*dGe tshul, Skt. shramanera*). This has given rise to the misconception that the Nyingma Tradition allows ‘married monks’. Gé-tsul is the next level of novice monk. In addition to the five precepts, they refrain from sexuality, eating after noon, singing, and wearing ornaments. A fully ordained monk is called a gé-long (*dGe sLong, Skt. bhikshu*) and takes 253 vows.


[116] (*jam dByangs mKhyen br'Tse'i dBang po, 1820–1892*), also known as Pema ’ö-Sel Do-ngak Lingpa (*pa dMa ’od gSal mDo sNgags gLing pa*).

[117] Drüpthob (*grub thob, Skt. siddha*) accomplished practitioner.

[118] Venerable ancient.

[119] Jigtèn chö-gyèd (*jig rTen gyi chos brGyad*) the ‘eight worldly dharmas’ or ‘mundane concerns’. 1-2: nyèdpa & ma-nyèdpa (*rNyed pa & ma rNyed pa*) gain & loss. 3-4: gö’dod & ’jigs (*dGos ’dod & ’jigs*) hope & fear. 5-6: tôpa & mèdpa (*bsTod pa & sMad pa*) or kha dran & lé-lan’drèd (kha dran & le lan ’ded) praise & blame. 7-8: ’du & ’dral (*’du ba & ’bral ba*) meeting & parting. There are different versions of the jigtèn chö-gyèd. In others, nyen-drag & ma-drag (*sNyan grags & ma grags*) fame & shame, is an alternative to tôpa & mèdpa praise & blame. Déwa & dug-ngal (*bDe ba & sDug bsNgal*) pleasure & pain are also listed in many versions.

[120] ‘Blues band’ had to be explained to Rinpoche – and he came to understand Blues as ‘the electric music of the Africans in America’. He then came to understand the term ‘Blues’ as the understanding of dukkha or ‘unsatisfactoriness’ – and was happy that Africans understood the meaning of this teaching.

[121] The term used was ‘upper-middle class’ but it was not translatable into Tibetan.

[122] Lhasa was the relatively sophisticated capital of Tibet.

[123] Thor-chug (*thor tshugs*) is the word for the coiled ropes of matted hair that togdens wind up into a turban on their heads. Sometimes these grow to be surprisingly voluminous.

[124] Central Tibet.


[126] Khandro Déchen—my wife and sang-yum (*gSang yum – spiritual consort*) will be properly introduced in her own chapter toward the end of this book.


[128] Shrine room of the peaceful awareness-beings.

[129] The syllable ‘Phat’ is pronounced more or less like ‘putt’ but the pronunciation often has more to do with the way breath is violently expelled.

[130] Dorje Legpa (*rDo rJe legs pa, Skt. vajra sadhu*) – the benign thunderbolt. One of the three main protectors of the Nyingma Tradition. He rides either a goat or a snow lion.

[131] Drupchen Sogpo Pal-gyi Yeshé (*grub chen sog po dPal gyi ye shes*). The term
‘Sogpo’ translates as ‘Sogdian’ and relates to a native of Sogdiana, an ancient Persian province centred on Samarkand (now in Uzbekistan). At that time in Tibet, blacksmiths were known as ‘sogpos’ because Sogdiana was a centre of great expertise in the art of ironwork. The place name ‘Uddiyana’ where Padmasambhava manifested his nirmanakaya existence is clearly linked with regions further to the northwest than academic research would indicate—as the linguistic similarity between Sogdiana and Uddiyana show. The importance of this is connected with the fact that Padmasambhava was born at the crossroads of many civilisations. His life indicates that he studied with everyone as an ‘enlightened eclectic’ and thus brought into himself the entire knowledge of the world. The Middle Eastern features often found—especially in statues of Padmasambhava—may be some reference to the area in which he manifested the transition from eight-year-old prince to adult yogi-king.

[132] Yeshé Zhön-nu (ye shes gZhon nu) was one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava.


[134] Tashi ’ö-Ser Rinpoche (bKra shis ‘od gSer rin po che, 1837–1910) was the abbot of Paljor Gompa.

[135] These two Lamas were amongst the principal disciples of Jig’mèd Lingpa and were highly respected incarnations.

[136] Bardo Thödröl (bar do thos grol) – Liberation Through Hearing in the Bardo is a text within the Zhi-trö Gongpa Rangdröl (zhi khro dGongs pa rang grol) revealed by gTértön Karma Lingpa. This text is mainly mis-titled in the West as the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

[137] Tibetan spiritual hagiography: an account of the life of a Lama portraying a spiritual path, and sometimes interwoven with songs of realisation. Namthars cannot be classified as biographies or autobiographies in the Western sense because they rarely communicate anything about a human personality – these we see only as rare glimpses in the stories about Lamas, which come down mainly as an oral tradition.

[138] Palden Lhamo (dPal lDan lha mo, Skt. Shri Devi or Remati) is the consort of Nakchen (nak po chen po, Skt. Mahakala) and the female guardian of a lake, Lhamo Lhatso.

[139] Regarding the story of ‘Sir Aubrey’ and the fart, the story is from Brief Lives by John Aubrey (1626–1697), and he names the protagonist as Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford.

[140] Dza Paltrül was very keen on people making religious objects. He was especially interested in the construction of mani walls. Mani walls are the long agglomerations of stones on which mantras have been carved. These walls can often be seen on the paths that enter and exit towns and villages in Tibet.

[141] Goloks loved their horses a great deal.

[142] Gyalpo means king – but it also applies to a class of demon. Gyalpo demons are often the rebirths of spiritual practitioners who have perverted the teachings to uncompassionate ends.

[143] Jampalyang (Jam dPal bYangs, Skt. Manjushri) holds the sword of wisdom in his
right hand. His elbow is bent and the sword is lifted above his head. The wisdom sword cuts through the illusion of duality.


[145] Sanskrit mahasiddha.

[146] Tiger skins and leopard skins were the symbolic dress of the dakas and dakinis respectively, and gö kar chang lo Lamas sometimes used them on their teaching seats.

[147] DoKhyentsé was rarely seen without a rifle.

[148] The older smooth-bore muskets were the Baker, prior to 1830, and after that date, the Brunswick.

[149] Paltrül had been inspired to follow a vegetarian diet by the example of Shabkar. In the same style as Shabkar, Paltrül combined the yanas of Sutra, Kriyatantra, and Dzogchen. His lack of difficulty with eating meat as the guest of his teacher DoKhyentsé conforms to the fact that his vegetarianism was a practice rather than a philosophical stance.

