

Tsultrim Jyamtso

Dondrup Gyal

Translated by Lowell Cook

Tserang Namjyal. Jyumdre Namjyal. Tsultrim Jyamtso. Geshe Lharampa...

Ah yes, even with these many different names, they ultimately referred to him and him alone. These names were like tape recorders, recording all the events from the life of Geshe Tsultrim Jyamtso in perfect detail. And just like mirrors, these names reflected the tales of Geshe Tsultrim Jyamtso's joys and sorrows in images crisp and clear.

Ab-tsi, hidden behind these names were so many tears and so much laughter. Buried inside them was plenty of gloom and disgust, but also serenity and cheer. If you opened your mind a bit and retraced the cycles of day and night, months and years; the seasonal changes between summer and winter, spring and fall; and the ebb and flow of the moon waxing and waning, there's no way you could miss his unmistakable footprint with his trials and tribulations deeply imprinted on the path of the Lord of Death.



To be sure, this darling child seated in front of two loving parents was Tserang Namjyal. He was the golden yolk in their egg, the heart in their chests, and the pupil in their eyes. Tserang Namjyal's parents were honest folks with deep faith in the Three Jewels and great reverence for the law of karma. It was karma on their tongues when they opened their mouths and karma in their hearts when they closed their eyes.

During his childhood, Tserang Namjyal's mind was a fertile field where his parents spread the rich manure of karma, planted the seeds of karma, yoked the work animals of karma, tilled it with the plows of karma, and irrigated it with the waters of karma until the green sprouts of karma eventually started to grow.

"The law of karma, eh? Well, that'd be obeying your parents, not telling lies, not stealing, not wishing harm on others, and not fighting with the other kids. Do these things and, well, that's the law of karma."

That was the answer Tserang Namjyal's father gave him once when he asked what karma was.

From that day on, Tserang Namjyal obeyed his parents and didn't fight with the other children. He did his best to follow the laws of karma that his father had taught him.

One day, he went to his father and said, "Now I can follow all the laws of karma that you taught me. So how about you call me Jyumdre Namjyal? Jyumdre means the 'law of karma' after all."

His father gave him a peck on the cheek. His son was so good at saying the darndest things. Beaming, he nodded his head a few times, signaling that yes, they could call him that.

"Well then, we'll have to change your names too. Apa will be called Jyumdre Jyap and Ama will be called Jyumdre Jyit. How about it, Apa?"

Both parents burst out laughing. "This little boy of only ten sure does have some wit about him," they thought to themselves.

Their eyes were full of love and moist with tears as they told him, "Sure, sure. That sounds great." From then on, his father jokingly called his mother Jyumdre Jyit and his mother called his father Jyumdre Jyap. Their household was a family true to the law of karma in both name and meaning.

During the fall one year, Jyumdre Namjyal and some other children went to play on a grassy knoll near the edge of the village where a variety of plants and shrubs, willow and sallows, grew. The children rifled through a few bird's nests and came back with some seven or eight eggs. The moment Jyumdre Namjyal's mother caught sight of them, her face grew grim.

"What a nasty thing to do, you cold-hearted little devils," she scolded them. "What do you think you're doing rifling through birds' nests? Hurry up now and put those eggs back!"

The other children ignored her and ran back to their homes with eggs in hand. Jyumdre Namjyal however saw how angry his mother was and dashed back to the knoll where he returned his two eggs to their nest.

When he got home, his mother said, "Oh mercy, how upset would that momma bird have been if you'd taken those eggs from her nest. Don't you ever do anything so wicked again."

After listening to his mother, Jyumdre Namjyal could see that from all she'd told him, he'd clearly made a big mistake and broken the law of karma. Skipping lunch, he took a handful of barley grains and scattered it near the bird's nest.

Ema! What an upstanding and pure-hearted little boy Jyumdre Namjyal was. Yet, just as the sprouts of karma and flowers of compassion were beginning to grow in his heart, a cruel hailstorm at odds with the law of karma came pelting down unexpectedly. In a single instant, the flowers blooming in the depths of Jyumdre Namjyal's heart would be annihilated. What's more, their family which was true to karma in both name and meaning would be torn apart.

Having scattered the handful of barley near the bird's nest that day, Jyumdre Namjyal hid a little ways away and waited for the momma bird to return. He waited and waited and waited the whole afternoon until the momma bird finally showed up and nibbled at the grain. Only after

seeing the momma bird did he come bouncing back home. The moment he arrived at the gate to his house though, he heard the voice of a stranger. *Ah-tsi*, it was Chief Harelip.

Chief Harelip was the head of their community which included over ten villages. He was tall in stature and on the heavy side. His face was dark and he had a split lip running from his upper to his lower lip, and everyone called him Chief Harelip behind his back. Chief Harelip bore a strong resemblance to King Drachen from the opera *Nangsa Wobum*. The opera describes him as follows: “He had a temper hotter than fire and was pushier than a river’s current. He was stingier than a horse’s hair and his tongue was fierier than Indian chilis. He was as wobbly as a round pea, though his calculations were as fine as flour.” Just the sight of Chief Harelip made Jyumdre Namjyal’s skin crawl and his bones ache.

“The law of karma? Hell, I’ve got so much wealth that karma practically works for me! Where would karma be without me? Heh heh. But I don’t have the time to be talking about karma. Get over here and hop on top of me.”

“Please, dear mister Chief. Don’t do this. I’ll gladly bow down at your feet instead. Surely you don’t mean to let all the other young girls out there get away when they’re as fresh as flowers and do this to the likes of me, a married woman with a child? Please mister Chief, I’m begging you.”

“Heh heh, no need to bow down now. You might be a mother with a child, but don’t you know you’re the moon shining amidst the stars and the queen lotus among the other flowers? And I’m a chief who only says things once. So get on with it! Hurry up and undo your sash. What’s that? You won’t? Well, then you leave me with no other choice.”

As Chief Harelip pressed Jyumdre Namjyal’s mother down on to the ground, Jyumdre Namjyal felt he couldn’t keep watching as his mother was being harassed like this. He scurried up to the roof and aimed a rock the size of his fist at Chief Harelip. He let the rock fly. The stone was like an arrow propelled by the law of karma as it struck Chief Harelip square at the base of his ear. A nasty cry rang out from Chief Harelip’s mouth and he collapsed to the ground.

“Oh no, now I’ve done it! What should I do? What should I do?” Jyumdre Namjyal’s mind was a torrential hail storm and his heart a rolling landslide. His lungs were gasping for air like little bleating lambs and his insides felt like they’d been struck by lightning. He stood there frozen for a spell.

Not sure what had happened, his mother also stood there speechless for a while. Her face had turned paler than white ash, and yet darker than raw liver. Seeing the blood gushing out from the base of Chief Harelip’s ear and the rock smeared with blood, she hurried to tear off a piece of her sash and bandage Chief Harelip’s wound.

“I’ve got no other option now but to run far, far away. But where can I go?” As Jyumdre Namjyal thought over his predicament, he started to panic.

“Oh, that’s right! Uncle Tsultrim’s at Shedrup Monastery. I’ll go there. I’ll tell him everything that’s happened and we can try to figure something out. But I’ve never been beyond our mountain

town. I don't even know what direction Shedrup Monastery is in. Whatever, a two-pointed mind won't get me anywhere. I have to go and find Uncle Tsultrim. Even if it kills me."

Without any provisions for the road, Jyumdre Namjyal started out by crossing the small knoll near the edge of the village. He hid there for a while before climbing down to the bottom of the valley and crossing through a forest. Just as the sun was setting, he arrived at the mouth of the valley. He spotted a house with a stone wall ahead on the left-hand side of the valley. But with no smoke coming out of the chimney, there was no way to tell if anyone was home. Either way, night was soon approaching and Jyumdre Namjyal was starving, so he ran over in hopes of finding a place to spend the night. As luck would have it, he showed up just as the family was having dinner. They invited Jyumdre Namjyal to eat with them and he slurped down more than two helpings of hot noodle soup. It turned out that they worked as traders. There was only a husband and wife and they took to Jyumdre Namjyal with great affection. They asked him lots of questions about where he was going and what he was up to. Jyumdre Namjyal didn't want to lie, but he'd be in grave danger if he told the truth, so Jyumdre Namjyal told the first lie in his life.

