

MEMOIRS
OF A TIBETAN LAMA

LOBSANG GYATSO

translated and edited by GARETH SPARHAM

Snow Lion Publications
Ithaca, New York

BQ
942
L 597
A 3
1998

Snow Lion Publications
P.O. Box 6483
Ithaca, New York 14851 USA
607-273-8519

Copyright © 1998 Institute of Buddhist Dialectics

All rights reserved. No portion of this work may be reproduced by
any means without prior written permission from the publisher.

ISBN 1-55939-097-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blo-bzan-rgya-mtsho, Phu-khan Dge-bśes
Memoirs of a Tibetan Lama / Lobsang Gyatso;
translated and edited by Gareth Sparham.
p. cm.

ISBN 1-55939-097-2 (alk. paper)

1. Blo-bzan-rgya-mtsho, Phu-khan Dge-bśes. 2. Lamas--China--
Tibet--Biography. 3. Refugees, Religious--China--Tibet--Biography.
4. 'Bras-spun (Monastery). 5. Institute of Buddhist Dialectics
(Dharmasāla, India). I. Sparham, Gareth. II. Title.

BQ942.L597A3 1998 294.3'923'092--dc21

[B] 98-25832 CIP

Printed in Canada on recycled paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
From the Valley of a Tang Princess	11
To the Land of the Gods	47
Drepung Monastery	85
Caves of Increasing Goodness	119
Phukhang House	135
House Guru	159
The Glorious Goddess	199
The Sadness of Tibet	213
Did Mao Hear Those Voices?	243
Last Pilgrimage and Exile	267
Afterword	307

565387
MAR 28 2005
Lamont Library
Harvard University

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been written without the help of many people. At the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, Lobsang Yeshey spent many long hours, both before and after his great uncle Lobsang Gyatso's murder, listening to tapes with me and explaining obscure references and incomprehensible words in the Kongjo-rawa dialect. The present Director, Geshey Damcho Gyaltsen, in his gentle and unassuming manner kindly allowed a number of valuable pictures to leave the school's collection for reproduction and has offered every necessary support. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the Assistant Director Kalsang Damdul who anticipated my every need and more, and extended to me a true hand of friendship during the difficult period after Genla's death. I would also like to thank the office staff at the Institute for stepping in to help solve computer and printer problems.

I would like to thank Snow Lion Publications for accepting this work for publication and for their generous editorial assistance. In particular I must acknowledge the contribution of Chris Hatchell, whose detailed editing has greatly improved this book.

Finally, I would like to thank the Dalai Lama for his quiet, moral support and Nga-hua Yeo for being a benefactor to me as a monk and giving me the time to complete this work.

INTRODUCTION

Memoirs of a Tibetan Lama, published here for the first time, is a Tibetan *namthar*—a life story as Buddhist teaching—written in the candid style of a tell-all autobiography by the famous Tibetan Buddhist teacher Lobsang Gyatso (1928-1997). Inevitably the life of Lobsang Gyatso will be seen through the lens of his death. He was born in Kham, eastern Tibet, about seventy years ago. Called Drang-te (Beggar's Rubbish) as a boy, Nag-po-pa (Fleabag) or Choo-churwa (after his village in Kham) by his classmates, and Gen-la (a mix of comrade and teacher) by his students and friends, he was killed in the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, India, next door to the Dalai Lama, in February 1997 along with two of his students.

Lobsang Gyatso (Ocean of Fine Thoughts, his monastic name) was recording these memoirs at the time of his death. A master raconteur with an eye for human foibles and a wicked sense of humor, he steps out of his remembrances as a roly-poly delinquent with a fierce sense of justice, a love of pork and beer, a dangerous temper, and a love of guns and knives. These memoirs take the reader up to Lobsang Gyatso's first years in India, ending in about 1963. Narrated in an unusually realistic style, his account of his early life as herder and *ben-chung* (young monk or lout) in the semi-nomadic community in eastern Tibet where he grew up, his journey to Lhasa, and his life as a monk in Drepung (at that time the largest monastery in the world) recreate what was special in old Tibet—the Shangrila of western imagination—but with an openness and realism that is sometimes disturbing. He describes a country and a people as they really were, and he describes

himself honestly as an ordinary man, with all his failings, caught between the pull of the world and the tranquility of spiritual life.

Lobsang Gyatso left his homeland in Kham to study in central Tibet at about the age of seventeen, entering Phukhang house, in the Loseling section of Drepung Monastery in 1945. He was at first little more than a debt collector for the house guru, but finally was taken in hand by the saintly Gen Yaro who for seven years led him through the traditional monastic curriculum. He became well known in Drepung as a capable debater and he spent long periods, during study sessions, in the caves above Drepung in retreat. Later he would say that whatever personal and intellectual honesty he had stemmed from his spiritual training during this period. In 1954 Lobsang Gyatso became the Phukhang house guru and demonstrated a talent for administration and financial matters; in 1956 he became the house grainkeeper, a position he held until he fled as a refugee to India in 1959.

In 1974 the Dalai Lama and Lobsang Gyatso founded the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala. After some difficult early years it established itself as one of the success stories of the Tibetan exile community. The founding of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics is the work for which Lobsang Gyatso will be best remembered. Unencumbered by past history and unfettered by formal ties, it evolved under the guidance of Lobsang Gyatso into a diverse institution defined only by the wish to properly educate Tibetan youth in exile.

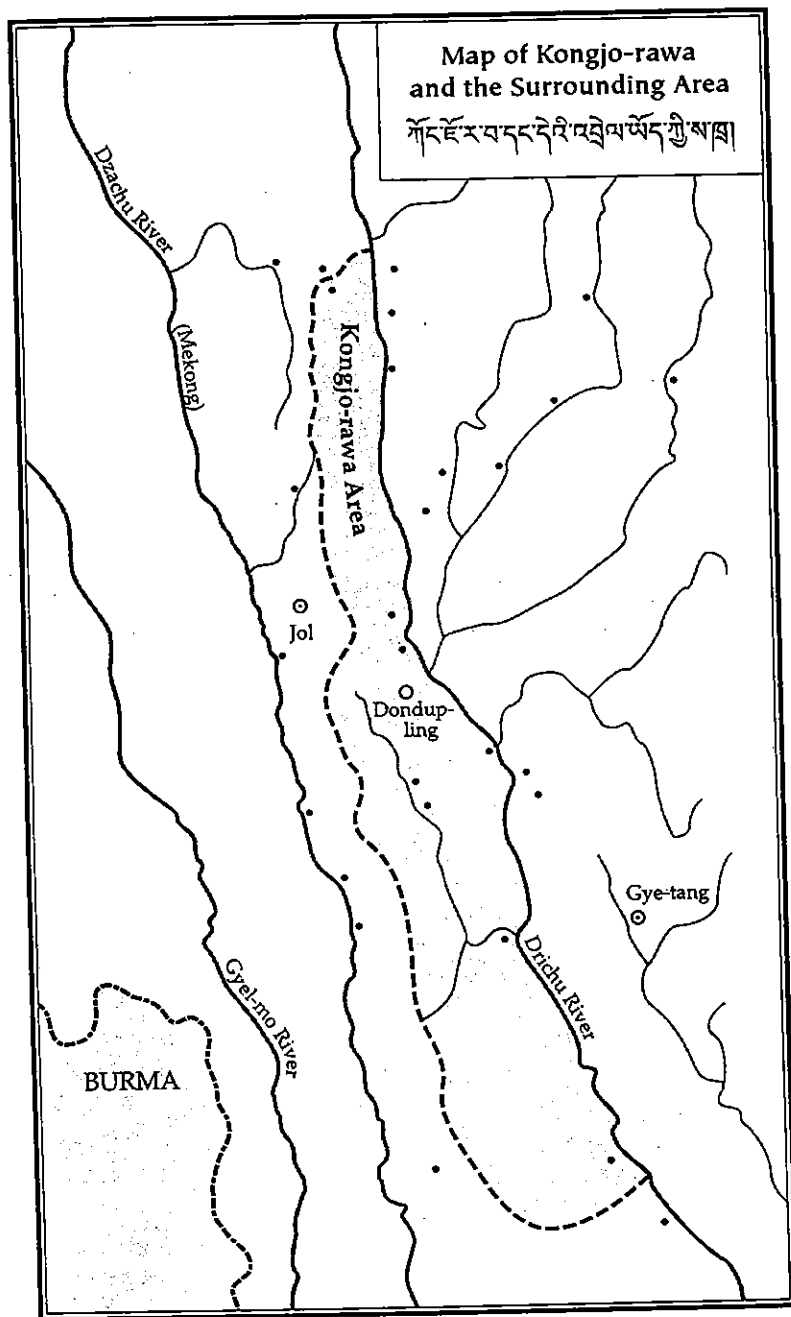
That Lobsang Gyatso was a deeply spiritual man is obvious from these memoirs. His descriptions of his Red Uncle (his first guru), and the gratitude he feels to Gen Yaro (the guru who began to develop his prodigious intellectual talents) evoke memories of famous gurus of the past. And his love for his home monastery Dondup-ling in Kham, and for Drepung Loseling in Lhasa, is unmistakable. But Lobsang Gyatso writes obliquely. He details his own shortcomings and sillinesses rather than openly describing the excellence of his gurus, and he is confident that his description of the grubbiness and even horrors in the monasteries will gently lead the reader to find for him or herself the noble sense of community that was there as well.

Of particular interest is Lobsang Gyatso's detailed description of the Tibetan economy before the Chinese occupation. His eyewitness account of Tibet's market-oriented economy, based on the monasteries as banks, will do much to put to rest once and for all the self-serving myth of Tibet as a feudal land where peasants toiled and the rich lived off the fruits of their labor.

Lobsang Gyatso's memoirs take their place alongside the other records of pre-1959 Tibetan society, the best known of which is the Dalai Lama's *My Land and My People*. But Lobsang Gyatso's memoirs are unique for a narrative style strongly influenced by realism, and for the perspective he brings to his description: that of an ordinary Tibetan. His willingness to embrace controversial issues head on and his tragic death at the hands of sectarian fanatics will ensure his memoirs a lasting place in Tibetan literature.

Lobsang Gyatso's memoirs are characterized by the same humor and fearlessness that he showed in his life. More than anything else, he valued authentic spiritual endeavor, free from hypocrisy and unfettered by mere conformity to rules and ritual, and he was supremely confident that what was authentically good in Tibet and Tibetans, embodied in the Dalai Lama, would prevail. His outspokenness and love of Buddhism and his country are summed up in his memorable critique of his fellow Tibetans: "too much faith in Buddhism and an inflated notion of their own country."

Memoirs of a Tibetan Lama, spoken in Tibetan into a tape-recorder over the last two and a half years of Lobsang Gyatso's life, are rendered here into English by his close friend and student Gareth Sparham.



FROM THE VALLEY OF A TANG PRINCESS

My name is Lobsang Gyatso and there is nothing particularly spectacular in my life. What you have with me, I'm afraid, is just an ordinary fellow spinning around in the world of life and death. As of now I am in charge of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics here in Dharamsala, North India, and I am head teacher here. There are things in my life which are worth recording, no doubt, even which need to be said, but with me everything that has happened is confined to this ordinary world.

I was born in the northern part of Kongjo-rawa, in the four rivers and six mountains region of Kham, not far from the Burmese and Chinese borders. One of the four great rivers of Kham is the Drichu (called the Yangtse when it gets to China), and Kongjo-rawa is the name for the western bank of this river for about two hundred kilometers or so just before it enters China. We share the lower part of Kongjo-rawa with the Jang people. They are not actually Tibetans, though they are Tibetan Buddhists like us, and they live in the southern part of the valley closer to the Chinese border. The valley cut by the Drichu is so deep along this part of its course that the other side of the river, a region called Zanam, is almost completely cut off from us.

Kongjo-rawa is never more than seventy kilometers wide even at its widest. For its entire length it is hemmed in at the back by high mountains, and only a few passes leave the region, heading over to the region of Jolwa. Like Kongjo-rawa, Jolwa also lies alongside a valley

carved by one of the four great rivers—the Mekong. The northern parts of the two valleys of Jolwa and Kongjo-rawa are referred to together as Jol-kong-ra. Sometimes the region is called Jol-kong-gye, referring to Jolwa, northern Kongjo-rawa, and Gye-tang, which is to the south, on the other side of the Drichu River.

Kongjo means "Tang princess." The old kings of the Tang dynasty were known as *kongs*, and their daughters were called *kongjos*. During the seventh century, at the time when the great Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo was invading China, the Tang king had to give one of his daughters to Songtsen Gampo to keep him from taking over his capital. The *kongjo* whom the Tang king sent became one of Songtsen Gampo's wives, and was the one who brought the famous Buddha statue which is the central figure in the temple in Lhasa. Songtsen Gampo sent one of his ministers, a fellow called Gal-dung-dzin, to collect his *kongjo*. It would have been a long trip, and on the way back, I suppose the two fell for each other.

The *rawa* in "Kongjo-rawa" means "garden" or "pleasure stop." While journeying back to the king in central Tibet, the couple passed through my part of Kham, and stayed for a while having an affair. So that is how it got its name, "The Pleasure Garden of the Tang Princess." Some others explain that *kongjo* is actually the local pronunciation of *pongjo*, which means "the one who abandoned her child." While traveling from China to Tibet with Gal-dung-dzin, the princess got pregnant, and unable to find an easy place to cross the Yangtse, the caravan stopped in Kongjo-rawa, where the princess gave birth. Knowing that she could not take the baby with her to central Tibet, she put it in a basket fashioned of reeds and let it float back to China. Kongjo-rawa therefore got the name "The Pleasure Garden of the Princess Who Abandoned Her Baby."

I was born there in 1928, in a village named Choo-chur, which means "bitter water" in Tibetan. The bitter taste of the local water came from its high soda content. If you used this water when you cooked, you would not need to put any baking soda in your dumplings or bread to make them rise. The village was quite famous for this and people from neighboring villages would make a special trip to get some of our water to use for their cooking.

The village was inhabited by perhaps ten or twelve families when I was a boy, so it was not big by any standards. It is located at the base of a rock formation that looks like an elephant, and the great monastery of Dondup-ling was located high above. When you approached

Kongjo-rawa, the lie of the land made it look exactly like the monastery was on the crown of an elephant's head, with my village down and off a bit to the left, situated at the elephant's left foot.

My family name is Ye-drong Nya-me Nam-pa. We got the name because of where we lived in the village. The two houses of my extended family are about ten meters apart from each other, and are set off from the rest of the village a little way up the hill. *Ye-drong* means "the villagers a little way up." Because one of the houses was further up the hill than the other, it was known in the village as Nya-me Nam-pa, "one a bit higher up," while the lower one was known as Wo-ma Nam-pa. I belong to Ye-drong Nya-me Nam-pa; it is the house where I was born and where my family still lives.

My family was *sa-ma-drok*, which means "not farmers but not nomads." My family owned fields and had permanent houses, but our lives were also partially nomadic. In the late spring we would take our flocks up to the high grazing lands. Most families in Kongjo-rawa lived like this. In other villages, families made their living by doing business, using their animals to transport goods for trade. In others, families simply worked their fields. Sometimes, but not often, farmers engaged in trade by transporting goods on pack animals that belonged to others. Other families made their living by plying a trade; there were iron workers—lots of them—and there were the petty traders who lived by small business alone.

There was a lot of business in my region. The bigger traders would bring up tea, brown sugar, and soy noodles from China, sell what they could in Kongjo-rawa, and then take the rest up to central Tibet. They would then pick up the many different grades of woolen goods and take them on to India. In India they would buy cloth to sell on their return to central Tibet, and when they came back home to our region they would bring loads of woolen goods. Traders who did not have the capital to do such big business would just head down to the Chinese border and then come back and sell their wares in Jol, or in the regions just on the borders of Kongjo-rawa.

Our family had particularly good fruit trees, and we had fields sufficient for two households. So by local standards, though we are by no means considered very rich, we are certainly not considered poor. We are not a noble family by any stretch of the imagination and are not a family with a glorious history, but over the previous generation or two some of our family did make a name for themselves in the region with their magical powers, and got quite rich performing rituals to

identify and punish thieves. My maternal grandfather knew how to make a figure of a person representing an unknown thief, and he would put a piece of thread around its neck. He would slowly tighten the thread until it started to cut into the figure, and then he would ask his client, "Do you want to kill him or not?" If the client said yes, he would tighten the thread so much that the head would be sliced off, and for sure somewhere in the district the thief would fall into a terrible sickness from which he or she would soon die. I grew up hearing a lot about my recent ancestors, these local religious figures who had been skilled in a mixture of Bön magic and Buddhist learning, and I knew there had been quite a rivalry between my ancestors and two other local magicians.

I was born into this family in 1928, probably in the tenth or eleventh Tibetan month, just before new year that falls in very early spring. My mother had nine children in all, but only three of us survived infancy. My older sister, Tsering Chern-dzom, was eight when I was born and my younger sister was born two years after me. My older sister was the local beauty and the villagers used to say that when the village went up to a festival all the men would go to see her, not the performance. She knew that everybody was looking at her too, and she always had a sense of pride. She had an incredibly sharp tongue and was not to be crossed lightly, but she was a fine worker and when the house and fields came into her charge she took over with confidence and skill.

I was very sickly when I was born and my mother used to tell me how close I had come to death when I was a week old, and then again a month after that. I was on the verge of certain death, she said, when they called in a Dondup-ling monk named Barshing Dulwa, a distant relative of ours who was famous throughout the district. He gave me a *chin-ten*, a blessed pill, and then I got well. My mother often said that had I not been given that pill I would have died for sure.

The fact that I was so sickly and that so many other children in my family had died in infancy explains the name I was given as a child. I was called Drang-te. *Drang* means "beggar" or "destitute," and *te* means "something that has been retrieved." So my name, a horrible one so that no malicious spirit or person would have any interest in me, meant something that a destitute had thrown out and that had then been picked up by someone else. That was the name they hung on me—"the fellow scavenged from the beggar's rubbish."

ALTHOUGH OUR FAMILY had a lot of animals and its holdings were quite large, it was in a state of decline. My father had a stroke early on, leaving him with one side of his body partly paralyzed, and he went around with one hand clutched tightly to his body. My mother, bless her, was a rather simple woman, and with no grown-up children to do the work the herds and fields had not been properly looked after. Eventually my sister took charge and later, when I was only about seven or eight, I was sent out to tend to the sheep and goats since there was nobody else available. I can hear them now, telling me carefully that there were eighteen sheep and goats, and telling me what I had to do to take care of them. They gave me good food and sweets to take with me and made me a new pair of slipper shoes.

Since I was so young I could not go off to tend the animals on my own, so I was teamed up with a neighbor's slightly older son who was looking after a large flock. Although sometimes he was friendly to me, sometimes he was very nasty and would make me feel stupid, so I gradually came to hate him. My family would give him treats too, but he would lie to my mother and she believed everything he said. One time he took my new shoes, which I had taken off and laid aside while I was running in the fields. He insisted that I had lost them, and I did not see them for weeks until one day he turned up wearing them. Of course, I could not say anything to him because he was bigger than me and he was in charge. If I had told my parents they would not have believed me, and I would have just come in for a scolding, but I thought that one day when I grew up I would teach him a lesson. I carried that grudge around with me for a long time even though I had to go out herding with him nearly every day.

I remember one time when the two of us were out with our flocks; we were close to a beautiful retreat house built nearby the home of the village headman. It was a very peaceful place that had been made for a member of the family who had been to central Tibet and become a geshey. There were fruit trees nearby and we were sitting underneath them, helping ourselves to the villager's apricots and peaches without a care in the world, blissfully unaware that our flocks had all got into the neighbor's field, which was just about ready for harvest. Suddenly a tall monk who was the caretaker of the retreat house came running across the adjacent field in a towering rage, driving our goats and sheep in front of him. We ran off as fast as we could, both heading along one of the level paths away from the retreat house. As he began

to gain on us we split up, my companion heading up the hill and me running down as fast as I could. The monk at first came after me and came within an inch of catching me, but my companion tripped on a thorn bush and the monk went after him. He caught up with him and beat the daylight out of him.

I kept on running and crossed a small stream and hid under a thorn bush. After a time I could hear the sound of footsteps; I peered out from under the bush and saw the tall monk start off in the general direction of my house. I started to worry that the monk would tell my family and that I would get a beating from him and from my family too, so I leapt up and ran home as fast as I could without returning to the goats and sheep. When I arrived and found that the monk had not been there, I decided I had better make up a good lie to explain why I was home so early in the afternoon—it could not have been much more than two or three o'clock. My sister with the sharp tongue was very hard to fool, but my mother believed me right away when I said I felt terrible and that I had started to vomit. She was very gentle with me and said to the others that I was very sick. Inside I was terrified of being found out, but my mother made me the object of her attention and bundled me up in bed. She even brought me a special rice porridge.

Towards dark I said that I was feeling better and that I would go out to see about the flock. I had gone a short way when I met Namgyal, my companion, coming home alone with the animals. I could see he was in a foul temper and he asked me where I had gone. "What could I do?" I said. "The monk was going to beat me so I ran home." When I asked him how he had fared he said he had been beaten to a pulp. The monk had taken a stick and beaten him so hard that there were black and blue marks all over him, which he showed to me. He shoved me about a bit, but that was one occasion when I came off better than him.

THE TRUTH IS that Namgyal was not really a very good fellow. One time while we were playing he picked up some fresh dung on the end of a stick and came running after me, trying to smear me with it. I ran off as fast as I could and he came chasing after me. I went off quite a long distance to escape from him, and when I got back to where we had left our food for the day he said that the crows had taken all mine, even though it was obvious that he had eaten it.

I had to go out with Namgyal until I was nearly eleven. Then as I gradually got older we started to go out separately. One day I had taken the animals out by myself and had gone quite a distance to a

place close to a cliff face. I was playing there by myself, letting the flocks graze, when suddenly out of nowhere a single big boulder came crashing down and landed just a short way off from me. There was nobody about and nothing further up the cliff. It was as if it had just fallen straight out of the sky. I felt scared and immediately drove the sheep and goats further down the mountain. Later I met up with a local woodcutter who warned me not to go near the cliff because a leopard had just given birth to a litter and was keeping them there. I kept thinking about that big boulder that had fallen from nowhere. If it had not fallen to scare me I wouldn't have known there was a danger and would have just kept on playing—the leopard would have killed me for sure. I felt certain that a god or goddess had been looking down on me and had protected me. A few days later I went over near the cliff with some friends and we could see the leopard with her kittens, just as the woodsman had said.

I remember another day when I was out by myself with the flocks. I had taken them up behind the village along a stream that ran through a dense piece of forest. Suddenly I saw a man with a huge stomach—it looked like he had a cow's stomach, really. The rest of him was as thin as a stick man sketched out of charcoal. I ran off to call another boy who was looking after his herd close by and told him what I had seen. We both ran back to the spot where I had seen the strange apparition, but there was nothing there. I felt so strange—I knew that I had seen something, but now I was there with my friend and there was nothing there at all.

When I was about the same age I had become friends with one of the yak and dzomo herders in the village. He was a fellow with a limp who had taken a liking to me and sometimes gave me treats: fruit or pieces of meat or little pieces of brown sugar. One time he told me that I should keep my ears open and come immediately if I heard him clap his hands. The next day when I took the flocks out, quite early on I heard him clapping so I went down with another village boy to see what was going on.

When we arrived, we found the herder getting ready to force-feed his cattle to strengthen them before taking them to the spring feeding grounds. The cattle in our parts get very emaciated during the long winter months, so in the spring the herders feed them pork to strengthen them. It works very well—you mix the meat, mainly the fat, together with grain or ground barley and you open their mouths and push it in. The cattle quickly regain their strength, and then when you take them up to graze they do very well.

This herder was in charge of all the cattle belonging to one of the main administrators of the monastery, so to feed them all he had to cook up a great pile of pork. He had stolen quite a bit of pork in addition to what was allotted for the cattle, and though some of it was a little old, some of it was still very tasty. As he cooked, he would give us some tasty bits, eat some himself, talk about this and that, and then go back to work again. There were three or four of us there and we spent the best part of the day enjoying ourselves, totally unconcerned with the fact that our untended flocks were wandering far afield.

By the end of the day there was only a kilo or so of the pork left. When I finally went out to see what had happened to the animals, I saw the whole flock running in a panic out of the woods and down the side of the hill. When I counted them there were three missing, but what could I do? Nothing but tell a lie, right? I decided it would have to be a good one to conceal a whole day spent eating pork, especially since I had not touched any of the bread given to me for my lunch. "I fell terribly sick," I said as I came lurching in, and my mother immediately began to worry about me. Mothers are like that, are they not? They have such a feeling for their kids that they always take their side. "But why didn't you come home immediately if you were so sick?" she asked. To cover my tracks I said I was so sick that I didn't feel I could make it home. My mother tucked me up in bed, brought me hot water and told me not to worry. But of course I was worrying inside because I knew that three of the flock were missing. To make matters worse, my sister and her husband were getting ready to go out searching for the missing sheep and I said that I had taken the flock in the opposite direction to the one I had come from so that they would not meet up with the herder and find out what had really happened. They went out in the wrong direction hunting high and low for the missing animals, but of course they came back much later without having found even a trace of them.

A few days after that, the remains of the three carcasses turned up in the forest. There were just some traces of the hair and hide remaining; a leopard had eaten all the rest of them up. After a month or so the family heard the whole story of the pork-eating incident, which was making the rounds in the village. Everybody was laughing about it, and by the time my family heard about it, the time for a beating was long past. As they discussed the incident they were alternatively stern and joking, and my sister asked me why I had not at least been truthful about the direction I had taken the flocks—they might at least have

been able to salvage some of the carcasses. I told her straight. "Sister," I said, "you are always on my case and you scold me for the smallest mistake. If I had told you honestly that three of the flock had been eaten by a leopard while I was enjoying myself eating pork, you would have eaten *me* alive on the spot." Everyone had a laugh at that and my sister just had to let it pass because she knew what I said was true. Dear old mother, she looked at me shaking her head. "You should not lie, you know that," she said. "It was wrong to tell a lie, you naughty boy." And that is how the whole incident passed off, turning into an often repeated family joke. The villagers enjoyed talking about the incident too. If truth be told, I was a naughty fellow and was known for it. Often when people met me they would say, "You are the young fellow who spent the whole day pigging out on pork instead of following your flock, aren't you?" Then they would give me a slap on the back and go off chuckling.

THERE WERE A LOT of wild animals and birds in our region. There were flocks of two or three hundred blackbirds, and you could see hundreds of the white stork with red legs that we called the "whitebird." In the winter when the deep snow fell on the high regions the whitebirds would descend into the valleys to feed. In the evenings there would sometimes be so many of them that they would cover the fields in a white blanket, just like the snow in the higher regions covered the mountain tops. Nobody would ever lift a finger to hurt them. In summer, the birds would disappear up into the high regions and you would not see them again until next winter. It was the same with the wild animals: they would come down into the fields when the snows were heavy in the high regions, but when the snows melted they would disappear again into the woods.

Although there was so much wildlife, none of those who lived in the valley were supposed to hunt, and by and large none did. It was considered low. People from outside the valley would come in to hunt, but if you caught one of these poachers you would immediately confiscate everything he had and send him away. On the other hand, wood was not held in any special respect. There was so much of it and it was only used for cooking and house-building, so there was not really any need to have special customs to protect it. After all, there was no lumber industry to talk of, nobody was cutting down the trees and selling them, so whoever needed wood from the forests would just take what they needed. There was one forest though, on one mountain which

was sacred, and cutting trees there was not allowed. Still, there was a carelessness even then about the trees and forests—even back then our people were at fault in the way we went up and indiscriminately cut any trees we wanted without any thought for their place in the environment. We thought clearly about the animals and birds, protecting them quite well, but we didn't think much about the trees.

Though no one hunted, the villagers were happy if someone was able to kill a marauding leopard or wolf. These animals went after the flocks, so if someone killed one it would be considered excellent. I remember there were some devious beggars in our parts who would get hold of a leopard pelt and go through the villages begging. They would pretend that they had killed the animal, thereby protecting the flocks of the villagers, and would ask for bounty money from each villager. We called this *zig-long*, which means "leopard-begging."

IN OUR PART OF THE WORLD, it was the custom to use some of the local land as common property. Families who had no fields of their own could make their entire living on the common lands by grazing livestock, sheep, and goats. At festival time, when each family gave a part of their harvest for the rituals and celebrations, the families who used the common lands would pay the community back by contributing an extra share of their harvest. Families who had their own fields would give some of their harvest, but it would only be a little bit. Orchard owners would be expected to give some of their fruit, but since there were no orchards on common lands, the amount of fruit at the festivals was less than the amount of the other offerings. This system, called *sa-bab-kyi-thun-kyen* (requirements in accord with what is taken from the land), was a kind of land tax, though not what one thinks of as land tax nowadays.

There was a natural order to things. Three families were responsible for collecting this tax, and every three years the responsibility would pass on to other families, who would take up the work without question. The amount that each person gave to the communal pot was always offered with happiness; no one felt, "This is a tax that I have to give though I do not want to give it." When the monastery had to raise materials to carry out rituals that ensured the well-being of the region, the same sort of procedure was followed, but again there was no feeling on the part of the villagers that it was a tax. It was an offering to the monastery by those who owned fields and livestock, and the herders, field owners and orchard owners each contributed their share.

LIVING AT HOME WITH US when I was still a little boy was my maternal grandfather, who we called Anyi. He was a very old man and had suffered a series of strokes that had left him more and more paralyzed. He lived until he was about eighty-two, I think, and for the last year of his life he could not even get up. But boy could that old man eat! Whatever you served him, he would have it down immediately and he was never sick. He was almost blind, so he would just lie there, but he knew exactly what was going on, and took a very active interest in things. He had a soft spot for me and was always saying, "Come over by me," or asking where I was, or what I was doing.

One day, I was already a monk by then, my grandfather called us three children together—my elder sister Tsering, me, and my younger sister Bhuti. He had us sit down and began to talk seriously to us. Now, my uncle, which is to say his son, was an important figure in our local monastery, Dondup-ling. "He is well off," Anyi said about my uncle, "so we do not need to consider him here. When I die, he will take care of you and be in charge of you." He then turned to my sister and said, "The house and the authority over the house and what is in it are all in your hands, Tsering Chern-dzom, and I want you to remember that if you put yourself to the task you will be successful at it. It is me who set you up here, set the whole thing right for you." He always had a lot to say about that and never let people forget it. Then he said to me that as a monk I had a responsibility to go up to the monastery in Lhasa, which was a very expensive proposition. Therefore he said he was going to give me most of his belongings as an inheritance, in order to be able to help meet some of those expenses. When he was younger he had four very good dzomos and a bull that went with them, and he ran off each of their names for me there and then. They were no doubt excellent in their day but of course they had died long before, and since he had his strokes he had not had any cattle. Very warmly he said to me, "I want you to have those five animals—I want you to take care of them and then when you are ready to go up to Lhasa I want you to sell them and use the money to help to pay your way. That is your inheritance, my boy." He also gave me a big walnut tree that belonged to him. "You can either use the walnuts for food or sell them each year," he said, "but I am giving you the tree as well."

Old folks, when they are very old, seem to see more and more clearly those things that happened when they were young, so here he was giving away to me as my inheritance things that were nowhere except

in his mind. And there I was saying thank you, and my sisters knowing what was going on. Both of them were nearly splitting apart trying to contain themselves. He was very warm and kind about it: "This, my boy, is your inheritance—those four dzomos and that bull!" And there I was saying "Thank you grandpa, thank you," knowing I was not getting a thing. "Be very careful with those dzomos, my boy. They will fetch you a good price when you sell them and it will help you when you go up to Lhasa." I can hear him now, and my older sister enjoying every minute of it. As for my younger sister, he said to her that he would advise her not to marry out into another family, that she would be better off to stay at home. He said that he was giving her a field as her inheritance; I think there was maybe another walnut tree in it for her too, if I remember rightly—I am a bit unclear now because it was a long time ago.

When he was finished what could we do except say, "Thank you grandpa, we will do just as you have said." There was nothing else to be said, right? When we went outside my sister was enjoying herself as much as I have seen her saying, "Now you take good care of those dzomos, you hear me, that is your inheritance. You be sure to milk them well and keep them well fed now, you hear me?" And there I was, with nothing to show for the experience except the cows of his youth that he loved so much in his mind.

THE DIFFERENT REGIONS on the Sino-Tibetan border were given a considerable amount of autonomy, a policy that can be traced back to the time of the Tibetan dharma-king Ti-re-pa-chen. He devised a system of regional autonomy for Gye-tang, Jolwa, and Kongjo-rawa, allowing them to mobilize their defenses immediately if there were any encroachments on the borders of the Tibetan kingdom. The protection of the borders of Tibet, therefore, was a particular duty he laid on these regions. If the border regions were unable to deal with a threat they were expected to inform the central Tibetan dharma-king in Lhasa, who would then respond by sending reinforcements. I cannot say that this description is based in actual historical fact, but I do know that this was what was said about the origins of our form of highly autonomous administration. What it led to in practice was a number of small principalities, almost little kingdoms. We were grouped under the central Tibetan authority, but we had great autonomy. It was a state of affairs that continued until the early part of the present century when the power of China, for the first time, became too strong for the Tibetans

to stand, and we began to have to bow in the direction of their wishes. Until that time, our laws were local laws that were administered by locally originating bodies of authority. After our defeat by the Chinese, we had to pay a war indemnity which continued down to my own days.

In 1909, when the Chinese first started coming in, they set up a settlement of about a hundred soldiers in the center of the Kongjo-rawa region. They were going and coming every day, bringing in all sorts of things. There was much talk about the soldiers, and fearing their intentions, an armed party from the monastery wiped out the lot of them, barring two who were able to get back to China and report what had happened. You can imagine the size of the force they sent to avenge the atrocity. All the monks ran away into the hills and the Chinese were about to raze the monastery, insisting that the monks who had done the killing be handed over to them. Anyi, my maternal grandfather, was an important intermediary in this dispute, and had a Chinese incense burner that he had been given as a gift by the general who led the forces that finally subdued our district.

A representative left by the Chinese occupying authorities became the most powerful figure in the region. He had the final say in a lot of matters, and made an administrative base in Zhayi, a pretty little place about three hours' walk away from Choo-chur. When there was a meeting of the different people of the district he used to call on my grandfather, who served him as a sort of minister. He had quite a high status from this.

My maternal grandfather was an unusual man. He was not from our part of Tibet, but from a place some way off. He came from a large extended family but due to some circumstance or other he had killed a man, or was involved with someone else who had killed someone. He had to flee his home district, and he sought refuge with Tra-tang Rinpoche, an incarnate lama of Dondup-ling. Tra-tang Rinpoche sent him into our family as a *ma-pa*, a husband for a woman who is in charge of the family's property. At that point our family was quite wealthy. With him also married into it, smart as he was and always finding occasions to succeed, the family became quite rich and made a name for itself.

My grandfather was truly an intelligent man of the world. Our traditional chief or head villager would often consult him about the best course of action in some situation or other that had arisen. In general our chief was held in very great esteem. He represented the interests

of the region and was expected to take care of negotiations concerning the law. If in the course of such consideration a difficult issue in law came up he would not make a decision himself but would customarily call on the elders of the village and discuss the matter with them. Since this was the way administration of the region was carried on, there was little strife; everything was transparent and everyone could see that what was being carried on was in the common interest.

My grandfather was an extremely forthright man who always spoke his mind. He eventually became a secretary to our chief, so people who wanted disputes settled had to approach him first to arrange the appointment. He no doubt took a hefty fee to arrange appointments for the more wealthy, but they say he went out of his way to help the less fortunate for little or no personal benefit. There are a lot of stories about Anyi, some of them quite funny. Once there was a poor family in our village and Anyi went up to their house and gave the parents the advice not to let the kids have any soup. We Tibetans have all sorts of soup, sometimes with noodles, sometimes with different grains. In our part of the world we had a corn soup which was very tasty. "Don't let your kids near it," Anyi told them. "It makes their stomachs expand—they will get pot bellies, and then they will get bigger and bigger appetites and you will go destitute trying to feed them." He had all sorts of unusual ideas.

As he got very old and his death was obviously approaching, he used to tell us that there would be no need to do any funeral rituals at Dondup-ling after he died because he had already taken care of them himself! He said he had made three or four very large offerings to all the monks, so certainly there was no need for any more rituals than that. He said that when he died we should simply burn him. "I have already made all the offerings that people have to make when somebody dies. Just take care of my things," he said, "they are no longer a concern of mine. I have had my funeral and am ready and prepared."