[150] Copper Coloured Mountain (Nga-yab Zang-dog Pal-ri – rNga gYab zangs mDog dPal ri) – the visionary dimension of Padmasambhava.


[152] Lama’s ritual table.

[153] No sheep.

[154] In the context of our conversation, Rinpoche understood that I was alluding to: the rifle empowerment as the ‘bum wang’ or ‘vase empowerment’ (the rifle being the vase; the bullet, flame and smoke being the peacock feathers); the meat empowerment being the ‘sang wang’ or ‘secret empowerment’ (the meat being the transitional sphere between form and emptiness / embodiment and disembodiment – as the sambhogakaya is the bridge between the nirmanakaya and dharmakaya); the insult empowerment as the ‘shérab yeshé kyi wang’ or ‘knowledge-wisdom empowerment’ (the insult being a pure empty reflection of Nyoshul’s mind); and the saintly charade empowerment as the ‘tsig wang’ or ‘word empowerment’ (the charade being the empty expectations which are miraculously and completely unexpectedly fulfilled in the unification of the previous stages of empowerment). For detailed clarification of the four empowerments, see Ngakpa Chögyam, Wearing the Body of Visions, Aro Books, 1995, Chapter 7.

[155] gTértön Cho’gyür Lingpa (gTer sTon mChog ’gyur gLing pa, 1829–1870).

[156] Butcher’s is Cockney rhyming slang: ‘butcher’s hook’ rhymes with ‘look’, hence ‘Take a butcher’s at this’ means ‘Take a look at this’.

[157] Milarépa had to build nine stone structures, each larger than the previous one. Each structure apart from the last had to be dismantled on its completion and each stone returned to where it was found. Milarépa’s back became one huge running sore with the labour of carrying large stones and he practically died of the exertion. See The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, volumes 1 and 2, translated by Garma CC Chang, University Books, 1962.

[158] Both Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had told me that homosexual paedophilia was common in Tibetan monasteries – so these references were not
merely there for shock value. This was common knowledge. Both Lamas also had high praise for worthy monastic practitioners and for the institution itself – when it was correctly maintained.

[159] In Tibet precipitation of this variety is described as ‘the rain of flowers’. The reasoning behind this, is that the rain kisses the cheeks in a delicate way. It caresses the skin as if flower petals were touching your face.

[160] The sky at high altitude is very dark blue due to the thin atmosphere. This gives an unusual intensity to phenomena such as rainbows, and their diverse variants: sun-dogs, circum-zentihal arcs, circum-horizontal arcs, para-helic arcs, and solar columns – caused by ice crystals in the upper atmosphere. The passing of realised beings is often accompanied by ‘sky phenomena’ which do not fit into any of the recognised categories.

[161] Thig-lés are manifestations of the essence of the elements that appear in visionary practices. They are the atomic structure of being, and familiarity with that level of experience is what leads to the accomplishment of the rainbow body.

[162] Drong (‘brong) is the wild prototype of the yak. Drongs stand up to seven foot at the shoulder, and can be a dangerous proposition when roused. The horns of some drong come into the category of ra’dzab (ra ’dzab – mantra horn) and turn black on contact with poison.

[163] Tsogyel Gé’phel Jong in Yang-lé-shöd is an example of such a gompa. Sonam Sangpo Rinpoche and Khandro Tséring Wangmo live there, along with various practice couples such as Lama Lodró and Jomo Nyida Wangmo. This was once the home of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel Déchen.

[164] Thunderbolt King of the Sky (rNam rGyal rDo rJe).

[165] Dri (bri) is the female of the yak (gYag). It is common in the West to speak of yak-milk and yak-butter – but this is equivalent to our speaking of bull-milk and bull-butter. Westerners who travel to Nepal also mistake dzos for yaks and dris. The Dzo (rDzo) and Dzomo are cross-breeds with cattle and are smaller than the yak and dri. Dzomos prefer the lower altitudes, and produce creamier milk than the dri.

[166] Ma-za-dor sum – Mamo Ékajati, Za Rahula, and Dorje Legpa (Skt. vajra sadhu).

[167] A tsèn is a protector who is still within the bounds of duality.

[168] Dér-gé is a town in Kham. The ornamental filigree ironwork of Dér-gé was much prized. Such ironwork was often partially gilded, giving a fabulous contrast between dark iron and gold. Shrine boxes were made in this style and are amongst the greatest treasures of old Tibet.

[169] Shi-ga-tsé, a town in Southern Tibet, was famous for its wonderful carpets – and in particular for the specially shaped ‘saddle carpets’ resembling numnahs (the shaped pads—of Indian origin—which are placed under the saddle for dressage). The Shi-ga-tsé carpet saddle sat on top of the Tibetan wooden saddle. The carpets were also renowned for their beautiful flower patterns and the softness of their wool pile.

[170] Nomad fashion allowed a chuba to be worn in various ways – so that one could ride stripped to the waist or exposing one arm – depending on the temperature.

[171] Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche said “Local protectors, same like Mafia – you must be very powerful to receive favours without trouble getting. Always something in return expecting … and if not paying – then everything losing – even life! If power having, then
work yourself doing – no need Mafia asking.”

[172] Traktung Düd’jom Lingpa (khrag ’thung bDud ’joms gLing pa, 1835–1903).


[174] Thunder: druk-ké (’brug sKad) or druk-ngar (’brug ngar) – the voice of the dragon.

[175] Gyèling (rGya gLing) – Tibetan oboe or shawm related to the Indian shenai. Silnyen (sil sNyan) – a pair of large cymbals. Both gyèling and silnyen are used for the practice of peaceful awareness-beings. Rolmo (rol mo) are a pair of heavy cymbals – smaller than silnyen but having a large hemispherical boss. Dungchen (dung chen) is the large horn – usually over five feet in length.

[176] Ga’kyl (dGa ’khyil) – circle of joy: three-sectioned spiral representing essence, nature, and energy according to Dzogchen. Yung-drung (gYung drung) – swastika. The anticlockwise form symbolises the sky and Dzogchen. The clockwise form symbolises the Earth and Mahamudra. The word ‘swastika’ is derived from the Sanskrit word svastika, meaning auspicious. It is composed of su meaning ‘good’ and asti, ‘being’. The suffix ka intensifies meaning. The Nazi emblem, the Harkenkreuz (German – meaning ‘crooked cross’) which was derived from this ancient symbol sat ‘diamond-wise’ and was used in both directions without reason. The Eastern forms always sit square.