"I'm from Sertang. My mother is my only family. My father went to Central Tibet on business many years ago, but still hasn't come back. There's no news as to whether he's dead or alive. And now my mother's fallen ill and is bedridden. So, I'm on my way to call on an uncle who's a monk at Shedrup Monastery."

The married couple felt a pained tenderness toward the boy. "Oh mercy on you, poor little boy!" they exclaimed as they took care of him with hearts full of love and kindness. Fortunately, it happened that two pilgrims were going to Shedrup Monastery the following day. The married couple gave Jyumdre Namjyal some provisions for the road and sent him off with the two pilgrims, instructing them to look after the boy.

After three days of traveling alongside the two pilgrims, Tserang Namjyal finally reached Shedrup Monastery. With their help, he was able to track down his Uncle Tsultrim. When he told his uncle everything that had happened, Uncle Tsultrim just shook his head. With gloom in his heart, Uncle Tsultrim remarked on how utterly senseless this samsaric world was.

"There's no other option now, my nephew. You were always a clever young boy. You'll be ordained as a monk here and practice the Holy Dharma. You might even do the Buddhist teachings some good."

Like that, Tserang Namjyal became a monk as his uncle had instructed and received the ordination name of Tsultrim Jyamtso, meaning "Ocean of Discipline." The days and nights flew by as Tsultrim Jyamtso threw himself into his reading, writing, and other studies. One day, his uncle said, "My nephew, you no longer have anything to be attached to. Your mother died and your father fled far away after killing Chief Harelip. So focus on your practice of the Holy Dharma and see if you can't find your way to liberation."

Basically, what had happened the night after Tserang Namjyal ran away was that Chief Harelip

regained consciousness and stabbed his mother to death. His father had arrived home at that exact moment to see his wife being murdered and flew into a violent rage. Unable to control his anger, he ended up driving a hatchet into Chief Harelip's skull, sending him on to his next rebirth. After burying his wife, he then fled to another region.

From the day he heard the news of these inauspicious events, Tsultrim Jyamtso suffered so much sorrow that he lost all appetite during the day and couldn't sleep at night. And who could blame him? What ten-year-old boy doesn't miss his parents? Though the law of karma probably did exist, it didn't seem to apply to Tserang Namjyal or his parents. Chief Harelip's voice echoed in his ears. *The law of karma? Hell, I've got so much wealth that karma practically works for me! Where would karma be without me?*

He thought back to everything that had happened that day. The way he'd brought the law down on Chief Harelip with that stone played out vividly in his mind's eye. All that must be the law of karma, he thought.

At that moment, his uncle walked in and tried to console him. "The law of karma does exist. Not only does it exist, but we're even witnessing it right now. The misfortune that's befallen your parents in this life comes from their negative actions in past lives. Bad results come from bad causes, and good results come from good causes. Here, let me give you an example. If you plant barley, you won't get wheat. And if you plant peas, you won't get mustard, right? It's just like that. You need to believe in karma and have faith in the Three Jewels. The only thing of any meaning in this life is the Holy Dharma. So muster up your courage and put the Dharma into practice!"

With his uncle's guidance, the dying embers of karma in Tsultrim Jyamtso's heart had been rekindled. He vowed to forsake all negative actions and engage only in wholesome deeds with the aim of helping his parents purify their negative karma and increasing his own stores of virtue as well. Like a man starving for food and dying for water, Tsultrim Jyamtso dove into his studies of the Buddhist scriptures. He passed his days and nights solely by reading texts and refining his understanding of them. After some time, there wasn't a single monk who could rival his diligence and intellect. His reputation roared like thunder throughout all of Shedrup Monastery.

But Tsultrim Jyamtso started to miss his parents again. The face of his mother with all her feminine beauty never faded from his mind. It was as if his mother's face were that of his guru, whose form he was supposed to be visualizing. The words of his honest and honorable father never stopped echoing in his ears, even for the amount of time it takes to boil tea. It felt like his father's words were the prayers he should've been memorizing.

"Oh, kind and loving Ama, your negative actions from past lives caused your beautiful face and attractive form to become your enemy in this life and led you to die at Chief Harelip's blade. I'll be dedicating prayers to you all day and night to help you purify your negativities. Even so, you've probably already been reborn amongst the buddhas in the Akanishta or Abhirati pure lands where you're listening to the holy teachings right now. If you could only see how your son has entered the

gates of Dharma and is engaged in virtuous deeds, there's no doubt you'd feel that having a child was worth it. I'm sure you'd be proud of me.

"Oh, dear Apa, where might you be now? Every time I think about your dazzling white smile and your guidance in the laws of karma, I'm overcome with a mixture of joy and sadness. I'm swept up in a flurry of happiness and sorrow. You might've had to kill Chief Harelip and flee far away to avenge Ama's death, but in doing so you've accrued enormous sin. With that, there'll be no happiness in store for you in your future lives. I'm chanting confession prayers on your behalf to purify your negative deeds. Apa, oh Apa. You might've saved your neck for the time being by escaping to the ends of the earth. But do you really think there'll be any road out of town or any hole to hide in when the Lord of Death and his demonic mercenaries come for you?"

Image upon image washed over Tsultrim Jyamtso. He shed tears of compassion that soaked his robes.

"What happened to you?" his uncle asked. "Why're you crying?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Just missing my parents..."

"Look, nephew, you don't have the time to keep thinking about them. In this degenerate age, conflict and turmoil are never-ending stories. They even say that in the Chinese lands there are two opposing parties doing nothing but trying to massacre each other. So you'll be going to Central Tibet to advance your studies. I've already prepared the provisions for your journey. You head out tomorrow."

At dawn the next day, Tsultrim Jyamtso joined a group of traders and embarked on the road to the holy land of Central Tibet. What should've taken them a year took them months, and what should've taken them months took them days. They traveled during the night when others would've only traveled during the day and, eventually, they arrived in Lhasa. Tsultrim Jyamtso enrolled in the Gomang Monastic College at Drepung Monastery where he applied himself in his studies with the perseverance of a roaring river. Meanwhile, five whole years went by.

In the fall of 1949, Tsultrim Jyamtso received a letter from Uncle Tsultrim. The letter contained news of the Liberation of their homeland and details about how wonderful the Communist Party's policies on religion and ethnic minorities were. At the end of the letter, his uncle stressed how it would be best for him to return home as soon as possible. With his mother dead and his father at the ends of the earth, his uncle was the only kind and caring relative he had left in this world. If there was anyone he was going to listen to, it was his uncle. Be that as it may, Tsultrim Jyamtso had made up his mind to take his Geshe Lharampa exam the following year. He wrote back to his uncle explaining his situation and reasoned that he'd return home as soon as he received his Geshe Lharampa degree.

In the middle of spring, 1950, Tsultrim Jyamtso had turned thirty and had taken up the great responsibility of transmitting the teachings of the Buddha. His reputation of being a Geshe Lharampa preceded him. He felt called by his hometown and uncle and departed the holy land

of Lhasa on horseback, headed for Amdo. On the way back, he offered many faithful men and women great feasts of Dharma teachings. That summer, he eventually arrived at the great monastic center of Shedrup Monastery on the auspicious full moon day in June.

Witnessing how the Party's policies on ethnic equality and religious freedom were being implemented, Tsultrim Jyamtso took a great liking to the Communist Party and its magnificent leader Mao Zedong.

"The Communist Party oppresses tyrants but is also like parents who care for the downtrodden. This was a Party that respected the law of karma!" Tsultrim Jyamtso thought to himself.