Anyi died at the age of eighty-two. One day he sent a message to me to come down from the grazing lands. It was after the first harvest of the year, when we had already put the second crop in the ground. I went to be with him, and knew he must have been aware of his imminent death. He told me to go out and gather some early yellow apricots, which grew in abundance down a ways from the house. They were all ripe. I picked some and brought them back for my grandfather. Then he said to me that everything at home was fine, that there was nothing further to do, and that I should return to the grazing

lands. He told me to be sure to come back to him three days later, and to be sure to arrive before lunch. He stressed this and I said that I would come. He was preparing for his death.

I headed down the mountain three days later as he had told me to, intending to get there before lunch. But I was still a young boy, remember, and I caught sight of a big hornets' nest with all of the hornets streaming in and out of it. Of course I stopped to watch, and it was not long before I was throwing stones at it and seeing if any of them would come flying after me to attack me. If they did, and bit you, it felt like you had been run through by a spear. So much time passed like that that I was late arriving down at the house.

My grandfather had sent up a message to his beloved son, my Red Uncle, and had asked him to come down from the monastery. In my family my uncle was known as Ashang-me, or "Red Uncle," because of his red monk's clothes. Ashang-me was very skilled in the prayers and rituals said at the time of death. He led my grandfather in the Medicine Buddha prayer, and in the other prayers. My grandfather began asking about me as his breath got weaker, "Is he here yet? Is he here yet?" He kept waiting for me, but I did not get there until after lunch, and by then he had already passed away.

When I walked in, the lower room was empty and untidy, quite unlike it usually was. My sister had been so upset they had taken her out of the house, so she had not tidied up. My mother had been taken off somewhere too, so the place was empty. I was about to go up to the room where my grandfather had been staying when a fellow came and said not to go upstairs, to stop and have a cup of tea. Then my uncle said to come. He asked me where I had been, and I said I had been busy with a friend. Then he told me that grandfather had died, and I suddenly felt a great chill come over me and I felt as though my grandfather was there in front of me. My Red Uncle said to me, "Do not be upset, boy. We were together and we said the Medicine Buddha prayer. He was a very old man and he was ready and prepared to die. We said the prayers and he passed away peacefully. It was a shame that you did not get to be with him, but that is the way things are, do not get worried over it."

Then my Ashi (we called an elder sister *ashi* in my part of Tibet, they say *achala* usually) came in with some of the other villagers. She was weeping enough to drown us all and it was not long before she made me start crying too. Finally, my Red Uncle told me to go back up to the grazing lands. He said that I should come down on a particular day a

bit later and then we would do all the necessary rituals at that more auspicious time. I went back to the grazing lands and came down a few days later and did the last rites for my grandfather with my Red Uncle.

Many years later when I was in the monastery in Lhasa and had learned something of Buddhism and psychology, I remembered with a chuckle how my grandfather had so lovingly given me those dzomos which were nowhere but in his mind. I wondered if it was just the onset of senility or if it was an illusory appearance, a hallucination he had of something that he had enjoyed so much. Something totally nonexistent seemed so vibrantly to exist for him. I forgot about the walnut tree he gave me for a long time, but many years later when I was in India as a refugee, I met a nephew of mine called Phuntsog. He kept saying to me that life had been hard but bearable thanks to me. This was in a few of the letters that came through to me as well, that thanks to me things had been bearable. At first I did not take any notice of it, but then when my nephew said it again I asked him what he was talking about. "There are thirteen or fourteen of us in the family," he answered, "and amongst us there are none that are particularly gifted. Still we have all done rather well and there are none of us who have fallen on terrible and hard times. We all say that it is the blessing of you, our Red Uncle." That is what I am called now, many years later, just like we used to call my guru "Red Uncle" when I was young.

Phuntsog said that early on the Chinese authorities had outlawed private property and all the lands and trees were owned by the commune. During those years there was not a single walnut that came on the trees that was not eaten by the parrots. The parrots in our part of the world are very numerous and they are very destructive. When the change to partial privatization came, because we had a lot of trees before, the commune said that our family could pick one tree which we could have as private property. They said that we should talk amongst ourselves and decide which one. This put the family in quite a quandary because my tree had borne no fruit for years. The parrots ate it all year after year. My nephew told me, "We thought that if we were not to choose your tree then it would be inauspicious. We decided to ask for ownership of that tree even though it looked like we would get no walnuts from it. When we told the commune they said that we were being fools and that we should choose a better one, but we told them the history of it and they said they understood and gave it to us. Well, from that time on we have been having a steady crop of walnuts off that tree. The parrots come and circle around it," he said,

"but they pass it by and leave the nuts for us." Then my nephew, who is a bit of a drinker and cares more about appearances than realities, said, "I traded my dzomo for this good-looking one and there was quite an altercation in the family about it. Then, suddenly the dzomo began to have calf after calf and started giving incredible amounts of milk. We all say it is the blessing of the Triple Gem and our Red Uncle." I myself thought about this and thought it was strange. I said, "It is not me, of course, but I have tried to work for His Holiness the Dalai Lama and perhaps this is something. And of course the blessing of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha can help us, so make your heartfelt prayers to them."

I REMEMBER WANTING to be a monk even while I was a little boy. There must have been some trace of the life left somewhere in my mind, because when I was very little another young fellow and I decided to leave home to become monks. This was even before I had started to look after the flock, so we could not have been more than five or six. We had wandered up a kilometer or two towards the monastery when a monk coming down met us and asked where we were going. "We are going to become monks," we said. "Ah yes, but becoming a monk is very hard and you have a long way to go. Aren't you too young?" he asked. My friend and I looked at each other and decided that maybe we were a little young, so the monk kindly took us all the way back home where everyone was surprised to learn what we had been doing.

Then, when I was about twelve or thirteen, I remember my mother told me clearly that a neighbor was making inquiries about me as a prospective groom for his oldest daughter, who was going to inherit the control of the family property. "You are going to be a husband in the not too distant future," she said. "They are already starting to talk about it." She made very clear to me what was going to happen; this was quite unlike her usual way of talking about things and it upset me. I knew I did not want to get married and I became determined to become a monk as soon as possible to escape the married life. I started to think seriously about how I could arrange it.

It was about this time that my Red Uncle, my guru-to-be, took over as disciplinarian of the monastery. In our district, he was famous as a capable and strict elder. I knew that it was considered good for a disciplinarian if a lot of new monks were inducted into the monastery during his tenure, so I decided to approach him directly with my request. He was at our home visiting when I broached the subject, just

after night had fallen when we were all readying for the evening meal. "I want to be a monk," I said. "Even if you cannot accept me into the order right now I want your promise that you will accept me later. I want it to be confirmed that I am destined to become a monk, that I have been listed as one of those who is to be inducted." I told him to promise me that I would become a monk or I would run away. My Red Uncle said nothing to me in response.

That evening the family talked about it a lot, the pros and the cons and whether or not I would be capable of the life. I became anxious as the evening wore on and got quite agitated about it. My guru was put in a bind. With the conversation about my future marriage already underway it would not be easy to explain that I had decided to become a monk, but if he did not accept me, there was the real possibility that I would run away from home. He turned to me eventually and told me, "Being a monk is not just a game, you know. There is all the studying you have to do, all the playing and fun you cannot take part in. There is the discipline. Are you sure that you can handle that sort of life?" "I can," I said. "I know I can." "Well then," he said, "we will see. There is no way that a decision like that can be made so quickly, but we will see about it." I thanked him and we left it at that.

The rest of the family was totally against it. It was not just that there was no one else to do the work and that arrangements for my future marriage had already been started, it was also the sort of person I was. One of the things that I was well known for when I was little was my liking for liquor. All the villagers brewed barley beer and distilled a little spirit on the side, and I used to put my hand under the spout where the distilled spirit dripped out and lick it up. I loved it and often I would drink so much that by nighttime I was quite tipsy and I would lie there in the evening drunk. "You like beer and liquor too much to become a monk," they said. "How would a fellow like you, who everybody knows is naughty, who is so proud of himself, and who has such a liking for liquor ever be able to be a monk?" "I can do it. I know I can do it," I kept replying. And so the conversation went back and forth until they started saying, "If you were able to be a good monk we would all be happy, but becoming a monk and not being able to be a good monk is no good." I kept saying, "I know I can be a good monk, I want to be a good monk."

After a while, my Red Uncle came to visit again and said that since it was obvious I could not be prevented from becoming a monk, and because I wanted to, it would be best to let it go ahead. He said the

time was auspicious since he was disciplinarian and with that they all agreed. My guru turned to me and asked me straight, "Do you want to be a monk?" "Yes," I said. And that was it. It was decided that I would become a monk, and soon after three other village lads and I became new novice monks inducted into the monastery by my Red Uncle. I do not remember exactly how old I was when it happened, but I do know I was a monk for about six years before I left for central Tibet at the age of seventeen. So I must have been eleven or twelve.

As a monk I had to go up to the monastery when there were rituals to perform or when there were festivals, but at other times I would just stay home and do the same chores as before. The one difference was that as a monk I was not allowed by custom to work as a goat and sheep herder anymore. I turned that work over to my younger sister, and I remember that when I did so there were forty-seven in the flock, nearly a threefold increase since when I first took over—not a bad record. I was not to have nearly as much success with the yaks and dzomos that I began to look after from that time, though. In our part of the world the altitude was too low for the female counterpart of the yak, the *dri*, and too high for the cows that you find in places like India. The herds were mainly made up of dzomos, which were crosses between yaks and cows. They make excellent cattle, are quick to respond to human commands, and give plenty of rich and creamy milk. When I took over as herder we had about seventeen or eighteen head, including a yak or two and one or two small cows. When I left for Drepung about six years later I think there were only a total of twenty-six head, hardly a spectacular increase.

During the breaks between residence periods at the monastery I would come home and look after our family's herd of dzomos. During the times when the monks were expected to be in residence I would do a little memorization and be called on to recite what I had learned. I never really learned much of anything else, studywise, while I was there. In the late spring I would take the herd up to the higher pastures to graze, living up there in the grazing lands in a tent like a nomad. In the winter I would bring them down near our home in Chochur and keep them supplied with grass. There was always a lot of work involved with this, so any additional study was impossible. My guru was very careful with me. He would never let me stay overnight in the monastery when I came to visit him during periods when monks were not expected to be in residence. Towards evening he would always send me home and tell me to do my chores properly.

There were four families from our village who went up with their herds to the grazing lands: my own immediate family, the herders working for the village headman, and two families below us. Sometimes we would pitch our tents together and graze our herds in the same places, and sometimes we would go off separately and graze in different parts of the highlands. One of the four herds belonged to my paternal grandfather's family and the youngster in charge of that herd was my cousin, a boy called Kalsang Phuntsog. We often pitched our tents together.

As I started to get older and bigger I began to feel more and more confident about throwing my weight about. All through the years I had harbored that grudge against the older boy—the fellow called Namgyal—who had tormented me when I was young and stolen my food and shoes. I kept thinking how I could get back at him. It is gross really, the sign of a horrible person, to keep bearing a grudge like that and not let it pass. Finally I decided it was time to get back at him, so I asked another monk friend of mine to go and get him to come over to a deserted place. I remember him coming without a care in the world. I guess he thought we were going to play or something. He was a year or two older than me but I was pretty tough. I brought up the things he had done to me when I was little but he did not see how serious I was and tried to be friendly, saying that was in the past and gone. I said, "The nasty things you did to me might be in the past and gone but the nasty things I am going to do to you for it are right here and now!" I grabbed his long hair—he was not a monk so he had long hair—and I was able to pin him down on the ground where I beat him terribly. I gave him a real thrashing. That was me, the monk, in those days—not a very pretty sight I am afraid, but that was the reality of it. I said to him as he was pinned down there bleeding, "This is for what you did to me before! I have paid you back now for what you earlier did to me!" With that my friend and I swaggered off back to the monastery.

I really beat that boy up badly. In general, the monks, particularly young monks, were even more feared than the young laymen. There was a lot of fighting amongst us young men and the young monks were known to be particularly dangerous in a fight. So while it was not such a special occurrence that I had been fighting, when word of the beating I had given Namgyal got back to my family, they were disgusted with me and scolded me for hours, saying how bad it was to bear a grudge for so long, especially as a monk. I was unrepentant though, and kept saying he deserved it because of what he had done to me as a small child. That was the sort of personality I had and everybody knew it.

I USED TO SPEND a lot of time on the grazing lands with my cousin Kalsang Phuntsog who was a few years older than me. He was a lazy fellow and would always want me to look after his herd while he took naps. Then I would be running around the meadow looking after both of our animals while he would be lying there snoring. He had frightened me once by asking me to make sure no demon came by to attack him in his sleep. Since he was older and more self-assured than me I never had the confidence to stand up to him and tell him to do his own work. One time, after we had brought our herds down close to the village for the winter, the two of us were taking them to graze in a small gully. The moment we got there he said, "Watch out for my cattle will you," and went to sleep immediately. I felt so frustrated and I thought it was time to teach him a lesson.

Kalsang was such a deep sleeper that I was able to tie both of his feet and his left hand to big pieces of firewood. I carefully tied his long hair to another big piece of wood and then I loaded up his right hand with a big wad of fresh dzomo dung. He slept on soundly, like a baby. Then I put a burning piece of tinder gently on the end of his nose and scampered as quickly as I could up into the branches of a tall tree. As the tinder, a dense mountain moss, slowly burned down he began to feel the heat on his nose and started to twitch. Finally the burning ember got right to his nose and his right hand came around and plastered his face with the dzomo dung. By then he was wide awake but he could not move properly because of the way I had tied him down. He was sputtering with a face full of dung and I was up hidden in the tree nearly killing myself laughing and scared to death in case I gave my hiding place away. Finally he succeeded in getting himself free and went running all over the place in a rage trying to find me. He had picked up some rocks and if he had seen me in the tree would have pelted me with them for sure. When he ran off a bit in one direction looking for me I jumped down from the tree. Thinking that if he got me he would thrash me, I headed straight for home as fast as my legs would take me.

DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS, as I said, we had to take the herd up to the grazing lands. I was the boss of our little operation but I did not know how to milk the dzomos properly. If you do not give them a good milking every day, they will dry up and stop giving any milk at all, so I had a helper who the family hired to do that part of the work. He was much older than I was, and the family was worried that he would take advantage of me. One of the other herders, a neighbor of

ours, was a fellow with a great big goiter. They asked him to keep an eye on me and tell them how I was doing, and I must have been pretty good, because he sent down word that though I was very young I still made a very good boss. The helper always asked me for a handout or some sort of treat that I would not give him, and he sent down word that I was a hard boss who kept tabs on everything and was not an easy fellow to get things off at all. So I suppose that even while I was deficient in one way I had a streak of responsibility in another.

In those early days as a young monk, I was still a pretty bad character, a delinquent really, naughty at the best of times. When I think back on it I was capable of sinking to some pretty deep depths. Nobody would let me get my hands on a gun because they knew I was too volatile. I loved guns and I loved the long sword that people from my part of Tibet used to carry, and I always wanted to get my hands on them. When I was going up to the grazing lands one spring, my brother-in-law sneaked me a beautiful long barreled muzzle-loader. One day I saw a big black bird sitting up in the branches of a tree and took it into my head to kill it. I was not a bad shot and slowly took aim at it. Instead of just sitting still, however, it kept bobbing back and forth so that now it was in my sights and now it had disappeared behind a branch. I was totally intent on what I was doing and did not notice that my sister had come up from the village. She came up right behind me and flew into a rage. She started beating me and shouting at me, "Aren't you a monk? What do you think you are, wearing the clothes of a monk and trying to kill the animals?" She went on and on and there was nothing I could do but sit there taking it, because she was not a woman to try to talk back to when she was in a rage. I went down to the house and that evening she tore into her husband and tore into me again. "What do you think you are doing, giving him a gun? You know the sort of person he is, and today I caught him trying to kill a bird just for the fun of it." She went on for hours. Then my mother found out about it, and she said to me that if I ever hunted and killed anything that she would die from it too. Usually she did not know how to say anything effectively but somehow she found the words that night.

MONKS WHO HAD NOT been up to a big monastery in central Tibet were called *ben-chungs*. Nobody really cared if the *ben-chungs* got into fights so long as it was not within the confines of the monastery. If a monk who had returned from central Tibet got into a fight, however,

it was a big issue and there would be all sorts of repercussions. Our fighting ground, just beyond the monastery walls, was a spot marked by a goat's horn. One time I had picked a fight with a monk who was a little bigger than me and we had gone with a group of my buddies to the fighting ground. I guess he was a bit apprehensive because although he was bigger than I was, I had a few friends on my side. We started pushing each other, a shove here and shove back there, not really doing anything serious. Then I took out my key—the big heavy sort that we carried attached to a cord at our belts—and took a swing at him. It landed right on his temple and ruptured a vein and the blood came pouring out of him in a stream, getting all over him and me as well. Everyone was scared so the fight stopped right there. He was not able to get in any blows on me, so in that sense I won.

I washed off the blood as best I could and went back to my guru's room, not knowing that a bit of blood remained on my ear. Talk of a fight had already been going around the monastery and my Red Uncle must have heard of it, but he was unsure if it was me or not. When he saw the blood on my ear he caught hold of me and said he would show me what happens for fighting. He had a rope and a good-sized stick on hand at all times, and he had tied me up to a beam and was just getting ready to lay into me when a friend of his walked in. He asked what had happened and when my guru said I had been fighting the monk said, "You must not beat him, he should be given melted butter! He beat the fellow cold—the other fellow did not lay a finger on him. He is the talk of the village. The most important thing when you fight is not to lose, everyone knows that, and he beat the fellow for sure!" My guru sort of smiled and let me go. But a bit later he took out the rope and stick, as he often would, and shook them at me. "I should have given you a beating and you know it," he said. "But you watch out, I have these ready and if I hear of you fighting again I will give you the beating of your life!" The truth was that he would often threaten me, but he would never really beat me severely. In those days I was in fights all the time. I had a reputation as a fighter. But I do not think there is any need to talk more about that, it was a long time ago.

MY GURU HAD A PART FRIEND, part servant who we called Gelong, which means "Venerable One." This name was something of a joke, and was sometimes used for monks who had never been to central Tibet to do their three years in one of the big monasteries. Older monks who had not made the trip to central Tibet were treated in a patronizing manner

by the others because everyone felt that a monk should make the journey. These monks could never sit with the monks who had made the trip, but had to sit at the head of the *ben-chungs*, the newly ordained novices. They could never move out of this no-man's land, or take up any of the offices such as grainkeeper, chant-leader, or any of the other positions of authority. There was no monastic work available to them, and there was this name for them, "Venerable One," but with a sort of sarcastic upward tone at the end of the word.

A monk who made the trip to central Tibet had to stay for three prayer festivals, that is, he had to stay for about three years. Before leaving Lhasa to return home, that monk had to make a considerable offering to the monastic university in which he had stayed. When he returned home he was referred to by a special name, *ben-ser* (man of the cloth), instead of by the patronizing name "Venerable One" or the title *ben-chung*. A returning monk would also make a customary offering to his home monastery and then he was truly a *ben-ser* and would enjoy considerable status in the community. All the monastic offices were open to him, depending on his ability, and he would have considerable power and influence in the community.

Every monk was expected to go. Only those with a real physical deformity or real deficiencies in their faculties were excused. Such people would have to ask for permission not to go and would have to humble themselves considerably. It was a great loss of face.

Anyway, the Venerable One used to come over to my guru's apartment to cook or sew, and whenever he was there he would tell my guru about all the bad things I had been up to. I came to feel a strong dislike for him because he was always stirring up trouble between me and my guru, who would shout at me and scold me for the things that he found out about. I got sick of him coming over and causing trouble all the time.

Dondup-ling Monastery was a big halfway station for the salt and tea trade between China and Tibet. Tibetan salt caravans would come down to our region and the labrangs of the lamas, the office holders of the monasteries, and individual monks would all buy the salt and then store it until caravans arrived from the Chinese border, bringing tea, brown sugar, and soy noodles. There were a lot of these caravans. Tibetans who lived right on the Chinese border would bring the goods up and then the buying and selling would go on in the monastery, with the different people in the monastery acting as middlemen. Monks were permitted to trade, but not beyond the specific borders of their region, in our case down to Jol and as far as Gye-tang. What this meant

was that monks who were not so interested in learning or the spiritual life could get rich in business, and indeed there were a lot of that sort in the monastery.

The Tibetan traders carried their salt in sacks that were closed up at the top with strong sticks, maybe four inches or so in length, quite rounded and smooth. We kids used to play with the sticks from the used sacks. One day the Venerable One was upstairs talking away with my guru and I decided to put a bunch of these sticks on the stairs leading down from his room to teach him a lesson. I placed four or five of them on a high step and then went into my room and pretended to be studying. Finally the Venerable One got up to leave. As he was concluding what he had to say to my guru, he began heading down the stairs. He never finished the conversation. He stepped on those sticks and as they rolled out from underneath him his legs went up and he went bouncing down the stairs, landing dazed at the bottom and unable, for the moment, to get up. I ran down to him pretending to be very concerned and at first he did not see the sticks and did not know that it was me that had put them there. My guru came running out of his room too, and when he saw that the Venerable One was not really hurt, but had just badly bruised his pride, he could not stop laughing. When they saw the sticks both of them quickly understood what had happened, but my guru could not stop seeing the humorous side in it.

Next door to my guru lived an old monk with a crooked leg who had a student with a crooked leg too. Another old monk was always coming over to talk with him and we could not get any sleep. He would talk away until late in the night, driving me and the young monk with the crooked leg crazy. We decided to teach the old monk a lesson and stop him from coming over by putting some sticks on the stairs. Unfortunately the old monk with the crooked leg came down the stairs first, and even though they were not very high stairs he went crashing down. He was unconscious for the best part of twenty minutes, and though we both knew it was very serious we could not stop laughing. My guru came and he suspected what had happened, but of course I denied it to the death. We could hardly have confessed to that one could we? I guess I was just a born delinquent.

OUR MONASTERY WAS SUPPOSED to receive a yearly tribute of barley grain, called the *phug-dray*, from the Lapo region down on the Chinese border. One year the tribute did not arrive as expected, and my guru was put at the head of a force of about one hundred *mami-trabas*—

"soldier-monks"—to go down and inquire about the cause of the delay. While he was away I stayed in the monastery to look after his things, and as you can imagine it was not a time when I engaged in a lot of study or other monklike activity.

Every year there was a big ceremony to expel all the bad forces from the monastery that had collected during the year. It consisted of a long ritual that ended with the abbot throwing sacrificial cakes called *tormas* into a huge bonfire that was built outside the monastic compound. Before throwing the cakes into the fire, the abbot, preceded by four young monks carrying incense and blowing on long Tibetan horns, would circumambulate the entire monastery. All the monks from the community would take part in the procession and it would usually be watched by many of the villagers as well. That year the cake-throwing ceremony took place while my guru was away trying to collect the unpaid tribute, and it happened that a close friend of mine was chosen to be one of the *trer-dzin-pa*, the group of four young monks preceding the abbot. Those monks wanted to be dressed in their finest clothes because they were at the very front of the line. My friend, who knew that my guru had a lot of good monk's robes, came running in one day to ask me if he could borrow some. I was adamant that he could not. "You can have all the food you want," I said, "but I cannot go near my guru's clothes or other expensive belongings." Even though he was a very close friend and it was an important occasion I would not budge on that issue. Later when my guru got back from the expedition he heard about this and was very pleased that I had such a sense of responsibility when it came to his belongings.

On another occasion my guru sent me off to collect some interest on a loan he had made. In our part of the world grain and money were often lent for interest. In the monastery the main business was the lending of seed grain. The monasteries were the beneficiaries of donations from the farmers, so over time the monastery would build up a store of grain. This grain served as capital, and the monastery's grainkeepers lent it. There were three or four grainkeepers in the monastery at any one time. At the harvest time the grain would be repaid with interest and the extra grain would be used by the grainkeeper for the different general assemblies and rituals when all the monks had to be fed. Besides the monastery, there were also a number of wealthy families who would lend out their capital at interest in this way.

When I arrived at the house of the people to whom my guru had lent grain, I could see that they were totally destitute. They said quite openly that they had nothing to give, so I was in a quandary. I wanted

to collect the payment, but it was obvious they did not have it. Finally they said that if I wanted to I could take their pig in place of the interest. I could tell that the man didn't think I would take him up on his offer because it would be so hard to get the pig back to the monastery. But I accepted him at his word and put the pig in a sack, tied it up, and somehow or other lifted it onto my back. It was squealing and kicking but I staggered off under the load. After a while the pig got tired, resigned itself to the inevitable, and stopped squealing and kicking. Sometimes I dragged it, sometimes I carried it in front of me, and sometimes I carried it on my back, but I got it back to the monastery, which must have been an eight-kilometer walk.

When I arrived, my guru asked me what I was carrying and when I told him I had taken their pig he was angry and deeply embarrassed, yet somehow happy at the same time. "Nobody takes the pig of a destitute family when they do not have the money to pay," he said. "If this gets out, I will be despised by the whole district!" But I could tell that he was also pleased that I had wanted to do the work for him, and that I treated my work for him so seriously that I was determined not to fail. He would say, with a certain defensive pride, that for all my faults I was a fellow who would get every penny of what belonged to his guru. He did a great deal for me, I realize now, and I could not have asked for a better preparation for the complex life I was to live in the big monastery in central Tibet. He never taught me anything of the Buddhist literary tradition but he prepared me well for my future.

WHEN I WAS IN DONDUP-LING MONASTERY in Kongjo-rawa, I never thought about who my guru really was. To me he was always simply Ashang-me, my Red Uncle. The fact that most people referred to him as Choo-chur De-pa, the "Boss of Choo-chur," and the fact that he was quite famous and would be called to teach by important families and by the labrangs—the establishments that come up around incarnate lamas—this was of no importance to me. I was simply striving to be popular, and to establish myself as the best fighter amongst the *ben-chungs*. In many ways I think Ashang-me was probably the most important person in the monastery, but I didn't even realize it at the time.

Ashang-me was quite rich, but he never dressed me in special clothes, even when I finally set out for central Tibet. It was the custom for novice monks to wear lay clothes when they were traveling up to the monastery in central Tibet, but he made me wear a white chuba that was really cheap. Some of the people I met even asked me, "Aren't you the nephew of the Boss of Choo-chur? How come he didn't give

you something a better than that to wear?" Since I was a naturally vain sort of young man, my lack of fancy clothes irritated me immensely. My guru, however, not only gave me ordinary material, he made me sew my own clothes as well. I would often ask the other older monks for a loan to be able to buy better clothes so I could look more fashionable around the monastery, but they never loaned me money. I realize now that they would never have interfered with my guru's way of bringing me up. And though I felt irritated at the time, in fact the training served me well when I got to Lhasa, because I was able to stitch my own clothes and save much needed money. Somehow or other the upbringing I received from my guru in Dondup-ling enabled me to avoid the life of the vain Lhasa fighting-monk, which I suppose my guru could see was going to be a real temptation for me once I got there.

IT WAS THE CUSTOM that a monk from our home monastery could not leave for central Tibet until he had completed a certain amount of memorization. There was a special textbook, quite thick, which contained basic academic topics and all the prayers and recitations for the various assemblies and rituals. Although it was a rule that the monk could not go until it was all memorized, if he had passed five or so years as a member of the monastery then it was felt that it was absolutely necessary for the monk go up to central Tibet, even if it necessitated waiving the memorization rule.

Just before his departure for the journey, a young monk would offer a special meal to the four most important officeholders of his home monastery. The four persons were called "those in the calling of the high offices" or "those in high office worthy of offerings," and were the abbot, the disciplinarian, the leader of the chant, and a monk who had already held the office of disciplinarian. One of the things that had to be done during the course of this ceremonial meal was an accounting between the guru and student. Before the high guests arrived, the guru would review the student's finances. By custom a monk would have given whatever money he had received to his guru, so this was the time when that money was accounted for. The guru would tell the student that this was the amount of money that he had kept for him, this is the amount of it that he had spent on food for him, and this is the amount left over that he would be giving him now for his journey to Lhasa. The student would then look at the accounting and if he was happy with it would say, "I have not been cheated at all and

I have studied with you to such-and-such a grade." This accounting would then be set forth to the four officeholders. If the relation between the student and the teacher was, as with me, a close blood-relation between an uncle and nephew, the accounting would not have to actually be done. Both would just say they were happy with what had transpired and that would be acceptable.

One of reasons for this accounting was that when a monk returned from Lhasa he would no longer be under the teacher he had lived with while he was young; he would be a member of the monastery in his own right. Therefore this ceremony made sure that there was no outstanding animosity between people who would later be equal members of the community. Also, you must remember that when a young monk came into the monastery he would be put totally under the charge of his teacher. The teacher did not have to pay anything to the student and could work him as hard as he wanted and the student had to do everything he was told. Because all of the young monk's money had to be handed to the teacher, this accounting was a way to make sure that the students were not abused, and also to make sure that there was some consideration of the need to make preparations for their trip to Lhasa. The departing monk would be given a special dispensation from keeping the rules of his home monastery (such as attending particular assemblies and so forth) for the time after the ceremonial meal until he left his homeland. He would have set aside temporarily being a member of his home monastery.

In the months before I left for central Tibet, my guru's lecturing about the need for discipline became more and more intense. Every time we would sit down to eat he would tell me about what I could not do when I got to Lhasa, or what I had to do at such-and-such a time. I could not do anything right. He would start in on a lecture about the need to do this, or the need not to do that, and I would get sick of listening to it. I started to go to other people's rooms to eat and would even sleep in other people's rooms to keep away from him because whenever I met him he would immediately start up again about discipline. It was a trying time for me, but my guru was worried both for me and for the embarrassment he would feel personally if I got there and then made a spectacle of myself, or was expelled for some sort of crime or misdemeanor.

As the time for me to leave drew close, I was invited out by all the villagers. Most of my time before leaving was taken up with doing the rounds. Some of the villagers asked me to come for the whole day and

offered me good food and gave me presents of special *chari* (the apple-shaped tea blocks which are a specialty of Kongjo-rawa) or silver coins. While I ate they would offer advice and encouragement. Other households would have me over for the main meal of the day. They encouraged me and showed their admiration for me as well. But the advice of every one of them came to the same thing, "Boy, you are not cut out to spend a long time in central Tibet. Do your three years there and then come straight back. Your Red Uncle is a fine man and you have an excellent career in front of you working for him and looking after his affairs. On no account should you stay on. You are not cut out for it, so come straight back." Every one of them said that I was a delinquent, too quick tempered, too fond of food, and too lazy to study. But for myself, I felt I could study if I wanted to. It was not that I was so excited about a life of study, but I felt that I was capable of it, that I could make the grade and stay on if it came to that.

It was during this period that I was invited out by a man who was thought to be the most learned of all in the region. He was a very tall fellow, a distant relative who lived all by himself in a hovel a bit off from the rest of the village, and he spent his days saying his prayers and doing recitations of Dug-karmo (the Goddess Protectress Who Holds the White Umbrella). He was just about destitute, poor fellow. As I approached his place I could hear the sound of a chicken squawking loudly, and it sickened me when I realized what he was doing. In preparation for my visit he was killing the bird for me to eat. I felt ashamed for the old man. He was doing something terrible on my behalf and I thought I should say that I could not eat the meat since it had been killed especially for me. But he was the volatile sort, and was held in awe by the village so I was too shy to say to his face what I was thinking in my heart.

I went inside his little hovel and he seated himself in the place of honor, put me down beside him, and proceeded to serve up his dinner of freshly killed chicken. On the table he also set down a couple of silver coins and a *chari* or two as gifts. Then, as we got under way, he launched into a long diatribe directed against my Red Uncle. He told me that my guru had disgraced himself three times. "First," he said, "when he was young the family was very rich. He went up to the monastery in central Tibet on a bridge of gold and still did not study. When he came back he was dressed up like a peacock but he had not become a learned monk." That was the first disgraceful thing my guru had done. "Then," he said, "he disgraced himself again by coming

back here to Kongjo-rawa and only attaining the position of disciplinarian. He should at least have become the leader of the chant." Now this was my guru he was talking about, the man I admired most in my heart, and I began to boil thinking about the awful food and the terrible things he was saying. "The third disgrace," he was unstoppable, "is the sort of things he is involved in right now...." I had heard talk that he did not like my guru and as he went on and on I began to think that this was the root of his diatribe. I decided that I would make a stiffly dignified exit—just walk out of there without accepting any of his gifts. But then he turned on me. "There is not a reason in the world I should give you a penny as a gift," he said. "You have plenty of money. Choo-chur has plenty of rich people but there is nobody here to teach Buddhism. Now you are going up to central Tibet and you should study and learn about Buddhism and come back here and teach the people." He said the whole purpose of making the journey to central Tibet was to study and learn Buddhism, and that if I came back to Choo-chur a learned Buddhist monk he would personally prostrate himself before me if he had not died in the meantime. "If you cannot become really learned in the Buddhist scriptures," he said, "at least learn about the basic Buddhist practice of going for refuge to the Three Jewels." And then he looked at me and said, "If you ever come back to Choo-chur without at least learning about going for refuge I will cover your face with spit!" I was aghast. I wanted to insult him but I could do nothing but sit there listening to him as he went on for more than an hour. When I left I was not nearly brave enough to refuse his gifts. What he had said about me I did not mind but what he had said about my guru was nearly unbearable and I left his place feeling deeply upset.

It is now nearly fifty years since that old man gave me his parting advice. Some years ago here in exile in India, long after that old man had left the Pleasure Garden of the Tang Princess for other realms, I wrote a book on going for refuge. I wrote it because of what he had said and sometimes I think about going back and finding him still alive. I know it can never be, but I think, were it to happen, that he would not spit in my face and he might even smile.

A SHORT TIME BEFORE LEAVING for central Tibet, Aku-me, my red uncle on my father's side, told me to watch my dreams carefully and tell him what occurred. About two months before I was scheduled to leave I had a very vivid dream. I was up in the forest above the village

underneath a big walnut tree. The nuts had ripened and fallen and I was collecting them and putting them in my upper garment. Suddenly a totally naked black woman riding saddleless on a big black mule appeared in the dream and told me to follow her. I started to go after her and then, after a short time woke up. I was unsettled by the dream because I thought it might be a portent that I was going to have some trouble with my monk's vows. As for my guru, he knew nothing about dreams and did not invite people to tell him about them. But Aku-me was very pleased indeed. "Excellent!" he said. "That was Palden Lhamo, the Glorious Goddess, the protectress of Drepung, and it is a definite sign that you will be entering into Drepung." I still had my doubts and thought the dream was probably inauspicious, but he had been to Drepung and I think he was set on me going to Drepung too. Later I had a second dream. I was in the same place near Choo-chur when I saw a tall, extremely handsome man dressed up in a white Tibetan chuba with long sleeves. He was pointing out a path to me and telling me to go in that direction. As I started to walk that way I woke up. When I told Aku-me about this dream he was even more pleased. "Excellent!" he said. "That was Nechung, the protector of Drepung." He was pointing to the south, the direction of Lhasa from Choo-chur. "It is a dream that means you will be entering Drepung when you get to Lhasa." And it was not just him, all the elder monks in my part of Dondup-ling Monastery were old Drepung monks, and they all wanted me to go there and not to either Sera or Ganden—the other two big monasteries in central Tibet.

WHEN THE TIME TO LEAVE finally arrived, my guru told me that I should go to visit my family the next day and tell them that I would be leaving in two days. "Have your final talk with them," he said, "but tell them you will be coming the next day as well just to drop by and say a final good-bye. Then, without them knowing about it, leave the following day for Lhasa. That will avoid all the troubles that could come with leaving." So the next day I went down and had my final words with them. I told my older sister Tsering Chern-dzom that she should not be nasty with my mother. "Sister," I told her, "you have a sharp tongue and you sometimes hurt people with it. Our father died when we were very little and you have had to take charge, but you should be gentle with our mother." My sister listened to me silently with tears in her eyes and I could see that she was a little bit hurt by what I had said. Then I turned to a man who lived in our house. He had been

afflicted by leprosy and had been turned out of his own home. He went around on his knees, propelling himself by his hands. Our family had taken him in and he did chores around the house during the day in exchange for a place to sleep and some food. He also did his own work at night and had been able to build up a small savings. So I turned to him and said to my sister that she should not be hard on him either. "He has to go around like an animal," I said, "but never forget that he is human like we are. He has fallen on very hard times and he, of all of us, is the one we should be kindest to. I want you to promise that you will not shout at him ever, and that you will be gentle with him." I actually asked her and my brother-in-law to promise to me that they would do that and they did so. For their part they asked me to make a solemn promise that I would come back in three years, that I would not stay in Lhasa. I said that I could not make that promise but I said that I would definitely come back.