[177] Thig-lé (thig le) – essence: often depicted as concentric circles of infinitely variegated colours.


[179] Tsog’khorlo (tshogs ’khorlo, Skt. ganachakra) – a tantric ritual feast in which the participants actualise themselves as yidams.

[180] Drüpchen (grub chen) means mahasiddha – one who is possessed of great accomplishment.


[182] Ka’ thog rDo rje gDan dGon-pa – founded in 1159.

[183] sDe-dGe.

[184] Dam-pa bDe gShegs, 1122–1192.

[185] Ga’u (ga’u) – amulet, receptacle, reliquary box, or pendant for religious objects.


[187] Rinpoche gave the name of a place – but it need not be transcribed here.


[189] It can either be an unfaceted crystal sphere, a circular mirror, or a faceted crystal. These, respectively, are symbols of gDang, rolpa, and rTsal (gDang, rol pa, and rTsal) which are three ways in which nondual energy functions as the display of the nature of Mind.
Gurning is the art of grotesque facial expressions. A typical expression involves projecting the lower jaw as far forward and upward as possible whilst covering the upper lip with the lower lip.

This prophecy of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche was accomplished when Ngak’chang Rinpoche was the age of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. Both he and Khandro Déchen ride regularly in Britain and Montana.

See An Odd Boy.

Drukpa Künlegs (’brug pa kun legs / ’brug sMyon kun dGa’ legs pa), lived 1455–1529. The name Drukpa pertains to dragon, the land of Bhutan (Druk-yul / ’brug yul) and the Drukpa Kagyüd School. It could be rendered as Utterly Pleasing Dragon or Completely Gratifying Dragon.

Tsé-zha – a hat crested with stiffened woollen strands worn by monastics in monastic rituals.

Rinpoche requested that these stories should be kept reserved and not made public – so they are not told in this book.

Rinpoche mentioned several Lamas by name – but it is not appropriate to give details.

Rinpoche gave me teachings the next day on the female disciples of Padmasambhava and Yeshé Tsogyel. These are transcribed in the chapter ‘Sky Dancers’.

Nyima ’ö-Zér (nyi ma ’od zer) – Rays of the Sun: one of the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava.

Khandro Losèl Drölma (mKha’ ‘gro bLo sGrol ma).


Mi-gu (mi rGod) – literally, ‘wild man’.

The term ‘Abominable Snowman’ was coined in 1921 by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Howard-Bury who led the Royal Geographical Society Everest Reconnaissance Expedition. In 1832, the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal published BH Hodgson’s account of ‘… a tall, bipedal creature covered with long dark hair, which seemed to flee in fear.’ In 1925, NA Tombazi saw a creature at about 15,000 feet near Zemu Glacier. He observed the creature from about 200 to 300 yards as ‘… unquestionably … like a human being, walking upright …’ In 1970, British mountaineer Don Whillans witnessed a creature when scaling Annapurna, heard odd cries and saw a dark shape moving near his camp. He observed human-like footprints in the snow, and viewed a bipedal, ape-like creature for twenty minutes as it apparently searched for food not far from his camp. In early December 2007, American television presenter Joshua Gates reported finding a series of footprints in the Everest region of Nepal resembling descriptions of yeti. Casts were made of the prints – which were examined by Jeffrey Meldrum of Idaho State University, who believed them to be too morphologically accurate to be fraudulent.

These were all words that Pema Dorje found in the dictionary as other forms of abominable. He could not translate them all into Tibetan – but the ones he did translate seemed to be highly comical to Rinpoche.

Gé-mangpa Dung-zha ’ö-Sel.
[205] Rilbu (ril bu) – Tibetan medicinal pills.
[206] Ngak’chang Kong Myon (sNgags ’chang kong sMyon) – the mad yogi of Kongpo.
[207] Kham Myon Dharma Seng-gé (khams sMyon dhar ma seng ge).
[208] Tsé-kyä Myona Chingkar Donyö Dorje (rTas sKya sMyon pa phying dKar don yod rDo rJe) – who lived at the cusp of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
[209] Tsang Myon Héra Ru-pa’i Gyan-chan (gTsang sMyon he ru ka ras pa’i rGyan can, 1452–1507) – author of Milarepa’s biography.
[211] Rinpoche could not recall the name of the Lama.
[212] The three secret oral instructions: dam-ngag dongpa’i sum (gDam ngag sDong pa’i gSum) – the spontaneous self-liberation of body, speech, and mind.
[213] Küntuzangpo Ralpa Nakpo mDo (Kun tu bZang po ral pa nag po’i mDo).
[214] Shèl-kar Za Dorje Tso (shel dKar gZa rDor rJe mTsho).
[215] In 1979, Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche instructed Ngak’chang Rinpoche to eat meat as a regular part of his diet – and he gave up being vegetarian at that point.
[216] In 1979, Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche instructed Ngak’chang Rinpoche to eat meat as a regular part of his diet – and he gave up being vegetarian at that point.
[219] The Chini Lama was referred to as such because the first Lama of his line to be governor of Bodha spoke Chinese (as well as Nepalese and Tibetan).
[222] Gyaltsen (rGyal mTshan) – victory banner.
[223] Namkha sum-trug (nam mKha’ sum phrug gi dGongs pa) is ‘the self-realisation of the three skies’, and involves staring into the night sky. It is also called tshan-thun (mTshan thun), night session.
[224] The Chini Lama was referred to as such because the first Lama of his line to be governor of Bodha spoke Chinese (as well as Nepalese and Tibetan).
[225] Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche was a master of Nyingma mahayoga tantra – particularly an exponent of Tröma Nakmo from the Düd’jom gTérsar. His root teachers were Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche and Kyabjé Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche.
[226] See Marsha Woolf and Karen Blanc, The Rain Maker, Sigo Press, 1994. The book was self-published and contains errors – but it was sincerely written and gives a charming picture of Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche. Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche would be more accurately known as ‘The Rain Cutter’ (char gÇod pa) as he was mainly called upon to stop rain and hail.
[227] Near Hanuman Dhoka Road just off New Road, which turns into Ganga Path.
[228] A ‘bread-head’ is hippie patois for a person obsessed with money.
’dzem-ma Za Lhamo (’dzem ma za lha mo).

Shèdra for gomchens – a shèdra (bShad gRwa) is a college and a gomchen (sGom chen) is a great mediator.

Dob-dobs were the ‘monastic police’ in the largest of the gompas. They wore to-nga with outsize elephant ears—the squared points of which had outsize loops in which they held their thumbs—to enhance their authoritarian swagger. They also carried large wooden staves with which to break up any form of disorderly behaviour.