He was so overcome with joy and happiness that tears welled in his eyes and his hair stood on end. These feelings inspired him to compose a long poem called *Melodies of Praise Amidst Pure Clouds*. In that poem, he used flowery words to pay tribute to Mao Zedong as the emanation of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, and to the Party as the ambassador of the law of karma. Soon just about everyone—both men and women, lay and ordained—had learned that poem by heart and chanted it as if it were a Buddhist prayer.

Amidst much fanfare, the Working People's Secondary School was established in his local area and the People's Government invited Tsultrim Jyamtso to be one of its teachers. Not only did they award him the title of Patriotic Scholar, but they also appointed him to be a member of the Provincial Political Consultative Conference and vice-principal of the secondary school. From then on, Tsultrim Jyamtso did away with the trappings of being an ordained monk. He instead pursued the activities of the Revolution as he shouldered the glorious responsibility of training the next generation of revolutionaries.

For Tsultrim Jyamtso, the communist system and the pure land of Sukhavati ultimately came down to the same thing, aside from some minor differences in rhetoric. Not only did he continue to have faith in Buddhism, but he also found faith in Marxism. That newfound faith led him to apply to join the Chinese Communist Party. His request form read:

With the aim of liberating the impoverished from the shackles of oppression and exploitation and with the intention of guiding all mother sentient beings on the path to liberation, I adamantly request to join the Chinese Communist Party.

This application statement is certainly worth a few laughs. Yet, there's no doubt that those were the heartfelt words of a genuinely religious man. Even though Tsultrim Jyamtso's wish to join the Party never amounted to anything, his belief in the Party never wavered in the slightest at any time or in any situation.

"Any work to benefit the People and the different ethnicities is the highest of virtuous acts," Tsultrim Jyamtso told himself. "I'll forsake any personal gain, fame, or power and instead utilize

my body, speech, and mind for the advancement of future generations. That's not only the Party's orders, but it's also the wish of the People. There's no way I'll let the Party and the People down."

Nevertheless, the path that lay before him was filled with hardship after hardship. To make meaningful steps forward on that path was like sailing a boat on the ocean. Occasionally the winds were calm and the waves placid, but other times there were violent swells that could turn heaven and earth upside down. There were even times when Tsultrim Jyamtso found himself on the verge of death.

In the winter of 1957, Tsultrim Jyamtso received a letter. It was sent by the abbot of Drepung Monastery outside of Lhasa. The main thrust of the letter concerned a few local aristocrats who had recently taken a disliking to the Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army. They were revolting and staging many uprisings. The abbot wanted a clear answer as to whether or not that was also the case in Amdo. Tsultrim Jyamtso wrote the following response:

Replete with the ten powers, you are the treasury of omniscience.
The ways in which your physical emanations manifest know no limits.
The meritorious virtues of your wholesome deeds simply defy counting.
This letter I address to you, you who are poised on the seat of abbacy.

Your letter was like a petal from the blue lotus flower
And your words the laughter of a hundred dazzling smiles.
The honey bee of your faithful heart carried cupped in its hands
The glory of springtime to the delight of my ever-humble ears.

I am but a lowly mendicant in the snowy land of Tibet
Who folds my hands in prayer before Buddha Shakyamuni.
Yet I stretch out the proverbial leaf that is my tongue
And humbly offer these words with a heart of pure intent.

Mao Zedong, a name that blazes with renown and reputation,
Is the reincarnated emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom.
I praise him, this great god who watches over the world,
For bringing us the everlasting glory of goodness and well-being.

Never turning a blind eye to the karmic law of cause and effect,
The splendor of the Party's speech rings with the sixty divine melodies.
The songs of the Communist Party with their harmonies of peace
Dispel every last trace of sorrow within us weary beings.

The summertime thunder of the policies on religious freedom
Has roared throughout the immortal sky in the Land of Snows.
Those who spit wrong views with delusion and deception
Are sure to be vanquished by the thunderbolts of karma.

The shackles of exploitation ensnaring our bodies and minds
Are courageously shattered by the People's Liberation Army.
Any attempt to press thorns into their rocky mountain of victory
Will only serve to bring about one's own defeat.

Since they are polluted by afflictions and the five poisons,
There's no end nor control to the words of those tricky demons.
Those who shed blood in the milky ocean of the harmonious friendship
Between the Chinese and the Tibetans are but a cause for pity.

Consider the sage advice of Sakya Pandita when he said,
"Foxes ought to compete with other foxes."
How ought you, the king of beasts, the lion himself,
Stand beside those aristocrats and their greed for wealth?

I have now done away with any signs of being ordained
And aim to help develop Communism's beneficial affairs
By taking up a position of guiding and leading the neophytes.
It is toward these wholly virtuous causes that I exert my efforts.

You yourself lack no knowledge as to what is right and what is wrong,
Nor do you tire of properly upholding our religious and political traditions.
It is thus that I humbly encourage you to lead by sublime example
As you work solely for the benefit of the teachings and other beings.

—*Composed on an auspicious date*

That letter had truly come from the bottom of Tsultrim Jyamtso's heart. And yet, it was this same letter that eventually led him to be denounced as a counter-revolutionary ringleader in 1958 and thrown into prison with a seventeen-year sentence. During his time in prison, Tsultrim Jyamtso often recited a prayer that went like this:

O Three Jewels, our unfailing source of refuge,
And the Communist Party, the upholder of the law of karma,
Please continue to watch over us with compassion
As we follow your Dharma in this age of degeneration!

In both times of pain and joy, Tsultrim Jyamtso's late mother would dawn in his mind with a brilliant presence and his father, who might still be alive at the ends of the earth, would appear vividly in his mind's eye. Even though he still missed his parents, he no longer suffered or felt the same sorrow as before.

Tsultrim Jyamtso might have been undergoing all that pain and hardship on behalf of his parents, but who was there to help share his pain and hardship? His uncle had also been sentenced to prison where he died and passed on to the pure land. Now Tsultrim Jyamtso no longer had a single kindred spirit left in this world. He fit the saying, "A lonesome man with a horse all alone: traveling alone and fleeing on his own when the bandits come." And yet, during that period of his life, there was one person who Tsultrim Jyamtso couldn't help but think of. Who was that? Well, that person might not have had much in the way of womanly qualities, but from the glow in her eyes, the sound of her voice, and the look on her face, it was clear that she was indeed a woman.

She was ten years Tsultrim Jyamtso's junior and used to be a nun. In her twenties, she gave up nunhood for lay life and became one of Uncle Tsultrim's most faithful patrons. Whenever she brought meat, butter, or sweet cheese to offer to Uncle Tsultrim, she'd go out of her way to find something to say to Tsultrim Jyamtso. Even if she didn't have anything to say, an affectionate glow in her eyes would always find its way to him.

Once Tsultrim Jyamtso had discarded the trappings of being a monk and was working as a teacher, she was drawn to him like a bee after honey and used a number of ways to show her affection for him. Waves of yearning churned in the sea of Tsultrim Jyamtso's heart, but now he was a criminal in prison, a bird locked in a cage, and there was no point in entertaining such thoughts. Be that as it may, the bubbling brook that was his consciousness continued to flow in her direction, while the honey bee of his soul continued to buzz its wings around her.

"If one day the entire world became monks, who'd work the fields? Who'd be left to herd the yaks and tend the sheep? Monks would have a hard time getting by without any patrons. And more importantly, who'd continue the human race? Without anyone to do so, there wouldn't be any wombs for the great buddhas and bodhisattva to take rebirth in. How could there be any reincarnated masters or tulkus? And if the human race came to an end, there'd be no one to learn the Holy Dharma and nowhere for it to spread. Wouldn't the Holy Dharma just die out then? *Ab-tsi*, how come I didn't think of any of this before?"

As he mulled these thoughts over, Tsultrim Jyamtso's heart and mind found themselves in conflict with each other. His worldview had been shaken.