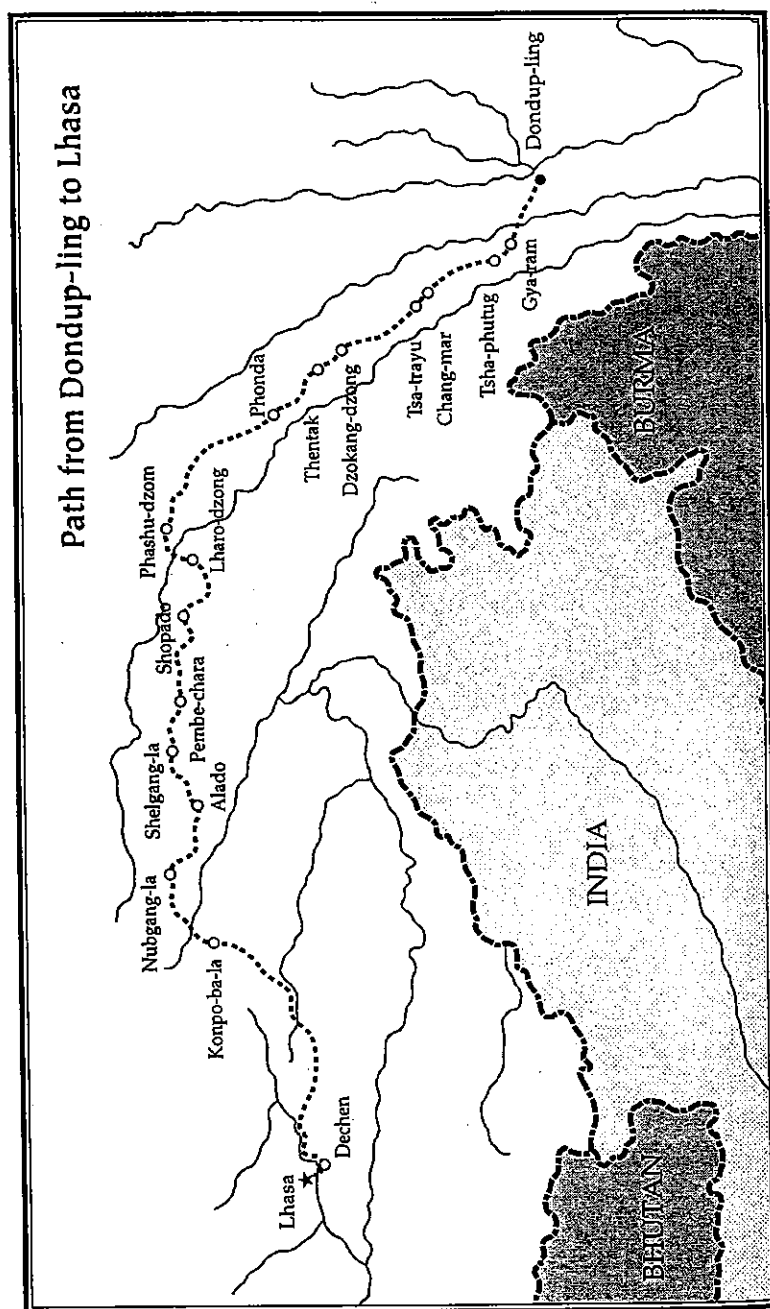
Then I left them, saying I would drop by briefly the next day. When I got back to the monastery my guru asked me what I had said and what they had said to me. I told him everything in detail, and when I told him about my advice to my sister he was very pleased. He said how excellent to ask others to be kind, and he told all sorts of people what I had said. "The boy told them to be gentle and kind," he said. "The boy gave them excellent advice." He was really pleased, though I am not quite sure why, perhaps because he felt he had seen some trace of a noble person in me. "This boy is a born delinquent, it's true," he said, "but he has a spark of something in his heart, and I think there is still a chance that he may turn into something to bring credit to us all."

Early on the morning of my departure I got up and went to all the holy statues in the monastery and prayed to the monastery's protectors. Then my guru walked with me as far as the walls of the monastery. It was before dawn and we were alone there for a few minutes. Until that time he had never been gentle with me. In the days before I left he had lectured me about discipline, and his criticism of me had been incessant. When we reached the walls of the monastery, however, he stopped and changed. He turned to me and took me by the hand. "I will come with you no further," he said. "Up until now I have been your mentor, and you should not have any doubts about what I have done for you. I have not made you learn any rituals, not only because you yourself did not seem to show any aptitude for them, but because I did not want you to get called out all the time by families in

Lhasa who need rituals performed. I want you to be able to study when you are there. That is also why I did not teach you to write. I know how to read and write very well but I knew that if I taught you, when you got to Lhasa people would find out and you would always be called on to do office duties. I did not teach you for that reason and you should know that. Now you go up to Lhasa and study. For as long as you want to study there you need have no worries. I have plenty of money and I will support you and I will pay for you to take your final exams if you get that far. But if you are not cut out for studying, after your three years are up come home. I will be waiting for you here. I trust you completely and I will give you control over all my things. I have two guns, a rifle with a six-shot cartridge and a handgun, and I promise you that the moment you get back I will give them to you personally. If you come back you can become disciplinarian or even the leader of the chant. What I do not want you to do is to stay in central Tibet not studying. Most of all I will be happy if you study there." I was deeply moved by what he said, and both of us shed tears at our parting. I promised him that I would do as he had said—that I would study, and I said that if I did not take to the study I would come back immediately after my three years were up. With that, early in the morning I took leave of my guru, my Red Uncle, and set out.

The path to central Tibet joined up with the path to the monastery just above Kongjo-rawa, and we had wanted to get clear of the village before anyone could see us. I was traveling with another monk from the same monastery—Phuntsog, the boy with whom I had run away to become a monk when I was little. We came in sight of the houses below us just as light was coming up and the villagers were making their daily offering of incense to the gods. Just where the path down to the village branched off from the main path, the village headman was waiting for us. He had seen us coming and greeted us with a small bag of ground dried fruit and brown sugar. "When you get high up near the top of the passes," he said, "you will sometimes feel like you are losing all of your energy. This will keep you going." Then he gave us an offering scarf and told us to hurry on our way. "Quick," he said, "the village is stirring and you two *ben-chungs* had best be on your way." We started then to walk quickly but my sister's eldest boy who was about six caught sight of us from the door of my house. He started to shout, "They are going, they are going!" and he began running up the hill towards us in the early morning light. He was naked and running as fast as his little feet would take him. But we could not

turn back even though it is inauspicious to leave a place where the people are crying and calling after you—it is a sign that you will never return. The little boy kept running after us, kept calling out to us, and from below the people from my house kept calling after him to come back. I was crying and crying and felt as though my heart was going to break but we kept going. And now, fifty years later, as I recall this I think that it is true that it is not auspicious if people cry when you leave home. I have not ever seen the Pleasure Garden of the Tang Princess since that day, and my friend Phuntsog, killed in the uprising against the Chinese in Lhasa in 1959, was never to return.



TO THE LAND OF THE GODS

I was only seventeen when I went up to Drepung, so my guru paid the traders to load my things on their mules and pack cattle, and I had both my arms free to walk easily. I had a long sword at my waist and a short dagger and a little bit of ready food. The owner of the caravan would head off early each day to scout for a good place to water and feed the animals that evening. The packmen were the ones who worked for the owner, loading and unloading the animals, and I would be expected to help them a bit. Apart from that I was free.

There were established traditions for long trips to central Tibet. Those who were a little older, say between twenty and twenty-five, might simply attach themselves to a trader and carry their own food and bundle, making their way to Lhasa under their own power. Others would hire themselves out as packmen for the trip and not only get food on the way but also end up with some money at the end. The majority of the monks heading up to Lhasa, though, would be between fifteen and twenty and thus not sufficiently mature to either carry their own loads or to work as packmen. They would pay a fee to the owner of a packtrain and then attach to it, being fed and looked after on the trip. The fee paid for food and drink for two months and a day. The money would be given to the boss, and then the young monk would simply be another member of the caravan for the length of the trip, eating and drinking whatever was given to the rest of the travelers and workers. The young monk would have a personal pack into which he would put the particular little things that he would need

on the trip, a few treats, a little tea, gifts, and so forth. He was allowed to put that on one of the pack animals, and did not need to carry it himself.

For the first few days of the journey I did not have trouble, but then my feet and calves began to give me excruciating pain. There was nothing I could do except keep up. I hobbled on, stopped, ran to catch up, and then stopped again trying to ease the pain. After four or five days I got used to it and then I could go swiftly wherever I wanted. There were about twenty pack animals in the caravan and two packmen, one an older fellow and one a youngster. The younger of the two was given the job of watching out for me. I had to help him with the animals, though of course I did not have the strength to lift the loads up onto the animals.

It was a very happy time for a young man. You had this long sword tied on your belt, and there was a special place for a dagger and a place for your amulet box. There was another place where you hung your tea bowl and you also carried a little bit of cash, but not much. The money that you would need when you got to Lhasa was always deposited with the caravan owner, and he would give it to you when you arrived. The owners kept their money in town to avoid robbery on the road.

Each evening when the traders made camp, we monks would have to go and collect branches of evergreen for the morning smoke offering to the gods, and we would also be expected to make prayers. The packs would be off-loaded and we would immediately sit near them in a makeshift camp, making the tea offering, reciting the prayer to the Goddess Protectress Who Holds the White Umbrella, and reciting the *Heart Sutra*. There was considerable importance given to the smoke offering, and the packmen would be careful to tell us well in advance if the place we would be camping for the night did not have any evergreen trees close by. Then we would load up boughs on our backs as we went along to make sure we would have the material for the offering. These were the customary duties of the monks on the long caravans traveling through Tibet; Phuntsog and I took them seriously and wanted to do them as well as we could.

About a month into the trip we arrived at Tsa-go-ching-tang, a huge plain. The packmen's tradition was to drink melted butter as soon as they hit that huge open space. They must have melted down about four kilos and were totally amazed when I was able to drink not just one, but two whole cups of it. Phuntsog was only able to drink half a

cup and mixed the rest in with the barley flour that he was carrying. I must have been famished from the walking because I enjoyed that butter immensely. The packmen said I was a fool to drink so much, and that I would be sick for sure, but it did not cause me any trouble in the least. After crossing the plain we had to cross a pass which brought us to a village where the traders would always stay for a day or so to rest. They bought a yak between them and divided it up for food. The older of the packmen refused to give me any, however. He said that after eating so much melted butter I would be sick for sure if I ate meat on top of it.

Before I left, my family and friends had warned me not to fight with the packmen. This older packman, not only did not give me my share of the butchered yak, but he did not even give my part to the others so that they could have some. I began to boil thinking about the injustice. Then a day later when we woke up in the morning somebody had got bad diarrhea and in his hurry to relieve himself had messed on one of the pegs that were used to tether the pack animals for the night. The old packman immediately started in on me, saying that I had been told not to eat so much butter, and that now I had diarrhea and was soiling the pegs. I could not stand it. "I was a nomad herder for a long time," I said, "and I am used to drinking melted butter. There is nothing wrong with my stomach at all. It is you who are shitting all over the place because you have guzzled down a double helping of the yak meat!" When I said that, he flew into a rage. He had been treating me like a little kid since we had set out and now he was not going to put up with me. "What, aren't you supposed to be a monk, little boy? Yet here you are spoiling for a fight with me." I went for him but others in the group held me back. After a day or so the old packman got so sick that he could not stand up. He had to be carried on the top of a pack animal for a few days and even though he was so sick I should have looked after him, I was so angry I did not do a thing for him.

Our caravan arrived at Tsa-drayer on the banks of the Chinese Ngu-chu River. The apricot trees were just ripening and wherever one looked there was a beautiful appearance. I had been told again and again about the dangers of eating the apricots in Tsa-drayer; that eating them would cause a flu called *tse-pa*. But they looked so appetizing I could not help myself. I ate a few and put perhaps six of them in the fold, we call it the *amba*, of my chuba without letting anybody know about it. We started off soon after and had to cross a very high pass.

As we got up high and the final ascent to the pass loomed before us, I began to think of the wonderful food I had back home. My homeland came before me clearly and I began to hear again, as if for the first time, the words of advice I was given before I set out. I thought of the burning words of the old man who said he would spit in my face if I returned home without knowledge of the dharma, and thought that I must try as hard as I could to study once I arrived in Lhasa. I got to thinking that he had offended me and my guru but that he had given his true heartfelt advice. As I trudged high up towards the pass, alone with my thoughts, this recollection had a great effect deep within me. How embarrassed I would be if I returned without learning anything.

THERE IS A GOOD STORY that I learned from the monks in my part of the world which is related to the journey to Lhasa. Back at the end of the seventeenth century the great Fifth Dalai Lama built the monastery at Gye-tang. Some time later, his political minister Sangyay Gyatso traveled to our part of Kham to find out what was happening there. He traveled incognito with another poor traveler so that he would have a better opportunity to find out what was really going on. After he had made his inspection of Gye-tang he had to cross the Drichu in our region, and to do so he had to use a boat called a *wa*. When he got on board, the man operating the *wa* asked for his fee but Sangyay Gyatso had no money. The boatman raised his hand to strike him for coming on board without the money to pay for the trip, and Sangyay Gyatso took off his hat and bowed his head in supplication, asking not to be beaten.

Now, it was well known that Sangyay Gyatso had a very distinctive flat head. When the boatman saw the fellow's flat head, he said, "I will let you off without having to pay the fee because you have a flat head that is the same as Sangyay Gyatso's." He did not think he actually was Sangyay Gyatso, of course. Later in Lhasa, Sangyay Gyatso wrote a letter that the monks from our part of Tibet were to be excused from all taxes and tolls levied on the road up to central Tibet, and were not to be given any punishments or troubles. He said that, were someone from one of the lama's labrangts to travel with those monks, they too would be exempt from the taxes. Actually no monk traveling to the great central Tibetan monasteries was ever asked to pay the tolls or taxes, but the traders and so forth were expected to, and did so without question.

ONE DAY THE BOSS rode off a day or so in advance of our caravan, which had linked up with another trader's pack animals. One of the packman with those animals was a nasty fellow who immediately started to pick on me and Phuntsog. We did not mind helping with the chores around the camp, but he sent us out to collect wood, and then as soon as we got back told us to go and get water. We did that without saying anything, but then when we got back with the water he immediately told me to go and look after the animals, which were out grazing on a plain strewn with small rocks. I said nothing but I did not get up to do what he said either. Right away he flared up. "I told you to go out and look after the pack animals, didn't I? Well are you going or not?" I had noticed that there were plenty of rocks out closer to where the animals were, so I held my tongue until I got closer to them. I was worried that if it did come to a fight he might get the better of me, but with the rocks close at hand I told him straight, "You are the one getting paid here, not me, so you are the one who is supposed to be doing the work." He was up in a shot and started to walk towards me saying, "You *ben-chungs* are always quick to talk back." I immediately picked up a good-sized stone and got ready to fight him and he was not going to back off, that was clear. The younger packman with our animals got hold of him and at the same time Phuntsog came and told me that I should not get into a fight. He knew I was very hot-tempered so he said to me, "You know how much you used to fight back in the monastery, and you know how close you came to killing that one fellow, so you must not get into another fight—who knows what you will do." He was clearheaded enough to see that even if I was able to knock the packman out right away with a blow from a rock, it was still a long way from Lhasa and he would be sure to pick a time for his revenge.

One morning, some time later, we woke up and got ready to break camp only to find that one of the pack animals was missing. The animals had wandered off while grazing, and one of them had gone so far that the packmen could not locate him. Two of the packmen came up to me and said I had to throw a *mo*—do a divination—to find where it had gone. I said that my divinations were totally unreliable and that it would be silly for me to do it, but they insisted. What the divination foretold was that the animal had gone off in an easterly direction and was behind some big bushes. They said that was stupid, there was no way it would have gone in that direction. Then the caravan moved

off, leaving the two packmen behind to search for the animal. Later in the day we saw them coming along with the lost animal towards the place where we had camped. They were full of admiration for me because they said they had searched all the other directions before going to the east. When they finally went where I had suggested they found the animal behind a clump of trees, just as I had said.

Most of us goat and yak herders knew this little three-stone divination trick. You would throw three small stones into the air after offering up a prayer. If the stones landed placed like the three stones of a cooking fire it meant that there was no worry from leopards and other wild animals. If they fell in a straight line it meant that there was danger lurking about. I had noticed that sometimes the divination was right and quite often was wrong. What I had done was think of a direction and when the throw came out like the three stones of a cooking fire decided the animals would not be there. When the stones came out straight I said it was that direction. Regardless, from that divination I went up a bit in the packmen's estimation.

In fact they had to treat me well because my Red Uncle was the main investor in the caravan. The boss of the caravan, who was quite beholden to my Red Uncle, had told both of the workers to look after me and to treat me well. My standing increased even further when one evening a very imposing fellow riding a very big pack animal stopped by to camp with us in the middle of a huge plain. He kept glancing in my direction as if trying to decide exactly who I was, and I had a faint recollection of having met him somewhere earlier. My Red Uncle had told me before I set out that there was a friend of his called Chandzo Rabti who he had not seen for three years. He told me to look out for him in Lhasa because he would help me in whatever way I asked. Finally the trader called out to me and told me to come close. "Who is your guru?" he asked, and when I told him it was my uncle he became extremely pleased, saying that my uncle was his guru too, and had started him out in the beginning with a loan to get his donkey transport business underway. He said his business was thriving and that soon we would both be in Lhasa. "Be sure to come to me anytime you need anything," he said, and with that he gave me three coins each of the three-sang weight. "We will be seeing each other in Lhasa," he said. He had already left early in the morning by the time I got up, but once the packmen thought that I was the nephew of a big trader, they began to talk about me and treat me with much more respect. Chandzo Rabti was not really that close. He was the manager

of a lama's estates in Karnda, the birthplace of my maternal grandfather, a valley about four days' hard walk along the path to central Tibet from Kongjo-rawa. But he had quite a reputation in Lhasa as a big trader so it rubbed off on me. They would say to me, as we walked along, that I would have no trouble in Lhasa since I was related to Chandzo Rabti.

BACK IN MY HOMELAND my Red Guru took snuff and he used to grind up enough for a year's supply and store it. I would steal it from him and when he caught me taking it he would be very angry and say that I should not get into the vile habit. When I was at home my brother-in-law would grind up a supply and give it to me and I thought I looked sophisticated as I snuffed it up. But I never did it in front of my Red Guru. My brother-in-law, as I set out to Lhasa, gave me some cans as a gift. He said that when I returned, I would have a lot of say over what happened in the house, but that I should remember that the way of the householder and the way of the monk were different. If householders drank a little and if they took snuff, that went with the territory, he said, so I should not come back from the monastery acting pious and trying to stop him from doing it. "Quite the opposite," he said. "You should remember that I supplied you as a youngster and should bring me some back." I used a little of the snuff until I was a month or so from Lhasa, but when I thought of the bad habits of my homeland and my hopes for being a good monk, I made a decision to stop and gave my remaining tins to the packmen. But then after I had been in Lhasa a few months I was with some monks who were taking snuff, and I began again. After that I became quite addicted and was not able to break the habit for a long while.

One of the packmen was carrying a *ri-pi-ja-ko*—that is what we called a repeating rifle with a revolving cartridge. I really liked the look of that gun and asked if I could carry it for a while. The packman was glad to get rid of the weight, so for a while I was able to swagger along with it on my back, even though there had been warnings all around that I should not be allowed near any of the guns. At one point our party was passing by an upland meadow where there were a lot of big rabbits hopping around and I immediately wanted to shoot one of them. The rifle was a nice gun but I had never seen a revolving cartridge before, so I did not know how to use it. I asked the others how to shoot it and they were in the middle of showing me how to load it and aim it when the boss came along and began to get really angry.

He shouted at the others that he had told them not to let me have any of their guns, and he asked me what I thought I was doing as a monk, setting out to kill. So that was the end of that episode, and they took the gun away from me for good.

Finally we were within a day's quick ride of Lhasa, at a place called Itu-rong where there were good grazing lands—about two days out for the pack animals. One of the bosses told me to go ahead to find a grazing place for the animals near Lhasa so that they could be put to pasture after the loads had been taken off. The boss assigned me to go with the packman from the other caravan with whom I had nearly gotten into a fight. We set off, both of us feeling a mutual dislike for each other. When we stopped for lunch at a house, my companion immediately started drinking beer. When I said that I would have tea the owners said that there was none available. He kept on saying to me that I should join him for a drink, that there was no harm in it at all, that all the monks drank when they were in Lhasa. I kept refusing, saying I did not drink, that I could not because I was a monk. After a while, the lady of the house got up and went into the kitchen and brought me some tea and some very good tsampa and butter. There had been tea all along. She was very solicitous and said how fine I was not to drink, that monks should not drink no matter how much people tell them to. I then realized that the packman had been trying to make a fool of me. I do not know what he would have had to say if I had succumbed, but I am sure it would not have been very flattering.

We left that house and went on, spending the night at Dechen, just outside Lhasa. By this time the rest of the caravan had caught up with us and the next morning we were held up at the river crossing, where there were many caravans being taken across on the rafts. We did not get across until very late. Darkness was already falling by the time we arrived on the outskirts of Lhasa and I never realized I was in the city until I asked someone. As I hurried along I could see some buildings but only their outlines. By the time I got to Banak-shol where there was a house that the traders used, it was totally dark. There was no way I could go directly to the central cathedral to pay my respects to the main Buddha statue there; it was too late, and I was totally exhausted, so I stayed the night in that house.

That night I remember very clearly I had a dream. I was in a two-room cottage with a veranda running along the outside. I was alone in the house, but on the veranda were many women, some of them very beautiful. I thought that it was a very dangerous place, that I would

have to be very careful about my monk's vows. I had a sense of fear and shrinking. I tried to hide myself in the back corner of the back room, but every now and then the women on the porch would look in through the windows and we would see each other. Then someone in the dream said that I should move to another room. The room was small and dark, the plaster was falling from the walls and there was a dank smell. It was a fearsome place and I felt that there might be scorpions around. But when I shrank into the corner of this room, I felt that the beautiful women would not be able to catch sight of me. Then I woke up. The dream troubled me. I thought that it was an omen that I might have a difficult time in Lhasa keeping to the basic monk's training and I told myself that I must be careful to try to keep my vows.

It was very early when I woke from the dream, but that was good. The traders had an excellent custom. They would arrive in the city late at night, like I had done, and then very early the next morning, even before drinking a cup of tea, they would make their way to the Jokhang to see the main statue of the Buddha. So it was very early in the morning that I found myself in the Jokhang, presenting myself before the Buddha and the images in all the other chapels to receive their blessings. I had done the most important thing on my first full day in Lhasa, even before the sun was up.

DREPUNG AND SERA MONASTERIES each had a subcollege house that accepted monks specifically from my part of Tibet. These were Lawa house at Sera and Phukhang house at Drepung. When a caravan from my part of the world arrived in Lhasa, the trader in charge was responsible for letting both of these houses know that new young monks had arrived. There would also be people in Lhasa itself on the lookout for new arrivals, aware that young monks were expected from the monasteries that sent their monks to those particular houses. When new monks arrived, the two house gurus would get together and with great care and secrecy draw lots. The students' names were written on pieces of paper and put into a cup. Each of the gurus would draw a name in turn. If there were two monks, it was simple—one would go to Drepung and the other to Sera. If there were three then a blank piece of paper would be put in the cup, and a note would be made of the discrepancy; the next single monk to arrive would immediately go to the monastery that had come up short. At the end of each year there would also be an informal accounting, and if more had gone to one monastery than the other it would be rectified the next year. There

was great care given to the drawing of lots as it concerned newcomers from Dondup-ling because there had been a big problem at the Phukhang house of Ganden earlier. Dondup-ling monks no longer went there because of that trouble, so great care was taken to make sure that everything was clear at Sera and Drepung. Even if two young monks with the same mother and father came to Lhasa, the lots would be drawn and one could go to Drepung and the other to Sera. There was no room for argument.

After the decision, the house guru would take the new student back to the house. The student would be provided with a special place to sit and then would be given a very nice meal, served with great care and delicacy. After the meal, arrangements would be made to find a guru for him. If the new student had a teacher who was expecting him, then there would be no trouble and he would be put in touch with his new guru. He would probably have a letter with him to make sure that the arrangements for this went smoothly. It was also open to a new monk to mention the name of someone he knew in the house of whom he would like to be a student. It was not definite that he would be accepted, but his wishes would certainly be taken into account. It was one of the responsibilities of the house guru to arrange gurus for incoming monks, and he would go around discussing the matter with people, asking them to be the guru, until the arrangements were complete.

There were thirteen feeder monasteries for Phukhang house in Drepung: Dondup-ling, Kenda-gon (in Makham), Ngang-zang-gon (on the other side of the river from us), Gye-tang Tsarong-gon's Rongba house, and Jol-gon (in Jolwa) were the main ones. There were a number of smaller monasteries too, but often they would not even supply one monk a year. Dondup-ling on occasion would supply as many as fifteen monks, and other big monasteries would send at least five or six a year. There were probably between forty and fifty new entrants to Phukhang each year from the different feeder monasteries.

This was the pattern for most of the different houses. Of course there would be differences from monastery to monastery, but in essence the relationship between Phukhang and Dondup-ling mirrored the situation throughout the different parts of Tibet. Some monks from the nearby regions of central Tibet, however, were admitted to the big monasteries through a policy called *nyen-kur* (local admissions). The houses that admitted these monks, the large houses of central and west central Tibet, were not as strict about entrance standards or rules

as the houses that admitted particular monks from particular feeder monasteries. The expectations for these new monks were not so exacting. My own house of Phukhang was extremely sensitive about monks coming from our part of Tibet. If a monk's lot fell to Drepung but it was found out that he went to Sera, immediately monks would go over there to sort it out. You could not just go into any house you wanted if you were from our part of the world. But after you had been at the monastery for four or five years, if it really was not where you wanted to stay, then you could resign from that house; this would be quite acceptable, and after that you could go where you wanted.

MY RED UNCLE had made arrangements for Chandzo Rabti to look after me, so immediately after breakfast on my first day in Lhasa I went to see him. During my talk with the Chandzo, he had said that I did not need to worry because there were two lamas from my own monastery in Drepung—Ludrub Rinpoche and Tra-tang Rinpoche—and that Gachag Rinpoche had his household, his labrang, in Sera, so whichever way the lot fell I would be okay. I said to him, however, that I did not want to stay in a labrang, that I wanted to be an ordinary monk and study the scriptures. He said not to worry about it, if that was what I wanted, he would put me with a guru called Lobsang Gyaltsen if I went to Drepung or the Yargang guru from Kazur if I ended up in Sera.

Because there was this uncertainty about whether I would be entering a labrang or entering a monastery as an ordinary monk, I ended up staying the next night in the labrang of Ludrub Rinpoche. I arrived still dressed in the clothes of my journey—long pants and a chuba. In the kitchen of Rinpoche's house was a fellow who had arrived a month or so before me, and he told me to go on up into the chapel where Rinpoche was making a ritual with a number of other monks. I prepared a scarf, and an offering of three coins and a ball of tea. I had last seen Ludrub Rinpoche in Kongjo-rawa while he was still young, and I thought that he would still look the same. When I went in and made my prostration I felt unsure about who the Rinpoche was because at the head of the row was a tallish man in ordinary clothes, while at the end of the row was a short, well-dressed fellow. I did not recognize either of them so I began to shuffle my way backwards out of the room in acute embarrassment. Then the monk at the head of the row said in a loud voice, "Hey young fellow, you do not know who I am, do you? I am Ludrub, it is to me you have to give that scarf. How

come you do not recognize me?" I explained how I had last met him when he was young and thought that he would still be short. Rinpoche laughed and introduced me to everyone present, praised my Red Uncle and said that everyone had high hopes of me too. Whenever I came to visit him after that he would always say, "Here is the fellow who does not know who I am." I was an idiot when I first arrived, totally at a loss.

I BEGAN TO MAKE my first forays into Lhasa town. At first I only dared to walk a little distance, carefully noting all the houses so I would not get lost and would be able to make my way back safely. Then each time I would walk just a bit further afield. On one of my little forays I bumped into a distant relative of mine called Samdup. We went for a walk around town and I suppose we must have gone most of the way around the Barkor when he set me down on a cushion and went off into a store to talk about something with the owner. After a long time he came out and was surprised to find me still there. "Hey, you have to go draw lots. Do you know the way there or should I take you?" Now, I had not the slightest idea of the way to get there (it was going to take place in the house I had stayed in the first night) but I felt I would look stupid if I said that, so I said that of course I knew the way, and I set off with a pretend confidence, not knowing where in the world I was going. In a few moments I was lost but I kept walking with a purposeful stride, becoming ever more mindful of some advice my Red Uncle had given me about not walking around by myself in the streets of Lhasa, particularly in the side streets where there were muggers and thugs ready to take advantage of any fool who happened to wander by. I kept going up one street and down the next, recognizing one sign on a house and thinking that I had finally located myself, only to get totally lost and disoriented again. Finally I took to walking in the large crowds going around the Jokhang with the thought that there would be safety in numbers. As I was walking, three monks from Sera caught up with me on the Barkhor; these monks had been deputed to witness the drawing of lots and had heard that I had arrived. One of them was originally from Yargang—a place in Kongjo-rawa a few days walk from my village. They had set out to find me, no doubt knowing that new monks often got lost, and approached me directly. "We have come from Sera to witness the drawing of lots. Do you want to go now to do it?" I said yes, and we set off together. After we had gone a short distance I began to have doubts about them. What if they were the muggers I had been warned about, dressed up in disguise?

Suddenly I turned to the three monks and said, "No, I am not going to go after all, I have to go back to the Barkor." I took off in the opposite direction and they began to follow me, which only increased my suspicion. I began to walk even faster, and as they kept following me my suspicions were confirmed.

I quickly hid from them in the crowds going around the Barkor. I recognized a street sign, but there were two or three roads leading off in different directions and I could not be sure which way to go. I started off down one street. Soon the three monks appeared again. Immediately the older of them began to talk in my own dialect. "I am from Lawa house at Sera," he said to me. "My native valley is Yargang and I am from Kazur-gang family. The teacher in charge of our house instructed me to come to witness the drawing of your lots. You don't need to be afraid of me." As he was speaking in my own dialect I felt reassured and I began to remember before leaving that I had been told that if my lot fell to Sera there was a monk from Kazur-gang family there who I should get in touch with. We were slightly related and people had said that I would do well to ask him to be my teacher if I were to end up in Sera. So I opened up to him and admitted that I was totally lost and going around in circles. "We could see that," he said, "but we could see that you were having doubts about us too so we were not sure what to do. But don't worry. Come along with us and we will get the drawing of lots straightened out." Then he gave me some cake offerings blessed in one of the Sera chapels and told me to turn in the direction of Sera when the lots were drawn and pray to be able to go there.

I made the prayer, though to be honest, deep inside I did not want to go to Sera. My guru had been to Drepung and Tra-tang Rinpoche from Dondup-ling was a Drepung lama and his *chandzo* had said that if my lot fell to Drepung he would help me. So I was hoping that it would be Drepung, but at the same time I was open to fate, knowing that I would go wherever my karma would take me.

As we were all heading back to draw the lots, they were chuckling at what had happened and were talking and laughing amongst themselves about how I had thought they were thieves. But by then it was late so we hurried along. When we arrived, two Drepung monks—Gendun, the house guru of Phukhang house and his helper—were already there to witness the falling of lots, so it was immediately done. My lot fell to Drepung and Phuntsog's fell to Sera. I had to go off with Gendun immediately.

Night was already falling as I first entered Phukhang house. The monks were in the assembly chanting the worship of their protectress goddess Palden Lhamo, and I immediately made my three prostrations and forged the lasting spiritual bond between myself and my new spiritual house, as was the custom. I was then taken to the anteroom of the large kitchen, offered tea and tsampa, and treated with great dignity. I was beginning to think that I was going to like living in this house. Many monks stopped to say hello to me. "Who are you? Ah, I see, you are the nephew of the Boss of Choo-chur. Ah!" I think that most of them knew who I was, but still it was a very pleasant formality, and after I had said who I was to quite a number of them I felt that I was known.

Finally the cooks called me into the large kitchen to find a place to sleep for the night. One of the cooks was from my region, and he told me that I should sleep there in the kitchen until I was assigned a permanent room. I looked around for a place, and at the back in a recess there was a bed built up out of bricks, a very rude structure, the sort of thing that a beggar in India might make. I went to sit there and the cook brought me a cup of tea. After I had finished it he quietly said that it was auspicious that I had chosen that seat, but it was a place that was reserved for the storekeeper or any of the monks who had served a term as the general house guru. Others were strictly forbidden to sit there. "Come and sleep over here," he said. I was devastated. I thought that I was finished. Here I had just arrived in Drepung with the warnings of my guru and family that the discipline was going to be very strict, and on the very first night I had done something forbidden. I had a sinking feeling that I was going to make a complete mess of it and that I would become a disgrace to all who knew me. The cook kept saying that it was a good omen, and that there was no trouble in it, but I felt doomed. As I look back, I think it must have been a good omen because later I was to become a successful house guru.

The next day, the house guru, Gendun, told me that there was an expectation that I would be joining the household of Ludrub Rinpoche. But I stuck to my wish to be enrolled as an ordinary monk. I was originally slated to have Lobsang Gyaltzen as my room guru, but maybe because I had a name as a relative of Chandzo Rabti, Gendun said that he would personally take me as a student. People in the house were put out by this, especially the oldest student of Gendun, but I had no real say in the matter and I had to follow along with what was decided.

Gendun took me to my new room, and later that night when I had lit a candle and was getting ready to sleep I was struck by the fact that it was the exact same room I had seen in my dream about the women. The plaster was falling off the walls, the window was in exactly the same place, it was dark and hidden in the back, and it was damp. It made me feel differently about my dream and I began to think that the women must have been the women of the Glorious Goddess herself. I had some faith in the Glorious Goddess from when I was a child, particularly since she was the protectress of Phukhang house.

It was a terrible room, so bad that nowadays if someone were given such a room they would cause trouble, but there were many living in such squalid quarters so there was nothing to say about it, and it became my room for the first two or three years of my life at Drepung.

HAVING BEEN FURNISHED with a guru and a room I headed down to Lhasa to do the accounts with the trader who had been the boss on my caravan. He had brought in a big load of tea my Red Uncle had given me to take as gifts to some of his friends—he had asked me to give one man a two tea-ball string, another a five tea-ball string, and so on. After I distributed the tea there was still quite a bit left, and the caravan boss had earlier agreed to buy what was left from me.

I had begun to worry about the trader during my journey from Kongjo-rawa. There was a custom that monks heading to Lhasa would give a feast for all the packmen and the boss, and since I was always the sort of person who wanted to show off to others, I had taken a lot of care to prepare for this feast so people would speak well of me. I had brought a lot of special things for it, and not long after setting out I had told the boss that I was ready and asked him when I could offer the *thabja*—the feast. He kept saying there was no hurry, there was lots of time since Lhasa was a long way off. As we were going along sometimes the packmen would joke with me saying that I had better not forget about offering the *thabja*. But whenever I told the boss I was ready he would put me off. In the end he never let me offer the feast, and I couldn't figure out why.

When I met with the trader in Lhasa, it didn't take long for him to rob me. There were four or five hundred balls of tea left from the original load, and he should have given me four and a half sangs apiece for them, but he only gave me three. Then he charged me for an offering called the *gruma*, which I had never made, and to top it all off he

charged me in full for the *thabja* even though he had not given the packmen anything. I was furious and went off immediately to inform Chandzo Rabti. I told him what had happened and he said he would take the fellow to court over it. I asked him to do it for me and I was so angered over the whole affair I felt I might burst. But after a while the Chandzo began to back off from his promise. "We are from different parts of Kham," he said, "and this could lead to problems." The trader was from Kongjo-rawa, you see, but Chandzo Rabti was from Karnda and he had to be careful about it becoming an issue of local pride. "That trader is rich and powerful and it could be difficult," he said, "What you had better do is write a clear letter home letting your uncle know exactly what happened and see if he can clear it up from that end. Just accept the loss." I was boiling. The amount of money involved was considerable. I lost hundreds of sangs on the tea, and having to pay for the feasts and so forth meant the money that my guru had banked with him was lost to me in the accounting. Just five silver sangs in those days was an amount to reckon with. You only had to pay fifteen sangs for fifty weights of butter. This trader who robbed me used to be a monk in our monastery and had then given up the robes and gone into business. Later his business went downhill and he ended up very poor.