Pawo (dPa bo) was the word that Kyabjé Küntze Dorje Rinpoche used – it means ‘hero’ but it has other meanings in relation to teachings on the male and female aspects of the realised state. Colloquially in Vajrayana, men and women are sometimes referred to as pawos and khandros.

That photograph is the cover photograph of this book.

The Beatles referred to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as ‘Maharooni’ when they became disillusioned with his behaviour. The people in Tintagel practised an admixture of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Western magic (which failed to abjure Satanism).

Shakespeare, Macbeth (Act 4, scene 1, lines 14–19): the cauldron incantation of the Three Witches.

Students in the context of Vajrayana—signifies people who receive empowerments from a Lama.

Pronunciation: rhymes with ‘newer house’.

Rainbow of Liberated Energy and Journey into Vastness. These books were later revised and enlarged. Rainbow of Liberated Energy was re-titled Spectrum of Ecstasy and published, first by Aro Books – and later by Shambhala Publications. Journey into Vastness was re-titled Roaring Silence and published by Shambhala Publications. The other writings on which the examination was based were published later as Wearing the Body of Visions and Entering the Heart of the Sun and Moon, both published by Aro Books, 1995 and 2009, respectively.

Ngakma Nor’dzin Pamo. Her husband—Ngakpa ’ö-Dzin Tridral—took ordination in 1990 as the third ordained member of our sangha. Ngakpa Rig’dzin Dorje had been ordained in 1989.

Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo (’jam dByangs mKhyen brTse’i dBang po, 1820–1892) was a major gTértön (gTer sTon – revealer of spiritual treasures). His gTértön name was Pema ’ö-Sel Do-ngak Lingpa and he was the last of the Five Majestic gTértöns. He was a contemporary of Cho’gyur Lingpa (mChog gyur gLing pa, 1829–1870) and Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tha’ye (’jam mGon kong sPrul bLo gros mTha’ yas, 1813–1899) and was the incarnation of both Dri’mé Shényèn (dri ‘med bShes gNyen – Vimalamitra, eighth century) and Chögyal Trisong Detsen (chos rGyal khri srong lDe bTsan, 742–800). He was one of the founders of the Ri-mé non-partisan/non-sectarian movement.

Ngakma Shardrö Du-nyam Wangmo is a disciple of Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen—who now has her own students.

Venerable Thanavaro (Giuseppe Proscia) had a keen interest in the Arts from an early age; he studied music, dance, and drama. Introduced to Buddhism by a disciple of a Tibetan Lama—he later became a Theravadin monk.
Gilbert Harris probably gleaned this information from Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche – as he had studied with him for a brief period.

Basil Hallam (1889–1916) – English actor and vocalist who created the character Gilbert the Filbert for ‘The Passing Show’. He also recorded the song in June 1914. His death in action two years later is described by Rudyard Kipling in ‘The Irish Guards in the Great War’.

The conference was held in the half-basement of Chonor House – the Tibetan Cultural Centre in McLeod Ganj.

Nyon mong héruka (nyon mongs he ru ka).

The word héruka (traktung – khrags mThung) means ‘blood drinker’ and applies to wrathful yidams. The idea is that one drinks the hot blood of the elemental neuroses and transforms them into the five nondual wisdoms.

Yeshé ‘cholwa (ye shes ‘chol ba).

Myon héruka (sMyon he ru ka).


Human femur trumpet used in various wrathful Vajrayana practices.

Zér nga (gZer lNga) the five nails – a Dzogchen practice involving the visualised dissolution of the elements into space.

Char-chöd pa (char gÇod pa) – literally ‘rain-cutter’. Usually translated as ‘weathermaker’.

‘Blushing-fair’ signifies the mixing of the red female essence and the white male essence. Yidams described as blushing-fair are pink in colour and symbolise the union of the male and female principles of Vajrayana.

Ba Donga is not Sanskrit. Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche never elucidated on its possible colloquial meaning in Tibetan. It was presumed by all who heard the story that it was a slang term for penis.

Ajitta (chhi ’med) – deathless or undying.

‘Khordong gTérchen Nuden Dorje Dro-phan Lingpa Tröllö-tsül (’Khor dong gTé rchen nus 1Dan ’gro phan gLing pa gro lod rTsäl) 1809–1872.

Bangor, North Wales.

The Frankfurt Ring is a centre which hosts spiritual teachers from all traditions.

The Seven-line Vajra Song of Padmasambhava.

Ground beef in the USA.

Kusha grass (khrus kyi rTswa) – *Desmostachya bipinnata*. Grass with long stalks and numerous pointed leaves used in various ceremonies.

Rig’dzin Drüphthab (rig ’dzin la ma’i grubs thab, Skt. vidyadhara guru sadhana), called the ‘Big Rig’dzin’ in Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s sangha. It was Padmasambhava’s transmission to Khyéchung Lotsa, one of his twenty-five closest disciples – and it was the first gTérma of Nuden Dorje, another of Rinpoche’s previous incarnations. It was predicted that it should be practised secretly for five generations before
dissemination. Khalden Lingpa and Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche received it independently. Rinpoche was the first to reveal it and give transmission for its practice.

[265] Dur-trö (dur khorod, Skt. smashana) – charnel ground or cremation ground.

[266] Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche had the custom of having his students wear red shamthabs when they practised. This was his style due to the fact that it worked that way in ‘Khordong Gompa in Tibet. In that gompa there was a deliberate lack of distinction between monastics and the gö kar chang lo’i dé.

[267] Takdröl (bTags grol) – liberation on wearing. There are six modes of liberation (drolwa druk – grol ba drug) according to the sense fields: 1. thödröl (thos grol), liberation on hearing; 2. takdröl; 3. thongdröl (mThong grol), liberation on seeing; 4. drangdröl (dran grol), liberation on remembering; 5. myongdröl (myong grol), liberation on tasting; 6. rekdrol (reg grol), liberation on touching. The takdröl hair ornament was bestowed on the author in 1985 in Cardiff by Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche.

[268] ‘Khordong gTérchen Tulku Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin (‘Khor dong gTér chen sPrul sKu Chhi ‘med Rig ‘dzin, 1922–2002) was also known as a gTértön Zilgnön Lingpa and revealed many gTérmas.

[269] rDo rJe Brag – one of the Six Ma-gön, the six ‘Mother Gompas’ of the Nyingma Tradition.