Around that same time, Tsultrim Jyamtso was suddenly released from prison. Had seventeen whole years gone by? He did some math on his fingers and realized that only three years had passed. Tsultrim Jyamtso had no idea why they'd put him in prison in the first place, and now again, he didn't have the slightest clue why he was being released. It must've been the blessings of the Three Jewels and the workings of karma, he thought. Either way, he was overjoyed. But, where would he go now? His mother was long dead, his father could be anywhere, and his uncle had passed away. So where was there to go?

Tsultrim Jyamtso thought back to her once more. "That's right! I'll go and try to find her. Shedrup is where we grew up, so that's where I'll head."

And just like that, Tsultrim Jyamtso once again started off in the direction of Shedrup Monastery.



The story "Tsultrim Jyamtso" came to me through the oral accounts of other people. I never knew Tsultrim Jyamtso personally. I don't know what he looked like or what might have happened to him after he got out of prison and returned to Shedrup. Writing a story like this that simply repeats what others have told me based on uneducated guesses and limited perspectives has surely offended some readers while also creating some unwanted gossip about myself. Perhaps if I were new to writing these types of stories, I could manage to throw away my sense of self-respect and plug my ears. But ...but ... yeah. It's true what they say—it's a lot easier to climb up a ladder on a cliff face than down one. So let whatever happens happen. I'm left with no choice but to wear this mask and try to dance the dance. There *are* those who've made it all the way to Central Tibet on the backs of old donkeys. Cats can still gnaw on bones when there aren't any dogs around and you can still recognize daybreak from the donkeys when there aren't any roosters. Nevertheless, rafters without pillars will never stand firm, and sewing without a needle will never work. When you console yourself it's seventh heaven, but when you deceive yourself it's the pits. All that goes to say, I didn't have a way to write an ending for the story "Tsultrim Jyamtso."

Rap-rap-rap...!

All of a sudden, the sound of someone banging on the door to my room rang out.

"Who's there? Come on in," I said half-heartedly.

I turned around and stared at the door, but no one came in. Did they not hear me? Or did they not feel comfortable walking in on their own? I repeated myself louder, but still nothing.

Who was this going out of their way to give me a hard time? There are always a few folks who ignore their studies and slack in their duties. Whenever they get a second of free time, they go banging on this person's door or peeking into that person's window. These types pass their days doing nothing but talking empty talk. I can't stand listening to all the coarse topics they'll go on

about. They'll badmouth others, talking about so-and-so's nose or such-and-such's mouth. And then, to top it off, they'll brag about being an expert at this or an ace at that, trying to show off how special they are. Basically, they love to interrupt and sabotage whatever others happen to be doing.

But this was strange. I had a few of those types of friends and thought they might've been trying to give me a hard time today. Yet in those situations, they'd always come bursting through the door. So today was unusual.

Then came another knock at the door.

If it's one of those guys, I'll give them a goddamn piece of my mind, I told myself as I threw open the door in a rage.

Ah-tsi. A stranger stood in front of my door.

Who was this? I didn't know anyone like him. Even so, his face told me he was a Tibetan from the Amdo region. And judging by his looks, I could easily make out that he was an intellectual type. I looked him over and he too stood there studying me.

A pair of eyeglasses with black frames sat perched on his prominent nose. His two eyes looked tired from years of having to stare through them, and yet his eyes darted about incessantly as they twinkled with a shimmering glow. His hair was three or four inches long and parted on either side of his forehead in the shape of a crescent moon. There was a black mole the size of a pea on his left ear with two brownish hairs growing out of it. One long. One short.

"Who're you looking for?"

"You."

His long face, his raised nose, and his two beady eyes behind the glasses on his prominent nose broke out into a smile. He raised his eyebrows a few times and walked straight into my room.

The man was basically completely hunched over, but if you didn't look at him from behind, his body appeared as straight as an arrow. That had to be some sort of optical illusion.

"Whoa—would you look at all these books?!" he said after he'd looked up and down my room.

It seemed like he might've been admiring the random assortment of books he saw on my bookshelf, on my table, and strewn across my bed. Or maybe he was being sarcastic since my books were scattered every which way. It was hard to be sure.

"Mhmm. Not only do you have a lot of books, but they're all important works too, eh? Hahaha!"

There're plenty of people throughout life who feel that having something over others somehow makes them better. It doesn't matter if it's being slightly older, better looking, more eloquent, or just a little bit cleverer. Either way, they love to tear people down with spite and insults. Ignorant of their own position relative to heaven and earth, they see themselves as somehow being more senior or greater. They love to feed you their "advice" on how that was wrong or you were mistaken, how it's done this way or you should do it like this. Every time I meet someone like that, I get a nauseating feeling of hopelessness. And so, that was exactly how I felt at that moment as this

man, this stranger, gave me his sarcastic laugh. There was simply no way I could've seen him in a positive light.

He sat down on a chair and adjusted his glasses before saying, "Boy, it sure is hot out today. Would you mind pouring me a cup of water?"

His words nailed me to the stake. My face turned blistering hot all of a sudden. Why of course, to not even offer a guest a cup of tea, but to give them an attitude when they're in your home completely goes against all of our Tibetan customs. I stumbled over to my tea cabinet, but I didn't even have a single leaf of tea left. Now I had embarrassment to pile on top of my shame.

"I'm sorry," I said as I poured him a cup of boiled water. "But drink this first and I'll run out to buy some tea."

"No, no. No need to go out. You must've heard the saying 'Heroes drink their water hot,'" he said with a chuckle.

I had no choice but to go along with that. And to be honest, I'd emptied my wallet yesterday. The water was boiling hot, but he took several slurps as he blew on it. He must've really been thirsty. He finished the entire cup of water right before my eyes. I refilled his cup with more boiled water.

"I'm probably interrupting your work right now. But I didn't show up at your doorstep for no reason. Basically, we should've gotten to know each other a long time back, but we live too far away. I came to Beijing for a meeting and I'm due to take the train back tonight at eight-twenty. Here, this is my train ticket."

It seemed like he must've been some sort of government official. And let him be. Their work was the type that took them to meetings in big cities and in fancy hotels. I couldn't care less if he was leaving tonight or next year. What'd that have to do with me? He's probably quenched his thirst, so why didn't he just go ahead and leave right now?

"I read that piece of yours a few times. Your writing is superb. However—mhmm—it seems like you don't actually know Tsultrim Jyamtso. But of course, it would've been impossible for you to have ever met him."

Everyone enjoys a bit of praise from time to time. That's for sure. This man's kind words gave me a pleasant feeling as if flowers had bloomed inside me. I started to feel a certain sense of affinity and empathy toward this stranger. He told me he hadn't just randomly shown up and had even read my story a handful of times. He was also aware of the fact that I'd never met Tsultrim Jyamtso. I figured, in all likelihood, he had to be a friend of Tsultrim Jyamtso. Or at the very least, someone who knew him.

I couldn't hide my excitement. I was now sitting with someone who personally knew Tsultrim Jyamtso. I could now stop second-guessing myself on whether or not I should complete the story. I'd no longer have to sit alone in my room, chain-smoking, and trying to come up with something. I could have yogurt made not from whey but actual curds, as they say. And I could eat my prover-

bial tsampa with real butter rather than bone marrow. I no longer had to patch up old boots or keep my felt folded up, so to speak. All that is to say, I was beside myself with elation.

“Hey mister,” I blurted out, unable to contain myself, “do you happen to know Tsultrim Jyamtso?”

He took another sip of water before putting his cup down on the table. He pushed his glasses back and shot me a smile that told me he did indeed know Tsultrim Jyamtso. Right then, I started treating him with more respect and speaking with honorific words. I even started taking a liking to those two long hairs sticking out of the mole on his ear.

“What great luck! To be honest, mister, I was thrilled to have written that story, but I ended up regretting sending it off to the publisher. And I’m sure I don’t have to tell you why. The story ‘Tsultrim Jyamtso’ put me in a tough spot. Here, take a look. This is how much I wrote for the original manuscript, but I was never satisfied with it.”

