

A Step Away from Paradise

EXCERPT No. 1

Kunsang

From Chapter 2, How The Light Gets In

The most important person with whom I spoke was Kunsang, Tulshuk Lingpa's only son. He provided the thread that wove together the story of Tulshuk Lingpa and his visionary expedition. Eighteen years old at the time his father departed for Beyul [the Hidden Valley], Kunsang was able to offer a first-hand account of what others knew only from hearsay. Kunsang heard the stories of Tulshuk Lingpa's early life directly from him, and while one might expect—and even forgive—a son to exaggerate his father's deeds, the details of his stories, no matter how fantastic, astonished me all the more by checking out when I asked others who were in a position to know. Kunsang's respect and admiration for his father was matched by his profound knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. And deep respect did not preclude his seeing the humor and divinely inspired madness at the core of so many of the stories. With Kunsang alone I had almost fifty hours of taped interviews. When I transcribed these interviews, I was struck by the amount of time speech was rendered impossible by laughter.

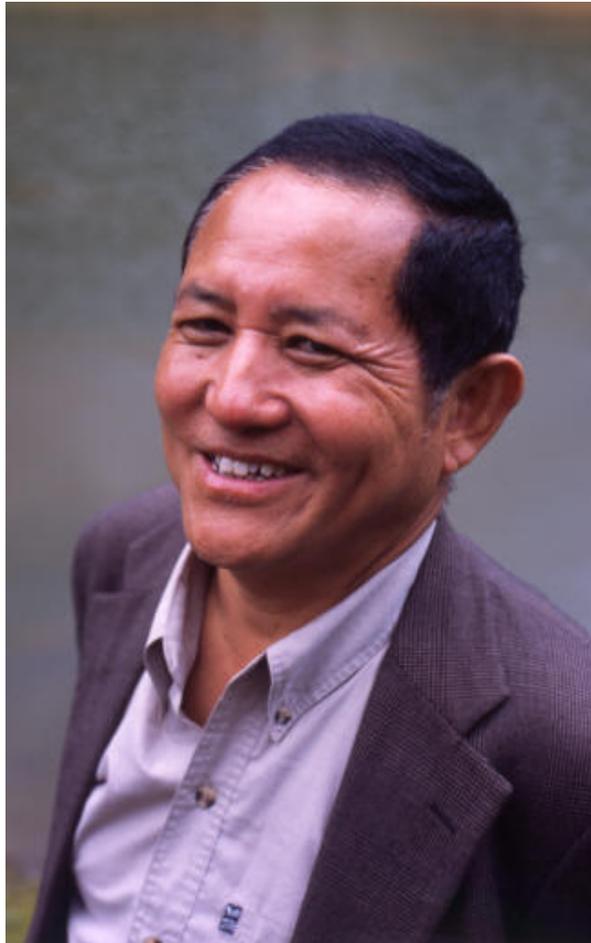
I used to wonder just where to draw the line when Kunsang told his tales. Often I had the feeling he was leading me down a narrow plank over deepening water, drawing me further than I felt comfortable to a place where logic failed. His stories often started out on firm enough ground, but as the incidents built up and became increasingly fantastic, I'd suddenly find myself following with my credulity intact further than I would normally go, believing things that if told outright would sound just too fantastic to have occurred. Every time I thought Kunsang had gone too far, I'd find a corroborating detail in something someone else said. Or I'd check details of what others told me with him, and found an uncanny concurrence of facts, even in the most outlandish stories.

With Kunsang, one got a taste of what his father was like, making reality of things usually relegated to the realm of fiction and imagination. He wasn't confounding fact and fiction as much as forging a new synthesis of the two.

We have been taught from the earliest age to separate fact from fiction. We can read *Alice in Wonderland* and get transported to a land of marvels. Yet while we are there, we know Wonderland

doesn't really exist. By imagining it, we partake in the hidden realm of wonders the author imagined, but we retain our sense of propriety. We don't redraw the line between fact and fiction; we suspend it, and we are entertained. That is certainly the prudent thing to do. We can assume it is what Lewis Carroll himself did. He could write his books about Wonderland and still maintain his position as a respected Oxford Don.

Imagine what would have happened if Lewis Carroll had proclaimed the reality of Wonderland. What if he had gathered a following and launched an expedition? Surely he would have been thought mad as a hatter in the Oxford of his day as he would be today. The line separating fact from fiction is certainly tightly drawn and enduring—as tightly drawn as that which separates sane from insane. Cross one, and you cross the other.



Kunsang