[270] The Chang gTér (byang gTer) – Northern Treasure, was discovered in 1366 by Rig’dzin Go’dem, in the cave of Zangzang Lhadrak. Rig’dzin Go’dem—born in 1337—was renowned as a scholar and meditation master. He discovered a gTérma coffer of five chambers in Zangzang Lhadrak Cave. His third incarnation established the Dorje Drak in Central Tibet, which became renowned as one of the most important Nyingma gompas. The Dorje Drak tradition of the Northern gTérmas has been transmitted without interruption to the present day. It is now held by Kyabjé Taklung Tsétrül Rinpoche.

[271] Mahasiddha Humkara (rDo rJe Hung rDzad) – one of the preëminent Rig’dzins (bKa’ babs rig ‘dzin chen po brGyad – the eight great Vidyadharas).

[272] Gyalwa Thöndrüp incarnated as Namgyal Gönpo, a disciple of gTértön Rig’dzin Go’dem (discoverer of the Chang gTér – Northern gTérmas). Namgyal Gönpo incarnated as: Drüpcen Sang-gyé Palzang; Drüpcen Tong-chö Répa; Drüpcen Bum-pa; gTértön Chenpo Düd’dül Dorje; and finally as Taksham Nuden Dorje (sTak sham nus lDan rDo rJe) before the incarnation line divided into the lineages of Nuden Dorje Dro-phan Lingpa of the ‘ö-Chung Clan in Nyi-khok; and Düd’jom Lingpa of the A-Kyong Clan. Chhi’mèd Rig’dzin Rinpoche’s previous incarnation, Khalden Lingpa (mKha’ lDan gLing pa) lived to the age of thirty-seven.

[273] Seng-gé Dongma (seng ge gDong ma, Skt. simhamukha) – the lion-headed khandro or dakini. Tröma Nakmo (khro ma naq mo, Skt. kroda kali) – the black wrathful mother. Dorje Tröllö (rDo rJe gro lod) – thunderbolt wrath: the crazy wisdom manifestation of Padmasambhava.


[275] Ngöndro (sNgon ‘gro) – preliminary practices.
Reference to the ‘Bermuda Triangle’.

Bob Dylan, ‘Like a Rolling Stone’.


A gö kar chang lo incarnation in the family lineage of Ratna Lingpa. The author corresponded with him up until his passing in 2007.

For those interested in helping to sponsor this project – please contact: Sang-ngak-chö-dzong, PO Box 65, Penarth, South Glamorgan, CF64 1WF, Britain – or email: queries@arobuddhism.org

Khandro Déchen Tsédrüp Rolpa’i Yeshé (*mKha’ gro bDe chen tshe grub rol pa’i ye shes*).

Sang-yum (*gSang yum*) – literally ‘secret mother’, but ‘mother’ in this sense pertains to the empty quality of wisdom which gives birth to method. ‘Sang-yum’ is therefore often translated as ‘mystic consort’.

Ngakma Nor’dzin Rangjung Pamo and Ngakpa ’ö-Dzin Nyima Tridral.


Desmond Dekker (1941–2006) was the Jamaican singer-songwriter who co-wrote ‘Israelites’ with Leslie Kong.

*The Adventures of Champion* was an American children’s Western series that aired from September 1955 to March 1956. In Britain the series was broadcast under the title *Champion the Wonder Horse*.

The actual name of the A’pho Rinpoche Gompa is Chhi’mèd Drüb-pa’i Ga’tsal.

Sé Rinpoche (*aka Ngawang Namgyal Rinpoche – born in 1963*) was the son of A’pho Rinpoche. He is thus the third lineage holder of Togden Drüpwang Shakya Shri (1853–1919). Shakya Shri was a gTértön of the Drukpa Kagyüd School. Sé Rinpoche was recognised as the incarnation of one of the heart students of Shakya Shri – Tripön Pema Chögyal (1876–1958). Tripön Pema Chögyal was the emanation of Gyalwa Gotsangpa (1189–1258) the eleventh Gyalwang Drukpa – Head of the Drukpa Lineage. Tripön Pema Chögyal travelled on foot from Ladakh to Eastern Tibet to receive teachings from the Togden Shakya Shri and devoted the rest of his life to retreat and teaching. Shakya Shri appointed him the holder of his transmissions.

Rolang (*ro langs, Skt. vetala*) – zombie: a human corpse which has been re-animated by a demonic entity. The term can also mean vampire.

’Phowa (’pho ba, Skt. samkranti) is the practice of dying with awareness, and of the transference of the mindstream at the time of death. This practice can be performed for others – if one has gained the ability oneself through retreat.

Rangjung Chörten is known to Nepalis as Swayambunath. Rangjung means ‘self arisen’ and this chörten has been a place of Buddhist pilgrimage since the fourth century A.D.

Yang-lé-shöd is known to Nepalis as Pharping. Lama Gyaltsen is also known as Lama Sonam Sangpo.

Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar is the widow of Lama Yeshé Dorje Rinpoche.
Ngakpa Rig’dzin Dorje.

Ngakpa Trögyal Dorje, a disciple of Ngak’chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen, is a medical doctor.

‘Chanting is dandy.’ Dönpa means ‘liturgical chant’.

Long-dé (rDzogs chen kLong sDe) is one of the three series of Dzogchen: Dzogchen sem-dé; Dzogchen long-dé; and Dzogchen men-ngag-dé.

The Three Vows (sDom pa gSum) – the five precepts, the Bodhisattva vow, and the vows to the Lama.

This identifies Drukpa Künlegs as belonging to the Kagyüd lineage.

Drukpa (‘brug pa) – inhabitant of Bhutan. Druk-yul (‘brug yul) – Land of the Dragon. Drukpa also signifies the Drukpa Kagyüd lineage, which is the closest lineage to the Nyingma Tradition and has many similarities. The same is true of the Drigung Kagyüd lineage. Both lineages have gTérmas and Dzogchen lineages within them.

There are many different kinds of khandro (mKha’ ’gro, Skt. dakini), and there are lists of particular qualities. Not all are beautiful in the archetypal sense – and some are hideous. They can be obese or deformed – but each has a particular aspect which is seen as valuable in respect of relationship. The same is true of the pawo (dPa bo, Skt. daka or vira), the male equivalent for women.

See Khandro Déchen and Ngakpa Chögyam, Entering the Heart of the Sun and Moon, Aro Books, 2009. This book is a commentary on the Khandro Pawo Nyi-da Mélong Gyüd (mKha’ ’gro dPa bo nyi zLa me long rGyud) from the gTérma of Khyungchen Aro Lingma.

ibid.