I handed him my manuscript of “Tsultrim Jyamtso” which had been written, erased, and re-written far too many times.

He thumbed through the thick manuscript and said with a smile, “The way I see it, you’re the type of man who buys his troubles. There’s no point in going through all this hassle. Tsultrim Jyamtso is the most ordinary of ordinary folks. His story isn’t worth writing about. It won’t do anyone any good to have it in writing. If I were you, I wouldn’t write another word.”

So that’s why this guy was here. With those words, he’d taken this story I’d spent days hard at work on and dismissed it as rubbish. And not only that. He went so far as to degrade the one Tibetan scholar who held the position of greatest importance for me. All my emotions surged in my chest and I started fuming. As far as I could see, this man was good for nothing. His beady, mouse-like eyes and that jackal face of his struck me with revulsion. That mole on his donkey ear looked no different than a spider.

“Don’t give me that nonsense. Sure, maybe the story I wrote isn’t all that great. But I won’t let you degrade Tsultrim Jyamtso with those nasty words coming out of your nasty mouth. Tsultrim Jyamtso was pure in heart to the Party and the People and held the law of karma in highest regard. He was an exceptional man who cared about others more than himself. It’s true that I don’t know his whole life’s story in detail. But his heart was as pure as crystal and his character as strong as a vajra. His nature was as clean as a white khatak and he had capabilities as vast as the ocean. He was by no means an ordinary man. It’s my duty to try to capture an image of this Tibetan scholar in writing. And it’s my personal calling to show the next generation the bumpy and winding road that was his life. I plan to shed light on the footprints of joys and sorrows that dotted this Tibetan scholar’s life’s path. Make no doubt about that.”

Had my words laid bare his blunders? Or had he regretted his mistaken remarks? I couldn’t be sure. But either way, the color of this unwelcome visitor’s face transformed all of a sudden. Tears blossomed in the corners of his eyes and his breathing grew faster and heavier. Even that mole on

his ear seemed bigger and blacker. I thought I'd managed to shut this bigmouthed stranger up for good. I felt proud of myself for having served him so many systematic and logical counterarguments, all in a single breath. My rebuttals really had flowed out like a river's current and rained down upon him like a hailstorm roaring with thunder and lightning.

"You're right, I don't doubt you. If you want to write this story, then go ahead. I'm Tsultrim Jyamtso."

"Huh?"



Now readers, can you believe this? The man sitting right in front of me was Tsultrim Jyamtso himself. If you were in my situation, you'd be just as shocked and moved as I was then. You'd share the same sense of excitement and joy. I regretted my appalling behavior but went on to ask Tsultrim Jyamtso a number of questions. It was one o'clock in the afternoon and Tsultrim Jyamtso was due to head back to his hometown at eight-twenty that evening. What a rare and precious thing time is! Fortunately, though, we still had around five or six hours to talk.

The story that follows is what Tsultrim Jyamtso told me himself. I've put his words into writing exactly as I heard them without inserting or deleting a single thing. You can believe what you read.

I.

In the words of Tsultrim Jyamtso:

Your story already covered my childhood days, my parents' history, my time in Lhasa, and my eventual imprisonment. So I won't repeat any of those things. But to be honest, I'm not the sort of man you made me out to be in your story. I did believe in the workings of karma from a young age and tried my best to follow the law of karma. But there was one area that... heh heh. It's hard to find true gold and even harder to find a perfect man. That's right, I'm referring to some of my regrets. Even great lamas and noble folks have things they keep hushed up or are ashamed of. So it goes without saying that I should too. You wrote that with my mother gone, my father out of sight, and my uncle dead in prison, I had no home to go to or hole to hide in. But you got that wrong. I had a few friends who were closer than brothers. And, on top of that, I still had plenty of my old students left. But the point is... hold on... you probably remember writing about that ex-nun who became our patron, right? Well, her name was Lhamo Drolma. You didn't even manage to give her a proper name beyond the pronoun "she." It looks to me like you might've been worried about harming my reputation and tried to keep that part of my story hidden.

Having secrets is what makes us human. The only difference is that some people know how to keep a secret and some don't. Either way, people are bound to find out about your secrets, no matter how well you keep them hidden. And if you continue to pretend that nobody knows about them when you become the talk of the town, then it's actually no longer a secret you're keeping from others, but rather a secret they're keeping from you! There's something to the saying, "Kings can't conceal the guilty and lamas can't save the sinners." So I'm going to lay my whole story out in front of you without hiding a single thing. After all, no wall can block all the wind and no container can hold all your secrets. So you do the same too when you write down my story. There's nothing you need to keep out of sight or try to conceal. That being said, write about whatever you think merits writing and skip the unnecessary bits. I'll leave that up to you. All right, so now let me tell you about that little secret of mine.

It all happened when I was still quite young. In those days, my uncle had lots of patrons. But the one that made the deepest impression on me was Lhamo Drolma. She had great faith in my uncle. She was a generous patron who made sure to save at least half of whatever she had for us, whether it was a tin of tea or a handful of tsampa. You got that wrong about her being ten years younger than me. That was someone else. But anyway, that's a story for another time.

Lhamo Drolma's hair wasn't terribly long on account of having been a nun. But the hair she did have was thick and black and glistened wonderfully. One day, I went to the banks of the Shedrup River to fetch some water. Even though I was a monk, my main duties in those days were to fetch water and prepare meals. Lhamo Drolma was also down by the river that day with her water pail. She was normally a playful sort of woman, but she wouldn't show so much as a smile around the younger monks. I was something of an exception though. I got to enjoy her smiles and even some other expressions that the other monks never saw. In those days, I didn't have any coarse thoughts on account of being a monk with vows of celibacy. Yet the root of desire is not so easily severed. And so, each time I'd catch a glance of that smile or her figure, my imagination would take over. I couldn't help reflecting on what a captivating young woman she was. If I didn't have vows to uphold and my uncle to fear, I'm sure I would've taken her as my life partner or, failing that, at least a lover for a night.

"Did you come to fetch some water?"

Lhamo Drolma and I'd usually only exchange small talk whenever we passed each other. So that day, when she asked me that question, what could I do but say "yes" and try to make do with that single syllable reply. My imagination swarmed with all sorts of images in that moment and my heart churned like waves on the ocean.

These things we call vows are like chains restraining the joy of life. They're a dungeon imprisoning youthful ambitions. What was I doing letting myself be suffocated by these chains as I wallowed away in that dungeon?

"O dear Lord Buddha, you sure did teach a lot of exquisite things. But none of them were quite

as spot-on as when you declared, ‘Pledges are a source of suffering.’ I follow in your footsteps in pledging to guard my monastic vows as carefully as I do my eyes and my life. But it’s only now, as I gaze upon her smile and her figure, that I realize what it means for pledges to be a form of suffering. It’s only now that I see how they contradict your teachings. What’s the use of making us pledge to uphold vows on the one hand and, at the same time, telling us they’re a form of suffering? I’m only in the middle of studying the Middle Way philosophy and I’ve yet to perfect my understanding of the Perfection of Wisdom. So how could I possibly even begin to comprehend the depth and profundity of your scriptures? It was *she*—she with her radiant glow, her slender figure, her round face, her sharp dark eyes, and her brilliant smile... *ab-tsi*. It was ‘she,’ she who had all that and more. It was she who managed to slip inside my heart.”

There were a few times after that when we ran into each other. Each time without fail, the glow in her eyes was never the ordinary sort and also, without fail, my heart would throb inside my chest. Where did she get such allure? Where did she get that power to magnetize me? Had the intoxicated elephant of my mind not been tied down with the ropes of my monastic vows, there’s no way my life would’ve turned out like this.

One morning, I was doing my chanting when she came by.

“Is your uncle home?”

My uncle was away acting as preceptor for a group of monks who’d requested full ordination. So it was only me in our monk cell. She held a cloth bag in her hand.

“Oh, here’s a little bit of butter. You and your uncle can...”