AFTER A FEW DAYS I went to Dampag a few kilometers down from Drepung to get my robes made. New incoming monks had to make their robes out of *yaday*, a sort of wool that was not the best quality. Gendun told me to accompany a fellow called Adrag who was going down to buy some material and would show me the way. I had the money for my robes safely tucked away in the fold of my traveling chuba. As we were going down Adrag said, "I hope you have got your money stowed away properly there, you do not want to lose it." "Oh yes," I said, "it is safe inside an inner pocket of my upper vest." I felt inside to check that it was there, pushing it firmly down to make sure it was not bouncing out. Then a bit later he said again, "Be careful, now, with your money." This made me a bit nervous so again I reached inside to check and again firmly pushed it down. Unfortunately there was a small hole in the pocket of my vest that I had not known was there and with my nervous pushing, the money must have fallen through the hole. When we finally got to Dampag I found I had lost a lot of it; probably a total of a hundred sangs had fallen out. I lost the present day equivalent of maybe three thousand rupees. I thought

my heart was going to burst. There was no way to get it back. There were people traveling up and down the road and it would be gone by now. I had already lost so much money from the trader and now, of my little remaining, I had lost even more. Adrag told me that I would just have to go back to Drepung—there was no reason for me to go looking at the material because I had no money.

I went back by myself, heartbroken, thinking how poor I had become, how I had been taken by the trader, how my savings were gone, how hard it was going to be, and how much my new guru would scold me for my carelessness. So I lied to him. I said that the previous night I had a terrible dream and that I was so distracted by it and the lack of sleep that I had lost my money. My guru, and in this he was a good guru, did not scold me but tried to comfort me. He said that I should not think overly about it, and though it was a hindrance I should try to think that it was over and about how to do well in the future.

All told, I lost just about every penny of my ready money, except for a small reserve, and the only money left was the money that my uncle had banked with others. I did not have enough ready money left to even think about making a good set of monk's robes—it was going to have to be the very cheapest of the cheap. I had imagined that as the nephew of the famous Boss of Choo-chur I would not just dress in any old monk's clothes, but in something more suiting my rank. But with my loss, my whole plan of cutting a fine figure in the monastery came to an end. I settled into the thought that I was going to be dressed like one of the plebs, and was going to be a pleb because that was all my meager money supply would allow. I certainly did not want to borrow and right from the start get into debt.

Reduced to these straits, my worldly side began to weaken and my spiritual side manifested itself more strongly. I began to regret how I had lived in the monastery at home, never studying anything at all, only reciting just as much as my guru insisted and never doing anything more. I began to see how the adversity that I was facing was in fact the best thing that could have happened to me, how the loss of the money that I was planning to use to be a monk like I had been at home was in fact not going to be a loss to me, but the cause of far greater gain. I had carried my Dondup-ling lifestyle with me to Lhasa, but now I had banged my nose three times, and banged it hard, and that old lifestyle was getting dented. Being totally taken by the trader had bruised my ego, and then I had been so ignorant as to sit on the bed reserved for those who were at a high level, and now finally I had

lost all my money for clothes. I felt deflated but somehow with the inner tears of my loss was a growing determination to study, to study hard and make a name for myself as a monk and scholar. I again remembered the old man's threat to spit in my face, and what he had said acquired a depth of meaning in my consciousness, against the backdrop of my first unhappy days in Lhasa, such that I began to feel he had a special wisdom.

MY GURU, GENDUN, had pushed to get me as his student and word of this had got around. Understandably, the oldest student of Gendun was not very well disposed to me, and from the start he would glare at me and would tell me nothing about the various customs which one had to know about to stay on the right side of the college rules. One evening, begrudgingly, he told me that I had to go to the *damcha*—the assembly when the debaters get together and all put their questions to a selected few. By the time I got there it had already started and I felt shy about going in late, so I hid myself at the back of the compound. After a while a fighting monk walked slowly from the darkness. He had the last part of his upper garment tightly pulled around his neck like a scarf, instead of draped over his shoulder, and he passed by me in what I considered a threatening manner. He slowly went outside to urinate and I felt so scared of him I plucked up the courage to go inside and sit down. I found myself seated next to a young monk from my same part of Kongjo-rawa and it was not long before we got lost in conversation, me telling him about the latest news from home and him telling me all about life in the monastery. Now, although house gurus would tend to be a bit lenient with new arrivals who might not be keeping all the rules perfectly, the monitors called *parsha-rawas* were not at all. As we got more and more into conversation and our voices began to rise with excitement, we totally failed to notice one of the *parsha-rawas* coming towards us. Without a word of warning he gave me a tremendous slap across the cheek and asked what we thought we were doing. "What about the guru whose name you give when you are asked whose student you are? What about your elder classmates and roommates? Is there nobody who tells you what you can and cannot do in this place?" I was totally flattened by this, pounded, as we say, as thin as the fine membrane around a muskdeer's gland.

Coming on top of what had been happening since I arrived, I was overwhelmed with the thought that there was no way I was going to be able to make it, and that I might as well resign myself to the thought

that I would not be able to stay at Drepung even for a few years but would have to leave for home in the next short while. In that deeply upset state I went back to my room after the assembly was over and, somehow or other, was able to motivate myself to study a little.

My guru should have appointed somebody to teach me but did not do so. Luckily there was a boy from my own monastery who was ahead of me and it was from him that I learned the first debates. After teaching me for a while he asked me one day to go to the general house study-guru to ask permission for him to do his recitation in his room instead of going outside onto the open veranda. It was a college custom that a younger student could go to ask permission for an older student to do his recitation inside, but not vice versa. So I went off to ask. In the monastery back in Kongjo-rawa when a monk went to ask for permission there was a particular way of asking. We would say, "Can he stay inside or can't he?" We did not phrase the request in a way such that it was an exact unequivocal request for him to stay inside. So in a blissful ignorance of the way to do it at Drepung, and without being told by anyone exactly what I should or should not do, I entered the guru's room. He was a good man at heart but was extremely direct and brutal on the surface, so when I addressed him in the language of my part of Kham he looked at me ferociously and said in a loud voice, "What did you say?" I said the same thing again, "Can he stay inside or can't he?" And after the second request in an even more infuriated voice he said again, "What did you say?" I asked a third time in the same way and he exploded. "What do you mean, asking me if he can or cannot stay inside? Are you asking me if he can stay inside? Don't you know how to ask properly? Do you dare to come in here without the proper care and respect?" With that he gave me three or four tremendous wallops with the heavy thong that he hung his keys from. He did not really hurt me, and I do not know to this day if he really was as infuriated as he seemed, but he kept saying "Can he or can't he..." as though he was beside himself with anger. When I got back to the young guru who was teaching me the debate and told him what had happened, he was terribly sorry and apologized again and again for not having told me the proper way to address the request. But the damage had been done and my confidence was totally gone.

Back in Dondup-ling I was one of the worst of the monks, egotistical and arrogant. From these early experiences in Drepung, however, I became very deferential and retiring, quite the opposite of my earlier self. Back at home everybody had said I would never be able to

last at Drepung because of my arrogance, that I would come up against the discipline and get into trouble. But now here I was, after just a few weeks, totally deflated and deferential. I thought of what they had said with a bittersweet taste.

WHEN A NEWCOMER arrived he had to make an offering called the newcomer's tea. It was not particularly necessary for him to give a big or small tea, but at the least he had to supply two rounds of tea to the two hundred or so members of the house. If the person was poor that would be the best he could do. A richer person would give better tea, make a big show of it and hand out money offerings which would then entitle him to the name of *chon-dze*—"a facilitator of the dharma." A person who wanted to be a *chon-dze* also had to offer a fine *mi-tag* noodle soup, and make the money offering twice to the whole college. Those who were not rich enough to give the money offering twice, but who could offer the noodle soup, were not *chon-dzes*, but their offering did exempt them from the roster for house duties. Monks who were not able to make these offerings while they were in Lhasa would have to make an offering in their home monastery as big, or bigger, than the one expected of them in Lhasa. When the monk got back to his part of Tibet he would say that he had not been able to offer the *mi-tag* noodle soup and then there would be a specific amount that he would offer to the monks of his home monastery which would serve as the equivalent. In essence, the newcomer's tea was obligatory but the *mi-tag* noodle soup might, on occasion, be left out.

If a new monk did not have the funds to offer the *mi-tag* soup he went into a pool of people who had to do duties around the house. Since I had lost nearly all my money I was not going to be able to make the offering and word of this got back to Chandzo Rabti, who called me down to the labrang office. He asked me why I was not giving the *mi-tag* and I said that I did not have enough money to give it. "Well you can borrow the money for it, can't you?" he said. "Going into debt I am not going to do," I said, and after some more conversation I eventually went back to the college. Then again a few days later I was told to go and see the Chandzo. There were two big loads of butter sitting on the floor when I got there and the Chandzo told me to pick them up. They were so heavy I could not pick up even one of them without staggering, never mind both at the same time. The Chandzo asked me, "Can you carry things like that? That is what you

have to do if you go into the work pool." I just looked at him. "So you can see, then, that the offering of the *mi-tag* is very important—it is something that you have to do. Do not worry, I will help you with what you need." I sheepishly thanked him and then went back to the college.

I went to the college administration and arranged the dates and so forth and made it definite. Then one day I went down to the Chandzo and he gave me a load of butter to carry back to the monastery. It was not quite the size of the earlier ones but it was still big enough—it must have weighed forty kilos or so. I staggered out with it and it was incredibly difficult. It took me half the day to get to Drepung from the center of Lhasa. The rope around the leather skin that contained the butter cut into my back and I thought that there was no way I was going to be able to do this sort of work, and that it was definite, whether or not I went into debt, that I would offer the *mi-tag*. Luckily a huge monk from the same part of the college was making his way back to Drepung at the same time, and I asked him to help me the last part of the way because the cuts in my back from the ropes were so painful. "No trouble," he said, and took the load the last of the way up.

After that I was certain about offering the *mi-tag* and went to see my guru to tell him that I had definitely decided to do so. The total cost of a good tea and *mi-tag* would come to about twenty dotse; I had about fifteen or sixteen dotse left, nothing more, but with Chandzo Rabti's butter and his offer to help, I told my guru that I wanted to do it properly, that I was not going to just give an offering that came in under the mark. "Excellent," he said, "and now you have the backing of Chandzo Rabti, so I will sanction it and advance you any extra money you need."

I was slated to offer my *mi-tag* in the tenth month when two different monks took over as house gurus. I was scheduled to offer it in the evening and I woke up very early in the morning of that day feeling extremely anxious. I immediately went to the kitchen to see how the preparations were going. A proper offering was not just a thick *mi-tag* soup, but was supplemented with a *paktsa mar-gol*—a barley flour dish with a melted butter crown. For that you needed lots of melted butter as well as the fruit and cheese and so forth that went in the barley flour. One of the cooks saw how nervous I was and played a joke on me by holding up a ladle of watery soup and saying that this was what I was going to be serving because I was so short of ingredients, and wasn't I ashamed to be confronting the house with such slop? I was crushed, and believing everything he had said I rushed off to my

guru's room to tell him that I was going to back out of the *mi-tag* because my soup was not good enough to offer. He sat up immediately and said, "What, the soup is no good?" and we both rushed off to the kitchen. The cook said that he had just been joking and that in fact the soup was excellent. "I could see how worried you were when you walked in this morning so I thought I would put the wind up you," the cook said. "Don't worry, the food is going to be fine; it is all taken care of." My guru had a great laugh at this, and by midmorning many of the older monks had heard the story. They were laughing and pretending to scold me. "You cannot back out of a meal, even if it does not come up to your expectations—you still have to serve it," they said. "You really are the dictator aren't you—putting down your foot in the kitchen when the soup is not up to your standard." My guru said that he would have to watch out for me from now on or I would bankrupt him. "What were you going to do with all the soup that was not up to your lordship's standard?" he asked laughing. "You have already spent all your money and a good bit of mine on the ingredients. What exactly was it that you had in mind, throwing it all out for the dogs?" He chuckled away to himself. It made the rounds, this story, and even after the event had passed off successfully and the meal had been enjoyed by all, the old monks would ask me if I was the one who was going to cancel the soup because it was not up to the standard.

When I finally did the accounts with the Chandzo for the feast I came up about six dots short. The entire cost, over twenty dots, must have been the equivalent of twenty thousand Indian rupees in today's money, but the Chandzo said that I should not worry about it, that I would not have to starve or wear rags. He said that when he had started out in business he had nothing but a single mule and my Red Uncle had staked him and helped him immensely. Now my uncle was not in need of anything but I was. So whatever help he could send my way, he said, it was more than a pleasure to do it. He said that he had gone over the accounts carefully in order to acquaint me with the procedure, but that I should not consider myself in debt to him for the outstanding six dots that he gave me to pay back the advance I had taken from my guru Gendun. I thanked him profusely. Then he said that if I ever ran into trouble I should be sure to come immediately and ask him and that he would take care of it. It turned out that I never received any more money from the Chandzo. I often would think that I must go down and ask him for something but when the time

came and he would ask me how I was doing and if I needed anything I would always feel shy and say that I was making out alright. But his openness and his willingness to be there if I got into trouble was a great comfort. You know how it is, even if the person actually comes up with nothing it is still very nice to have someone say that they are ready to help. He never ever put money in my hand, probably knowing that I would spend it immediately and that I would use it to look good around the college.

WHEN A NEW MONK first arrived in Lhasa everybody would tell him how important it was to study, what a special opportunity it was and so forth, and how important it was to follow the conduct becoming of a monk. At the monastery, as he went about in his early days, many people would make a special effort to impress on him how important it was to study, to be modest, and to make good use of the time. But that is not to say that everyone did study. There was a certain amount of memorization to be done, and some of the new monks ended up doing a bit of that, but not really studying. After a few months, the monks who were not studying at all would start to wander about, making sure that they cut a fine figure as they did so. There were all sorts, some just hanging around waiting for their three years to end.

The house gurus appreciated the efforts of the studious monks, and their status in the monastery went up. Still, there was no set of rules in the monastery saying that those who stayed there had to study. It was up to the student himself. If one adhered to the three basic trainings (a basic morality, some contemplation, and some intellectual activity) one could stay. So it was a very liberal environment, an accommodating one. If one wanted to study one did, but from the outside there was not a strict discipline that required it. There were many monks in Drepung, but I would venture that no more than three thousand of them were involved in the study of Buddhism. There were definitely some who did not study and did not do anything else, who were not particularly noble people, and if they came to the notice of the monastery authorities they would be asked to leave.

In some houses, though not in my own, there were monks who were traders. They were businessmen and that was their job. There were not many of them but there were some in the monastery. And there were also meditators, people for whom the quiet contemplation of truths in their own rooms and on their own time was the main

thing. There were different sorts and they were all allowed the freedom to do as they wanted, within the general rules and regulations of the monastery and colleges.

Financing the stay was always a problem. Many monks went back home simply because they could not afford to stay. Others went back because the discipline in the monastery was something they could not take. There were always letters from home urging one to return and one would always remember the ample food and freedom of one's native place. It was not easy to study, and there was a tremendous pull on the new monk to just give up and head back to the familiar territory of his birthplace. There were also monks who would find employment in one of the different labrangs, or who would find some other sort of work and thereby be able to live relatively well, but at the expense of time which otherwise would have been given over to study.

AFTER A GURU had been arranged for a new arrival, the young monk would give all of his money to him and it would be properly entered into an account at that time. Then the monk's food and clothes and the cost of the necessary ceremonies would be met by his guru from this money. If a monk was poor, his clothes and food would all have to be supplied by his guru. When this poor monk received money from donors during the assemblies, it was then expected that he would hand it over to his guru, who would use it to meet these expenses.

Monks got up at dawn and went to the Drepung general assembly, which lasted for as long as two hours. The gesheys and older monks were required to attend, though there was a schedule so that all of them did not have to go at once. A required number of new monks always had to be in attendance. The tea that these new monks got in this assembly was just black tea because all the butter would have already been poured out into the cups of the gesheys at the heads of the rows. The black tea was given out three times and the monks mixed it with their tsampa. When there was a money offering in the Drepung general assembly you did not have to go and sit for the tea in order to receive it. You could stand outside in the courtyard, though sometimes you had to wait for up to an hour. After the general assembly was over, Loseling and Gomang colleges (the two biggest of the Drepung colleges) had their own morning assemblies. During debating periods this would take place right after the general assembly in the debate ground. Attendance at this assembly was mandatory for all new monks who had not completed three years of residence in the monastery, but of the older monks only the leader of the chant and a few

monks with strong voices attended. It did not last long and was over in about forty-five minutes. Tea was not served though there might be other offerings. The house assembly and morning prayer was after this and lasted for about two hours. If a monk had not been to an earlier assembly he would have to go to this if he wanted to get any tea.

After the house assembly there was a break of about two hours before the daily debate. This was the period when one went to one's guru for teachings, or if one did not have a teacher, when one studied oneself. The daily debate went from about one in the afternoon until about four and was the longest of the debating periods. After this, if there was a sponsor for an evening tea, it would be signaled by a clapping of hands and would be the occasion for the evening meal. For this tea the ingredients were supposed to be put in a churn and mixed well, but the kitchen workers rarely took care to ensure this happened.

Then there was a break before evening pre-debate prayers. During this time, again one went for teaching from a guru or one would study by oneself. The prayers started in the early evening with all of us reciting the twenty-one praises to the goddess Tara. That prayer was said twenty-one times and then there were a number of other praises, all with long chants, so the evening prayer went on for a long time. When the chant was slow and drawn out, the monks who were studying recited their memorized texts in a very soft voice, did the mantra of Tsong-khapa, or just sat there thinking and contemplating the part of the scriptural tradition they were studying, in order to better utilize their time. New monks had to attend the evening prayer, whether they wanted to study or not, but older monks who were serious about study missed the evening prayer and came out when debate started. Others would teach during these long recitations. Without letting others know what they were doing, they would quietly teach a particular part of the scriptural tradition to a student or friend they were sitting next to. Immediately after the end of the evening prayer, very new monks returned to their house and, under the watchful eye of the house guru and the *parsha-rawa*, they had to recite what they had memorized in a loud voice, outside their rooms. They had to keep at it until the house guru told them they could stop. Other monks went to debate, which lasted until ten or eleven. Debaters did not have to recite for the house guru, but they would usually do at least a short recitation after they returned from the debate.

The disciplinarians made sure that all monks were present for the first hour of debate; after that they did not take much notice, so only the ones who wanted to debate would stay on, some until as late as

twelve o'clock. Those who debated late into the night experienced a special feeling in the debate courtyard. Even in the middle of winter one did not feel the cold, and in the warmth of summer, debating amongst the trees, there was a wonderful cool feeling.

GENERALLY SPEAKING, the first months were the hardest for a monk. As he got older he would be more capable of looking after his affairs, more capable of budgeting properly, and also would be more looked up to. But it was the guru who was his surrogate parent, and it was the guru who was summoned by the general disciplinarian or the general governing body if the student got into serious trouble. Say the student stole something. The guru would not have to answer for it as an accomplice, but he would be upbraided and asked why he had not properly looked after his student; how could the student have been involved in thievery without his knowing? On the other hand, if the guru gave terrible food to the student or dressed him in rags, or if he abused him with beatings, then the guru would be called up to answer the charges. The truth is that being a guru was a very important role in the monastery, but the job was not that easy. Sometimes the guru would sustain a real financial loss looking after a student, though it could also happen that the student would be a source of greater wealth for a guru, or that the guru would be well looked after by his students.

In Phukhang house a new student had to stay with his guru for his first five years. During that time he was not allowed to set up on his own or cook in his own kitchen. After that he could find himself new rooms, cook by himself, and also could begin to take in students of his own. Hence a monk had to stay with his guru, to eat with him, and apart from the little bit of money he was able to hide away for his own private use, he had to give the guru everything he had. I think all the houses were run on basically this same system.

A guru's expenses for a monk's food were taken care of at a monthly accounting. The amount of money that the student had brought in from the prayer assemblies, and the amount of money that the guru had paid out in food and so forth were totaled up at this time. At the end of the year there would be an accounting as well. If the student lived a frugal life and was careful not to waste money or food, he could make it through his time at the monastery and at the end of his stay have enough left over to buy material for a reasonable set of new robes to go home in. But there would be plenty of monks who bought

special food they could not afford, with too much meat or whatever, or who felt they had to have the latest fashion in material or robes, and they would find that the amount of money they received from the donations in the assemblies was not enough to cover their needs.

The guru one was assigned on entering the monastery was not necessarily the most important person in one's studies. The disciplinarian in the big assemblies and the house gurus were the main ones checking on this. They made sure a monk was in the assemblies or in the debating sessions that he was expected to attend. Some houses were not so strict in this, but Trehor, Gowo, and Phukhang were incredibly strict about attendance, and the house gurus were always about with their lists, checking that everyone was there. The monks in these houses were themselves careful to turn up where they were expected, so the disciplinarians were usually better disposed towards them. If some infraction occurred, the disciplinarians were more likely to treat the offending monk from one of these houses more lightly. The disciplinarians would quickly bring the guru looking after the monk into the discussion when the student had some sort of fault. "Didn't your guru tell you about this? Haven't you been told exactly how and when this is supposed to be done?" If the fault was serious, the disciplinarian would confront the student and his guru together and give the both of them a tongue-lashing.

IT WAS HARD FOR ME because I always had a big appetite. I always wanted to eat but never quite had enough to spend on food. That is not to say that I was short of money. My Red Uncle had been intelligent about the way he had set up my finances, taking care of every possible eventuality. So even though I had lost large amounts, the offerings that I had to make to Loseling and to Drepung had been safely routed through Ludrub labrang. In addition he had given me two sets of money to carry on my person. One he told me to put on my belt where it was easy to get to. "If the packmen ask for a loan you can give them a little bit of this," he said. The other set of money he told me to keep in a hidden pocket under my arm. "Do not show this even to your guru," he said. "Just keep it safe so you will have something to buy food with when you are hungry." I kept that money, quite a bit really, never letting my guru know that I had it, and I used that to assuage my hunger and thirst. Since nobody on the way into Lhasa had asked me for a loan, I had most of that money left too. I kept it secret, so I was never one of the really destitute monks.

Still, I was always hungry—greedy I suppose is the word. No matter how much I ate I always felt hungry and always felt like eating something. Sometimes it was quite painful, this feeling of hunger, and I was always on the lookout for food. One time my guru had gone out and I was dying for something to eat. My guru had left out some low quality mustard oil, the sort of oil that you needed to cook at quite a high temperature before using, and I decided to mix some of this with tsampa and eat it. I got it down alright and since I had not used much of the oil my guru did not notice it. But having tried it once I knew it was there and I got to eating more and more of it until one day he asked why the oil was disappearing so fast. I confessed that I had been putting it in tsampa, in the place of butter, and he was shocked. "You cannot eat that oil!" he said. "It is not like apricot or walnut oil, it will kill your stomach." He was quite concerned and said we would have to go to the doctor right away. But when I said I had been eating it for quite a while, with only the occasional diarrhea, he allowed himself to believe that I was alright. It seems that two young monks from Pombara house had cooked themselves up some barley flour with a melted butter crown using mustard oil in place of the butter, and had died a most painful death from it. The story had made the rounds and my guru was very worried that the same would happen to me.

In these early months I was not very enamored with college life. I hated feeling hungry and kept thinking of how it was at home. I thought to myself that it was unlikely I would stay in Drepung after my allotted time of three years was over, but even so I kept studying the scriptures. I did not have a good teacher, but the young monk from my part of Kham who had helped me learn the opening debates was very fine and humble and he helped me as much as he was able. My own guru was not even the head of our little part of the house even though he was the house guru. The real head of our part of the house had gone to Kongpo to do some business and was not there. So there was not really anyone who took an interest in my affairs or who looked after me in an attentive way. The elder student, as I said, took an active dislike to me. I was very shy then, too. I had never been taken to any of the common rooms of the college and was too shy to go there by myself. What with the hunger, the feeling of abandonment, and the loneliness it was an unhappy time.

There was one boy from Dondup-ling living down the hall and I would often go over to his room to seek out his friendship. His guru had gone off to the winter debate called the Jamyang Gun-cho. My friend lived next to an excellent monk and scholar called Tsering

Chophel who had gone to the Jamyang Gun-cho as well. At that time for some reason or other my own guru was also not around. One day my friend showed up with a piece of pork that he had stolen from the room of Tsering Chophel. He did not have any cooking facilities in his room and he knew that my guru did. I said that even though my guru was away I could not let him cook there because many people came by and if my guru came to know I was using his things he would not be happy about it. Some time later my friend came by with another bit of pork. This time it was cooked pork that you could eat with tsampa and he gave me some. I asked him where he got it from because it was unusual, and he said that he had to go into Lhasa quite often to see the *chandzo* of a labrang and it was from there that he got it. It seemed plausible enough so I chose to believe him. Later he brought a very nice piece of woolen cloth called a *phu-rug*—a piece of cloth better than a *yaday*—and said he was going to make an upper jacket with it. Then, a few days before the participants in the debate were expected back, he brought a bundle of things and asked me to keep them in my room. I did not feel comfortable about having his things in my room, but there was a little annex to it where I said he was welcome to put them if he really wanted to.

When Tsering Chophel got back he found his room pretty much cleaned out. My friend had been going there everyday, eating what he found and taking his belongings. The day after he got back there was an assembly and my friend walked into it carrying Tsering Chophel's tea bowl. When he was seen doing this, people knew he was the thief. Quite a few of Tsering Chophel's belongings were found in his room. Then, since we were known to be friends, suspicion fell on me too. My guru confronted me and asked me if I had been involved. "Did you steal from Tsering Chophel?" he asked me, and I said no. "Did you eat any of his meat?" "Yes," I said, "I did eat some." "And did you go together with him to get it?" "No I did not," I said. "He came with it and when I asked him where he got it he said that it had been given to him in Lhasa." I told him that I had not eaten much of it. "Have you received anything else from him?" he asked, and I told him about the bundle that he had brought and left in the annex. Then my guru said to me straight, "That boy is a thief and I think that you were in on it with him." I said that even though Tsering Chophel's room was close by I did not know about it.

A day or so later the boy's guru and Tsering Chophel came to see me. They said that it was a very dangerous situation. The boy was a thief and the next day there was going to be a general Drepung assembly

where he would be formally accused and then expelled from the monastery. In fact they both liked me, but to test me they said that I would probably be summoned before the assembly as well. Although they were joking, I cannot even begin to tell you how scared I was. The thought of facing my Red Uncle having been expelled for stealing, even if I had not done so, was unbearable. I could not settle down and as night fell I was totally beside myself. They found out about how scared I was and immediately sent for me. "We were only frightening you," they told me. "We know you did not do it and we have decided not to take the matter to the central authority of Drepung because if we did you would also probably get into trouble. Your friend is leaving the monastery at the new year so we have decided to let the whole thing blow over. Study hard and do not worry." I was so scared that I did not trust them. I thought that the authorities would come at any moment, no matter how much they reassured me. They said to me that I should be careful about my friends, that I should not eat with just anybody, and that I should be particularly careful about avoiding the gangs of troublesome monks if I was going to be successful with my studies. Tsering Chopel told me, "Go with the well-behaved monks, not forgetting that there are all sorts of people here in the monastery. He robbed me but since you were associated with him you got stained. And be careful also when you go into Lhasa as well. Do not go around with people with bad reputations—even going to certain monks' quarters is an act you should be mindful of." He gave me excellent advice and it connected with me, went deep into my heart. How terrible I thought, not to have been in the monastery for even a year and to have such a story get out and be known back in my part of Tibet, just because of choosing my acquaintances carelessly.

It was on account of this, and the other early experiences, that my sense of confidence, my arrogance, disappeared. It was there within me but only faint like a dream after this. It was as if I had the stuffing knocked out of me. Later, looking back on those early experiences which so scared me, which left me so apprehensive of making a mistake, so uneasy about entering into relationships, which left me feeling shy and humble, I saw them as most fortunate indeed. Hardships that turn into friends, that is what they are called. At the time they are experienced they are most distressing, but they stamp out arrogance and youthful delinquency and give a young man the break which sets him on a better path.

In those early days at Drepung I did not get much opportunity to study. I felt very sad when I contemplated this because when I had first arrived I had the opportunity to go into Ludrub labrang. Even though I would not have had the opportunity to study there, I would have been earning my keep; I would not have just been spending money and having trouble with food, living quarters, and acquaintances. I started to think that maybe I did not have the forehead, as we say in our part of the world, for studying the dharma. I did not have the merit. I could not go over to the labrang now because I had said I wanted to study, but my guru had not arranged for anybody to teach me scripture—he was only interested in using me as a debt collector.

ONE OF THE DUTIES of the house guru was lending out house money at interest and it became one of my jobs to go with him to collect what was owed. At first he took me with him to show me where to go and how to do it and then later he would send me off alone. I was always having to go off to collect this money, and my study periods, not long anyway, shrunk even further. Things went on this way, with a bit of study now and then, but mainly I was collecting debts for my guru.

I remember being sent out to Nyimo-ganga, across a big river that came down from Tilung-phug. The people I had to go to get the money from had a roof over their heads but not much to eat. It made me feel terrible to be collecting a debt from people who were so poor. I had set out in the morning with a proper meal's worth of good tsampa, and here I was faced with the task of asking for money from people who were eating far worse tsampa than mine, and hardly enough of it. How could I force them to pay? When they, trying to be respectful to a monk, gave me some of their blackish tsampa and tea I said that I could not possibly take it off them. I spoke openly with them, gave them some of my own tsampa and said that if my guru ever came they should tell him that I gave them a really hard time trying to collect the money, not to tell him that I had been friendly and given them some of my own food.

There was another person who owed our house money who lived in a dirty hut. When I arrived, there were six or seven people huddled in there trying to keep warm. The place was so horrid that I didn't even want to go inside, but it was far from the monastery and I had to stay the night. All they could give me to sleep on was a *phu-kug*, a thick Tibetan grain sack, and a few other bags and a black covering. In

the evening they made a soup of the nettles that we Tibetans say carry the blessing of Milarepa. It was revolting to look at but once you ate some it was not bad. We ate huddled around their little stove and then I had a fitful sleep, freezing like all the rest of them. We got up early in the morning and I told them that I could not ask them for the grain that they owed. I knew I was going to get an earful from my guru, but there was just no way I could get the grain back. I told them too, if my guru came, not to tell him that I had let them off.

That summer my guru told me to go back to Nyimo-ganga, to the first house where I had failed to collect the debt. When I had gone before, the river bed had been pretty dry; none of the overflow rivulets had water in them and I had been able to go across just by hiking up my monk's robes. This time I was in over my knees even as I was crossing the rivulets. The people in the house caught sight of me and shouted for me to go back, but I figured they were just pretending it was too dangerous because they did not want to face me asking for the repayment. In fact I should have realized that it was too dangerous, because if the water was up over my knees in the rivulets it was definitely going to be very deep in the main channel. I made it across some of the rivulets and then followed the path of a rock channel which was used to divert the water to different fields. Then I started out across the main floodway. It was all churned up, carrying sand and small pebbles, but by then I was too far across to turn back and I had to keep going. The water was up well above my waist and was going at a terrific speed. I hit a pool at the same time as a wave came through and I experienced terror as I started to be swept away. Luckily I found a big, strategically placed stone and was able to save myself. My mind was racing and I began to think of the stupidity of it all—how hard it had been to make the trip to Lhasa from my part of the country. I thought of my house, and of my hopes for study in Lhasa, and how I only ended up as the unpaid servant of a man who wanted me to go out collecting his debts. I felt enraged at my guru.

The people I was trying to reach were all looking at me anxiously from their house, and I began to back up, a careful step at a time, until I reached slightly higher ground. By then all thought of crossing the river to collect the debt had gone. The people were waving to me to go back; there were by then a line of people who had left their work in the fields and were all watching my progress anxiously. I was exhausted, but still had a big stretch of river to go back across. My fear

and fatigue made it difficult, but I hiked up my robes, put my food on my head and with fervent prayers to the Glorious Goddess somehow made it across to the shore. I could see the people slowly returning to their work when they were sure I was safe. By this time it was quite late and I stopped for a rest at a different house that had earlier borrowed seed-grain from the monastery, but which was now seeing better times. They said that it was wrong to send out a new young monk who had no understanding of the district in such a way. I was not able to eat any of the food that I had brought with me because I was still in a state of shock. They gave me some tea, which I eventually drank, and then slowly slowly I made my way back home. I arrived probably well after twelve o'clock at night and fell asleep, exhausted.

When I woke the next morning, instead of getting up as I would usually do and going along to see my guru and have breakfast, I just stayed in bed. I could not stop myself from thinking that the whole situation was hopeless. I had come up to study but was totally alone in the world and was just being worked like a donkey. I was so depressed I stayed in bed until finally my guru came looking for me. When he asked me what was wrong I said to him that I wanted to give up and go home. I told him I had come to study but he kept sending me out again and again to collect the debts. I was no more than a donkey, I said, without anybody who loved me, so there was no reason to stay. I felt humiliated and I had decided I could put up with it no more. My guru said he had not realized that the work he was giving me was so hard on me. "Do not worry," he said, "I will not send you out again and things will go better for you. Do not give up hope." Then he sent me to another monk for breakfast (he must have told him about my state of mind) and this old monk encouraged me, saying that I should not go home but should stay for my three years. He said that Gendun had not realized how hard the work was for me and that I would not be expected to do it again.

ONCE INTO ITS RHYTHM there was a certainty to the monastic year. The new year fell in early spring. The time from the beginning of the third Tibetan month until the full moon of the sixth was called "crowned by debates," and contained three debate periods. The first debate period lasted fifteen days, and the monks were given two breaks called "wood-collecting days." It had once been the custom of the monasteries for the monks to go out to collect wood on these days, but now it was just

the name for the weekly holiday. On the evenings before these breaks there was a formal debate in the house that could easily go on until two or even until five in the morning. Younger monks who had nothing to debate about simply sat there while the more learned ones debated on into the night. The house guru would sometimes call out one or more of the new monks from the debate to recite a particular passage that should have been memorized, to make sure that they were studying hard. He could not, however, call out an older monk, only the very new arrivals.

The morning after an all-night formal debate, you could sleep in and miss the general assembly tea. There were no prayers scheduled in the house for that day and you could make tea in your own room. The monks would also prepare a better meal and have a special time. This meant that of the fifteen days, there were two days when you had a good meal. On the wood-collecting day you could also go outside the boundaries of the monasteries to wash and take it easy, arriving back in the monastery in the evening after a pleasant day off. New students did not have to sit for their evening recitation on that day, so they always carried around in their minds that it was so many days until the next wood-collecting day, though the day was not on a calendar and could be put off for a while or brought up a few days earlier. The second debate lasted twenty days (this was during the fourth Tibetan month) and there were three wood-collecting days. The final debate lasted for a month, and had four wood-collecting days.

After the period called "crowned by debates," a long summer retreat took place that lasted from the full moon of the sixth month to the new moon of the eighth. Most Loseling monks, particularly the studious ones, would go to live in caves during this period. At Sera this custom was not so widespread. Drepung Gomang monks would find themselves a room to live in around the monastic complex and study there. At Ganden, individual monks had particular households who sponsored their study breaks. The monks would go off to those different households to do their study and they would receive alms from the sponsors. If the monk was diligent, the sponsors would send them back from the break with food and coins, and when it came time to become a geshey the sponsors would often meet their expenses.

The summer break (called the "rains retreat" in India) was a time when monks had to remain in one place, so from that point of view our retreat in the caves was not right because we would always have

to wander about to find wood to make our tea. The general Drepung governing body sometimes banned monks from going up into the mountain caves for the long study retreats because of this. But it had become a tradition in many of the houses of Loseling, so the general governing body usually did not insist on having its way in this matter. The monks who went up to the caves did not take the summer rains retreat vows to keep within strict boundaries. They treated their study as even more important, at this point, than keeping the formal *vinaya* rules of the summer rains retreat, and missed the latter in order to do the former more fully.

During the winter, when the weather got too cold, the monks returned to the monastery, though some would stay on even until the end of the eighth month, missing the first month of autumn debate. A few hardy souls would return to study in the caves as early as the study break in the third Tibetan month, and by the ten-day break in the fourth month many were studying there.

After the end of the summer retreat a long uninterrupted debate period of two months would begin, with only a fifteen-day break. During this time the new monks would arrive, often bringing letters that had been sent from one's homeland. If you had letters to send back, it was during these times that you would write and send them. So it was not a time for deep study. There were relatives and people from home to talk to and traders to contact before they left Lhasa to return to Kham.