Bum (pronunciation: rhymes with book) – one hundred thousand.

Wang, rLung and tri (dBang, rLung, and khrid) – tantric empowerment. Wang – transmission through the power of symbol; rLung – transmission through the sound of the voice; tri – transmission through explanation.

This refers to the ‘dark retreat’ practices of Dzogchen togal (rDzogs chen thod rGal).

Gékor (ge dKor) – overseer of monastic discipline.

Chal (phyal). Also dro-khog chenmo (grod khog chen mo).

Trülku’i ‘khorlo (sPrul sKu ’i ’khor lo, Skt. nirmanachakra) – the navel. Also tè-wa’i padmo (lTe ba ’i pad mo).

Ku jidpo (dKu lJid po).

Ku-lumpo (dKu zLum po).

Bhaga’i kyil’khor (bha ga’i dKyil ‘khor). Also sang-né (gSang gNas).

Kyil’khor thig-nyi (dKyil ’khor thig nyis) – the thig-lé cosmograms.

Nutog padmo (nu tog pad mo). Also numa yati (nu ma ya ti).

Ku-sum (sKu gSum, Skt. trikaya) – the three spheres of being: chöku (chos sKu, Skt. dharmakaya), the sphere of unconditioned potentiality; longku (longs sKu, Skt. sambhogakaya), the sphere of realised visionary appearances; and, trülku (sPrul sKu, Skt. sambhogakaya).
nirmanakaya), the sphere of realised manifestation. These also relate to emptiness, energy, and form.

[317] The border village between Nepal and India en route to Sikkim.

[318] Naljorma 'ö-Sel Nyima.

[319] Naljorpa Bar-ché is the student of ours, who—with Ngakma Shardröl— was closest to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche and Jomo Sam’phel. Künzang Dorje Rinpoche said that Bar-ché Dorje was his son and entrusted him with his essential quintessence Ling Gésar lineage.

[320] Naljorma Dzü’drül Pamo and Ngakpa Trögyal Dorje are a teaching couple within the Confederate Sanghas of Aro, as are Ngakma Shé-zér and Ngakpa Namgyal Dorje. Ngakpa Trö-rig Dorje is one of our ordained sangha.


[322] With the syllable Om, all that could be wished for fills the sky. With the syllable A’a: alcohol is transformed into wisdom nectar. With the syllable Hung: alcohol brings happiness and satisfaction.

[323] The lineage of the Buddhas’ primordial wisdom; the Rig’dzins’ symbolic lineage; the lineage of oral transmission from Lama to disciple; the lineage of empowerment; the lineage of the authorised holders of the teachings; and, the lineage of the entrusted khandros and pawos.

[324] rTsa sum (rTsa gSum) – three roots of Tantra: Lama, Yidam, Khandro/Pawo (bLa ma, yi gDam, mKha’ ’gro / pDa bo, Skt. guru, deva, dakini/daka).

[325] Ngakpa Rig’dzin Taklung Dorje is a teacher within the Confederate Sanghas of Aro. His wife Tsal’gyür Wangmo is one of our students.

[326] He said the same a year later to Naljorpa Rang-rig Dorje—an ordained disciple from New York—who is similarly afflicted.

[327] Gomtag (sGom thag) – meditation strap or belt.

[328] This refers to Aro Yeshé, the son of Khyungchen Aro Lingma. Aro Yeshé was albino.


[330] gTér Bum – treasure vase. A ceramic vase filled with 111 precious substances and empowered. These vases restore vitality to the elements (earth, water, fire, air and space) which have been depleted by pollutants in the environment. They have the power to magnetise wealth and abundance, improve health, remove obstacles to long life, pacify anger and warfare, and increase wisdom and realisation in those who are within their mandala. Traditionally a treasure vase is kept in one’s home or buried on a mountain top, at the source of water, in a field or garden.

[331] Authenticate—in this sense—is an alternative word to ‘bless’. An implement held with intention by a realised master, is said to have been authenticated i.e. it has been used for its intended purpose. This is then an inspiration for the one who is going to employ the
Vajrayana implemented in practice.
[332] Pencak Silat is an Indonesian martial art.
[333] Naljorpa Bar-ché Ying-rig Dorje and Naljorpa Chhi’mèd Künzang.
[334] Rang-rig Togden was the father of Khyungchen Aro Lingma. He received Ling Gésar as Mind gTérma in direct Mind transmission from Thangtong Gyalpo. See Bar-ché Dorje, Natural Heroism, to be published by Aro Books in 2012. Rang-rig Togden’s Ling Gésar gTérma is not the same gTérma of Ling Gésar as that given to Naljorpa Bar-ché by Künzang Dorje Rinpoche. These are two distinct lineages – but Künzang Dorje Rinpoche said that the gTérma of Rang-rig Togden was to be practised as the outer form of his own essence gTérma.
[335] Zha-nak (zhwa nag) is the black hat dance. It is practised by most of the gö kar chang lo’i dé in order to overcome obstacles to practice for oneself and others.
[336] Rinpoche inserted Ying-rig (dByings rig) into Bar-ché’s name – making him Naljorpa Bar-ché Ying-rig Dorje.
[337] No one addressed as ‘Rinpoche’ by their students (in Tibetan culture) would tell anyone that they were thus addressed – or suggest that they should be thus addressed.
[338] The fourteen root vows of Vajrayana are the same in every tantric system of every school. The branch vows—which are secret—apply to costume and many other specifics. They may number in the hundreds.
[339] In spite of the fact that Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche is a gö kar chang lo Lama – he is held in awe by all.
[340] Ampleness of physique is seen as a sign of health, strength, and vitality by Tibetans – and the terms ‘powerful’ and ‘wrathful’ are used in this context.
[341] The clear light phase prior to death.
[342] Ku-dung (sKu gDung) – the physical vestigial existence of a Lama who has died with full awareness.
[343] Forty-nine days is the symbolic time frame which relates to the period between death and rebirth. In this period the Bardo Thödröl is read and other rites are performed for the person who has passed over.
[344] Dorsem (rDo sens) is a contraction of Dorje Sempa (rDo rJe sens dPa, Skt. Vajrasattva) – a yidam connected both with Dzogchen and bardo practice.
[345] This is the same Kyabjé Trülshik Rinpoche whose gompa Khandro Ten’dzin Drölkar went to when she was young.
[346] Ku-dung zhug’bul (sKu gDung bZhugs ‘bul) – cremation rites.
[347] Lama Damtsig Dorje – well known for funerary expertise, having directed the cremations of numerous Lamas.
[349] Kar-zèn (dKar gZan) – white shawl.
[350] The ‘Flight of the Vulture’ is a sem’dzin (sens ’dzin) from the Aro gTér. A sem’dzin is a Dzogchen method for finding the presence of awareness in the nondual state. The words are those of the Seven-line Song of Padmasambhava and the vajra melody facilitates...
finding the presence of awareness in the dimension of sound.