“No,” I interrupted her. “Look, you’re always giving us your food and not saving anything for yourself. We can’t accept this butter. Please, keep it for yourself.”

She shot me an odd look. The unusual expression on her face made her look like a spoiled little girl pouting at her mother. What a kind-hearted woman she was. As her breasts heaved with her breath, buried inside was her beating heart, purer than white milk and sweeter than honey. Who was aware of that but me? My heart was pounding and my lungs heaved heavily. I genuinely felt as if my liver might’ve been turned upside down. My uncle and my vows were nowhere to be seen...

Ab-tsi, the sack of butter hit the floor. I felt a warm roughness and a cold tenderness. In my hand was the hand of another. But whose? Lhamo Drolma’s head was hung low and her left cheek was growing red. But why? Oh no, had this damn hand of mine come into contact with non-virtue? Immediately I remembered the law of karma. Thoughts of my uncle and my vows swirled around in my head.

I saw her a few times after that either by the side of the road, in the monastery, or in the midst of crowds. But with that particular regret still inside me, I didn’t dare talk to her. And it wasn’t long after, that I went to Lhasa.

When I returned from Lhasa, my homeland had already been liberated. Since the Revolution had turned heaven and earth upside down, I ended up disrobing and becoming a teacher. I still had

the title of a Lharam Geshe in those days and a few volumes of scriptures stored away in my brain. Even so, being a teacher in the schools of the new society was no easy task. We only had seven teachers and fifty students in our school at the time. Nearly all the teachers lacked even the most basic teaching experience and we even had to make our own textbooks. There were two Chinese comrades among us seven teachers. One was Mr. Li, the principal, and the other was Mr. Chen, a math teacher. Neither of them really knew any Tibetan while the Tibetan teachers—Shyazang, Tenjam, Wangden, and myself—couldn't speak much Chinese either. The other Tibetan teacher, Tupten, was fluent in both Chinese and Tibetan and translated for all of us.

Mr. Li was a competent man. Even though I was given the title of assistant principal at that time, I wasn't able to help him with his work that much. My responsibilities included teaching two grades and writing textbooks for four grades on top of that. I was incredibly busy with work in those days, but I'd also never been happier. It was at the insistence of Mr. Li that I wrote the Party application statement you found so funny.

I never forgot about my late mother at that time and likewise never forgot about "her," the woman whom I missed dearly. Back then, I was a strapping young man in my thirties and didn't have my uncle to fear or vows to hold me back. So how could I have not been thinking about her? I'd head out in the morning sunlight and try to find her among the ladies fetching water at the banks of the Shedrup River. I'd go out at dusk to see if I couldn't catch a glimpse of her smile in the crowds at the Shedrup Market. Had she floated away into the sky? Had she dug herself underground? If she had flown away, there'd have to be a cliff where she'd come back to land. Or if she had gone under the earth, there'd at least have to be some hole left behind. Nevertheless, I didn't dare ask my uncle and wasn't comfortable bringing her up with anyone else. The pain I held in my heart during that period was known only to me.

"You think I don't know about your little secret? Don't beat yourself up now. She's already married with kids. And feeling down about that won't do you any good. Better you busy yourself with something new."

My uncle's words felt so cruel. Any hope of being her lover was now nothing but the horns of a rabbit, the fur on a turtle's shell, and the son of a barren woman. *Ab-tsi*, I'd let myself believe in something everlasting, even though I knew all too well how impermanent worldly things are. Who could've been dumber than me?

"My dear Lhamo Drolma, there's nothing left for me to do but to pray for the happiness of you and your family. O Three Jewels, have mercy and continue to gaze down upon her with eyes of compassion."

I learned a lot of new things about her from my uncle. She'd married a guy named Lushuk three years back and gave birth to a son the year after. Lushuk wasn't a bad guy, but he was the sort who lacked both the know-how and the interest to raise a family. The newlywed couple had constantly been at each other's throats for the past year because Lushuk had taken up with some sweet-talking

young woman. Lhamo Drolma's mother-in-law was a stern old lady who tried her best to blame the whole situation on her daughter-in-law. Lhamo Drolma had to endure her mother-in-law's temper and shouting all day and night. The moment I heard that news, I felt more pity than I could bear for Lhamo Drolma. Each time I thought of her, her face would appear distinctly before my eyes and her voice would echo clearly in my ears. Be that as it may, she was now a mother with children and a wife with a husband. Tormenting and torturing myself over her wouldn't accomplish anything. So instead, I promised myself that I'd work harder. I'd dedicate my entire being to the Party's mission of educating the ethnic minorities. I'd be the mentor to a new batch of scholars for the next generation of our Tibetan people.

And suddenly, one day I saw her. It was a day I'll never forget for the rest of my life. She was wearing a goatskin robe with colorful trim. Her previously slender and supple body now looked like a crooked old tree. Her piercing eyes and bright smile were nowhere to be seen. The sullen expressions covering her face spoke to me of the pain she held in her heart.

Did she not see me? Or did she just pretend not to see me? I couldn't be sure, but what I was sure of was that the "she" in my heart and the "she" whom I was looking at now were not the same person. Even so, the shape of her face was proof that she was indeed Lhamo Drolma. I figured I'd better chuck all those past events into the crate of history and bolt it with the lock of forgotten memories. She might've been the satin brocade around my heart, but now its pattern had faded. And what value is there in fox fur that's lost its sheen or in leopard skin with faded spots? From that day on, I forced myself to banish her from the castle of my heart.

The work at school presented plenty of challenges, but we overcame them and our labor produced some major results. Our bright and diligent students were growing up day by day and were advancing in their studies as they competed with each other to earn their place of respect. We teachers couldn't help but feel proud. We were especially excited when the Provincial Education Agency granted our school an award of recognition and selected us as one of the most progressive departments among all the educational institutions for ethnic minorities throughout the entire province. The second meeting of the Political Consultative Conference convened that year and I was appointed as a member. I saw and heard many new things in those meetings that I'd never encountered before and was able to expand my worldview in new ways. Once back at school, my determination was strengthened and my confidence boosted. I dedicated all my strength and energy exclusively to the Party's mission of educating the ethnic minorities and didn't let anything else cross my mind. Not that I would've had the time to think about other things.

In those days, something unbelievable happened. Unbelievably funny, that is. Hey there young man, won't you pour me another cup of water?

II.

I was so focused on Tsultrim Jyamtso's words that I'd completely forgotten to offer him more water.

What a riveting story this was! Tsultrim Jyamtso might've had rivers of suffering throughout his life, but he also had oceans of happiness. An air of sadness came over him when talking about Lhamo Drolma, but a smile took its place when he talked about his work. Not wanting to stop him, I quickly got up to pour him some water.

Tsultrim Jyamtso picked up where he left off:

In those days, I had to teach Tibetan grammar and poetry to secondary school students, but I also had loads of administrative duties on top of that. I didn't think about Lhamo Drolma much anymore and, to be honest, I didn't have the time to. Now that she was a mother with children, a wife with a husband, and the lady of a house, all my worries had brought me nothing but heartache. It was in that way that I came to focus all my energy on the Party's mission to educate the ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, something unimaginable happened to me around that time.

After I'd left Lhasa and came back to Shedrup, I'd gotten in the habit of going down to the Shedrup River each morning, no matter what season it was. There, I'd recite some of the main prayers I had stored away in my memory in the hopes that they wouldn't fall prey to the bandits of forgetfulness. I'd also try to memorize some new scientific facts that I'd never gotten the chance to learn before.

One fall morning, I went down to the banks of the Shedrup River as was my habit. When I got back from my morning session that day, I spotted a glass bottle of milk on the windowsill outside my room. I figured it must've belonged to one of the neighbors on either side of me. When I got back home after my afternoon classes, the bottle of milk was still sitting on my windowsill. I checked with my neighbors, but neither of them said it was theirs. The next day, there was another bottle of milk. As each day went by, more and more bottles of milk appeared on my windowsill.