The study year ended with a winter debate called the Jamyang Gun-cho. It took place in a special debate ground not far from Lhasa where all three monasteries had buildings. The monks stayed there for about six weeks studying and debating the topics in Dharmakirti's *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. They returned to their home monasteries just before new year and then came together again to participate in a number of prayer festivals, the most important being the Monlam Chen-mo, which began in Lhasa on the fifth day of the new year and lasted until nearly the end of the first month.

DURING MY FIRST SUMMER RETREAT my guru, Gendun, was attending a series of teachings and we younger monks were sent to the caves to attend to our memorization and study. One day about halfway through the study period, I came down to get some things from my room and I had to find my guru to get the key from him. I found him in the

assembly hall just as the lama was beginning the teaching. The lama had on the yellow hat of Tsong-khapa and was putting a text to the top of his head in reverence. I had never seen anything like that before in my life and was filled with wonder. I must learn from this man, I thought, I must have the opportunity to listen to him teach. I asked who the solemn and imposing lama was and learned he was the Khyab-chi Shudrub Rinpoche, from Litang. I went back to the caves full of enthusiasm and was able to memorize nearly the whole of the root text on Perfect Wisdom at that time.

Towards the end of this first summer retreat I fell sick. There was some sort of epidemic going around the three monasteries in those days and I must have caught it. I was in bed for the best part of two months, with no one to look after me. It was not the custom to take solicitous care of the sick as it is nowadays. One day I was visited by the *gendag*, a special monitor who made sure that monks were attending to their memorization. He had been wondering where I was, he said, because before I had been working so hard but then had been absent. When he saw me there sick without anyone looking after me he said it was not right. "I wonder if your teacher is looking after you as he should be," he said. "I will have a few words with him."

SOME OF THE MONKS were quite wealthy and lived well; some were as poor as mice. But there was a certain honor given to the very poor who still attempted to study. The teachers took a particular pleasure in the presence of such people and it was not long before they were given gifts and help. The house gurus in particular would treat them kindly, holding them up as examples to others, saying that they put their study even before their food. Even the abbots would get to know about a poor monk who was trying and would send down a little gift and inquire to make sure he was supported. So poverty in a monk was never the cause of his being looked down on; it was always a cause of being given greater respect in the monastery. This was one of the unique features of monastic life.

If a monk kept strongly to his studies he would often find himself very poor in worldly terms. In this sense it was built into the course of religious study that a monk would find that he would have to put his spiritual life ahead of even his own well-being, and to that extent would have to find a deeper faith to go ahead. But it was also built in that the monk who indeed found such a faith and inspiration within himself

was never a peripheral figure in the monastery, but was rather the very central and most sustaining force within it. If a monk gave up even having enough to eat in order to be able to pursue the spiritual life, as he went further and further the respect accorded to him would grow and grow until his commitment and struggle became the cause of attaining the very greatest status in the monastery.

THE MONASTIC YEAR AT DREPUNG LOSELING IN 1945

Days and months listed below are according to the Tibetan lunar calendar, which begins in late winter or very early spring.

- 1/1 - 1/4 New year celebration (*Losar*)
- 1/5 - 1/25 Big prayer festival (*Monlam chen-mo*)
- 1/26 - 1/30 Five-day study break (*Cho-tsham*)
- 2/1 - 2/15 Monastery debate (*Tratsang chodra*)
- 2/16 - 2/20 Five-day study break
- 2/21 - 2/30 Small prayer festival (*Tshogcho*). The last day of this was called *tshogcho sertreng suwang*, when all the valuables of the main temple were taken out in procession and big dances were held in front of the Potala.
- 3/1 - 3/30 Study break and the great spring debate session (*Che-cho chen-mo*).
- 4/1 - 4/10 Ten-day study break
- 4/11 - 4/30 Fourth month long debate
- 5/1 - 5/15 Fifteen-day study break
- 5/16 - 6/15 Summer month-long debate
- 6/15 - 8/1 Summer retreat in caves (*Cho-tsham chen mo*)
- 8/1 - 9/1 Autumn month-long debate (*Tong-cho chen-mo*)
- 9/1 - 9/15 Fifteen-day study break
- 9/16 - 9/30 Debate
- 10/1 - 10/15 Fifteen-day study break
- 10/16 - 10/30 Debate
- 11/1 - 11/15 Study break
- 11/16 - 12/15 Winter debate of all three monasteries (*Jung gunchoe*)
- 12/22 - 12/30 Seven-day prayer festival for all monks of Drepung (*Jamzhung chen-mo*). After this ended, it was the new year's holiday.

DREPUNG MONASTERY

Young monks arrive in Lhasa from their home monasteries in late fall, in the eighth Tibetan month. The first thing they do after settling in is to begin studying *Du-dra* (Collected Topics). Some studied this for one year, some for one and a half years and some for two years. There was no specific time for this early part of the course. Halfway through this course of study, after the end of the prayer festival, the student had to take an oral examination. After this was successfully completed he could go on to the Perfect Wisdom class that began in the second month, after the end of the Monlam Chen-mo prayer festival. Because of this, since new monks from Kham arrived in Lhasa in late summer, it was possible that some students would begin to study Perfect Wisdom after just half a year of Collected Topics. The Perfect Wisdom course was a six year one. The course was divided up into parts—there was a tradition of what was studied during each year and there were particular topics which had to be dealt with. The teaching would be structured to convey the essentials of particular topics. In the first two years there were less topics but the amount of debate about them was more. In the third and fourth years there were more topics but it was not absolutely necessary for every topic to be fully covered if there was not enough time. It would often be that some of the crucial topics were taught over again to make sure that the essence of the topic was indeed conveyed to the student. If a student, for whatever reason, missed some topics of an earlier year, there was no provision for repeating them. One just missed that part and picked up with a gap.

The first year of Perfect Wisdom was known by the topic of the Three Bodies of the Buddha, and the year following that the new monk would be introduced to Definitive and Interpretative Statements. Students would prepare for this by memorizing Tsong-khapa's *Speech of Gold*. When a monk was doing this topic it was not absolutely necessary that he get taught Tsong-khapa's book, but if one had the time and fortune to do so, it would be considered a full and excellent teaching. Similarly, when one was doing the topic of Bodhichitta, which gave its name to the third year, it was not necessary that the relevant sections of Tsong-khapa's *Great Exposition of the Path* be consulted, but if they were included, it would be considered full and excellent. The basic text used was the monastic *yik-cha*, or textbook, through which the essence of the topic would be conveyed. Going beyond that was better, but not necessary.

What one's guru was trying to get across was the essential point of a topic. The full text, the different chapters in it, the sentences and what each meant or did not mean were not the focus. The simple transmission of a part of a text through having heard it read aloud was not considered particularly helpful or important either. Once the essentials of a topic were explained, the different ramifications of the point of that topic had to be explored through debate.

The community of learned monks did not rate so highly the person who was able to set out in full the divisions of an argument or the exact way that a particular author went through it. The scholar-monk most highly regarded was the one who had grasped the deeper implications of a topic and could explore those implications in a structured debate without feeling lost when moving away from the specifics of a particular presentation. There were scholars in the community of monks who were great at book learning, who would be able to skate all over the surface of a number of sacred texts and who had the ability to recite from memory large pieces of them. But if they could not, in a debate, leave the surface of the text to explore with confidence some of the deeper ramifications of a particular argument, they were not rated amongst the finest. They were called "uncle parrots" for their ability to recall what they had heard without having plumbed the meaning of it.

The finest of all, beyond even the ranks of competition, was the rare monk who was blessed both with the ability to recall from memory passages from sacred texts and to move with ease through the depths of arguments that teased out the implications and deeper meanings.

If one had to be sacrificed, though, it was considered better to lack the ability to quote from memory passages of the sacred texts. The monk who could bring out the essential meaning quickly and keep it in focus for the other participants to consider, coming at it from a number of angles, was the object of great admiration. The point is, of course, that he was talking about something real, and reality has a pull of its own. People naturally prick up their ears when they hear a debate or conversation that is coursing in reality, in the way things are from one's own experience or intuition. Such a person is always admired even if in the end he is defeated with a number of carefully constructed arguments. Even the fact that the particular position that such a person has attempted to defend is demonstrated to be untenable in the final analysis is not considered so important if, in his attempt to defend it, he demonstrated an ability to penetrate to the essence and to retain it in his mind and allow exploration of it. Those who are capable of debate, who are intellectually gifted, will not reject such a person as an interesting and valuable interlocutor even though he may well lose in debate again and again.

Monks who insisted on a close reading of what a text literally said and who were scared to venture afield into the realm of thoughts that followed naturally from an apprehension of the essence of a topic were not only not valued particularly highly but could even be hauled up by the older monks. The abbot might tell them to stop being so literal-minded and to look deeper for the meaning. Conversely, even if a debater was off a bit from what a sacred text said, still, if his debate was based on some contact with a reality which was authentic, then he would be admired, even praised for his honest attempt to find meaning. Even if he was in opposition to an accepted position of the monastic textbook, his straightforward and honest intellect would be praised. Who cared if a person was not following the party line if his position was one which opened up a view of reality? Since that was what we were drawn to, we naturally felt admiration when it became opened to us.

It was because of this search for meaning that the more important topics might be taught to a student not just once but two or three times, while there were other topics which should have been learned, but which were skipped over and not taught in any depth at all. Those less important parts might be taught in a day. One might be in a class where the teacher read quickly through fifteen or twenty pages of a text when it was not a crucial part, and then at another time one would

not get through a page even in an hour and a half. At another time one would be stuck on two lines for a day or more. The lines might occasion a whole series of investigations such that when the class next met, the teacher would be stuck right there and another whole class would be spent dealing with the ramifications, going through the argument with the responses and the counter-responses, the lines of ideas which led to dead ends or which led to greater and clearer vistas of the vast and profound. The teachers would be happy on account of such occurrences, not irritated that they were not able to go quickly on.

That is how the teaching proceeded and the student's knowledge increased. The yearly oral examinations went on, but they were not strict affairs. During the year there were also interclass debate sessions when the next higher year debated with the class below it. At such times only the more gifted of the class would debate. For the rest, particularly those who had not been studying much, it was not much more than a show, and they watched from the outside without entering into the contest. The only strict oral examinations were those that the new monks had to take in front of their house guru when they first came into the monastery. After that, at higher level, it was not strict, and how much one wanted to push oneself was a personal matter. If one had nothing to recite, nothing to be examined on orally, then nobody would come and tell you that you had to do an oral examination. If you wanted to be examined you could be examined on the amount you knew; if you did not have anything that was alright as well. Your teacher or the abbot might give the general advice that it was important to study, or might even belittle or abuse you for wasting precious time, but such advice was just that—there was never any talk of being expelled from the monastery if you did not study. If you took the advice to heart you studied; if you did not, that was your own choice.

There were quite a number of older monks who hardly ever went to teachings; they were totally out of that part of the monastery life. But again there were some amongst those who would, after a time, begin to attend classes again and begin to study more and more. On the other hand there were those who had spent their whole lives in study only to become slowly slowly more caught up in some sort of more ordinary activity, such that the time they gave to study became less and less. Over us all there was no fearful monastic authority insisting that this or that had to be done on threat of expulsion or whatever. When a monk who had studied hard began to descend into the

ordinary worldly activities of the monastery, nothing was there to stop him, though he knew that in the silence of the halls, behind his back, the other monks were remarking on how sad it was, what a waste that so-and-so had fallen to spend his time in less meaningful activity.

There were also monks in the monastery who were not gifted at study but who lived a sincere life saying their prayers, doing their recitations, and attending the assemblies with faith and devotion. They were much valued and praised for their practice and it would be said of them in conversation that though they were not gifted intellectually they were admirable, sincere in their spiritual practices, and ornaments to the community. There was another sort of monk who would be found in the classes studying but then would not be there for a few days. He would have accepted an invitation to perform a ritual in the town, for the laity. Such a person was looked down on somewhat because it was considered that he liked the ease of city life, liked being treated as someone special, and liked the good food and offerings that would come his way from having done the ritual. That is not to put them down, though. It was hard to be hungry when there was a way to get a good meal. When you were hungry, when you had been studying hard, and all you had to do was accept an invitation to do a ritual to get a good meal, then it was understandable that you would do it, but it was not something that engendered respect. The problem was that after having a taste it was hard to keep from returning to it. Once you went to do one lay ritual it tended to escalate until there was nothing else that you were doing besides that.

A SPECIAL MILESTONE was reached when a class got to the topic of Definitive and Interpretative Scripture. All of the students from the different houses who were in that class would pool their money and buy good food and have a good time during the debate period. The disciplinarian and sub-disciplinarian would turn a blind eye during these few days and let the monks enjoy themselves because they wanted the monks who studied hard to know that enjoyment was not divorced from the life they had chosen to lead. When monks were that far into Perfect Wisdom they were no longer just dabbling and had a certain status that allowed them to ask for this special dispensation from the strict discipline of the monastery.

After a year or so of Collected Topics and six years of doing as much Perfect Wisdom as one was able, one went on to the study of the Middle Way. There were only two years to this course, but when a monk had

advanced this far, everyone knew he was serious. The monks of that class would offer a meal to the general authority of the monastery, and having done so they would be allowed to carry on their shoulder the distinctive yellow hat of our order and they could wear it in the assemblies. Prior to this they were not allowed to wear their hats. Now when they went to the general assembly they no longer needed to line up outside, but with much dignity, with their hats on their shoulders, they could pass the younger monks and enter directly into the assembly and take their seats. Those who had not advanced to that stage in their monastic career had to stay outside where they recited the mantra of Tsong-khapa. The great doors into the main assembly hall would be opened wide as the older, hat-bearing monks entered. Then, after they had all entered, the doors would be closed and the newer monks, still reciting the Tsong-khapa mantra, would rush up the steps to crowd in against the door which would soon be flung open and they would all rush in. Once inside, the hat-bearing monks did not have to get up to answer the call for tea-pourers; they had passed beyond that stage. This was the case both in the general and college assemblies—those with hats did not have to pour tea.

After two years in the Middle Way class, those in Drepung Loseling passed on to five years in the study of Vinaya (Discipline). After that, they passed into the first or highest class—the fifth of the five classes. This was when one studied Abhidharma and revised the earlier work one had done, and then could finally become a geshey. There was an exception made for incarnate lamas, but it would usually take an ordinary monk twenty or even twenty-five years of study before he would be allowed to be able to enter into the ranks of the gesheys.

MY STUDIES BEGAN with the first topic in the Collected Topics, on colors, and then about five or six months after that, we moved on to the "Little Cause and Effect" chapter on the topic of karma. In the sixth month of their first full year, students have to pass an oral examination in this topic, so it is thought to be especially important. My own teacher, the young monk who helped me when he saw my guru Gendun was not teaching me, was not a particularly learned person, and was only three years above me, but he was a truly humble and spiritual being. To prepare me for this oral examination he explained to me the line from Dharmakirti's *Commentary on Valid Cognition* that says that no result will come about unless and until all the component parts of a necessary causal complex are present. I felt a great confidence in the

truth of this statement and the doctrine that lay behind it. Even while I had been in my home monastery I had great faith in cause and effect because there was a teacher there who used to tell me stories from the sutras about karma. He was a riveting storyteller and his words had a great effect on me. My belief was strengthened even more by my study of cause and effect during my first year at Drepung, and as my faith grew so did my intention to remain in the monastery studying until the end of the course. Even during my first twelve months at Drepung when life was so hard, when I was only able to study very little, I still carried within me this growing intention to stick at it, even though I always felt pulled in two directions.

My attachment to my home in Kongjo-rawa was very strong. I had an imprint so deep in my mind that even though I was moved deeply by the advice of my gurus and friends, my thoughts would keep returning to my homeland. Sometimes it was so strong I could not stop it. But just when it was nearly unbearable, the other part of me would surface and I would be filled with a desire to study even if it meant never seeing my family or homeland again. That is what happens in a mind that has become habituated to places or people—even when it is filled with faith and enthusiasm, it can be suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to see something from the past. The need can totally overpower you.

SOON AFTER I RECOVERED from my sickness, the monks began preparing to leave for the Jamyang Gun-cho winter debate. I had missed the first one since my guru Gendun had made no arrangements for me to attend, and when I asked him if I could go to this one, he said it would be stupid because I had not been studying. I got quite upset and said the reason I had not been studying was because he had not arranged for me to have a teacher. I threatened to quit, saying I was going home immediately after the next prayer festival, and I told him that since I was learning nothing I wanted to go to the debate at least to get the blessing from the place. This was a silly reason but it was enough to get my guru to let me go.

When I arrived at the winter debate I was completely lost. My guru had not arranged for me to meet a teacher, so I was alone again. Luckily there were instructors for people in my situation. There were overseers who found out which monks were without teachers and we drew lots to decide where we should go. My lot fell to Gen Yaro, perhaps the most famous teacher at the gathering. There were about ten or

twelve other students already with him, and he taught logic. I entered the class with another monk, but neither of us could understand any of the teaching. I think someone must have told Gen Yaro because after a few days he said that we should come separately and we did. Even with his help I still couldn't do the rudimentary memorization, nor was I capable of understanding even the most basic things, so Gen Yaro said to me that I should not go to any of the debating sessions or to the recitations. He told me just to go to the prayer and during the rest of the time to make prostrations. I followed his instructions, and was very happy to do so.

For the whole time that the debate was going on I prostrated fervently. After a short while, I starting receiving personal instruction from Gen Yaro again and I began to get the hang of it. I started going to the debates. I improved so quickly that by the end of that winter debate I was better than the new monks who had come to the debates the year earlier. I was pleased with myself and my teacher was also very pleasantly surprised that I was so good after such an inauspicious start.

For the first time I began to feel that it was possible for me to study and be successful at it. About a month of the debate had passed by this time. During the two weeks left the debate slackened off as we began to memorize the things that we would have to know when we arrived back at our colleges. We met in groups where we would do recitations and have more general discussions. One day Gen Yaro told me to go out and lead the discussion. When I first got to the class I had been so stupid that the other students had been talking about me, but now Gen Yaro wanted to use me as an example for the others. Most of the other monks participated in the session I was leading, but three of the best students from before did not join in. Gen Yaro berated them: "Just a month ago you were saying how stupid he was, how he could not understand anything. It was you who were way out in front, but you have been lazy while Lobsang Gyatso here has been working as hard as he can. Now it is you who are lagging behind and he has overtaken you!" I got quite puffed up over all this success and towards the very end of the winter debate I began to be unable to understand as well as I had earlier.

At the end of the Jamyang Gun-cho there was the main debate when everybody had to get up and show their skills. I did quite well. Some of the others were limited to just reciting aloud bits of memorization but I was able to utilize some of the more basic principles of pervasion

and logic to demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of the topics. My memorization also went off excellently so the whole event was, for me, a great success.

When I got back to Drepung, Gendun said that I had done well and that I should give up my plan to go back home after the new year's prayer festivals. There was an extra thirteenth month in the calendar that year (you get an extra month now and then because ours is a lunar calendar) and during that month Gendun said I should start learning Perfect Wisdom and he taught me some basics. One day when I was in his room he started debating with me on some logic and I was quite good in my answers. He was obviously pleased and said to me that I was intelligent and showing promise, but that I was getting too conceited and arrogant. He told me that as one studied one should never allow arrogance or conceit to come in. Actually I was not so conceited, but Gendun's other main student was jealous of me because he was not catching on as quickly, and he had told Gendun that I was becoming very conceited and arrogant. So Gendun really laid into me and said I was getting unbearable. It was true that I was a bit full of myself in the sense that I thought I was from a good background and had an ample share of talent, but I did not feel I had done anything to make people consider me arrogant. But what could I do? He filled up a valley with his scolding and I had to listen to all of it.

ON THE FIFTH DAY of the new year many of the monks go to see the famous Sera *ton-je*, a huge figure of the Buddha that is put on display. I was still considering going home after the prayer festivals so I thought it would be a good idea to get the blessing of the *ton-je* before leaving. I asked my guru if I could go, and having received permission I set off with a few other monks. Until we passed beyond the fence of the monastery grounds we wore our clothes properly, but once we got outside the fence we all changed our clothes into the fighting monks' style, hiking up our lower garments and slinging our upper garments in a rakish way above our shoulders. All the fighting monks wore a red rope bracelet on their upper arm, around the muscle, and we got out ours to wear. I do not know why, but I had quite an idea of myself as a fighting monk, it held out quite an aura to me.

When we got to Sera I stayed with the monk Phuntsog, my traveling companion from my trip to Lhasa. After a day or so we got talking and he asked me why I was wearing my clothes like a fighting monk. "You went to the winter debate," he said. "You have been studying. It

is not right to go around like that. You should be thinking of studying as hard as you can." He gave me a long lecture on how it was wrong to go around as a fighting monk and about how important it was to study. Because of that I put my lower robe down properly and for the rest of the time I dressed and acted like a proper monk.

While I was there the Sera monks from Kongjo-rawa all got together and said I had to sit *damcha*, to be the main respondent in a debate. I refused. They said I had to do it—wasn't I the young monk who was the star of the general winter debate? They came after me in a group, and sort of as a joke, but also to show off their learning at my expense, they lifted me up bodily and took me to the debate ground. They had a low throne there but I could not sit on it; I felt totally inadequate to be on a throne. Then one of them started debating and asked me the definition of a valid reason. I said, "Something that is the three modes." Now, in Sera Monastery they say, "something that meets the requirements of the three modes," so when I gave my different answer they were totally perplexed. Since they were new they had never heard of such a definition and were dumbfounded. After a little while one of the older monks came to say that I had done well. He said that it was an auspicious beginning to things and said that I did not need to sit to answer anymore. He praised me very much.

I began to think that I would have to learn Buddhism well, otherwise there was a real danger that I would lose face. I had been carried bodily into the debate ground and even though I had been able to acquit myself with credit, it was really just luck on my part. If it happened to me again then I would be stuck out there on my own unable to answer and everyone would take me for a fool. I remembered what my Red Uncle had said to me time and again about the importance of studying, and I thought about how many other people had told me the same. For the first time I really began to get a strong urge to study, and to study hard and long enough to be able to acquit myself with dignity and to feel pride in the presence of my mentors and countrymen.

I WENT DOWN TO LHASA to attend the prayer festival and continued with my memorization and study of the scriptures. Many people urged me to keep on with my study and gave me advice about its importance and not giving up. Many monks were very solicitous and kind to me. On the fifteenth day of the prayer festival I was wandering about and came across some booksellers. I picked up a little book—I think it must have been a book about the practices of Bodhisattvas—

and bought it. A bit later, when I was going through it, I came across a passage that grabbed my attention. It said, "One's native place is the prison of the demon Mara and one's parents are the snare that he uses to get one inside." How strange, I thought, to say of one's mother and father, who are the very kindest of all people, that they are the snare of Mara. It does not seem quite right. Then some time later, when I was back in the monastery and the debate sessions were underway again, I asked Gen Yaro what the verse meant. He had become my teacher and was gentle as he gave me a complete explanation. "It is like this," he said. "If one does not stick to one's attempt to train in the higher spiritual life but leaves the monastery and returns to one's native place, it is as though one is being dragged back by a demon, in the form of attachment to one's parents, to a life that, without higher understandings, is but a prison. There one has to attend to all the work around the house and in the fields and one has to become involved with all the hates and needs of the house-owner. What is this," he asked, "but a prison? There are so many things that have to be done to run a house properly; there are so many things that are never quite right, that require attention and take one away from one's higher training. One's love becomes restricted to a family circle and those outside are no longer important, taking away one's possibility for higher spiritual life. As for the way in which one's parents are the demon's snare, it is because they are always sending you letters to come home—they are always saying they miss you so much, telling you that you have studied enough and that you should come back home. It is in no way saying that one's parents are not the kindest of all; it is not denying that one has a great responsibility towards them. But their letters and concerns slowly build up to cause you to leave the spiritual life and go home, like a snare around the neck of a person being led off to jail."

Then he said that in my case only my mother was left at home, my father having already passed away, and she, bless her, was a simple soul and unable to lead me along a spiritual path. It was my older sister who continually wrote to say that I should come back. "It is those letters," he said, "like that one you got from your sister a short while back, and that you showed to me, telling you to come home. There it is! The demon's snare dragging you back to your homeland where you will become nonvirtuous and suffer in the jail of cyclic existence." Gen Yaro then leaned over towards me and asked me why I had such a feeling of homesickness. "Think about it deeply," he said, "and then come and tell me what you have found. And think about

the meaning of the two lines: is your native place a jail? Are letters from your relations the snares of Mara or not? If you think about this you will feel in your heart the meaning of these two lines."

So I thought about it. "Just what is it exactly that is so attractive in my homeland that exerts such a pull?" I asked myself. "If I leave here and decide to live in my monastery back home what will happen? The first five years I will have my head stuck in memorizing the monastery's different rituals and chants and prayers. My world will revolve around that. Then there are the different responsibilities that get apportioned out. I will have to do those. And on top of this I will have responsibilities to my ancestral lands and family members which I cannot escape. If the country was attacked, as a monk of Dondupling I would have a responsibility to mount a defence and would have to carry arms." I began to feel strongly that there was no way to be a monk, as a monk was expected to be, unless I stayed in Drepung, and that if I went back to my homeland any possibility of being a decent monk would be lost forever. This opportunity provided to me by my life—that I could truly be a fine monk—there was no doubt, I felt, if I went back home it would be irrevocably wasted. "Apart from not wanting to be separated from my kinfolk, what else is operating within me?" I asked myself. The advice of that old man who killed the chicken began to ring in my ears, as it had once before on the journey up to Lhasa, and with it came the thought of him coming up to me and spitting in my face out of disgust. It began to sound like precious advice, and I thought that I simply had to continue studying—there was no other proper path for me to follow.

After five or six days I was with Gen Yaro again and he asked me what I had been thinking. "I have been thinking," I said, "that if I go home there is nothing there for me. So I do not want to go home, but I see the hardship involved in staying and that is a little bit frightening." My teacher was pleased and encouraged me with the story of Milarepa, reading from his biography. "Look how he struggled, living just on the first leaves of the nettle bush and making such an effort that in a single lifetime he reached the stage of enlightenment itself. Compare your food with his—your situation is not that bad at all. I am not saying you will get enlightened, but I am saying that if you keep trying you will gain a great result. Your Red Uncle is urging you to keep at your studies and not return. He has studied and knows about virtue and nonvirtue in the deeper sense of the words, something that the other members of your family do not know, so you should pay heed to his advice should you not? The advice of those who are

ignorant of virtue and nonvirtue should not have more influence over you than the advice of those who know what virtue and nonvirtue entail." I then told him what the old man had said to me before I left and he said I was lucky to get such advice—it was precious oral instruction itself. "As for your ability to learn," he said, "do not worry about it. You will do all right. It will be difficult but you will be able to bear it. If you really get into any problem with money and food, come and tell me and I will try to help you as much as I can."

WHEN I GOT TO THE important section in the first year of Perfect Wisdom where it says that things are neither one nor many, I went to Pangon Rinpoche and asked him to teach me. He accepted and during that time my interest in the ultimate meaning was sparked and I began to reflect on emptiness. Of course I had not even heard the profound middle-way philosophy at this time (that would come more than five years later), but the idea that something is real only insofar as it is given reality because of looking the way it does made a strong impact on me. I would sit reflecting and meditating on the truth of it.

One day Gen Yaro told me that if I wanted to complete the whole course of study and become a geshey then I should begin showing respect to those who wore the tattered clothes of the fully ordained monk. In Loseling we had the custom that only monks who had studied Vinaya (Discipline) could wear those clothes, and they were the only ones who could wear the *chab-ben*—the square of brocade, at the top of which is a small container for water for the monk to wash his mouth out after a meal. I took his advice to heart, and if I was sitting down and a monk wearing those tattered clothes came by I would immediately stand up and bow with respect.

NOT LONG AFTER I ARRIVED in Drepung, the young Fourteenth Dalai Lama was being introduced into the three great monasteries and there were huge preparations taking place. At this same time a problem came up between Sera Monastery and the central government, and this ended in a fight. Those who know modern Tibetan history will know all about this fight, and I will talk about it in more detail later. It happened during the small prayer festival that takes place in Lhasa at the end of the second month.

Following the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's death, Reting Rinpoche, the great reincarnate lama of Sera Jay college, had been appointed as regent of Tibet. But in 1941, after seven years in office, Reting quit mysteriously and Dalung-drak (also called Taktra Rinpoche) rose to power.

Some say that Dalung-drak was only meant to be a temporary regent, and that he and Reting Rinpoche had made a secret deal that Reting would reassume his power after three years. Regardless, the Reting household was still one of the most powerful and influential in all of Tibet, and its members were still in many of the high offices of government. As Dalung-drak's power grew, so did the conflict between his household and that of Reting. This conflict led to the arrest of Reting Rinpoche in 1947.

The Sera Jay monks were outraged by the arrest, mediation with the government failed, and the monks soon rose up in revolt. A battle followed, ending in the defeat of Sera; many monks died, and the government troops occupied Sera Jay college. During this troubled time we Drepung monks were forbidden to go down to Lhasa and were confined to the monastery. All of us were very unhappy because we felt that an attack on the monks of Sera was an attack on us and our interests as well. Since Dalung-drak was at the head of it all we had a very bad feeling about him; we were all depressed and would talk badly about him. One day Gen Yaro had heard that I had been criticizing Dalung-drak, and told me that it was wrong. He reminded me of the example of Songtsen Gampo, the religious king who was in fact an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, the god of compassion. Songtsen Gampo's work for the good of the people was beyond an ordinary person's comprehension, and sometimes what he did was hard to understand. My guru told me stories about him and also reminded me of the story of a monk at the time of the Buddha who saw everything the Buddha did as hypocritical. For seven years the works of the Buddha himself seemed to this monk to be just the deceitful actions of a devious person. "Practice the mind training that sees all of the actions of Dalung-drak as emanating from within a pure realm, without fault," he said, "and do not criticize him." So from then on I did not voice my dislike openly, but in my heart I did not like Dalung-drak at all.

It was a depressing time. After the defeat of Sera and I went down to see Chandzo Rabti and found him very dejected. He said that Dalung-drak had not been crooked, that the monks of Sera just would not listen. "It was a terrible shame that the war happened," he said. "So many monks have been ruined, their religious lives destroyed. It was Sera today," he said, "but it could just as easily be Drepung tomorrow. It seems to me that you should get out of the monastery as soon as you can, and we will both go home together. I cannot say that I am going to be able to look after you as I had promised your uncle

earlier. We should just leave. I will buy you the clothes you need for the journey back and if you want to stay in Kamda Monastery, fine, or if you want to go back and stay in Dondup-ling I can arrange that too. One way or the other you should not stay in Lhasa."

When he said this I remember I was happy, thinking that it was certain that I was going home. Chandzo Rabti had even said that I could go home on a horse if I wanted. When I went back to the monastery and told Gen Yaro he told me that he doubted such an extreme step was necessary and said I should first go to ask for a divination from Pangon Rinpoche. "There are thousands of monks in Drepung," he said, "and all of them are not despairing and leaving for home. Go see the Rinpoche."

I went off to see Pangon Rinpoche, and my guru had obviously talked to him before I got there. When I asked for permission to go he said no. I did not know how to argue, so I lied and said I was having bad dreams. "So am I," said Rinpoche, "and so what? A dream is just a dream and means nothing." Then I said, "I am having terrible trouble with my teeth and am too poor nowadays to fix them." He said I was being idiotic. "If you are having trouble with your teeth the last place on earth to be is your homeland since there are no doctors or medicine there. Better to be in Lhasa where there are people who could do something about it." I tried every avenue to get him to agree, but no matter what reason I gave he said it was stupid and there was no need to go home. I began to think that it was wrong to keep pressing so hard when a holy being like the Rinpoche was so set against my going home. I wondered what profit he saw in my staying in Drepung.

A few days afterwards I began to have some doubt about whether I should really leave. When I talked to the Rinpoche again I said that I was still very worried, because even if I did stay I would have a lot of trouble later when I became the house guru because I was not going to have enough money to do the job. Rinpoche pulled out a great big wad of money and said he had plenty, and if that was what I was worried about I should put it out of my mind because he would bankroll me through without any problem. He made signs that I could take any money that I wanted. So I left in two minds, unsure if I should go or not. Pangon Rinpoche was closely associated with Chandzo Rabti, and during this period he sent word to the Chandzo, saying not to lead me astray by telling me it was time to go home. The next time I visited Chandzo Rabti he said to me that he had been wrong to be so negative. "I was depressed about the situation at that time," he said,

"and I spoke out of turn." He told me that the Rinpoche had been speaking to him and that he should not have told me to prepare to leave. He advised me to stay and study, and said that although he was leaving town, he would leave money for me so that I would be taken care of.

Chandzo Rabti wanted to buy me a nice set of robes before he left, so he took me to the bazaar where they sell expensive woolen cloth. As a young monk I was not allowed to wear expensive wool, so even though he wanted to give me this gift, I could not accept it. But when finally we found a lower quality *yaday*, the coarser woolen cloth the poorer monks wore, the Chandzo was not happy about the quality and said there was no way he was buying that sort of rubbish. "If you want to buy it go ahead and do so," he said, "but I am not having anything to do with it." So in the end he didn't buy me anything. Then he said, as I was leaving for Drepung, "Be sure to come before I leave. I will be going soon and I have some things for you."

I felt humiliated at the way he had treated me and my pride led me to decide not to visit him again. Had I done so it would obviously have been to get a gift, and I felt that if the Chandzo really wanted to give me something he would do so whether I went or not. This was a stupid attitude on my part because he wanted to help me, but by not going when he was expecting my visit, I made him angry. He did not call me, and irritated by my silly behavior he left Lhasa without setting aside anything at all.

I always ended up poorer than expected. Because I was the nephew of the Boss of Choo-chur, a relative of Chandzo Rabti, and was known to Tra-tang labrang, everyone thought I had plenty of money. Everyone was sure I had many people looking after me, but in fact the money I brought from home and the money my Red Uncle sent to me was the only money I had.

I had a particular idea of karma—that each person should use what comes to them, but should not try to use the possessions of others. A person should not go around asking others for a share of their possessions, the things that they had come into because of the deeds that they had done in their earlier lives. My own merit gave me the right to what came my way, but it did not seem to me that I should try also to make use of other's merits. So I appreciated it if someone gave me something, but I would never ask for anything. I would write letters home telling my Red Uncle that a certain amount had arrived and thanking him, but I would not write letters asking for money, or

saying that I had such and such a need. Before I left home, my Red Uncle had told me not to allow myself to become very poor—I was going to Lhasa to study, he said, and I had to stay in decent health to do that. He said that if the money he sent did not suffice for any reason, I should go to the Chandzo and take money off him and he would pay him back. "Do not use things without awareness," he said, "but do not sink into poverty either. Look after your health." So there was money with a number of people in Lhasa but I never asked for it, and since from their side they did not make an effort to give I became quite poor.

My study guru told me the stories of the holy beings and how poor they had been, how much they had to struggle—how Sonam Dragpa, the famous teacher of Loseling, had not even proper clothes to wear when he studied, how Jamyang Shepa, the famous teacher of Gomang, had to eat the dry leftover offering cakes, and how Trehor Chupon Rinpoche had nothing but a cracked earthen pot to cook in, and how he lived on soup. Of course, he also told me again and again how Milarepa had lived in cave eating nothing but nettles which had made his skin turn green, but how, by such hard work he achieved the state of enlightenment in one life. These stories made me feel that living as a poor person was the correct way to be, and the stories gave me a great inspiration, a capacity to go on.

Sometimes, with the same low quality *tsampa* day after day, I wondered if I could go on. But at other times this would turn to enthusiasm, and remembering Gen Yaro's advice I would feel happy and confident, even without food, thinking of my good fortune.

My understanding of karma also meant that I did not feel comfortable asking others to do work that I considered to be my own. In the monastery it is common for the senior monks to give some of their work to the younger students, but I have never felt comfortable with that custom. I try to do what I am supposed to do myself. I cook my own food, I do not ask for loans, and I do not try to cash in on others' good fortune. Even in India, where at times I have faced real hardship, I have not done so. As head of a school I have sought loans sometimes for the good of the school and students, but never for a personal project. Sometimes I have seen something attractive—a radio or tape-recorder—that a friend might have in his room. It comes to my mind that it would be nice to have something like that, but I hold back from asking. That is not to say I do not feel the tug, but I never ask, and if the person offers I always say no. If someone really has decided to

give me something and has it there for me I will take it, otherwise not, because I made a sort of promise to myself back in those earlier years not to go beyond what my karma delivers to me. This is the kind of restraint that I learned in my first years in Drepung.