[352] The book An Odd Boy is a monothematic Arts-memoir of the author’s life from 1957 to 1975. It began as a lengthy rambling essay intended only for students. Then – through the enthusiasm of Naljorma gZa’tsal it was converted into a memoir—set in a quasi roman à clef mode—to make it suitable for a general audience. The Crossroads, Volume I of An Odd Boy, was published by Aro Books Worldwide in July 2011 – the subsequent three volumes to be published at six-month intervals thereafter.

[353] Yeshé (ye shes, Skt. jnana) – primordial wisdom, uncreated knowledge.


[356] Gō kar chang lo’i dé (Gos dKar lCang lo’i sDe).

[357] Space element: Nampar Nangdzé (nam par sNang mDzad, Skt. Vairochana) and Ying-chugma (dByings phyug ma, Skt. Dharmadhatvishvari).

[358] Air element: Dön-yō Drüp-pa (don yod grub pa, Skt. Amoghasiddhi) and Damtsig Drölma (dam tshig sGrol ma, Skt. Visvapani, or Green Tara).


[360] Water element: Mi’trugpa (mi ’khrug pa, Skt. Akshobya) and Dorje Ma-ma-ki (rDo rJe ma ma ki, Skt. Mamaki).

[361] Earth element: Rinchen Jung-né (rin chen ‘byung gNas, Skt. Ratnasambhava) and Sang-gyé Chanma (sangs rGyas sPyan ma, Skt. Locana).

[362] gDang, rolpa, and rTsal – essence, nature, and energy.

[363] Sang-yum and sang-yab (gSang yum / gSang yab) – literally ‘secret mother’ and ‘secret father’.

[364] Trisong Détsen (khri srong de’u bTsan), 790–844 A.D.

[365] Kar-sum (dKar gSum) – the three whites: milk, butter, and yoghurt. Ngar-sum (mNgar gSum) – the three sweets: sugar, honey, and molasses.

[366] Khen-lob-chō-sum (mKhen sLob chos gSum). Khen refers to Khenpo Shantaraksita, Lob to the Tantric Buddha Lopön Padmasambhava, and Chō to the Dharma King, Trisong Détsen.

[367] Rabjung ngur-mig gi dé (rab byung ngur sMrig gi sDe).

[368] King Tri Ralpachen (khri ral pa can) ruled central Tibet in the years 866–896.

[369] Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche wrote this text—as intended—in 1999. It was privately published later as a booklet called ‘A Descriptive History of the Rig’dzinpas and Rig’dzinmas of the Great Secret Mantra Vehicle – They Who Are Dignified in White Skirts and Resplendent with Long Hair’. This text varies in various respects from the oral instruction given to me in 1975. Although there are both omissions and additions which make them dissimilar – they carry the same import. The printed booklet also contains details of mahayoga symbolism—which Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche did not mention
in 1975—which would prove of great interest to anyone studying Vajrayana in a gö kar chang lo lineage.

[370] Kham (khangs) / A-mé (a mya).
[371] Ngari (mNga’ ris) / Jopa (jo pa).
[372] Ü-tsang (dBus gTsang) / Ngak’chang (sNgags ‘chang).
[373] Serkhyimpas (ser khyim pa) – Ser refers to the yellow monastic colour and khyimpas means householder.
[374] Töd Gugé (sTod gu ge) and Gungthang (gung thang).
[375] Nangchen (nang chen) and Dê-ge (sDe dGe).

[376] “In three valleys of Nangchen and Dê-ge ngakpas practised ‘The Triangle of Earth and Sky’. At any triangular confluence of lines formed by earth, sky, valleys, and rivers, the syllable ‘Ham’ can be placed inside a triangle. This is dangerous for anyone but ngakpas – but is of great benefit. If people are wracked with fearful mental experiences caused by hope and fear, then the presence of those who have sharpness and swiftness and other powerful energies of wrathful activity is extremely beneficial. The gö kar chang lo’i dé are therefore always of great value to people.” Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche

[378] Drogön Tsang (‘gro mGon tshang).
[379] Lachen Minling Trichen Rinpoche (bla chen sMin gLing khri chen rin po che).
[382] Amdo (a mDo), Chakri Phurdrak (chags ri’i phur brag), and Shangzab Phulung (shangs zab phu lung).
[383] Repkong (reb kong).
[384] Ü (dBus) and Tsang (gTsang).
[385] Zabphu ngakpas (zab phu sNgags pa) – ngakpas from Shangzab Phulung.
[386] Nambu karpo (gNam bu dKar po) – white woollen shamthab.
[387] Khandro (mKha’ ‘gro, Skt. dakini) is an abbreviation of khandroma (mKha’ ‘gro ma) which literally means female sky-goer. Keith Dowman, who translated the biography of Yeshé Tsogyel which was published as Sky Dancer, coined the term ‘sky dancer’ – and it has passed into popular usage because it is a highly expressive term.
[388] Khandro Chenmo Yeshé Tsogyel (mKha’ ‘gro chen mo ye shes mTsho rGyal).
[389] Yangchen-ma (dByang chen ma, Skt. Sarasvati) – the Buddha of Knowledge and Eloquence. Yangchen-ma’s manifestations are as follows: Rinchen Yangchen-ma (rin chen dByangs chan ma), Melodious Ratna Buddha; Dorje Yangchen-ma (rDo rJe dByangs chan ma), Melodious Vajra Buddha; Padma’i Yangchen-ma (pad ma’i dByangs chan ma), Melodious Padma Buddha; Thrinlé-kyi Yangchen-ma (‘phrin las kyi dByangs chan ma), Melodious Karma Buddha; Sang-gyé Kün-ngö Yangchen-ma (sang rGyas kun dNgos dByangs chan ma), Melodious Embodiment of all Buddhas; and Ngawang Yangchen-ma (ngag dBang dByangs chan ma), Melodious Buddha of Powerful Speech.
Mandarava (man da ra wa).

Tashi Chhi’drèn (bKra shis khyi ’dren).

Dorje Tröllö (rDo rJe gro lod).

Kala Drüpcchen (ka la grub chen ma, Skt. Kalasiddhi).

