

The Master Director

EXCERPT No. 9

Childhood Stories

(from Chapter 15)

I hesitate to write about Gurudev's past. Most tellers of tales when it comes to Gurudev are not as level-headed as his uncle, and it is difficult to draw the line between fact and fantasy. Most of the stories seem to begin on one side of the line and then cross over.

A case in point: When Gurudev was a child he lived in a village in the Phoobsering Tea Estate, where he was born. One day he untied all the cows, goats, sheep, and pigs in the entire village. They say he was motivated by compassion for the animals. Regardless of his motive, the animals' motive for what they did next is clear: hunger. They went into the fields of ripening corn and grains, filled their bellies, and ruined the village's crop. The police were called in, Gurudev was caught, and to appease his angry neighbours and to avoid a hefty fine—which the family could not afford—the boy was sent to jail. This part seems to be fact. But like every other story about Gurudev's past, the story doesn't stop there.

While he was in jail, the story goes, he told the guard, 'I am now in your jail and you can control my body, but you cannot control everything that happens in your jail: you cannot control my mind. My power is still greater than yours.' The guard took this as a challenge. 'I'm in control here, and if you're not careful, I'll prove it to you.'

Gurudev reached his hand through the bars in his cell's window and tore a bud off a plant that grew there. He held it in his open palm and said, 'This flower bud is in your jail. If you control everything in your jail, command it to open. Tell it to become a flower!'

The guard thought this boy, who had caused the destruction of his entire village's crop, weak-minded. 'Nobody can do that!' the guard exclaimed.

'Then just watch,' Gurudev said. 'I will make it open.' He held the bud in his palm and commanded it to open, and right there in front of the jailer the bud transformed into a flower. The guard, greatly shaken, left the cell. Later, he came back to bring the boy some food. He peeked into the cell and there was Gurudev in the full-lotus meditation posture. He was levitating a few feet off the ground, glowing with an unearthly light. The jailer opened the door, prostrated himself before the boy, and apologized. 'Please

forgive me,' he said, 'I didn't know who you were. You are free to leave.' And thus ended Gurudev's time in jail.

The more fantastic the stories, the more I would hold stubbornly to facts, insisting on the rational even though I knew there was a universe beyond the rational. Perhaps it is the imagination that truly sets humanity apart from the other beasts in the jungle—but not fantasy. I often wondered why the people surrounding Gurudev needed such stories to believe in him. It always seemed symptomatic of a lack of faith, rather than its opposite.

Another tale I heard many times was that when he was a child, Gurudev used to ride backwards on his donkey all the way from his village up to Darjeeling. And when he got to the city he would take out a flute and play while he rode backwards, laughing so much the whole time that people thought him mad.

So I asked him one time, through Dawa, 'Gurudev, did you used to travel backwards on your donkey through the streets of Darjeeling playing your flute?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I did.'

'Gurudev, why did you ride your donkey backwards?'

'If we were going up to Darjeeling, my donkey knew the way. So why should I also look where we were going? If you have two flashlights, why should you point them both in the same direction?'

'I saw no difference between that donkey and myself. Actually, I see no difference between anybody and myself. We are all one being. But that donkey and I were especially close. It used to follow me everywhere, like a dog.'

Gurudev went on to tell me another story: 'One day I was riding the donkey up a steep path in the thick fog. I came upon a Hindu priest, who of course was a Brahmin, the highest caste. Donkeys are considered lowly and impure in our culture. I was a boy. He was an old man. The path was steep. I asked him if he wanted to ride the donkey but he refused, saying if he merely touched the donkey he would become impure and no one would have him come to their house to perform the rituals. This was his source of livelihood. But I convinced him. "Surely you know purity comes from the heart," I said. "Aren't your powers greater than a donkey's? How could he defile you? Besides, you'll be the same man before and after riding the donkey, only you'll be more tired if you walk. Why don't you ride? The fog is thick. No one will see you."

'So he got on the donkey. We were approaching the village when the fog suddenly lifted and everybody saw the Brahmin priest riding the donkey.' Gurudev burst out laughing.



Gurudev as a Child