I STUDIED AND DEBATED HARD that year, becoming one of the best in my class. Then the Jamyang Gun-cho came around again. This was the cutoff point. Those who had decided to go home would not go to the debate and would start making preparations for departure after the Monlam Chen-mo prayer festival. I had told my teacher that I was going to stay, so even though I felt a tremendous pull to go home, I did not make any obvious preparations. Among those who had come up in the same year as me from my homeland, only one or two stayed on. All the other new monks in Phukhang house returned home.

After that winter debate, I went to my third prayer festival. I saw my friend Phuntsog from Sera, but the discipline was too strict for us to talk. Finally, on the last day of the *tsog-cho*—the smaller prayer festival that took place on the last ten days of the second month—there were not many sponsors and the discipline was more relaxed. We got together at a ceremony called the *su-wang*, and watched as all the valuables of the main temple were taken in procession around the Potala. We watched the big dances held in front of the Potala for the nobles, and Phuntsog told me that he had decided not to go home and was pleased that I had decided to stay and study as well. On this final day of the mini prayer-festival my guru had given me some extra money and some bread, so during the dances Phuntsog and I retired to a quiet place where we could talk at length. He spoke to me seriously. "We are next-door neighbors," he said. "I know your home and you know mine. We both know what is waiting for us there and we both know it is nothing but the waste of a precious opportunity. I have decided, come what may, that I am not going back and I want you to make a solemn oath to me, here and now, that you too will not return." This conversation hit me deep inside. Though Phuntsog was more gifted than I, still in years I was older than him and I should have been the one giving the advice. At Sera he had the great good fortune to find excellent house and scripture gurus. He had learned much while I was still basically ignorant. It upset me. I said that I could not make an oath but I would do everything in my power to remain and study, and I said that if I did decide to go home I would not go before coming to talk it over with him.

It was not just ordinary homesickness that made me hesitate about swearing an oath; our situations at home were different. There were many children in his family but I was the only boy in mine, and I felt more strongly the sense of responsibility that comes with that. I thought about the goats and yaks with no one to herd them, the work around the house that was my responsibility. But Phuntsog said to me that I should put all of this behind me and stop thinking about home. It was perfect advice at just the right moment.

We went back to the closing ceremonies of the *tsog-cho* and then I returned to Drepung. Later, when I went to see my guru, I spoke quite openly with him. I told him that I was in two minds. A part of me strongly wanted to stay but there was still this other part of me tugging me back home. I told him the advice Phuntsog had given to me and said that it had affected me deeply, but that in all honesty there was still a little part of me that wanted to leave and I did not know if I could hold out against it. "You can," he said. "I have no doubt that you can hold out against that need to return. You have a precious friend in Phuntsog, a man who is a real friend. Those who lead you astray are bad friends and those who lead you along a wholesome path are good ones. So rejoice in your good fortune and decide, regardless of the difficulty, that you will stay. I will look after you."

Following that crisis the thought to return home did not bother me for nearly two years. I decided that if I had some success at study I would keep at it, but if I found I was not suited to it only then would I return to Kongjo-rawa. I wrote a letter to my Red Uncle and told him my intentions.

IN THE SIXTH TIBETAN MONTH, in late summer, there is a special morning assembly of all the monks of Drepung called the *ridra* assembly. Tea is given to the whole community in the great hall of Drepung, and during the tea some of the monks have to stand up and debate in front of the whole assembly. This debate has a special name—*tsog-lang chung-wa* or "minor debate." Each monk first has to do a recitation in front of the entire assembly, then one of the monks puts questions and one gives answers. Lots are drawn to decide which of the monks have to debate on which of the various subjects. I was in my first year of studying Perfect Wisdom, and when I drew my lot it said that I would have to stand up and debate the topic of revelation and interpretation. A monk from Gomang at the same stage in his career would be debating against me.

My house was very pleased because it was considered a most auspicious event when one of the house members rose up to debate in the great hall, but I was terrified by the thought of having to stand up in the presence of nearly ten thousand monks. There was a particular line of chant that I would have to master, and while reciting it I would have to match my steps with the chant in a manner that would allow me to cover the entire distance up and down the spaces between the long rows of monks. Since it was a huge hall this was no easy matter, getting the recitation to end at exactly the same time as one finished walking up and down the rows. I spent many hours measuring the exact places where I would have to end up at the different times of the recitation in order to do it properly. As I applied myself to the preparation I found my little store of confidence evaporating, so I went to Gen Yaro and told him I did not think I was going to be able to do it—the recitation alone was as long as the Praise of Dependent Arising prayer, and my debate topic was the most difficult of all. But Gen Yaro was a truly extraordinary being and he said to me that debating in the great hall was a rare opportunity and that I should simply go there and try my best. So, armed with his confidence and advice I kept preparing for the big event.

That year, when the time arrived for the *ridra* assembly an even larger number of monks than usual were assembled for the tea. The monk from Gomang took the position of the elder and I the position of the junior so I did not have to put questions to him, I only had to do the recitation and then give answers. There was a tradition in Drepung (whether based on fact or not I do not know) that if a monk paused on the huge flagstones that marked the head of each row as he did the recitation and prayed to the goddess Saraswati as he rounded from the end of one row to the head of another, she herself would appear. I can report that Saraswati did not make herself known to me, nor for that matter did any of the other fabulous animals or mysterious personages that were said to make an appearance to the faithful. I did not see a thing. But I remember clearly that the recitation went well. The debate, however, quickly veered into whether Maitreya was a Buddha or not. Since Gomang traditionally held that he was a Buddha while my college, Loseling, held that he was not, there could be no certain resolution of this debate. My debating partner cited many scriptures to buttress his argument and I dealt with them as well as I could, but still I was left with the feeling that I did not acquit myself with great distinction.

After the assembly there was a celebration in my house. My guru had made preparations for it and had set up in his room a small throne, a large cushion, a carpet, and a monk's mat on top of the symbols of immovability, ready for my return from the assembly. The preparations were the same as those made for the arrival of a high lama and the moment I returned from the assembly I was served tea and my guru gave me a scarf. Many others, mainly the new monks, came and gave me scarfs as well. One of the most senior of all of the gesheys—probably second or third in seniority amongst all the gesheys in Drepung, a very old, bearded, tremendously imposing man called Ngaram Tenpa, sent his student to give me a scarf and a very generous gift, the equivalent of three or four hundred rupees in present day India. The student gave me this message from Geshey-la: "I think you did very well in the assembly. I do not know who you are, but from your accent I think that probably you are from Phukhang house. It has been many years now since I have had the pleasure of seeing a member of Phukhang house rise up to debate in the assembly, and I found your recitation very much a pleasure to listen to, the rise and fall of your voice perfectly appropriate. Besides, it is most auspicious, I feel, because the day is most excellent astrologically, there were many large benefactors today, the assembly was very full. I do not know who you are, beyond that you are from Phukhang, but I express my happiness to you and urge you to continue on with your study until the very end."

From then on Ngaram Tenpa was very solicitous about my career. Our house often gave him special offerings of tea, and if I was the one who took them to him, he would show himself to be particularly pleased.

AFTER MY MINOR DEBATE in the assembly passed off with success I went up to the caves for the study break. During this time I would sometimes come down from the caves to buy butter from the bowls of the senior gesheys. The gesheys sat at the head of the rows in the assemblies and were first in the line when the tea was served. Since the butter quickly rises to the top of Tibetan tea, the senior gesheys had large amounts of excess butter in their bowls so they would collect it and sell it in amounts of two or three kilos. This was not as expensive as fresh butter but was still good butter and was not dirty. When I went to buy some they would often say they were very happy that I was going up for the study session, and would add in, on top of my

purchase, a kilo or perhaps a half kilo of the leftover butter as a gift. One time I came down to buy leftover butter from Geshey Drimay. He was one of those very calm gesheys—one with long intestines, as we say—nobody could rush him. "Sit down for a while," he said, as he pottered about in his room doing one thing or another. After a little time he prepared for me some tsampa with ground cheese and butter. It was not fresh butter but I can remember the excellent taste of that bowl of tsampa he gave me even today. It is here, that ball of tsampa, clearly before my eyes right now. Today I doubt we would even eat leftover butter in tsampa, but there is a special taste to food when you are really hungry, and that tsampa was incredible. Then he said how pleased he was that I was studying hard, and that he had been in the assembly and seen my minor debate go well. "Keep at it," he said, giving me yet another dollop of butter as a gift, "I am happy to see you study." There were quite a few gesheys like that.

MY STUDIES PROGRESSED to the part of Perfect Wisdom where it says that those with sharp intellects do not believe in spiritual attainment until they see it is really possible. Their belief in the possibility comes from contemplating the fact that there is no true existence anywhere. While I was studying this I began to feel more confidence and even began to feel that I might be able to understand emptiness itself—a rather vainglorious hope. I would spend long periods when I thought that I was meditating on emptiness, though I have no idea what it was exactly that had come into my mind. One thing is for sure, the wondrous clear path of emptiness was not what I was thinking about, so I must have been just sitting there in a sort of black hole with a sense of vacuity believing that somehow that was it, the real thing, the most profound ultimate truth.

Because emptiness was not appearing to me with the clarity that I wanted I thought that it was because of the obscurations in my mind. People said that to be successful in study one had to acquire merits, and that a good way to do so was to recite the praises of the goddess Tara and to say Tsong-khapa mantras. Gen Yaro also said that, so I began from then on, for some years, to recite Tara and Tsong-khapa mantras all through the night, not undressing but just sitting there cross-legged reciting, falling off to sleep and then reciting again each time I woke until morning. I found that I was not physically able to do it for more than ten or fifteen days a month. During the other days I would take off my robes and lie down in my bedclothes in the normal

way. I think that my understanding began to bloom at that time. I became more of a renunciate, a monk unconcerned with the sort of clothes, shoes, or food I got. Sometimes I would eat tsampa with just cold water and sometimes I had only torn clothes to wear, but I had no thought for anything but the course of study. I would not take time out to go to prayers, I would not get involved in unimportant little jobs, and would try to spend every waking moment studying.

I came to have a great belief in the Svatantrika school of Buddhist philosophy, a belief I carried with me until some time later in India. It was not that I had really plumbed the depths of it, of course, but I had some idea of what the words were trying to convey, and it affected me. I would meditate with blind faith that there is no true existence anywhere.

One of the last topics in the first year of Perfect Wisdom is called Wheel of the Dharma. While studying it, the tradition was that higher classes debated with lower classes and vice versa. Classes lower than mine were not included in this debate. The older class was seated to one side and the lower class to the other. When the debate got underway it happened that the only member of our class capable of giving any answer was me. I do not remember much about it now, but I remember that they were debating and I was answering and that after the event people came up to me and said I had answered well.

In those days the debating courtyard was a ground strewn with rough and sometimes sharp gravel. I had shoes but they never fit me properly, so I would go to the debate barefoot. One of the people in my class was an incarnate lama, a student of the abbot Tsangpa Khen Rinpoche, and one time he asked his student about this classmate of his who spoke in the dialect of Sera Lawa house and wandered into the debate barefoot. "He must be from Phukhang," he said, "and he seems to be very poor because he has no shoes and his clothes are tattered. He is a thoughtful young man, he gives good and reasoned answers, he shows great promise." At that time I was also given the nickname Nag-po-pa (Blackman, or Fleabag). Some said the name was after an earlier member of our house, Geshey Nag-po-pa, who had distinguished himself as a scholar. Others said it was because my clothes and my face were so dirty, and because I never washed and was smelly.

During this period Gen Yaro would spend at least one study period a week explaining how a monk leads a sincere spiritual life. If he taught us from the scholastic texts five days a week he would teach us directly

from his experience about spiritual life on the sixth day: the correct way to read a spiritual text, the motivation one should have, the type of attitude to cultivate, as well as all the ordinary spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism. He taught us how to prostrate, how to behave in the assemblies, and he made clear with a simple faith the spiritual life that unfolds, stage by stage, for a monk. My guru had much practical spiritual advice and even when he would be teaching from the scholastic texts he would again and again relate what was being taught to our conduct and attitude. There were five or six of us studying with Gen Yaro at that time, but I was the only one with the good fortune to study with him right to the end.

When I got up in the morning I would immediately do the daily preparation practice starting with cultivating the proper motivation for the day's work ahead. When I went to the bathroom in the morning I would recite the ancient Buddhist verse that says everything created is like a morning star, a lamp, an illusion, a water bubble, a dream, a cloud, and a flash of lightning. I would snap my fingers at the end of this verse, reminding myself that nothing lasts more than an instant in the vast eternity of time. This verse goes back to the time of the historical Buddha who recited it after his meals. When going to the bathroom there was another mind training which allowed one to transform even excretion into a positive act of giving. I would recite to myself the verse which says, "By the power of this giving, may all living beings never be separated from the self-originated Buddhas, the earlier victorious ones, and may every living being be freed by this." "There are many living beings that utilize excrement," Gen Yaro used to say, "and one should not forget them, or feel they are gross or unimportant." He told us to try to train the mind even when excreting, to cultivate a noble thought and consider it a gift to those living creatures. I continued with this daily mind training up until my flight to India. Since arriving in India, though, sometimes I remember to do it and sometimes I forget.

I DID NOT EVEN take time out to brush the floor of my room I was so intent on study. I neglected even to wash my clothes. Just outside the fence of Drepung there was a hill called Digo where I sometimes went for a walk. There was water there and sometimes it struck me that it was wrong not to keep clean, so I would wash my body and clothes. During the summer picnic period the whole of Drepung would go down to the river to wash.

The strange thing is that the terrible smells you get from people who do not wash in India did not seem to be there in Tibet. Maybe it was because the climate was so much drier and colder. Here nowadays, if you went for two weeks without a bath wearing the same clothes you would stink unbearably and no one would come near you. Also, washing more often seems to be helpful to physical well-being here in India, so my habits in this regard have undergone a big change. But this fixation on having a shower again and again does not seem to be of particular value. A shower twice a week strikes me as a middle way. I really do not know how to explain why we did not stink unbearably in Tibet, because there really was not a lot of opportunity to wash.

IN THE EIGHTH OR NINTH MONTH of my first year of Perfect Wisdom, a letter arrived from my Red Uncle carried by a trader. When I went to get it I was very surprised that it contained almost no money—there were just a few three-sang coins. Since I had written to my guru to say that I was planning to stay and study, and since he knew that it was not possible for me to study unless I was supported by him, I was very confused when the trader said that there was nothing else. I went back to the college in a state of anxiety thinking that even though some people could live on the handouts from the monastery, there was no way a fellow with my appetite could do so. I began to suspect that somebody had been talking to my uncle behind my back, poisoning him against me.

In fact he was testing me. He was still not sure that I was really studying, so he had told the trader to check before giving me any money to see if I was sincerely studying or if I was just hanging around Lhasa. If I was wasting time, I was to be brought back home and under no circumstances to be given any money. After a few days of checking, the trader called me down from Drepung and gave me a big bag of money. There must have been eighty or ninety of the three-sang coins, a good amount of money in those days. He told me that my Red Uncle had told him to check on me before giving it to me, but that he had found I was studying. He said that he was personally happy to see this, and that it was what my uncle wanted more than anything else. "If you need anything," he said "just tell me, because your uncle told me to meet any need you have, if you are studying, and that he would pay me back."

I told Gendun that I had received a big pile of money, but I did not feel I had to give it all to him. He was not a person with any advice to

offer, but Gen Yaro would have advice and I wanted to listen to it. I told him what had happened and Gen Yaro said that I now had the chance to continue with my study and I should be happy about it and continue to study as hard as possible. "Stop thinking about going home," he said, "and study hard." I determined to do so from the bottom of my heart.

IN PREPARATION for the study of the interpretation of texts with divergent meanings, students began memorizing Tsong-khapa's *Speech of Gold*. I started in on this during the period when the traders arrive in Lhasa from Kham. I was with my guru in the caves to the east of Drepung, he in a little cave lower down and I tucked into a open cave with a slanting roof, hardly more than a crevice in the rock. I was memorizing at a rate of probably three or four pages a day. Then one day, when I had gone down to get some tea, a goat got made off with eight or nine pages of my text. When I got back and realized what had happened I could see the goat with the remains of the pages still in its mouth, but it was too late to retrieve them. I told my guru and he said that I should expect obstacles when studying the *Speech of Gold* because it is a very profound book.

I was able to borrow the leaves that had been destroyed and my memorization was progressing well when one day there was a loud noise outside my cave that sounded like a fall of loose earth or a rush of hail. I thought it was a prankster up above so I did not let myself get scared, but kept at my task. A bit later the noise came again, this time louder than the first and then, after that, again still louder. I wanted to see what was happening but decided not to break my memorization. A few days later I scouted around to see if I could determine what had happened, but found nothing. I went to ask my guru about it, and again he said that there would be obstacles that I would face, so I should not let myself get upset but should recite the Buddhist refuge formula again and again. He asked me if it had started me worrying. I said it had not. "That is a good sign," he told me, "so know there are obstacles but know that you can overcome them too."

After I had been up in the cave for eight or nine days I got a message that the traders from my homeland had arrived. As I headed down to Drepung, for some reason I was filled with foreboding. That night I had bad omens in my dreams. I arrived at Ludrub Rinpoche's residence but was told that my letters were in the possession of a man called Gangphag, a wonderfully radiant monk, tall and peaceful, who

had moved permanently into Lhasa to become the *chandzo* of a rinpoche. Ludrub Rinpoche's people told me to collect my mail from him, so I went off to Lhasa, feeling confused.

Gangphag was a man of great beauty to behold, and just being in his presence caused a feeling of peace. When I arrived at his residence he said to me, "Ah! You have come. Sit down for a little while and take it easy." He gave me tea, went about some work he had to do and then served me a meal. He was a man with very long intestines. Eventually he sat down across from me and said that he did not have my letters, that they actually were at Ludrub Rinpoche's residence, but they contained some unhappy news. The Rinpoche had felt that I should be told by someone I felt close to. The letter was not clear, he said, but my mother had fallen very sick and there was bad news. "Do not let it upset you," he said. "This is the nature of this ongoing stream of life, that once we are born we fall sick and die. One is to bear with this reality, to feel compassion for those caught within it." I knew then that my mother had died.

I felt a peace that my mother's death had happened while I was in Lhasa. If I had heard the news on the road home I would not have been able to pray for her and make offerings on her behalf in the central temple, and I would not have been able to approach the lamas to pray for her well-being. And even if I had been at home during the time of her death what could I have done for her? There in Lhasa I could make offerings before the three main statues—the one in the central temple, in the Ramoche temple, and in the Potala—and ask the lamas to dedicate the prayers for her benefit.

Even when I returned to Ludrub Rinpoche's residence they did not immediately give me the letters. Finally the Rinpoche's *chandzo* said that my mother had passed away. When I said, "I am glad," my response took him aback somewhat. "What do you mean, you are glad?" he asked. "My mother was a very old lady," I said, "and her dying while I am here studying in Lhasa makes it possible for me to make offerings in the very holiest of places and to approach the most spiritual of beings to pray for her. If I was at home all I could do is be with her as she died, and this is not a particularly beneficial act in the absence of the rituals and prayers. She was an old lady, and the time of her death was not far off in any case, so I do not feel I should push against that inexorable tide in human life." "What a fine way to think," he said, "an excellent way to approach this sad event." Ludrub Rinpoche then gave me the letters where the death of my mother was spelled

out clearly, and he said he was making offerings for her well-being and told me to do so as well, that money had been sent from home for this. I took the money from Rinpoche—it was a large amount—and for two or three days I did not go back to the monastery as I made all the offerings and had all the prayers properly performed. After I had finished, the death of my mother hit me strongly. She was gone now; one of the people in Kongjo-rawa who I had wanted to visit so much was no longer there.

BEFORE RETURNING to my cave I went back to Ludrub Rinpoche and he told me that he was very pleased that I was studying. There had been some discordance between us when I first came to Lhasa because I had been expected to live in his household, but had entered Drepung instead. At that time Ludrub Rinpoche had suggested to my Red Uncle that I not do the offerings required for entry into Drepung, but rather, along with a section of the new monks coming up from Kongjo-rawa, go straight into the higher tantric college, by-passing the colleges of Sera and Drepung. The chants in Dondup-ling were a mix of chants from the upper and lower tantric colleges and from Namgyal Monastery in the Potala, but they had no real sanction from a higher spiritual institution. Rinpoche had therefore thought it would be wise for some Dondup-ling monks to enter the upper tantric college to learn their rituals and chants in order to set the home monastery's ritual activity on a more certain basis.

The time when I would have entered the tantric college, if I had acted according to Ludrub Rinpoche's plan, was just as Perfect Wisdom study began. At that time I had received a letter from my Red Uncle saying that although Ludrub Rinpoche wanted a number of monks to enter the tantric college, I should not feel I had to do so if I was really able to study, and that I should find a delicate way to put it to him that I wanted to remain at Drepung. My house guru in Drepung was also of the same opinion, so when the time came I went down to ask the Rinpoche for his permission to keep studying. He was rather displeased. He said that of the monks coming up from Dondup-ling there were none performing very well, whether in study or in the tantric colleges, and he intimated that he would be washing his hands of the whole matter if it went on in this way. "As for you," he said, "you are probably living in a dream world to think you can stick at the study. It is highly unlikely it will lead to anything except a vain attempt to be an important person." However, if I went to the tantric college, he said, I would have a special status when I returned home, so I should

really consider the matter and follow his advice. I respectfully asked his permission again, and said that I would come down to him, year by year, and if my study was collapsing I would follow his wishes and enter the tantric college. He just about sneered at me, "You youngsters from Dondup-ling are not acquitting yourselves well at all, do you hear me?" Still, the Rinpoche valued study highly and would never stand in the way of someone who was really studying, so I could only apologize and say I would honestly try as hard as I could, and that if I failed in the attempt I would come down and enter the tantric college later.

That was what had passed between us a year or so earlier. So right after the death of my mother, when he told me that he was very pleased that I was studying it was a very encouraging comment. My ability to see my mother's death with detachment had impressed him. "Your study has begun to work its way into your heart, which is where it must be," he said. "I am very pleased that you are studying and on top of the money that has arrived from your home for the rites of your mother, I am including a small offering for you so that you will dedicate the merit of your wholesome work to me. I am not sure," he said, "whether I should be receiving death offerings or giving them." I did not know what the Rinpoche meant by this last gesture and wondered if it was a joke.

I then returned to my cave above Drepung and began my memorization anew. I went to see Gen Yaro and told him everything that had happened in detail. "These are the expected obstacles on your spiritual path," he said, "but I feel now they are finished. Go back to your work and try to memorize as much as you can."

After four or five days I got a message from Ludrub Rinpoche asking me to come. I went immediately and he showed me a terrible rash that was afflicting the insides of both of his thighs and asked me to swear to him that I would continue to study until the end. I did so, and he then said to me quietly but with great strength that I should try with all my heart to study the dharma. "Do not come and see me again," he said, "just remain at your books. It may be the case that this will be the last time we meet together, but I want you to stay at your study; do not feel you must come down to show your concern."

I returned to my cave yet again and told Gen Yaro all that had transpired. He said that Rinpoche had earlier given me a death offering and that probably was a sign he knew his own death was imminent. It was very likely that he would die in a few days. As he reflected on this Gen Yaro became lost in thought. Ludrub Rinpoche was a man of great

spiritual depth and learning, and that he was to pass from us filled him with a sense of sorrow. He sent me back to my cave and told me to continue work. About three days later I got the message that Rinpoche had passed away. I went down to the labrang in Lhasa and the reality of Ludrub Rinpoche's death made me deeply cold inside even while my heart felt like it was on fire. For two or three months I carried within me a feeling of great loss and emptiness.

Rinpoche's main assistant was so affected by his death that he was on the verge of distraction. He asked me to take responsibility for moving the body to the different places where it had to be taken, and for arranging the different rites. A geshey from Gangshing, a village in Kongjo-rawa, and a number of other older monks took responsibility for the Rinpoche's funeral rites. I was one of those who carried the body on a ceremonial seat to the cremation ground. We made a procession to a small mountain monastery near Drepung and laid it on a pyre, where it was given over into the flames. After the cremation, the Rinpoche's house gave the monk's robe in which the Rinpoche had been dressed for his journey to those of us who had done the last rites. This was a gesture of thanks which we greatly appreciated because though the robe was not particularly expensive, it had been next to the body of our lama and we therefore held it in the very highest esteem. After some discussion the older monks decided to let me take the garment, which was fragrant with the perfume of Rinpoche's perfect morality. I kept it for a year or so until a friend of mine who was returning to Kongjo-rawa asked me if he could take it home as a sacred object for the people to pay homage to. That is what I remember about the passing away of Ludrub Rinpoche while I was in Lhasa. I have talked about this only to give an honest idea of how important a homeland rinpoche like Ludrub Rinpoche was to us. We considered him to be in a completely different sphere of existence from our ordinary selves.

I returned to my cave to try to continue my memorization, but by the end of the year I was not able to memorize more than about fifteen pages of the *Speech of Gold*.

I REMEMBER THAT YEAR at the general winter debate I began to study the opening lines of Dharmakirti's *Commentary on Valid Cognition*. Gen Yaro gave us a long and detailed explanation of the opening lines where the author says he entertains no illusions about the people who will be interested in his work. "Ordinary people are dominated by ordinary

needs," it begins (that was me, I thought) "and do not have the intellectual capacity to understand profound texts." (Again me, I thought.) "They do not have the staying power to get to the meaning," (me again) "and they are stained with the dirt of jealousy." I did not feel jealous, but I still ended up with three of the four stains. It was a tremendous teaching that affected me deeply and inspired me to redouble my efforts. These words by Dharmakirti put across to me with great clarity that if I did not take personal responsibility for my attitudes, values, and behavior no one else could help me—not Dharmakirti or even my spiritual friends and gurus.

It is strange how much effect just a single verse of a religious text can have if it is the right time. That verse and the long commentary by my guru affected me as personal religious advice, and I feel its effect even today. At other times, if you are not in the right frame of mind, a whole text can be explained and you can understand it intellectually, but it has no power as spiritual advice—your inner life is left unmoved and the writer's intentions just pass you by. When I heard Dharmakirti's works, I saw clearly how ordinary work robs us of the opportunity for turning to a spiritual life and developing our higher talents. I saw vividly the pettiness that comes with the round of household chores, monastic rituals, and the comfortable life of the businessman monk.

Nowadays, when I hear the Dalai Lama give a discourse, the clarity of the points he makes, the correctness of what he advises, strikes me so vividly, but my inner world, now hard, is not transformed as it was then. I feel a great sense of personal dissatisfaction when I see that, even taught so well, still Buddhism does not transform my attitudes deep inside and make me the better person the Dalai Lama would have me become. Either I go to listen to the Dalai Lama too much, or I do not go enough, or my own spiritual standards have degenerated from what they were in those years. One way or the other, it leaves me with a feeling of loss.

DURING THE NEXT Jamyang Gun-cho we studied the next topic in the *Commentary on Valid Cognition*—about reasoning from results to causes: that a result directly perceived presupposes its own causal complex. I began to think deeply about the doctrine of karma and I began to see how our suffering is the result of an unwholesome inner causal complex. I saw how difficult it would be to change that unwholesome inner world of mine and its selfishness and pettiness. But I felt the truth of the doctrine of karma even stronger than before, and I stopped

talking down to others from above the reality of my own station, and misleading people for personal gain. It struck me that spiritual life was rooted in the belief in karma, that if a person did not look into it and consider it deeply, the way to peace was impossible to gain, because without some feeling for cause and effect no one could maintain the discipline of the monks and nuns, or even keep the laws of a country.

One day I had gone down to Lhasa to buy some provisions and was returning with two large packets of tea that somebody else had asked me to pick up for them. On my way back I came to the large open space called Chang-tang Lam-ka, where the roads to Sera and Drepung part. A little beyond that is a bridge we knew as "Halfway Bridge" because you were about halfway at that point. It took an hour's walk to reach this bridge from downtown Lhasa, and it was about an hour from there to Drepung. I sat down for a rest and when I went through my money I found I was left with more than I should have. I began to worry that I had not paid the full amount to the trader. I checked again and when I still came up extra I went all the way back to Lhasa and told the trader to check his sums because I had a feeling he had shortchanged himself. He checked but came up with the same figures. "But I have extra," I said. He checked again and said, "Monk, we are businesspeople. When we add up figures we make sure we never shortchange ourselves, of that you may be sure. Exactly where your extra comes from I do not know, but I can assure you that you did not cheat us." There was a woman there who said it was good of me to come all the way back. "Usually when a deal is done no one will change it, so I appreciate your attempt to be honest," she said. "But go back to Drepung now otherwise you will be late. You are going to have to be careful in the future or else you are going to lose out again and again on your business dealings." They were very pleased and gave me a gift of a ball of tea, a few pieces of fruit, and a little bit of money as well and told me to study hard. They said it was a pleasure to behold an attempt to be honest, even if it was based on a mistake.

I got home very late that night and now, as I look back on it, it seems to me a sign that my mind had been affected by the teachings on cause and effect, because to go so far back into Lhasa for just seven or eight coins was, in a certain sense, an odd thing to do. But I feel pleased that I did it because those were days of great poverty for me, and it would have been easy to simply pass over it. To treat the possessions of those more wealthy than myself as important even when I

was poor seems to me a good state of mind, because it is always easy to rationalize unwholesome acts based on the reason that one's own state in life is not as good as one would like it to be. Nowadays I know more than I did then, I have studied for many years, so I feel that the extent of my personal honesty should be even greater than it was in those years. But I wonder. Still, I look back and am pleased to think my study of karma affected my inner world and my behavior, and was not simply an intellectual exercise.

Earlier that same year, if my memory serves me well, during one of the early general assemblies not long after the *ridra* assembly, I had just come down from studying in the mountains and was dying for a good meal. We newer monks never got any butter in our tea; by the time it came to us at the ends of the rows it was nothing but black tea with salt. It came into my mind to steal some of the butter from the tea offered to the assembly.

In the assemblies it was the custom for a few of us younger monks to jump up when a bell was sounded and rush out to the kitchen to bring back the large kettles of hot butter-tea. We were called "line runners." All the runners had to go to the head of the line first and serve the elder monks. That meant there was a short time when there was a big crush of tea servers up at the head of the line. I was up there, with a full pot of hot butter-tea in my hand, and after a few minutes of serving, I ran out of the hall as though my pot had been emptied. I waited outside, watching the progress of the pouring, and when it came to where I was seated I immediately went back into the assembly hall and poured from my full pot right into my bowl, and into the bowls of the two monks to my left and right. Having emptied the pot I then went back to the kitchen where I was suddenly struck with a tremendous feeling of dread.

This little trick was not really considered to be stealing at Drepung, it was more of a misdemeanor that would warrant a sharp blow across the shoulders, but my Red Uncle had said to me again and again that I should never do it, and I could hear his words as clearly as if he were there speaking to me directly. So it was with a great feeling of dread that I re-entered the hall. The three bowls which had butter on top seemed to me to be like blazing suns amongst all the other bowls full of black tea, advertising my wrongdoing. The monk who had the specific duty of checking the rows did not notice. Had he done so he would have shouted out for all in the assembly to hear: "You thieves, stealing the butter!" and we would have been beaten on the spot. I began to

feel more and more regret for what I had done and stayed huddled under my gown. "In this assembly of monks," I thought, "there are definitely Bodhisattvas, and yet I have stolen from them." The fellows to my left and right had already added in tsampa to their bowls and were very pleased to be getting a hearty breakfast of tsampa and butter. "Drink up," they said. "What is wrong?" I told them I had a bad headache, and did not feel like drinking it. Beckoning across to the person sitting opposite me I asked if he wanted to change his black tea for my butter. "No problem at all," he said licking his lips. I mixed some tsampa with the black tea, and ate thinking of the purposelessness of traveling all the way from my homeland and working hard at study only to end up stealing butter. I made a silent commitment to myself that until I died, and in any other life that I may find myself, I would never steal anything again. I prayed from the bottom of my heart that this would come to be. This helped to lighten somewhat the feeling I had. My friends had by this time finished their delicious meal and kept nudging me to find out what was wrong.

I went back to my room still feeling depressed, and soon after I told my study guru about what I had done. His basic message was that my Red Uncle had given me good advice, and that it was good that it had come through loud and clear at that moment. But as I was telling him the whole saga, stage by stage, he could not help breaking out into laughter again and again, and clicking his tongue and saying "What an embarrassment, what an embarrassment." He asked me why I decided to steal the butter, in the first place. "I was starved," I said. "I had been up in the mountains and I was dying for a real bowl of tsampa." It could all be traced to my need for a good feed.

This incident left me with that commitment that I have carried in my heart, and the realization that those without good fortune will always do the sort of things I did in my youth. Over the years I have learned more and more, and now I think that if I were to consciously do wrong the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who fill space in all directions would feel a sadness in their hearts that I could not bear to behold.

4

CAVES OF INCREASING GOODNESS

There were a number of caves around Drepung. Some were up above the monastery to the east and some were to the west. Way off in the east, there were big cave complexes called Tema-mo and Phug-shag. Near Gonpa Ritro, high up on Tema-mo's mountain, there were some excellent caves. There was a big one there that a group of us used as a communal eating area, and a slanting one above it that I used as my personal cave. Inside the caves was a fine, absolutely dry sand; they were not damp like the caves nowadays in the foothills of India. We would each put down fresh grass on the sand in a little cave, and our bedding on top of that. Outside there were just thorn bushes, no big trees, and during the day we would go out in the mountain grass and recite and study. It was indeed a beautiful retreat, peaceful and perfectly suited to study and meditation. In the morning and evening we did recitations and memorization. Sometimes Gen Yaro would come up and he would give teachings. It was a happy time.

In the fourth month, during the ten-day break, monks would do a retreat in the caves and would return again in the fifth month for fifteen days. In the sixth month the long retreat would begin. A group of five or six of us would find ourselves caves relatively close to Drepung for the shorter study periods, but on this long retreat we went off to the more distant caves in the east. We had a large cave which served as a kitchen and storeroom, and each of us had our own smaller cave for our recitation and reflection. When I think back on it now I remember it with a sense of incredible pleasure, as though it were almost a paradise. But young monks, never satisfied, would begin thinking

wistfully about the pot boiling back home whenever a strong pang of hunger came in their stomachs. That always happens, does it not, once you begin to get hungry?

As new monks, we rarely got the good balls and rectangular bricks of tightly pressed tea that come from India and China. We usually made a drink called "the beverage of Tsong-khapa" from a small red-leaved bush that grew in the sand. If you boiled the root you got water of a deep red color and if you mixed a little of your precious real tea with it and added butter it was drinkable. It seemed tasty at the time, if a bit without body since it was nothing but the root of the plant. If you then got some real ball or brick tea, and made a full cup with that, it tasted incredibly fine. If you drink real tea daily it can never taste as good as it does when you have been in the mountains and not had a cup for weeks.

Once a week we all got together to make ourselves a slightly better meal, and would spend the afternoon enjoying it. Even hermits and yogis must eat enough each day to keep alive—not special food, but food which is healthy and simple. You know you have really dedicated your life to the study of the dharma when you give up special food and eat just enough to be able to live and study.

When we stayed in the caves close to Drepung we would go down to the assemblies given by benefactors to receive the offerings. When we stayed at Tema-mo and Phug-shag, however, it was too far to return. If there was something of great importance the monastery would send someone up to get us; otherwise we remained there without break.

Waking in the morning, one first would start a round of memorization that lasted until about eight o'clock. When five or six of us were at the caves together we took turns making morning tea, so at eight whoever was the cook clapped his hands loudly to announce that breakfast was ready. We ate together, quickly and without talking much, sometimes downing our tea and tsampa outside, or, if the weather was not good, in the larger cave. We would then return to our memorization and studies until about twelve-thirty, when we would eat together and take it easy for a time, chatting and playing jokes until about three o'clock in the afternoon. At three we would have a cup of tea and then spend the afternoon outside on our individual rock perches reciting what we had attempted to memorize so far, seeing if our ability to recall was perfect or not. Sometimes we would stay there reciting, patching up parts that we had started to forget, making a seamless flow, until ten or even eleven o'clock at night, even until the early hours of the morning. We would stay at it until we could do it no more.

GEN YARO EXPLAINED to us how poor retreat monks make water-bowl offerings. He said we should use our drinking bowl, carefully cleaning our bowls and offering water after morning tea, throwing that water away just before lunch. I had the notion that this sort of offering was not good enough and I had begun saving my money to buy a proper set of seven bowls. I was very frugal with the offerings I received in the assemblies, and saved up a nice little sum, always keeping it with me to make sure it was safe.