It was strange. Who could've been sending me all this milk? And why were they leaving me milk bottles without any message? When that odd situation didn't stop after a day or two but went on for several days, I started feeling uneasy. Maybe it was my buddy Lozang trying to prank me. He was a real joker. Otherwise, it might've just been a kind-hearted student bringing them to me without saying. Either way, if this was one of Lozang's practical jokes, then I only

stood to gain since I didn't have much in the way of milk money. If it was a student though, I planned on reimbursing them. I boiled up some of the milk and made a point of inviting Lozang over to drink it with me. Yet, he just repeated the same old jokes he always made and didn't do anything out of the ordinary. I'm going to get to the bottom of this tomorrow, I told myself.

The next day, oh boy, that was a day I'll never forget for the rest of my life. That was the morning of September 15th, 1958. I got out of bed early that morning, went outside, and hid behind a poplar tree facing my window. As if trying to help hide me, the full moon laid down to sleep behind the western mountains earlier than normal, taking with it all of its radiant glow. In the cloudless sky above, the stars and planets smiled down on me and laughed at my dumb efforts. Everything around me was draped in darkness. The golden spires of Shedrup Monastery were dimly visible as they stood exalted in the sky. Everyone else on earth was still in the heavenly realm of sleep. There was stillness and silence.

A chilly breeze slowly blew by, relieving me of my sleepiness for a moment. The poplar tree had lost most of its leaves and its empty branches swayed back and forth in the shadows. I could see the occasional dead leaf or two fall from the top of the tree down to the ground. The sound of my heartbeat and the tick of my wristwatch had aligned their rhythms to play a symphony my ears had never before heard. Time passed, minute by minute, as the wind grew colder and colder. My face stung and the tip of my nose felt like a frozen stone. The light of the stars began steadily fading as the old tree beside me started to moan, complaining about the wind's tortuous effect. On the eastern edge of the sky, the glow of dawn glimmered with a pale light. I could hear the crow of a rooster and dogs barking somewhere off in the distance. It was around that time that I went to the bathroom before coming back to stand at the same place behind the tree.

Daybreak had come. And to my amazement, a bottle of milk was sitting on my windowsill. *Ab-tsi-tsi!* All my efforts in braving the cold to stand guard for over two to three hours had come to nothing. Who was this magician? When I got up this morning to check the windowsill with my flashlight, there definitely weren't any milk bottles there. But now, after more than two or three hours, one was sitting right before my eyes. What else could this be but something supernatural? I was genuinely shocked.

I described these events to the other teachers and they too were astounded. "What's so amazing about that?" Lozang retorted. "What? Do you think the milk came from the gods or something? You're all what they call not having a single good thought in a hundred years. Even the Geshe here is dumbfounded. By

tomorrow, I'll have exposed this mystery for what it is. Who wants to bet on it?"

Wangden bet Lozang two liters of liquor. When Principal Li caught wind of all that, he gave me a stern talking to. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed like he'd stopped trusting me around that time. He hesitated to acknowledge me in passing and even stopped calling on me in both official and informal meetings. When he handed me back my application to join the Party, the application that I'd written with his help, I was taken aback.

I knew these inauspicious events could not be good omens, but there was no way I could've known what was happening to me. I had a hunch that my belief in Buddhism was making the principal suspicious of me and that he'd returned my application to join the Party due to a lack of qualifications. Faced with that, I worked harder to correct my worldview. I resolved to make better choices from then on.

The next morning, Lozang and I stood behind the same tree as yesterday and waited to get to the bottom of things.

"Geshe," Lozang said to me, "Do you know why you couldn't crack this mystery yesterday? No? Well, it's quite simple. Had you not gone to the bathroom you would've already figured it out. Oh, by the way, Geshe, they're saying there's unrest in Lhasa. Do you think it's true?"

"I don't know about any such thing. Lozang, you'd better not be stirring up controversy."

"Controversy? This isn't any controversy. When I went to the market yesterday, there were lots of folks discussing the matter. I asked my brother-in-law about it once I got home and he said it was in fact true. Alak Drakjung Rinpoche also went to a meeting and still hasn't returned. Some say he was thrown in prison."

Lozang's brother-in-law was the committee vice secretary for our county. I was in the middle of considering how the news Lozang was sharing with me must've been true when he suddenly called out, "Hey Geshe, look! Your milk fairy has arrived!"

I glanced over to where Lozang was pointing. A woman covered in a shawl and wearing a water pail on her back was making her way toward my room. She first came up next to my door and glanced behind her before taking a milk bottle out of the folds of her robe and placing it on my windowsill. She then dashed off toward the main gate of our school. Lozang wanted to stop her and got up to run, but I pulled him back and stopped him from going after her. I'm sure I don't have to tell you why. That was a shape I was used to staring at and a stride I'd seen countless times. I stood there wide-eyed as her silhouette disappeared through

the main gate.

“Who was that?” Lozang asked me with surprise.

I didn’t give him an answer. Instead, I went over to the windowsill and took that bottle of milk to my room. I set some milk tea on the stove and boiled it quickly. Lozang had all sorts of questions for me, but I didn’t give him a single answer.

“Yep, that just about says it all. Heh heh. You don’t even have to tell me. I know. Basically, Geshe here used to have a...”

I cut Lozang off. But you can imagine what he was about to say.

I saw Principal Li only once that day. There was a strange look in his eyes. When we nodded to each other, the way he smiled looked completely artificial.

That evening, I went to my uncle’s monk cell. I only went because he’d sent a monk to call on me. I had no other choice. My uncle’s cell hadn’t changed in the slightest. But as I reached his door, I saw a young woman sitting inside. The moment she saw me approaching, she rose quickly and her face turned red. Her name was Gangkar Tso. She was the woman you said was ten years my junior. She might not have been all that attractive, but the look in her eyes had a dazzling sharpness. The tone of her voice and the way she held her body also told you that she was a woman who was hard to read and skilled in manipulation. That was the sort of wife my uncle had found for me. At that, my uncle and I started arguing. Our disagreement remained unresolved until the day of my uncle’s imprisonment. It wasn’t long after that when I was accused of being a counter-revolutionary ring leader and sentenced to seventeen years in prison.

All right there, young man, I drank too much water. I’ll just step outside. Where’s the bathroom?

Hey there, readers, Tsultrim Jyamtso had to step outside and I’ve got no choice but to pause the story here. Once he returns, I’ll let you listen to the end of his tale.

Editor’s Note: Dondrup Gyal passed away before he could complete this story and we are therefore bereft of the good fortune to read any more of it.

Translator's Commentary

Acclaimed as the father of modern Tibetan literature, Dondrup Gyal (Don grub rgyal, 1953–1985) helped Tibetan literature to emerge from the ashes of several decades of cultural, religious, and linguistic oppression. Despite his tragic and untimely death, Dondrup Gyal was an extremely prolific writer whose collected works fill six volumes and include poetry, short stories, essays, translations, and other writings. While some scholars have highlighted the novelty in Dondrup Gyal's writings to argue that he sought to break with tradition, a closer reading of his works clearly demonstrates that Dondrup Gyal intentionally made use of numerous traditional themes and classic literary tropes, albeit in new and innovative ways.¹ In her article on Dondrup Gyal's reworking of the *Rāmāyana*, Nancy Lin clearly shows how Dondrup Gyal's writings on this epic demonstrate his efforts to uphold the classical Tibetan literary tradition while, at the same time, developing new indigenous Tibetan literary principles.²

The story *Tsultrim Jyamtso* is an excellent example of Dondrup Gyal's pioneering blend of the traditional and the modern. In this story, readers encounter oral literature such as proverbs and folk expressions alongside high literary *belles-lettres* like Tsultrim Jyamtso's poetic response to the Drepung abbot. Quotations from Tibetan operas, revolutionary communist jargon, Buddhist philosophical terminology, newly coined words, and Amdo dialect all sit comfortably beside one another. It is this rich, literary diversity that makes Dondrup Gyal's fiction such a joy to read (and to translate) and has installed his stories at the center of the canon of contemporary Tibetan literature.