Rainbow body (’ja’ lus).

Shakya Lhamo (sha kya lha mo, Skt. Shakyadevi).

Mélong Za Rinchen Tso (me long za rin chen mTsho). According to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche, she was the original of the incarnation line that preceded A-yé Khandro (A ye mKha’ ’gro), one of the two sang-yums of Aro Yeshé (A ro ye shes) and the previous incarnation of Khandro Déchen Tsédrüp Rolpa’i Yeshé.

Tshan-ma Za Dorje Tso (Tshan ma za rDo rJe mTsho).

Tshom-bu Za Pema Tso (tshom bu za padma mTsho).

Yidam (Yi gDam) – meditational deity: the nondual anthropomorphic form employed for self-identification in visualisation practices of Tantra.

Tshé-nam Za Sang-gyé Tso (tshe gNam za sangs gyas mTsho).

Rü thog Za Thönrüpma (rus thog za don grub ma).

Shèl-kar Za Dorje Tso (shel dKar za rDor rJe mTsho).

Rü thog Za Thönrüpma (rus thog za don grub ma).

Shubu Za Sherpa-ma (shu bu za’ shar pa ma) – Lady from the East: sister of Shubu Pagyi Seng-gé (shu bu dpal gyi seng ge), one of the twenty-five disciples of Padmasambhava.

’ö-ché Za Kar-Gyelmo (’o ches za sKar rGyal mo).

Yamdrok Za Chökyi Drölma (yar ’brog za chos kyi grol ma). Yamdrok is one of the Drappa’i Tso-chen Gyêd (grags pa’i mTsho chen brGyad) – the Four Renowned Lakes: 1. Yamdrok Yutso (yar ’brog gYu mTsho), the Turquoise Lake; 2. Tri shöd Gyelmo (khri shod rGyal mo), Ko-ko nor—The Blue Lake in Do-mé—also known as Ling Tso Ngön-mo (ling mTsho sNgon mo); 3. Tso Mapham (mTsho ma pham), The Invincible Lake (Manasarowar); 4. Chang-gi Nam Tso (byang gi gNam mTsho), the Celestial Northern Lake.

’dzem-ma Za Lhamo (’dzem ma za lha mo).

Chu-len (bCud len) – extracting the essence.

Tibetan pills compounded of many different herbs and minerals.

I practised this—according to Rinpoche’s instruction—in July 1983 at Lam-rim Chöling in Raglan, Wales.

’bar Za Lha-yang (’bar za lha dByangs).

Cha-rog Za Changchubma (bya rog za byang chub ma).

Aro Za Druk-tsal Shèldrakma (A ro za ’brug rTsal shel brag ma).

According to Künzang Dorje Rinpoche, she was the origin of the incarnation line that preceded Aro Yeshé.

Drom Za Pema-sèl (’brom za padma gSal).
Men-ngag Khandro Nying-thig (man ngag mKha’ ’gro sNyin thig, Skt. upadeshavarga dakini hridayasara) – ‘The Implicit Instruction which is the Heart Essence of the Khandros’: an essential transmission of Dzogchen.

Rong Za Siddhi (rong za si ddhi).

Trum Za Shel ma (khrum za shel ma).

Khu Za Peltsun (’khu za dPal tsun).

Namthar (rNam thar).

Dorje Bérnakchen (rDo rJe ber nag chen) – the great black cloaked protector, a form of Nagpo Chenpo (nag po chen po, Skt. mahakala).

Nyênchen Thanglha is the protector of Kyabjé Künzang Dorje Rinpoche’s homeland. Regarding Nyênchen Thanglha, Drigung Rig’dzin Chödrak wrote his invocation of the protectors: ‘In the centre of the fragrant celestial realm of the northern direction – external phenomena spontaneously formed a four-peak snowy mountain, and inner phenomena manifested a treasure trove of precious jewels. There lives the obedient wealthy lord Nyênchen Thanglha. Great protector, Jowo Shakyamuni, and female celestial beings of fragrance, purify the warriors of Mon.’ Also Trülshik Pema Düd’dül wrote: ‘The heart son of the great celestial being Tshangpa; holder of the treasure of the trans-dimensional water being’s crown. Great liberator Nyênchen Thanglha – purify the vast assembly of Mon.’

Dzambu Ling (dzam bu gLing, Skt. Jambudvipa) – the world.

Black Chinese Ha Yang Tobchen; Yellow Mongolian Takmar Tobchen; Northern Takgig Mi-nak Tobchen; and Northern Mi-chen Tobchen.

1929.

Damchan Dorje Legpa (gDam chan rDo rJe legs pa, Skt. Vajra Sadhu) – one of the three main protectors of the Nyingma Tradition. He is shown riding either a goat or a snow lion.

Palden Lhamo (dPal lDan lha mo, Skt. Sri Devi) – the female consort of Nagpo Chenpo.

'ja’tshon Kön-chi’i (’ja’ tshon dKon chi’i) – a gTérma revealed by Rig’dzin ’ja’tshon Nyingpo (rig ’dzin ’ja’ tshon sNyin po, 1585–1656).

Nyingma Gyüd’bum (rNyin ma rGyud bum) – literally ‘The 100,000 Nyingma Tantras’. This is a collection belonging to the inner tantras, gathered by Ratna Lingpa and edited by Jig’mèd Lingpa. It contains ten volumes of Dzogchen, three volumes of anuyoga, six volumes of the inner section of mahayoga, thirteen volumes of the drüpthab section of mahayoga, one volume of protector practices, and three volumes comprising historical catalogues.

Rinchen gTérzdöd (rin chen gTer mDzod) – The Great Treasury of Precious gTérmas. This is a collection of the most important gTérmas of Padmasambhava, Vimalamitra, Vairochana and their closest disciples. It was gathered by Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Tha-yé and Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo.

Dung-sé Thrin-lé Norbu Rinpoche is the son of Kyabjé Düd’jom Rinpoche Jig’drel Yeshé Dorje.

Kam pu’i tar is the Tibetan phonetic rendition of ‘computer’. 
1995.

The primary form of Padmasambhava who sits in full lotus and holds a vajra to his heart.

Küntuzangpo (kun to bZang po).

Gö kar chang lo’i dé (Gos dKar lCang lo’i de).

This does not mean, however, that those with red robes never practise tantric teachings. One is not supposed to misinterpret this. There are monks and nuns who are tantric practitioners, such as Namkha’i Nyingpo – Essence of the Sky.

Mahasandhi is the Sanskrit word for the Tibetan word Dzogchen (rDzogs chen).