When I was in the caves just to the east of the monastery, I would sometimes be visited by a goat herder who would come up from Dampag, a village just beneath Drepung. Once we had talked for a long time, and when I heard the call for tea I said that I was going, and left him there alone. When I returned he had gone and I thought nothing about it.

A few days later I realized that my money was missing. My first thought was that one of the other monks was playing a joke on me. Earlier I had snuck into one of my friend's caves and hidden two of his balls of tea for a week, so I thought he had found out a way to pay me back for my nasty little joke. I watched him carefully for a day or two, but there was nothing in his demeanor to suggest that he had taken my money. I even hinted to him that I had lost some money, but there was nothing in his bearing to suggest he was hiding it. Finally I asked him directly, and he said he would never play those sorts of jokes with money. "You have definitely been robbed by that goat herder," he said. "He used to come up here everyday and for the last while we have seen nothing of him." So all that money I had so carefully hoarded up, precious little coin by precious little coin, was wiped out in moment and there was nothing I could do about it. Thinking that at the end of the day a thief may very well run off with all of one's wealth certainly lowered one's desire to build up a hoard of money.

On another occasion I was returning from Drepung and some monks told me that a mountain leopard had been resting in my cave. After staying there for a long time it had stretched and walked away amongst the thorn bushes. Some said it did not matter, and others said they would be scared if it had happened to them. Later this same leopard came in the night and sat itself outside my guru's cave some distance away. When my guru had moved about to let the leopard know he was in there, it had growled, so the next morning my guru went back down to the monastery, taking this as a bit too much danger for his liking. I stayed in retreat and the leopard returned again; it sat on the rocks above my cave and then left. After this I decided I had to go see

the oracle of the goddess Tema-mo. On hearing what I had to say, the oracle went into a trance and then communicated that the animal was a protector leopard who was there because I was going through a period of danger from thieves. The oracle said that the leopard would only come when I was away, so I should continue my study as before. "But what about my guru?" I asked. "I do not know," was the answer.

I also asked some of the older monks. They said that the mountain was the sacred dwelling of the goddess Tema-mo and that she had a special relationship with those who studied there. Sometimes retreat monks had to listen to what Tema-mo might be trying to say. "She could certainly send a leopard to ward off thieves," they said, "or she could send a leopard to rear up and scare you if you were playing about instead of studying." So all agreed it was an emanation of Tema-mo.

Another year we lived in the caves at Phug-shag. I had a nice-sized cave there. To get into it you had to bend nearly double, but once inside you could stand upright. Off in the distance Drepung was visible, shining out. When it rained a beautiful fringe of water dripped down across the low roof in front my cave. Our guru lived a little lower down than me in a bigger cave where we all came together for meals. Nearby were a number of small caves traditionally used by the monks at Phukhang house from Kongjo-rawa, some with walls built up in front and with windows. Above these was a very big cave and some smaller ones traditionally used by Nyakri house.

This part of the mountain was called Phug-shag, after a spirit of that name who inhabited it. Some said that he was the customary owner of this part of the mountain, and that he was a warrior god in the larger retinue of the goddess Tema-mo. He was extremely pleased that we were using his mountain for our study, and when everyone was hard at work a wonderfully fragrant smell of fresh beer would waft by on the breeze, a sign that the god was enjoying what we were doing. Perhaps once every two or three days you would smell it, a delightful smell just wafting by faintly on the breeze.

Once some monks had died in these caves; during very rainy weather, the stones above shifted and crushed them to death. Shortly before their death a man had appeared out of nowhere and urged them strongly to go down to the monastery, saying it was not a good time to stay. It seems they did not heed Phug-shag's warning and during the night their caves collapsed, burying them alive.

One year it rained heavily while we were in Phug-shag studying during the long summer retreat. In the middle of the night I heard the repeated thudding sound of a rock. The next morning I saw that a

very big boulder—it would have taken twenty-five strong men to lift it—had fallen down from the rocky part of the mountain where the god himself lived. It had rolled down the mountainside and lodged just in front of a cave that was big enough to sit in but not big enough to live in. I went and told Gen Yaro who said that he had heard the thudding too, and had thought it was an earthquake. The rock had headed directly towards the cave where our study guru and a few monks were sleeping, and it would probably have killed them all had it just come crashing straight down. But it had lodged up against an outcrop of rock. The strange part was that the place it should have landed, as one looked up the trajectory, was right above the big cave, but there were drag marks from that place to a place about eight or nine arm spans off to the side. It was as if it had been dragged to a place where it would not cause harm if it fell in the future. Gen Yaro said he was not able to just shrug off a danger like this and that he would have to consult the Phug-shag Oracle.

The oracle lived in a house surrounded by poplar trees at the foot of the mountain. We all went down; through the oracle the god said he could not protect us from everything when it was raining so hard, but that we had seen how he was working as hard as he could. He said that since the rain looked like it was going to continue he could not promise that he would protect us, and that we should think about going back early to Drepung. He was happy that we were studying but it was for us to decide.

It was only three or four more days until the end of the retreat period and the monks below us were staying on. For myself, I thought how my guru was always going off to gather branches, and was always doing *chöd*, the meditation where you imagine cutting yourself up and then contemplate emptiness while blowing on a thigh-bone trumpet and shaking a small drum. I remembered how the leopard had come up and been displeased. So I had this thought inside that the goddess Tema-mo was displeased with him. One day I went down alone and asked through the oracle if I was doing alright. The god said that I should rest easy, that he was very pleased with my study and that no bad would come to me. "You have smelled the beautiful fragrance of beer," he said. "That is when I come to check on you and make sure it is going well and all is safe. You should know that." And it was true, I had smelled the wonderful smell that only a meditator in a cave can smell. As I think of it now, I suspect that smell still sometimes wafts over that part of the mountain. If one day we Tibetans regain our freedom I will go back there and sit again, reciting with

faith in my heart, until I smell again that intoxicating smell on the breeze and Phug-shag comes by. I can see it now, as I often see it in my mind's eye, the beauty of that place, and I often think what it would be like to go back there in my old age to do meditation again. What a beautiful and perfect place it would be; no doors on your home, just thorn bushes in front to keep the goats out.

DURING RETREAT in the caves I did a meditation called "giving-and-taking." I had attended a long guided explanation of the Guru Puja which the Dalai Lama had given in the Norbulinka, and he had explained giving-and-taking meditation where the text says, "May all the merit and good that I have go out to others and may all their shortcomings and problems come into me." Gen Yaro, who had practiced the graduated-path system deeply, urged me to do giving-and-taking meditation and I got excellent advice from him on how to do it. Sitting in my cave I watched my breath going in and out. As it came in I imagined all the problems of others coming in and landing on my selfishness, which sank down into the vast accommodating earth leaving me patient and capable. Sometimes I imagined my selfishness in the form of an owl or a dangerous snake and imagined chasing it away. As my breath went out I imagined it carrying all my happiness, knowledge, and merit to all living beings, covering them all. At other times I imagined that as my breath went out it reached all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and made offerings to them, and that as it came back it brought with it all the capacities and knowledge of those holy beings, with all the love and compassion that is in their hearts. Sometimes my recitation and memorization would naturally turn into watching my breathing and linking it up with the idea of giving and taking. Sometimes the meditation would have great depth and intensity. I would sense a great vacuity inside and a great lightness as I let my breath go forth carrying my own good fortune, and I would sometimes feel a tremendous weight as the shortcomings of others came upon me. It left me with a special feeling of pliability and softness in my mind. "If a meditator keeps on this path," I would think, "indeed, Bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment will rise up of its own power."

I tried to persevere, but the precious thought of enlightenment did not rise up in me. At other times the meditation just receded and I forgot about doing it. I would turn my mind to it but it did not click in that special way, and I would forget about it. But as I think back on it now, during some of those giving-and-taking meditation sessions something special happened, an indication of a level of meditation, because

right down to today, even while I have a very hard edge to my personality, a pigheadedness that makes me totally impossible to influence, and so many responsibilities and the control over many people that should lead to anxiety, still I can feel detached and carefree. These moments of well-being and deep peace and the ability to just step away and not feel overwhelmed even by the most complicated responsibilities seem to me to be a splendorous wave from that giving-and-taking meditation I did so many years ago in the caves above Drepung. That meditation left me without a strong feeling of partiality to one group or another; it has left me without animosity, and has let me find a patience when some seem nasty and spiteful. I feel that my mindstream was ennobled and purified by the meditation.

I ARRIVED IN DREPUNG just as a raging debate over the practice of *chöd* was dying down. A charismatic teacher of *chöd* called Geshey Donden was the strongest proponent of that form of meditation and had made the practice widespread. He stressed this teaching so much, and attracted so many disciples, that the number of people attending the assemblies and debates in the monasteries dwindled to a very small number. One party in the monasteries said this was not right while another said it was. Denma Tonpon Rinpoche, a strong opponent, insisted there was no scriptural corroboration for the practice of *chöd* and came out totally and unequivocally against it. This led to a polarization and considerable friction. Denma Tonpon Rinpoche had Reting Rinpoche on his side, while behind Geshey Donden were a number of aristocrats who were themselves deeply involved in the practice. The government was in a quandary over what policy to follow in this matter and finally called Geshey Donden and Tonpon Rinpoche together to debate the issue, but then cancelled it at the last minute. An edict was issued that said Tonpon Rinpoche's criticisms were valid, and that the dwindling number of monks studying and attending assemblies in the monasteries was regretted, but that Tonpon Rinpoche had been intemperate in the level of criticism he had directed at the practitioners of *chöd*. The edict also criticized Geshey Donden for giving the *chöd* empowerment to so many monks and causing so many to stay away from the assemblies and debates. Thus they found fault and good in both parties to the debate and brought it to an amicable conclusion.

By the time I arrived at Drepung, Tonpon Rinpoche's view had largely carried the day. There were many monks I met who would say of another monk, "He is no good, he does the *chöd* practice." Those refraining from the practice were more in accord with government

policy, while those doing *chöd* were in an opposition though primarily a religious, not a political one. But Geshey Donden was still at Drepung and my room guru Gendun, for one, was a fervent practitioner of *chöd*. Implicit in his advice to me was that I should take the *chöd* empowerment and begin to practice.

One time Gendun said that Geshey Donden was in the Ratsa-ritro and that he was going up to get the empowerment and teaching, and that I should come along too. Foolishly I did not go. The general criticism of the practitioners of *chöd* was probably well placed—that they were doing so much of it that it was harming their studies. But that did not mean that the actual practice itself was not a valuable and excellent one when properly fit into a spiritual life. There can be no doubt that Gen Donden was a highly realized being. So I missed out on that precious opportunity. My refusal to practice *chöd* was not from thinking about it deeply and understanding a shortcoming in *chöd* practice, it was rather just a prejudice that I had allowed to creep up inside me, nourished by a faint distaste for the picture of the beggars I had seen doing the practice beside the road. Nobody said to me it would be a bad thing to do. It was just a dislike I felt for it, based on a careless way of thinking. Gen Yaro had nothing to say on the matter. Gendun was sometimes critical and would say that just dry book-learning would not make a true spiritual person; a practice like *chöd* was needed to deepen one's practice. But his words were not sharp and did not constitute a forceful attempt to make me do it. From my side, I just did not like the idea. I suppose I had a more researched understanding of scriptural Buddhism, which did not allow a strong place for a practice like *chöd*.

WHILE IN THE PHUG-SHAG CAVES doing retreat I would find a rocky outcrop to perch on and do my recitation. Below were green fields of *janma* trees, where monks came to picnic, pitching different sized tents, playing at dice and other games, and enjoying themselves. Their shouts would reach up to me, and although they were far off, the thick, creamy butter on the tops of their tea cups was right there in front of my eyes; the smells of the meat they were eating along with their bowls of tsampa came to me as if I were sitting right next to them. I could not see the paradise called nirvana that is said to come from studying and living alone in a cave in the mountains, but I could certainly see the happiness that those monks were having down there on their picnic. "If there is no nirvana," I would think, "then I am making a big mistake by living on black tea and coarse tsampa."

Then I would feel a surge of confidence and inspiration. Although I did not understand the intricacies of the path to enlightenment in those years, I was filled with the faith that if the great masters could do it, then by following in their steps I could do it too. "I can attain enlightenment and turn the wheel of the dharma," I thought. "In life after life I have experienced the pleasures of paradises that make the pleasures of a picnic insignificant but nothing is left of those experiences now. Those monks enjoying themselves down there perhaps got money for their picnic by being devious in their villages, with their minds dominated by the thought of experiencing a bit of pleasure. Perhaps they have not met the guru who ripens their interest in the dharma. Seven thousand of the monks in Drepung are not studying so I am fortunate to have entered this path."

When I went down to see Gen Yaro I told him what I had been thinking and he encouraged me and told me about the deep existential problems that exist even in the happy times of our lives. Without his guidance in those early years, I would not have been able to go on. Thinking back to my study periods on the mountains above Drepung I am filled with wonder at how much peace there was, what a feeling of spiritual purpose. The mountain was called Ge-phel, "Mountain of Increasing Goodness," by the local people, and indeed it was that. I feel inspired even today when I think about it; of all that I was able to do in my early years at Drepung, my mountain retreats stand out as most precious of all.

I FIRST STARTED TO MEMORIZE Tsong-khapa's *Speech of Gold* in my first year of Perfect Wisdom, but stopped when I had to deal with the death of my mother. I returned to the text again in my third year. In the third Tibetan month I devoted my study break to memorizing it, and again during the fifth month when my study gurus were called away to do prayers for the laity. During that time I stayed in my room in Drepung and memorized a large amount, beginning at six o'clock each morning. There were days when I memorized as many as five pages. When I had memorized about forty-five pages and was beginning to feel confident about my ability to finally learn the *Speech of Gold*, I fell sick.

This was at the very end of the study period; my study gurus had returned from the prayers and the debate period was scheduled to begin on the following day. I had decided to make a melted-butter tsampa dish with cheese—a dish similar to the scrumptious tsampa with a melted-butter crown, called *paktsa mar-gol*. I melted the butter

and poured it on the tsampa along with a bit of oil. The sickness began to creep up on me soon after I had finished eating it. For three years an epidemic had been going around the monasteries and now, three years after my first sickness, it was my turn again. I felt ice-cold inside, began shivering uncontrollably with a high fever, and fell so sick I finally collapsed and could not get up. Gen Yaro came to see me but left soon after with all my gurus to attend a teaching by Trichang Rinpoche. The person who nursed me during this terrible sickness, treating me with a kindness I can never repay, was a young student not even from my part of Tibet. We had no real bond between us, but he looked after me with incredible care.

Slowly my illness got worse. The fever was terrible and I fell into deeper and deeper sleeps. Realizing that I was descending into a sleep from which I might never awake, I rubbed chili on the end of my nose to try to keep myself alert. My nurse would hit me on the cheek to bring me back to myself and would make me get up and keep walking; sometimes he made my eyes burn with chili to keep me from slipping away into a final sleep. During this time I felt great peace inside. I noticed what was happening and it dawned on me that I was keeping my nurse from his study and I felt bad about that, but no bitterness. I got weaker until I fell into a coma-like state where I could no longer see, or hear conversation. My gurus came back from the teaching, and after seeing and talking to me they must have decided that I was finished because they made preparations for my death. By now I was totally inside my own world; I felt no discomfort and thought I was alone and that all the people who were helping me had left. Even though I was surrounded by people, I was oblivious to all of them.

Then Gen Yaro came to my bedside, lifted me up, and said the mantras of Shakyamuni Buddha and Mahakala, the wrathful form of the Compassionate Buddha. I remember recognizing that it was my guru, but it seemed as though he was far off in the distance. It came in my mind that I must be very sick and I began to think that there was a terrible smell on my body.

A power in the mind of Gen Yaro came across to me when he repeated those mantras; they revived me a little, and though I was not able to say them aloud I started repeating the mantra of Shakyamuni over and over within. I could hear my guru saying that I should pray that my terrible sickness would purify all of the karmic obscurations to my practice so that I would be able to recover and continue for the benefit of all. "Pray for all your hindrances to be gone," he said. "Pray that all the unwholesomeness you have done from time without beginning

are purified by this sickness, that by experiencing this illness all the sicknesses experienced by all the holy beings of Tibet will be ended." I could hear Gen Yaro as he gave me this advice, but when I tried to get up and see him I found that I was blind.

I dreamed repeatedly that I was walking back and forth in a field with a river in it. It was a tremendously clear dream, totally real. Two paths opened up in front of me. I tried to go down the path on the right but a huge man blocked me and I turned back. It was from that time, that part of the dream, I believe, that I finally began to slowly come back to health.

I also dreamed about Toden Lhatruk, the man in charge of taking away the dead body when someone died in Drepung. He was taking corpses off to the cemetery, and he came to me, put me on his back, and carried me off. He threw me on a pile of corpses, but all the bodies were good-looking, sleek and with fragrant smells. The corpses filled up an entire ocean, and the bodies were in flames, making an ocean of fire.

Finally somebody went to Kanjur Rinpoche in Lhasa and asked him to do a divination. He said that it was necessary to perform the *cha-sum* ritual, and agreed to do it. The butter lamps of the ceremony appeared to me (far away though they were on Kanjur Rinpoche's altar in Lhasa) as lights glimmering in the distance, and I thought I saw huge people with one, two, and three heads. From then I began to improve markedly and I began to see and hear again.

As I got better I began to walk in my sleep. I would get up in the middle of the night and walk around without knowing what I was doing. When this happened, I could not hear anyone talking to me, and I was very hard to restrain. My friends tied large ladles on the windows so that they would make a clatter and wake people up if I began to walk out of a window. One time I sleepwalked right outside and was at a ladder that led downstairs. As I started walking down they grabbed me and tried to shake me into awareness, but I slipped off again into a deep, coma-like sleep and they had to carry me bodily back to bed. For many days nothing in the outside world could get through to me.

When I was a little better, my friends told me that my eyes had been shut tightly for days; I had been aware of nothing, and they could not even make me sit upright, I would just fall back to sleep. They said that I had been unable to keep food down and that everyone thought that I was certain to die. Everybody was amazed when I started getting better, and they said I was like a spirit who had returned from the land of the dead. When Gen Yaro saw that I had gotten better he

was very happy. "You have burned up a lot of obscuration and bad karma," he said. "Now you will be able to study well." I told him about my dreams and he said that the ocean of burning corpses was a good sign that a lot of bad karma was purified. I also told him how I had heard him reciting the mantra from far away and how I had not been able to see him. My guru said that in fact he had taken my head in his hands and said the mantras right in my ear.

This disease was called *tse-pa*, and was a sleeping sickness that caused very high fever, often ending in death. In all, I was sick for about two months. After my illness another student fell sick but I nursed him for a long time and he was able to pull through. Then a third student fell sick, and though I nursed him he quickly got worse. He would toss about uncontrollably in the night, throwing off all his bedclothes. No matter how often you put them back on him, he could not bear it and would throw them off again and lie there naked. I remained with him, but people said it was a hopeless case, that he could never pull through. His eyes went red and his nose began to flatten back into his face as the signs of death began to appear. His breath became labored and I was told that I should put the special pills of death into his mouth when he breathed a long breath. I had never done this before and was uncertain about the exact moment to give him the pills. I hesitated, and the poor monk thrust out his limbs and expired. I put the pills in his mouth even though his breath had stopped, and then put him into a sitting position, crossed his legs, and sat him in a dignified posture.

I called for Toden Lhatruk, the person who took away dead bodies, and when he arrived he asked me if the monk had died in the posture in which he was sitting. I said no, that I had seated him in that more decent looking posture after he had expired. Toden Lhatruk said that this was going to be a problem. One of his jobs was to report any suspicious circumstances surrounding a death, and I had broken a strict law of the monastery which stipulated that nobody was allowed to touch a dead body until it had been inspected. He told me that he would have to go to the central monastic authorities and report that the corpse had been tampered with. I waited nervously as he inspected the body very carefully, from head to toe. "You are obviously a new monk," he said when he was done, "and you do not know the rules. I am not going to make a problem, but you should be aware of the seriousness of the matter." I was relieved, because had the central monastic authority been called in, I could have been in real trouble.

This may seem like a strange rule, but the death of a young monk was taken seriously by the central authority because it had to ensure the security of all the monks. The position at the time of death would be an important factor in deciding if a monk had died from starvation, from a room guru's total lack of concern, from abuse, or if he had actually been murdered. Only after Toden Lhatruk declared himself satisfied could the corpse be bound up and taken to the cemetery. As was the custom, the clothes the dead person was dressed in fell to Toden Lhatruk as his share of the deceased's property.

AFTER I HAD PASSED four or five prayer festivals in Lhasa the letters from my Red Uncle telling me to come home stopped. My sister had not tired of telling him that he should tell me to come back, but he began to ignore what she was saying and let me study in peace. My sister got to know that he was not passing on her messages and decided to try another route. She got somebody else to write that she had made an incense offering to our local spirits of the earth (there were three of them, called the "Three Laypersons") asking them to do whatever was necessary to get me to return. She wrote that she had prostrated herself in front of the Three Laypersons asking them to fulfill her request. Those gods were my birth gods, and I had a strong relationship with them. Just before the letter from my sister arrived telling me what she had done I remember feeling a bit uncomfortable and I remember I also had a few strange dreams, but otherwise the gods did not hurt me; they did not do anything to help me, but they also did not cause me any mischief or harm.

She worded her letter to me very strongly. "I was the one," she said, "who held your hand and taught you how to walk, who sat you up in a chair and taught you how to sit. I looked after you during the time you were a small child. Now, when both our mother and father have died and I am here looking after all the family affairs by myself, you show no concern for your family at all. You stay far away in Lhasa and show no signs of returning. I think you should be ashamed of yourself for having so little concern for your family."

The advice of my guru about impermanence and the problems of home life had their effect, and my homesickness had all but disappeared by this time, but when I read her letter I felt a stab in the heart. I was flooded with concern. Later, though, when I reread it, I saw that the reason she wanted me back was just to help with the household work. There was lots of talk about the closeness of family, how we

were one, but the real message was, "Hurry back home, will you, there is a pile of work to do here and I want you to do it." My sister, I thought, placed great importance on those few she took as family, but felt irrelevance, even dislike, for those outside that narrow circle. It was a mind governed by notions of some people being close and the rest being outside. I just read her letter and put it aside. I remembered the words that one's home is a prison and one's family Mara's snare. My closest relative—my dear sister—was tugging at me to get me back, but to what? Nothing but samsara, nothing but an unending prison. After this I never had a strong wish to return home.

A letter from my Red Uncle arrived a bit later than my sister's letter. He suspected what my sister was doing. "It is possible that your sister is causing trouble trying to make you return," he wrote. "Take no notice of her, all she wants is an extra servant around the house, and you should stay at your study if it is going well and just ignore her." He sent a large amount of money with the letter and said he was happy that I was studying and to try to stay at it.

I had to reply to my sister, of course, but was unsure how to do so, so I went to talk to Gen Yaro. He said that I must write, but that I should be very careful, so I went to a letter writer and wrote that I was not forgetful of my family and our close relationship, that I held it dear, but that I was trying to study and even hoped to become a geshey. After taking the geshey degree, I said, I would return, but until that time it would not be possible to do so. I said that I was not in the monastery to have a good time, quite the opposite; life was hard, the food was terrible, and I was living on coarse black-pea tsampa and black tea. I said that my room was dark and the mud floor was bumpy and uneven, that from the point of view of the day-to-day life I was having a terrible time but that I wanted to persevere at it in order to become a geshey. I said they probably thought I was having a fine time in Lhasa, being my own master, eating and living well, but they were wrong. I told them to ask others about the life I was living. I asked them to send me money if they could afford to, but said that I would not be writing again and again to ask for it, it was for them to decide whether it was something they wanted to do. I sent off this letter, which represented a final severing of the cord that bound me to home. From then on I got letters from home with money, but never again one urging me to return.

The trader who took my letter back told them that it was no use trying to make me return home, that I was totally set on studying and would not do so. He said that the arrogance that I was known for at

home was gone, that whereas everyone used to say that I was too arrogant and proud to succeed in the monastery, I had changed and was the most self-effacing of the monks, slinking around almost as though I was invisible. Because of this I did not get on bad terms with my family, our relationship remained as it was before, except that the insistence that I return home stopped. My Red Uncle got word of what I had written to my sister and a later wrote me a letter saying that I had written well, and I had said what needed to be said.

IN OUR HOMELAND during the eighth or ninth Tibetan month there was a particular set of rituals associated with fall that took place once the yearly harvest had been gathered. People asked high lamas what rituals should be done and then invited the monks to perform them. Sometimes the villagers would invite as many as twenty monks for a day or more of prayers, and thirty or forty villagers as well would come and have a good meal. The feasting would go on for two or even three days. To supply food for these special meals at least two dzomos that had passed beyond their best milking years would be slaughtered, and pigs as well. It was not absolutely necessary to slaughter them at that time, dried pork would be available, but it was often done and had become a custom.

I thought much about how my people slaughtered these animals because they felt they had to make prayers, and it was something I did not like. It seemed wrong to be slaughtering animals to make Buddhist prayers. I asked Gen Yaro about it and he said there were prayer rituals to the Victorious Goddess, to Tara, and to the Medicine Buddha that needed big offerings, but that required the food be strictly vegetarian. He said I should write to my people and suggest they make those rituals in the fall, rather than the rituals which required them to slaughter animals.

I wrote home to say they should make rituals based on these other deities and should avoid rituals which required feeding the monks large amounts of meat. I said that it was for my sake, that I was going to experience problems if the slaughter of the animals went on (this was a pious fiction, of course, but one that I thought might influence them). I told them that they could buy dried pork and use that in the food they offer in order to be able to serve meat, but that they should avoid the yearly slaughter.

When word of what I had written got back to my Red Guru he was very pleased. He called the family together and said, "The boy is thinking about what is virtuous. He is urging us to stop the slaughter of

animals, and indeed we will do what he is urging. "From now on," he said, "we should only serve pure food and not consider it necessary to go each year and ask the lamas what rituals are necessary in the fall." He told them to do the vegetarian rituals that I had suggested.

My Red Guru said that if the family felt it was necessary, they could do the long and complicated Torgyak ritual of throwing out the offering cake. Otherwise the family would do the long and expensive offerings to the Victorious Goddess, to Tara, or to the Medicine Buddha. He said that the slaughter would be a hindrance to my life, and also would not be good for the family. He wrote to me saying that he was very glad I had sent the letter, that he had himself thought about my idea earlier, but that he had not been able to institute a family custom of sponsoring better prayers. He said that they would be doing what I had advised, and was happy at my life and aspirations.

From then on the family's affairs went very much better, and my family was more clearly set on the path of virtue. My family members tell me that even down to today the prayers the family makes are usually the sort I recommended, that they avoid the slaughter of animals.

5

PHUKHANG HOUSE

After my first year at Drepung I went to the general winter debate—the Jamyang Gun-cho—eight years in a row, attending every year until I became house guru in 1955. When you arrived at the winter debate you spent the first two days gathering wood. The debate would then begin and if the wood did not last you would have to go collecting again, sometimes two more times. In the old days there was plenty of wood close by, but by the time I attended you had to go a very long distance, a two-day journey, traveling both ways over a high mountain pass. We young monks left at two in the morning and did not arrive at the place where there was wood until seven. A senior monk remained camped in one place, preparing tea while the rest of us went far off in all directions. There was a custom that you could only cook where a senior monk lit the fire, so it was often a very long time until you got a cup of tea.

My self-image always caused me to push myself. If I went off to collect wood or dried dung I would never return until I had an unusually large load. But on one wood-gathering expedition during my second winter debate I could not find any. I went off a great distance, descending a mountain into another valley far from where the senior monk was brewing tea. When I only found half a sack there, I set off in another direction which took me even farther away. It was one o'clock in the afternoon before I gave up, still without enough for a full sack. I had been walking for nearly twelve hours with nothing to eat or drink, and I was beginning to feel faint. Carrying my heavy sack, I

involuntarily began thinking that this was the last time I was going to do this, that after the upcoming prayer festival I would go home and leave this dog's life for good.

Some monks finally came up to help me, and after I had something to eat and drink I began to revive, but by then the other monks were getting ready to start the long journey back to the debate grounds. The senior monk asked why I had been away so long, and I told him how far I had gone. "You are still a new monk and do not know how to pace yourself," he said. "You will learn and it will get easier for you." The others had large loads of wood and dried dung, but for all my effort I only had a half-sack of dried dung. I felt like an exhausted fool.

It was the tradition for the young monks to enter the debate grounds in a single file with their wood. The strongest would lead the line and stride into camp with a huge load. I liked to picture myself at the head with a gigantic load but this time I straggled in far to the rear, totally defeated. I had such a little load that the other monks gave me a bit of their wood so that I would not lose face. An elderly monk asked me why I had nothing spectacular to show for my efforts this time and my companions told him what had happened. "You should not feel bad about that," the old monk said kindly. "To come back with a little is fine if you tried your best and you should not feel upset."

During the prayer festival that followed at the beginning of the new year after this winter debate I remember that I was seated next to a younger monk from my part of Kham, a joker who never rose to the serious side of monastic life. I was serious about study by this time and I counseled him to try to study hard. I gave him advice as best I could, but he was not interested.

Amongst the new monks the most senior were the *parsha-rawas*, the minor disciplinarians. There were two of these disciplinarians, and they were responsible for keeping new monks in order when the house guru was busy with other responsibilities. It was a position that might lead to being elected house guru after one or two years. At this time, one of the *parsha-rawas* was a monk called Tsonдру who was smart, but full of himself and his status. He never gave me any trouble because he was well disposed to monks who were trying to study, but he knew that this young monk was not serious, and he had decided to give him a good thrashing.

One evening during the prayer festival all of us young monks were in a line doing recitation. The joker monk—his name was Tangdo Shuwa—was seated near me a little down the line. We were all bent

over reciting as the *parsha-rawa* came down the line looking for Tangdo Shuwa. He had a piece of stick for meting out punishment which *parsha-rawas* did not have the right to carry. Since it was already dark and a wind was stirring up the dust, Tsonдру mistook me for Tangdo Shuwa and began to beat me. As he gave me a terrible thrashing he shouted out all the bad things that I had supposedly done: "You have been fooling around! You are not studying, you are a disgrace to Phukhang house, and you are not decent enough to be allowed amongst the monks!" He went on and on, each time with a blow more vicious than the last. As he was beating me I was frantically running through my mind, wondering what I could possibly have done to deserve it. The only thing I could think of was a piece of dried bread I had eaten in secret during a break in the afternoon part of the prayer festival when monks were supposed to fast. Otherwise, I could not think of anything that could have upset him. Then the swirling dust settled down and he saw who I was. As soon as he realized his mistake he immediately stopped and left. Gen Yaro had told me that wrongdoings are purified by enduring hardship and it was in a person's best interest to cultivate patience, so I did not feel any bitterness for the beating. I just thought that a karmic obscuration had been removed. But Tangdo Shuwa, the intended object of the beating, thought the whole incident was terribly funny and could not stop laughing at my expense. He knew that he was the one the *parsha-rawa* was after, but he had buried himself deep in his cloak. I felt embarrassed because I had been telling him to be well behaved, and yet I had ended up with a severe beating. The monk with the good advice had been thrashed, the monk he had been advising had got off free.

During the prayer festival the discipline was very strict. After the recitation ended, monks had to go straight to their rooms without talking to each other, so I did not say anything to anyone about what had happened that evening. But the older monks were furious and said that Tsonдру always tried to be so strict, but he had made a mistake himself this time, and they were going to raise the issue in the house meeting. The next day when I was giving Gendun the offerings I had received in the prayer festival, he asked me what had happened. He too said that he would lodge a complaint, but I told him I did not feel hurt and I thought that the *parsha-rawa* had made an honest mistake. The common guru of the house also came by to ask me what had happened. He said it would have to be raised up in the house assembly, that Tsonдру was devious and arrogant and it would serve everybody

well if he were upbraided publicly. I replied that I would rather let it pass. "I do not feel any bitterness, so I would rather just absorb any loss instead of making it escalate. I would prefer you do not bring it up," I said, "but if you do, just say that I see the beating as the result of my own shortcoming and that I do not want anyone else blamed for it." The common guru was pleased. "If it is not an issue with you," he said "then I will not pursue it."

Both my room guru and the common guru did, however, bring up the beating during the house assembly. They both mentioned that I wanted to drop the incident, but there were other issues to do with Tsondru, and he came in for censure. A few days later Tsondru took me aside and said he had made a mistake. "I consider you a friend," he told me, "and I was wrong to beat you. I ask you to forgive me for what I did." He also insisted that I take a ball of leftover tea-butter. I said it was absolutely unnecessary, that mistakes were always made and that I did not hold it against him, but he insisted so I came out of it with a ball of butter.

There was always bullying in the monastery, with those at a higher level causing trouble for the younger ones, but I always took bullying as my own fault and it never left me with bitterness or hatred. I am lucky to have the ability to think this way even today. You will always meet with abusive people in higher positions. It goes with life, and it is in your own interest to feel patience instead of bearing a grudge.

MY ILLNESS the previous year had prevented me from studying Definitive and Interpretative Statements as well as I had hoped, but one did not redo a particular topic, one just forged ahead. After the prayer festival I went on to the third year of Perfect Wisdom—the Bodhichitta year. It was during this year that I had something go wrong with my energy winds and the pressure in my eyes made my eyeballs swell up badly. Later on I learned it was glaucoma. I was told that the best cure was drinking melted butter, so I took the ball of butter Tsondru had given me, boiled it up and drank it. It definitely helped.

In the fall of my Bodhichitta year my studies were interrupted again. This time I had to go to the winter debate grounds to help build new rooms. This was not something one chose to do, one simply had to do it, even though it was a hindrance to study. I am a fellow with a huge appetite, but I am also someone who can work very hard. During the time we were out at the winter debate grounds building, everyone was surprised at how hard I worked.

THE FOURTH YEAR of the study of Perfect Wisdom is called Twenty Members of the Community. During this year I was finally chosen for the *tsog-lang che-wa* or "major debate." The major debate was a far more exacting test of knowledge than the minor debate that I had completed some years before. A pair of monks called the major debater and assistant debater was chosen from a number of competing candidates. The major debater and the assistant sat together to answer any questions during the series of debates that took place over a period of months that were the necessary prerequisite and led to a final grand debate at the general *ridra* assembly. The major debater had to do the recitation and direct a debate at that final assembly, while the assistant sat with him to field questions and supply answers, but did not have to do a recitation or put any questions.

There was a rush to do the major debate. All the better students of each house wanted to do it. The final decision on major debate candidates was made at the beginning of the new year by a senior monk called the *lama shung-len-pa*, and the final *ridra* assembly debate took place about six months later.

During the fifteen day, twenty day and month-long debate periods in the period called "Crowned by Debates" there were wood-collecting breaks. Each night before a wood-collecting day there was an assembly debate in each house. Senior monks listed for the geshey examination to take place during the next new year's prayer festival were first called to sit at the head of these debate sessions. If they were not available, then those younger monks who had won the competition to do the major debate would be invited to sit there. If even they were not available, the house would decide which of their own monks would sit at the head of the assembled monks to answer questions.

Listed gesheys let the different house gurus know a few days before a debate session that they were coming. If two gesheys said that they were coming at the same time to the same house they worked it out between themselves who would come first and who would come later. Younger monks doing the major debate, on the other hand, asked permission from their own house guru to sit for a debate in another house. They said that they were going to such-and-such a house on such-and-such a day and asked their house guru for permission to do so. Their house guru gave permission on condition that no geshey suddenly decided to sit there. If a geshey did decide to go, the younger monk listed for the major debate was denied permission even if he had been slotted for that date. Three days before a debate the gesheys

made their final decision. If there were no gesheys, then the major debaters' house gurus would make it definite with the other house gurus and the monks listed for the major debate would sit in the other houses as arranged. There were twenty-three houses in total and monks listed to do the major debate made the rounds of them, going to different houses on the nights before wood-gathering holidays up until the assembly in the sixth month.

Besides sitting in front of the assemblies of the twenty-three different houses, the Loseling monks listed for the major debate also had to debate in the Loseling general assembly. All the learned monks, the *lama shung-len-pa*, and the Loseling abbot attended to ensure that the debate was conducted at a high standard. There was a Loseling tradition that a monk listed for the major debate from the highest class—Abhidharma—debated only with others from his own class. Otherwise, each higher class debated with monks from the class below, so in my case, since I was in the Twenty Members of the Community class, I debated with those in the class above me doing Chapter Four of Perfect Wisdom. After the circuit of debates was finished the monks listed for the major debate presented themselves to the *lama shung-len-pa* for guidance on the final *ridra* assembly and were told the exact time that the debate was scheduled to take place.