Tsultrim Jyamtso is eponymously titled after its protagonist, Tsultrim Jyamtso, whose story begins in childhood under his lay name of Tserang Namjyal. Young Tserang Namjyal is so keen on his belief in karma that he asks his parents to rename him Jyumdre Namjyal after the word *rgyu 'bras* for “karmic cause and effect.” Yet Jyumdre Namjyal's convictions in the workings of karma are shaken when he nearly kills Chief Harelip, a local leader, in order to prevent him from raping his mother. Dondrup Gyal's treatment of the otherwise taboo theme of rape in this and other stories is another pioneering aspect of his fiction and one that merits a more detailed study.

Another recurring motif in Dondrup Gyal's stories is the Buddhist idea of karma. Dondrup Gyal used fiction as a vehicle to explore karma's place in the suffering associated with the 1958 Amdo rebellion, the famine of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), and the senseless violence of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that he would have either witnessed or heard direct accounts

1. For more on traditional Tibetan literature's continued presence in modern Tibetan literature, please see: Lama Jabb (2015).

2. Lin 2008.

about.³ In *Tsultrim Jyamtso* it is significant to note that once Jyumdre Namjyal runs away following that violent encounter and is forced to tell the first lie of his life, Dondrup Gyal refers to him less as Jyumdre Namjyal and reverts more to his earlier name, Tserang Namjyal. This change in name suggests a change in identity as well, signaling his doubts in the existence of karma. These misgivings are dispelled by his Uncle (also named Tsultrim), though, once he becomes a monk and receives the ordination name of Tsultrim Jyamtso. Indeed, it is Tsultrim Jyamtso's conviction in karma that leads him to be so captivated by Communism when he returns to his homeland of Amdo to find it "liberated."

The 1958 Amdo rebellion, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution are some of the major events that form the backdrop to many of Dondrup Gyal's stories. In voicing the collective trauma suffered by the Tibetan people, some of Dondrup Gyal's fiction belongs to the body of scar literature, a genre that began being written (mostly by Chinese authors) in the late 1970s to address the injustices of the Cultural Revolution. Scar literature is, first and foremost, a Chinese genre and, as such, does not necessarily map neatly onto Tibetan literature. Since *Tsultrim Jyamtso* focuses primarily on the 1958 Amdo rebellion and not the Cultural Revolution, it technically is not characterizable as scar literature. Nevertheless, *Tsultrim Jyamtso* provides a similar cultural catharsis around comparably traumatic events and, in this sense, may be understood as a form of Tibetan scar literature. Perhaps the limitations of the scar literature genre should be adapted when applying the designation to Tibetan literature.

In *Tsultrim Jyamtso*, Dondrup Gyal does not give explicit details of the horrors that occurred during the 1958 Amdo rebellion, instead simply noting that Tsultrim Jyamtso suffered greatly during his incarceration and that his uncle passed away in prison. The readers are left to fill in the blanks, an ability that Dondrup Gyal's Tibetan readership would possess all too well. Instead, Dondrup Gyal seeks to heal his people's collective suffering through comic relief. Readers are sure to be struck by the humorous absurdity of Tsultrim Jyamtso's seemingly contradictory faith in the tenets of Buddhism and belief in the avowedly atheist ideology of Communism. For Tsultrim Jyamtso however, there was not the slightest contradiction between these two systems that "ultimately came down to the same thing, aside for some minor differences in rhetoric." Indeed, Tsultrim Jyamtso's failed application letter to join the Chinese Communist Party is, as Tsultrim Jyamtso's biographer writes, "certainly worth a few laughs."

The inspiration for the character Tsultrim Jyamtso was likely taken from what Luran Hartley has termed the monastic vanguard.⁴ The monastic vanguard refers to monastically trained scholars who became patriotic supporters of the Communist Party early on. They also became

3. For more on the 1958 Amdo Rebellion and *Tsultrim Jyamtso's* place in the literature addressing that period, please see Robin (2020).

4. For more on the role of the monastic vanguard in the development of contemporary Tibetan literature, please see Hartley (2003).

some of the university professors who educated Dondrup Gyal's generation, the first generation of Tibetan students to attend Chinese university. The monastic vanguard included scholars like Geshe Sherab Gyatso (Dge bshes Shes rab rgya mtsho, 1884–1968), Sungrab Gyatso (Gsung rab rgya mtsho, 1896–1982), Tseten Zhapdrung (Tshe tan zhabs drung, 1910–1985), and Dungkar Lobsang Trinle (Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, 1927–1997), among others. Among the monastic vanguard, Samten Gyatso (Bsam gtan rgya mtsho, 1921–1979) seems the most likely to have inspired Dondrup Gyal's character Tsultrim Jyamtso. Indeed, the Tibetan poet Jangbu (Ljang bu, b. 1963) recounts how it was well known that Samten Gyatso was “the only Tibetan intellectual in Amdo for whom he [Dondrup Gyal] had a tremendous respect.”⁵

We cannot be sure whether Dondrup Gyal would have continued to develop his character Tsultrim Jyamtso in the likeness of Samten Gyatso or the other monastic vanguard scholars, since the work was never completed due to the author's untimely demise. Dondrup Gyal had intended for *Tsultrim Jyamtso* to be a full-length novel when he started writing at the beginning of 1984. *Tsultrim Jyamtso* was, in fact, the last piece of fiction Dondrup Gyal would ever write.⁶ The disappointment readers are sure to feel at not being able to continue the story of Tsultrim Jyamtso was also deeply felt by its Tibetan audience. So much so that two authors, Rangdra (Rang sgra)⁷ and Dorje Rinchen of Jentsa (Gcan tsha Rdo rje rin chen)⁸ have written their own continuations (*rtsom 'phro kha skong*) to Dondrup Gyal's *Tsultrim Jyamtso*.

This translation of Tsultrim Jyamtso is from *A Frostbitten Flower and Other Stories: The Collected Fiction of Dondrup Gyal* (forthcoming). In this translation, I prioritized rendering the stories in natural English rather than reflecting the Tibetan construction of the source text. At the same time, however, I sought to preserve certain idiomatic Tibetan expressions and the internal logic of the work. To achieve this I allowed myself a greater degree of poetic license, one that many translators of canonical Buddhist literature, like myself, find uncomfortable at first. Yet it was this newly found creativity that allowed me to bring the stories to life in English. To arrive closer to the heart of the story precisely by allowing some distance from the literalness of its source text is, for me, the very paradox of translation. With this approach, I hope to have allowed Dondrup Gyal's stories to come alive in English while also giving the reader a taste for the uniquely Tibetan flavor of the original, the *rtsam dri* so to speak. The reader, however, will have to be the judge of that.

All of the proper names in *Tsultrim Jyamtso* have been transliterated according to their Amdo-pronunciation in order to further root them and their stories in their respective environment. As Benno Weiner notes in his study on Chinese state- and nation-building efforts in Amdo, “In employing Central Tibetan orthography, scholars run the risk of further peripheralizing their

5. Dhondup T. Rekjong 2022.

6. Bde skyid 'tsho, Rdo sbis klu rgyal don grub (trans.) 2006, 71.

7. Rang sgra (Tshe rgyal) 1999.

8. Gcan tsha rdo rje rin chen's *Tsultrim Jyamtso* is currently unfinished. See Gangs zhun 2009, 419.

subjects while reinforcing a framework of a single Tibetan radiating outward from Lhasa.”⁹ Translating Tibetan names like *Tshe ring* as Tserang might initially seem odd to readers used to seeing it transcribed according to Central Tibetan dialects as Tsering. Nevertheless, just as one would expect José not to be Anglicized as Joseph when translating a Columbian novel, it does not make sense for Amdo names to be “Lhasafied” in a similar manner. This, I hope, has helped to locate the characters in their geographical, cultural, and linguistic environments.

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9. Weiner 2021.

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