When I first went to seek permission to do the major debate from the *lama shung-len-pa* many other monks were there with offerings asking for the opportunity to do the debate as well. The *lama shung-len-pa* said to me that I did not need to make any money offering, that if I passed an oral examination to ensure I could do a recitation he would put me forward as one of the candidates for that year. I thanked him for his kind gesture because those *shung-len-pa* lamas usually received a large amount in money offerings.

There were four of us at the oral examination, amongst whom I and a monk from Para house acquitted ourselves well. The *lama shung-len-pa* said it was up to us to decide who would be main debater and who the assistant. Still, he directed the question in the first instance to me, as a favor, so I had first refusal. I chose the position of assistant because after a monk from Para house had successfully completed a major debate he was exempted from a number of otherwise time-consuming house duties and expensive ritual offerings to the house. Since this was not the case at Phukhang house, where the major debate was highly esteemed but did not carry with it any exemptions from duties or offerings, I accepted the role of assistant and he took the role of main debater.

We were both able to acquit ourselves well in the series of house debates and at the Loseling debate, in particular, neither of us were left in the dark and we both responded clearly and to the points the debaters were making. The assembly of elder monks was pleased.

After completing the circuit of debates we presented ourselves to the *lama shung-len-pa* for guidance on the *ridra* assembly. At our meeting he told us that he was pleased with our standard of debating up to that point. He also said that if we did as well in the final assembly we would not have to make the offerings normally made to him.

So then the *ridra* assembly came around, the time of the great assembly debate when one would rise up. As the main participant, my partner had to make some substantial offerings. He had to offer a number of good meals to those monks who had supported him, and he had to give a very good meal to the *lama shung-len-pa* as well. For myself, I had no work to do at that time except eat.

In the final debate my partner from Para house did his recitation and made large offerings. The monk representing Gomang was quite famous so many Loseling monks flocked to debate with him, but since we were unknowns not many came from Gomang to debate with us. Still, people said we performed well, and when we went to thank the *lama shung-len-pa* and give him our offerings he told us he was pleased and that if the job fell to him next year he would list us for the major debate again.

PHUKHANG HOUSE had a special text some twenty or thirty pages long written by Phukhang Nag-po-pa on the more complex subdivision of Members of the Community into forty-eight. After I had been chosen for the major debate a few monks joked with me that there would be a big test to see if Phukhang's unique little book could stand up to scrutiny during the series of debates. Thinking there would be a lot of debate on this and wanting to defend the honor of my house I memorized the whole text and prepared myself fully. Unfortunately, after all that preparation there was not one person who debated on anything even remotely connected with it during the whole cycle of debates! I prepared the whole thing for nothing. Well, not quite, because right down to this day I have that section of Perfect Wisdom right at my fingertips.

During the interhouse debate sessions my arrogance sometimes got the better of me and I would tell others that they did not know what they were talking about. Gen Yaro was sometimes at those debates and when we returned to our rooms he would not berate me but would

say firmly that was not the way to act. He said that there were learned monks at the debates and to be so arrogant was inappropriate. Gen Yaro was a humble and self-effacing man and he did not like arrogance. He often told me to check on my motivation because otherwise the purpose of debating would be lost.

One time earlier during my Bodhichitta year, word got out that the class above mine, where Gen Lam-rim-pa and the class captain were good debaters, would be meeting head to head with my class. The debate was hot and furious and went excellently. I came back to my room very excited and pleased with myself and sure that Gen Yaro would be happy as well. But instead he sat withdrawn into himself and did not say anything at all. Finally he said I was a disgrace to watch, so puffed up and driven by pride. "There are holy beings at debates," he said, "people making a sincere effort at spiritual life. You seem to have lost all track of why monks go to debate." He told me to remember that the aim of debate was to pacify the mind and to be calm and at peace.

EACH DAY AFTER HOUSE PRAYERS and debate ended, the free debates would begin, continuing until eleven or twelve, even into the early hours of the morning. During the main debating season the weather was quite warm and staying out to debate was very pleasant. All three of the great monasteries had night debate, but Loseling had a particularly fine tradition in this respect. New monks had to stay close to the disciplinarian. Then, as the night wore on, debaters from higher classes would begin to drift in closer to the younger ones who were left. The disciplinarian would have left by this time and older monks would come and ask the younger monks difficult questions. We would spend hours wriggling this way and that, unable to answer. When we tried to get up and leave they would grab hold of us and keep us there until we gave a satisfactory answer. One time this had gone on for over an hour, the older monks making a total fool of me, when I had sensed that my guru Gen Yaro had come to listen. After they finally let me go my head was spinning. During the whole night I could not sleep as I replayed the debate over and over in my mind. I felt the embarrassment of not having risen to the occasion with the right answer. The next morning I went to see Gen Yaro expecting him to scold me, but instead he told me that he thought the debate had been excellent. "Your older spiritual friends, they sure stopped you last night, did they not? That is a benefit indeed, far better than the transitory pleasure of besting

an opponent in debate. To be unable to answer makes you think and gets rid of arrogance. A feeling of humility and admiration for others, a wonder at how much there is to know—these will overcome this arrogance you have," he said. "It is a good lesson." This insistence on the deeper purpose of debate and his intense dislike of arrogance were special blessings of Gen Yaro.

THE FIFTH YEAR of Perfect Wisdom is called "Concentrations and Absorptions." During my careful study of the Members of the Community I had dealt at length with concentrations and absorptions so I felt, as did quite a lot of others in my class, that it was not necessary to study this topic intensely. We thought we were armed for the interclass debates. Others warned us that there were lots of gaps in our knowledge, but I was arrogant about my capacity to answer and marched into the first of the interclass debates and made a total ass of myself. "Phukhang Nag-po-pa," they taunted, "enlighten us about this, please," and I did not even know enough to identify the topic, let alone give an intelligent answer. The abbot was enjoying my discomfort immensely and I felt like a total fool. After the debate my classmates asked me why I had not answered. "You made a fool of us," they told me. "You let down the class." What could I say? That I thought I knew it even though I had not studied? I went to my room. Gen Yaro was silent at first, but finally he said that not being able to give answers was no terrible thing if it served to overcome afflictive emotion. "It will be a good experience in the long run," he said.

Though not unbearably conceited, I was arrogant about my ability to answer. When I left a debate my thoughts would run on uncontrollably: "I should have answered like this instead of like that. I would have won if I said that...." I could not stop the continual need to come out on top—a sure sign of conceit. After this debate, though, I was unsure if I could debate at all.

From then on, when I headed out to an important debate I always asked myself why I was going, I checked my motivation and reminded myself that the purpose was to stop the nasty parts of my personality from operating, that I should not try to debate just for the sake of looking good and letting my pride bloom. Gen Yaro always stressed the silliness of being top of a class just in order to get puffed up about yourself. This incident was an excellent illustration for me of how a person who gets conceited finds that their path through life gets more and more difficult.

MY NEXT YEAR was Perfect Wisdom, Chapter Four. I studied hard and debated well until the interclass debates, even blocking Gen Lam-rim-pa with my questions and answers. But then those in power in Phukhang house felt it was necessary to make one hundred thousand Tsong-khapa statues. And once that had been decided, the long ritual prayers that went with the blessing of the statues had to be done too. There was no way out except to take up the task with joy and enthusiasm. I and some others felt we had to volunteer to make the hundred thousand Tsong-khapas and do the associated rituals too to demonstrate our wish to put the well-being of the house even before our own personal goals.

The work started off slowly but once we got into the rhythm we were churning them out so fast you would not believe it. I had a partner, Apay, and the pair of us went at it like a whirlwind: I made the balls of clay, Apay stuffed them into the mold, and a third monk cut off the extra from the mold while other monks got them out and lined them up in the sun. We felt very proud about our work; we started before six in the morning and only stopped briefly for the low quality house food that was the only payment we got for doing the work.

We made more than one hundred and twenty thousand in total, and I remember vividly to this day the terrible food the house storekeeper gave us while we were working. He did give us tsampa in the morning, but beyond that we got only watery soup with blobs of tsampa in it and soggy servings of tasteless, stringy vegetables. That storekeeper was a tightfisted one; he parted with his tea like he parted with his most prized possession. It makes me laugh, because we were livid about the food at the time but had accepted responsibility for the statues and could not get out of it. That lousy soup with those infinitesimal blobs of tsampa was so bad I can see it before me now.

After the statues were made they had to be painted and the faces had to be done. We had an excellent monk from Gomang to paint them, but he insisted I remain with him as his helper. He brought it up in the house assembly and said that it was absolutely necessary that I stay with him or else he would not do the work, so I was caught again and had to remain until the painting was finished. It all took a very long time and it meant that I was denied an opportunity to study the fourth chapter of Perfect Wisdom deeply. I got back to the classes when they were studying the Signs of Irreversibility topic. I was, however, able to go to the Jamyang Gun-cho as usual, and though I was not able to sit for the debates as I had during earlier years I still studied well. I

did the Exclusion Theory of Knowledge topic from the *Commentary on Valid Cognition* and I also did prostrations. I had made this a habit during the winter debate because of that first time when Gen Yaro had told me to go out and do them. Each time recitation period finished I would go to do prostrations, and would even miss some of the debate sessions in order to keep up with them.

A MONK WHO WAS seriously studying was certain to be appointed house guru at a certain stage of his career. There was a lottery amongst those who accepted nomination for the position and a decision was made a full year in advance. Before being appointed house guru, a monk would serve at least one term as a *parsha-rawa* (minor disciplinarian). When I was twenty-five I was appointed *parsha-rawa*. This was a difficult year for me. While my class was studying the middle way refutation of the mind-only system, I was running here and there preparing for the upcoming year, when I was expected to be house guru. With my new responsibilities, I soon found that I was no longer putting enough time into study. I sometimes found myself totally lost in a debate and without any idea of the context or subject being discussed. I was still one of the better students in my class and was good at debating about subjects that I had studied, but I had large gaps in my knowledge. I wanted to keep studying and did to some extent. I admired learning deeply, and I had no wish to involve myself in worldly life that would take me away from spiritual endeavor.

I always had a vision of myself as a geshey going home to my birthplace. Down a ways, across a stream not far from our house in Kongjorawa, was a plot of land. There were trees growing there and in the middle of them was a small house. I hoped to move there and do an extended retreat after I finished at Drepung. So you see, my vision of spiritual practice at that point was one in which I kept the best of both worlds. In my mind a spiritual endeavor went along with a life free from too many problems coming my way. I had no wish to get into the stream of the important monks who were working their way up to the high *laram* geshey and from there towards important positions in the big colleges or monasteries. That path held out no attraction for me. Gen Yaro always said that sort of vision for the future was not a good one and I should avoid it. He said I should not hope to get to a special status as a monk; rather I should focus on the real meaning of spiritual life. And that is what I felt I was doing, working towards an authentic spiritual life.

ONCE DURING my year as *parsha-rawa* I was deputed to take a group of thirty monks to Gadong Monastery, where we had to recite a hundred thousand Taras and do an entire reading of the Kangyur. Nobody wanted to go because Gadong was known to be stingy towards monks—never giving very good food and making only small offerings at the end of the day. But it was a tradition that could not be avoided, so the monks had to go and I was head disciplinarian. While the monks were doing the prayers two of them fell to fighting. One of them was young, so as *parsha-rawa* I was allowed to pull him up and punish him, but the other was older and I did not have the right to criticize him openly; I would have had to report him to a higher level of the house. Hoping to take care of the problem immediately, I made an announcement to the whole group that I would be making a full report on these two monks to the house guru when we got back, and said that they had both better watch what they were doing.

Now, at Gadong there was a monk, a student of mine, working in the kitchen and I had a good relationship with him. He, in turn, was close to the Gadong Oracle so I asked him to request the oracle to come and ask me to spare the monks. I told him how my announcement had stopped the fighting, and if the oracle asked me not to make the report, then I would have a way out of getting the monks in trouble with the house guru. My cook friend passed the message on to the oracle, saying that an intervention from him would spare the two monks a very nasty punishment. The two monks themselves were quite worried about what was in store for them once they got back to Drepung.

Soon a representative of the oracle, in full formal dress, came to address the monks. He offered a scarf to the altar and said that he was very pleased that we had come to make the prayers, which were important and of great benefit. He said that from time to time small altercations would happen, that he was sorry such an altercation had arisen here amongst the monks, and that he was particularly sorry to have heard that a report was going to be made back at the monastery. He requested that the entire unfortunate incident be resolved there at Gadong, so that it need not go further.

I pretended to consult with my assistant disciplinarian and we announced that since the request had come from the Gadong Oracle himself we had no choice but to heed his wishes. I made a strong speech to this effect, and said that in view of the changed situation the two monks should make prostrations to the altar amongst the assembled

monks and the entire matter then would be considered closed. They did so that day and on the remaining days of the prayers. The workers at Gadong did not know exactly what had transpired but just saw me stopping the fight and then having these fellows prostrate, apparently at my command; they thought that I must be a tremendously powerful monk and they began treating me with great respect. Of course they did not know that the monks were doing prostrations because of my behind-the-scenes arrangement with my friend in the kitchen.

When I got back to Drepung the house guru and other elders heard about how I had resolved the incident and were very happy. They said it was excellent that it had been contained and not grown into a bigger problem. The older monks must have decided from my success in this that I would be good at keeping discipline if I became house guru.

GENDUN, MY ROOM GURU, himself had a room guru called Gen Dulwa, and technically speaking he was the room guru of us all. Gen Dulwa was continually away on trade and business. He was a fine man with many relatives and students, and he treated me with special kindness. Every year he went on business to the Kongpo region east of Lhasa and when he arrived back in Lhasa he sent a message to the monastery telling us to send down someone to assist him. I often went to help him at those times.

Each year the rooms that were the common property of the house were allotted to monks for their living quarters. They were put into a common pool and there was a lottery to decide who would get which for the year to come. One time Gen Dulwa was away when the yearly lottery took place and when I went to see him on his return he asked me about the results. I had to say I did not have the slightest idea because I did not know I was supposed to take an active interest in such things. He said it was absurd that I had been in the monastery for years and still knew nothing about room allotment. "You are a fool," he said, scolding me in a friendly way for my ignorance of important matters. Then he told me to go to do any shopping I had to do and come back. When I returned he noticed that I was so poor I did not even have a proper belt to tie my robes and he began to warm to me. He said that it was good that I did not know who got which room. "You are sincerely trying to study, and I admire that," he said. "You do not poke your tea-spout in where a monk should not; you do not wander around asking about ordinary things which will come between

you and your study and it seems you don't frequent the rooms of the old monks, trying to learn details about inconsequential matters. You are not one of those monks who are concerned about what the important monks have said in the house meetings. You don't even know about the room lottery."

Then he pointed to my threadbare clothes and asked, "What is going on? I thought you were the nephew of the Boss of Choo-chur. Isn't he taking care of you like we thought he is?" What could I say? That I used all the money my uncle sent me on food? Gen Dulwa then gave me an old lower robe, a belt, and a big lump of butter. "You do not have to share this with Gendun," he said. "Eat it up yourself during the retreat break," he said, "and this cheese." He told me to come down before he left again for Kongpo and I said I would. Later he again gave me butter and cheese, as well as some money and said that I did not need to give any to Gendun. "Do not get too thin," he said, "or you will find yourself falling sick."

From this time on Gen Dulwa always treated me kindly. Whenever I came to his house in Lhasa he would give me a big bowl of tsampa with good butter, cheese, and sugar, and would give me pieces of butter and money to take back to the monastery. His other students and relatives continually talked about their own petty squabbles, saying that someone had done this or taken that, and Gen Dulwa did not like it. He was pleased that I did not talk about such things and would tell them, "Choo-chur-wa sits quietly and is not always complaining about others; he should be your model for how to behave with decorum." He said this to Gendun, and said that it would be better if the others acted like I did.

Gen Dulwa also told me not to be anxious about taking on the responsibility of house guru, and said that he would help me with it. He reassured me and said I would have no difficulty with the task. At about this same time I got a letter from home saying that if I wanted to be house guru to go ahead and do so, otherwise find somebody to act as a substitute and pay them the necessary fee. "Do not worry," the letter said, "whatever the expenses involved in being house guru or paying a substitute we will meet it."

In the fourth month Gen Dulwa and his students went to Tsagu to do prayers for the villagers. When he came back he fell sick. At first he was not too bad and seemed to be on the road to recovery, but then, as time went on, his sickness worsened and I was given the job of nursing him. His other relatives and students for some reason did not

offer to help. I nursed him as well as I could and he responded with trust. Sometimes I went to Lhasa twice a day, early in the morning with his urine for examination by the doctor, and then later in the day to have particular ritual prayers made.

I was so busy looking after Gen Dulwa that my study of the Middle Way began to suffer. When I went to the interclass debates, the lower-class students singled me out because I had been one of the better monks before. At first I answered their questions with clarity, but since I had not been studying I soon got tied in knots and incoherent. The abbot enjoyed my discomfort immensely. When we debated with the class above us I was again unable to answer with distinction, and was once even reduced to silence, unable to answer at all.

I was very upset at not having time to study and at my guru's relatives and students distancing themselves from him during his sickness. I thought that it was not right to abandon a sick person, that nursing him had fallen to me but that I would keep doing it even though it was affecting my study. I nursed him right through to the winter debate session. And each day I carefully set his mind at rest with an accounting of what I had spent on medicines and prayers, what I had given to his relatives, what they had purchased or arranged. Since Gen Dulwa did not show signs of recovery and the costs of medicine and prayers were escalating by the day, Gendun began to worry that his guru's money would not be enough and that he would start to go into debt because of his sickness. Most of his relatives felt that he was making too many prayers, that they were not effective and were going to bankrupt him. From my side, of course, I did whatever my guru felt was needed, without question.

Gen Dulwa's relatives wanted to separate me from him so that he would not keep giving me the money for prayers and medicine. They too were worried that he would finally die in debt and that they would have to pay back the money he owed. Gendun told me to go to the Jamyang Gun-cho, that too much of my time that year had already been spent nursing. I did as he said, but Gendun told Gen Dulwa that I was going to the debate because I was tired of nursing him. Through this double way of talking Gendun made a division between me and Gen Dulwa. So Gen Dulwa thought I was tired of him and did not feel he could ask me to stay, and I thought that he had, for some reason, taken a dislike to me. I was a fool. Since I was unsure what was going on it would have been smart to have gone right to my older guru and spoken openly with him, but I did not.

When we did finally talk briefly he said that I had looked after him for a long time so I should go to the winter debate. We decided to settle our accounts. Though he had been giving me the money for the prayers and medicines, I had also been spending my own money as we went along, without carefully separating it. When the final accounting was over I had spent much more of my own money than I realized. I was eating more than I should have been, but the final figure when all the accounts were done left me with only sixty sangs. I was shocked. You had to give forty-five sangs to the house kitchen when you arrived at the Jamyang Gun-cho, and I had to sponsor a prayer to Tara for all the Phukhang monks since I was senior *parsha-rawa* at the time. Fortunately, by taking my own supply of tsampa, eating carefully, and attending the different assemblies with different sponsors who gave out money, I was able to attend without difficulty. But when it was over I came back to the monastery penniless.

THAT YEAR the money offerings at the Jamyang Gun-cho were quite large, so some of the younger monks wanted to use their extra money to buy dried dung instead of going out to collect wood. We had already made two trips, and the monks wanted to avoid the hard work of going out a third time. This led to some friction. The *cho-togs*—the top representatives from each monastery administering the winter debate—came to ask me, as senior disciplinarian of the young monks in our house, how we felt about going out a third time. I realized that some older monks felt strongly on this matter, so even though I sympathized with my younger monks, I said that we were happy to go.

We left very early and just before arriving at the gathering grounds I led the monks in a smoke offering. Some of the monks were definitely unhappy so I told them not to lose heart, that we would change the tradition a bit and make our tea closer to where we gathered the wood. This pleased them very much. I then told the younger monks to look for dried branches, but warned them not to cut any wet ones because we were on the mountain of the god Tsirab and he would definitely be angry if he saw anyone cutting wet branches. They went up the valley in the direction of many thorn bushes and dried dung while I went down the valley to a meadow. I told the others that when they were ready to eat and drink I would be down there with the tea and food.

Unfortunately all the water was frozen solid into ice, so I had some difficulty getting water. I lit a fire and went off to cut out some blocks of ice to melt for our tea. While I was away from the fire it started to

burn out of control in the dry grass around the fireplace. By the time I got back it had already spread to the thorn bushes, which were totally dry in the winter. I should have headed down the valley, since the fire was moving up, but in my fear and confusion I ran uphill and got caught by the spreading fire. It was burning out of control to the left and right of me below, driving me up the valley. I was panic-stricken. Not only was I going to die, I thought, but the others in the valley collecting fuel were all going to die as well. I am such a fool, I thought, I have somehow offended the god Tsirab and now the entire valley is on fire.

The fire made a great roaring sound and now and then I heard the sounds of explosions. I was beside myself, and not knowing what to do I prayed to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. I prayed to them and to the Glorious Goddess for help. I then started prostrating into the four directions. I made three prostrations to the east, three to the west, and to the other two directions as well. The valley became totally clogged up with smoke and I could do nothing but squat down with my hands covering my eyes. Above me the younger monks could see the fire burning out of control. When they lost sight of me in the smoke they thought that I had perished and were shouting and crying as they came down to try to find me. I could not hear them at all.

After about fifteen minutes the smoke began to lift and I could see that the main blaze had burned itself out. There was just a little smoke lifting in patches and a few areas of fire left. The younger monks came running up to me, some of them still crying. They said that the fire had been roaring out of control and there had been the sound of explosions after which, for some reason, the fire suddenly died. The monks said they thought that it was me exploding in the fire, that I had been heated up so hot that I had exploded. They asked me what had happened and I said I did not know. I did not tell them that I had prostrated in the four directions out of helplessness, but I said that it was the blessing of the Three Jewels that the fire had gone out, that we should be thankful that they had come to our aid. We then put out the remaining bush fires, had tea, and relaxed.

In my heart I was still terrified. The fire, at its height, had spread over a kilometer and had raged totally out of control. I could still see it burning and I was sure that we had offended the god Tsirab, and that he would not easily forget. It was well known that he did not like anyone to cut any green branches, and he was even offended if local people came to cut dry wood. He had a soft spot for winter debaters, it was said, but still I felt in danger.

After we had eaten and drunk our fill we headed back. The monks had collected a lot of dung and branches and we marched smartly into the debate grounds in single file, carrying large loads. Outwardly it looked like all had gone well. Some older monks asked me if there had been any trouble and I said no. They said the crows had been cawing loudly all day and that they had been worried and had made a black tea offering to the gods because it was felt there was something not quite right. Then I told them about what had happened, how the fire went out of control and nearly killed us. I said I thought I had angered the god Tsirab.

Very early the next day I went to Tsirab's temple and made a black tea offering to him. I said openly that I was sorry for starting the fire. "I did not do it on purpose," I said. "It was an accident and please forgive me if I caused offense." I tried from the bottom of my heart to patch up the mistake I had made. And I retained amazement at the capacity of the Three Jewels to intervene. I had prayed to them fervently in the midst of that roaring blaze and somehow, just through the force of faith in them, with those explosions the fire had almost immediately gone out. I had always had faith in the Three Jewels, but from then on I came to have a special, unshakable faith that they would protect us.

DURING THIS PERIOD I got word that Gen Dulwa had suddenly died. The night before I heard of his death I dozed off in late evening next to a window and dreamed with great clarity of him coming from a distance to see me. I remember wondering in my dream how someone too sick to move could be coming. Then, suddenly, right next to the window a big, powerful, black man was looking in at me. The dream was so vivid it frightened me and I woke up with a shout. Some monks who had not gone to sleep asked what was wrong and when I told them my dream they said probably my guru had died and that the giant was some sort of harmful spirit.

The man who arrived with news of Gen Dulwa's death told me that Gendun wanted me to come back immediately, move out of his rooms, and find myself another guru. The essence of Gendun's message was that now that his guru was dead, he did not want to associate with me. The older monks said that it was improper to insist a person move out immediately on the death of an older guru, and told me to return in a few days after the end of the debate.

When the winter debates finished, it was the tradition for the monks from each house to return to the monastery in strict discipline, in lines. If a monk had students, as he neared the monastery they would come out to take his load and carry it the small distance back. It was an impressive ceremony. But as I arrived at Drepung, while the others were surrounded by younger monks eager to help them, I had nobody. It was very embarrassing and it was not until I was inside the walls of Drepung and had nearly arrived at my room that an acquaintance helped me with my things. Customarily, a returning monk's room guru would serve him tea the moment he arrived. I expected that I would have tea with Gendun, but he had nothing for me, just a tirade about how bad a student I was. He was extremely angry that I had not come back earlier, and said that he did not want me in his rooms at all. Finally he threw me out—pushed me out physically. I went to my own room and sat there wondering what to do. Gen Yaro knew what had happened because a short while later one of his other students came to tell me he wanted to talk to me. He gave me something to drink and eat and told me to take it easy. But inside I felt terrible. Gen Dulwa had died and I was simply thrown out as if I had been a terrible student.

THE NEXT DAY I had morning tea at a Tara prayer in the house assembly. Then I went to the house guru and got permission to go into Lhasa to talk with Chandzo Rabti about my predicament. I told the Chandzo that my room guru Gen Dulwa had just died, that his oldest surviving student Gendun disliked me, and that I did not think I was going to be able to be house guru the following year even though I had been chosen. "I feel I am now at the end of the road," I said, "and had better go home."

"Exactly what you should do!" said Chandzo Rabti. "This year both house gurus have died in the job so it is a task you would do better to pass up. It is a thankless task at the best of times so make preparations to go home. I myself will take you back," he said. "You probably have no money but do not worry about it, I will buy you a set of robes for your trip." After talking for a while I went to another part of the house, and a bit later the Chandzo again called for me. "I have been thinking about what you said and it was not right of me to tell you to leave for home so suddenly." He said it needed more preparation and thought that I should go and ask for some divinations, because if he just took

me home all of a sudden like this my Red Uncle would not be happy. He would want to know why my study had suddenly been interrupted and attempts had not been made to continue. "Who should I go to?" I asked, and he said that because he knew Kanjur Rinpoche well, I should go and ask him.

I knew that no matter how many divinations Kanjur Rinpoche did, he would never say to me anything except that I should stay and study, and that it would not be good if I went home. So I did not ask for a divination but asked directly for permission to go home. "I am having a problem at the monastery," I said. "I am in line to be the house guru but my situation has turned difficult and I am not going to be able to do it. Please give me permission to go home." "No," he said. "You are talking nonsense and you should not go home, and that's that." He asked me in detail about my problems and I told him, but he said that the Glorious Goddess would not be happy at all if I left for home, and he said that he would search to see if he could find another room guru for me now that Gendun had rejected me. I then asked him to do a divination for me, which he did there and then. He turned to me with a triumphant smile and showed me the dice. "Look," he said, "it is a perfect *mo*." I had not the slightest idea whether it was good or bad, but he sat there holding out the dice for me to see with a look of triumph written on his face.

Kanjur Rinpoche then told me that Gangshingpa (the senior monk who had helped at the death of Ludrub Rinpoche) would probably take me on. "If he will not, come back and see me again and I will arrange for someone else. And do not worry about being house guru, I will guarantee that it will go well." I then told Rinpoche how I had caused the fire and appeared to have upset the god Tsirab. Rinpoche leaned back and pondered on this for some time before speaking. "No," he finally said slowly, "Tsirab is not angry. In fact he is quite pleased." Then he leaned forward and asked me if all that I had told him had really happened. "You are quite sure you made the black tea offering afterwards to Tsirab?" he asked, and when I said I had, Rinpoche said I should rest assured about the affair, that Tsirab was definitely on my side, and that he was not upset at all.

I went back to Chandzo Rabti and told him what had transpired and he said that with Kanjur Rinpoche so insistent about my staying, leaving was now out of the question. He said that he would help me with my house guru year and that I should not worry. I returned to Drepung

quite late at night. I had a place to sleep but no place to cook or get anything to eat. I did not have even a spoonful of tsampa, and had to borrow some from a younger student. Then Gendun called me to his room and reminded me that I should start looking for another guru.

GENDUN'S ATTITUDE during this whole time left me with an unpleasant taste. Many of the things that should have been done following our guru's death were not done. It is a custom in Tibet that someone who has spent time nursing a sick person is remembered after the person's death with a gift or memento from the deceased person's estate. But Gendun gave me nothing at all. What was worse, the offerings which should have been made for him were left undone.

I have to confess that my relationship with Gendun was not very good. I had seen problems looming on the horizon because he was going to be guru-at-large during the same year I was going to be house guru. This could have been a mutually advantageous relation, as guru and disciple, but Gendun was not a person you could trust in a tight place; he was not reliable. So I was hoping to be able to change gurus anyway. Of course one could not voice such inner hopes, it was totally inappropriate to do so, but when Gendun said to me that he wanted me out I was not unhappy about it. It was an opportunity, as I saw it, to find a better guru for the difficult house guru year ahead. Gangshingpa, who had money of his own, was a dependable monk and a good guru. He was just the sort of person I hoped for, so I asked a young friend to be my intermediary to him.

Gangshingpa knew that he would not be totally responsible for financing my house guru year, that other people were willing to help me, so he sent back a message accepting. When I told Gendun that I had found another guru so quickly he was offended and caused me even more trouble, telling Gangshingpa that he had not asked me to leave. Gangshingpa then got very angry at me for looking for a new guru without having first received permission to leave from my earlier one. "You are a troublemaker for sure," he told me. I explained that what my earlier guru said was untrue and I spelled out the situation. He believed me and was on my side. "Still," he said, "it is going to be very difficult for me, in this situation as it is now unfolding, to be your guru. You will have to find someone else as a witness to verify your version of events." I approached my friend the intermediary and told him what Gendun had done. He was upset too because he was

being made to look like a fool, so he went straight to Gendun, and told him that he had been acting totally inappropriately. After this I again approached Gangshingpa who said that he would be my guru.

OF THE TWENTY-THREE HOUSES in Drepung there is no doubt that being Phukhang house guru was worst of all. In some houses the house guru had an opportunity to make a little money, but in Phukhang it was accepted that there was a lot of work and usually a financial loss at the end of the day. The house was going through a bad period and most of the new monks were leaving as soon as their three years were over and returning to their homelands. Monks became particularly eager to leave in the year or so before their turn to be house guru came up, aware that the job would be thankless and end up leaving them in debt. That was one of the reasons why I was given the job so soon after getting to the monastery—so many of those above me had decided to return home rather than do the work.

It was possible to pay for a substitute to be house guru in one's place, but the house assembly did not agree to it easily, and it would cost the equivalent of more than fifty thousand rupees in present-day money. And anyway, I thought that if I were to take on the job and do it well I would make a lot of merit as well as purify a lot of bad karma. Also, I must admit at this point that even though I was top rank when it came to attendance at assemblies and debates, I was not top rank at putting my whole being into study. I was swayed too easily. I sometimes studied hard, but at other times I took it easy and got into long discussions about little affairs of the day. In my class I was quite good, but this was because my class was not at a very high level, not because I was particularly gifted.

In the eighth month letters arrived from home with money. The message from my Red Guru was that they were all pleased I was going to be house guru and that I could take up the job, or, if I preferred get a substitute. Gangshingpa felt that being able to stay at my study was an important consideration and he wanted to help me be able to do it. From my side I said there was a house order to these things and that I was happy to take my turn. I said I wanted to do it.

There was much to be done during the year prior to becoming house guru. You had to arrange a wood supply, memorize many rituals for offering cakes and black tea, and learn many praises to many house deities and gods. There also were many offerings to the Glorious Goddess. Once you became house guru you had to recite them all perfectly in the assemblies.

The new house guru also needed to find a guarantor, almost always his room guru. The room guru guaranteed that his student would not act contrary to laws and accepted customs, and said that if he got into financial trouble he would meet any financial obligations. Beyond the two room gurus, there were two year-long guarantors (*lo-nyer*) who stood as further guarantee. After this had been set up a monk could become a house guru. If the house guru died in office, his room guru or other guarantor was responsible for finding a replacement, not the house.

Once a monk became house guru he was responsible for accounting for every possession of the house, from the ornaments on the top of the house down to the cloth that was on the basement door. He also was responsible for the wood used in the kitchen for all listed teas and all prayers and usual assemblies. In my year as house guru I had to get in the equivalent of about three hundred dotses of wood for the year. There were two house gurus working together doing this and it meant a very large outlay of money. This responsibility for the wood supply was the main danger and difficulty for the house guru.

I had done the necessary preparations and was ready for the year as house guru when I went to see Chandzo Rabti, just before he left for Kham. "What help do you need?" he asked. I said that I had a big load of wood collected at a distance from Drepung and asked if he could help me transport it to the house. He had his own pack animals ready for the trip and was happy to oblige, transporting all my wood very quickly. He did not leave me any money, but he helped me with a number of things like this that needed to be done.

Both the house gurus from the year before me had died in office and it had been necessary to find substitutes during the course of the year. It was an unusual occurrence. People said that house gurus had never died in the middle of their duties before, for as long back as they could remember. There was a lot of talk going about, a lot of superstition in the air, and of course it rubbed off on me. I went to ask Kanjur Rinpoche, and his divination came up excellently. "No need to worry at all," he said, "I can guarantee you are going to have an excellent year." My partner (house gurus were always appointed in pairs) had a less than perfect divination, however. Kanjur Rinpoche told him that if he did one hundred thousand prostrations and many prayers his year as house guru would turn out well; for me, though, no prayers, no problems of any sort. My partner was younger than me but was a capable person experienced in business. Older monks said that I was lucky, because I had been so involved in study that I had little experience of

business matters. My partner had not studied much, but was good at business. They said that we would divide up perfectly, him for the business and me for the discipline and standard of study.

I also went to the oracles of Phug-shag and goddess Tema-mo to check if there would be difficulties during my house guru year. The oracles said everything looked excellent. They set me at ease and said that the gods were on my side and would help me. There was another oracle on the outskirts of Lhasa, but I did not have much faith in it. Some people took me there and while they went in to request the god to descend into the oracle I squatted outside. After a few moments my friends came outside to say I had to come in, that the god was calling for me. I went in and the oracle in the trance came up to me and gave me a scarf. "You are a person who is going to do special work to make the teaching of Tsong-khapa spread far and wide," the oracle said, "and the gods will help you with the work of house guru. The preparations you are making are the right ones and you should have no worries at all." This god praised me right to my face in front of others.

The tenure of a house guru began in the tenth Tibetan month. Before taking office you would make a formal statement in front of the house assembly, and affix your stamp to a document to seal your commitment. In essence, you signed for the entire year's work, regardless of any circumstances or difficulties. There was even a clause covering the eventuality of your death, and you promised that if you died before the end of your tenure your room guru would finish your work for you.

I decided to have one more divination before taking office, so I went to Locho Rinpoche and asked him about the upcoming year. He said that it would go well, but that I should expect some problems. He mentioned, in particular, that I should keep in mind that I alone was the house guru and that I had to do all the work. "Do not think you have a partner in the task who will be doing this or that," he said. "Get the idea in your mind that you have to do all the work and plough on regardless." It was unusual advice, intimating that there would be problems and saying that I should think I was the only house guru, and not to expect to rely on my partner. At the time I did not take particular notice of his advice.

6

HOUSE GURU

During the ceremonial taking over of office the new house gurus are expected to dress for the part, so I bought myself a grand set of monk's robes and made many preparations to ensure that I would make an impression. As I headed down the stairs to the assembly, dressed up in my fine new robes, what should I meet coming up the stairs but a man carrying an entire yak carcass! It was a terrible beginning, a very bad sign. But what could I do? I hurried on to the Glorious Goddess temple where the monks had already begun the black tea offering to the gods.

The ceremony there was stately and very formal. We two new house gurus had to do the *nye-shin* offering and do a recitation. After this prayer we went to the main house-assembly hall where tea was offered to all the monks. As the new house gurus we went around the entire hall offering scarfs to all the deities represented there and then sat down on special seats that had been prepared for us. Just after I sat down and the auspicious ceremonial prayers began, a cat came streaking across in front of my seat and killed a mouse right there in front of me. It sat there eating the poor creature. I was shocked in my heart and felt a sense of foreboding. But I was locked into becoming the house guru, the ceremonies were underway, and inauspicious signs or not I had to go on.

Only weeks after we took up our duties as house gurus my partner came to me with a scarf and asked for my patience. This was quite unusual. Normally it would be considered inappropriate for one house guru to make an offering to another because the two were equal in all