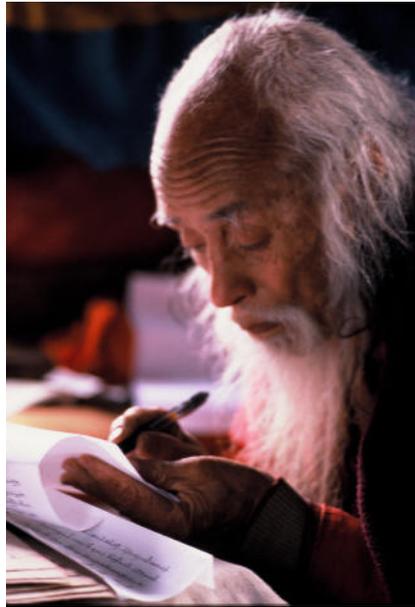


A Step Away from Paradise

EXCERPT No. 2

Chapter 3, Géshipa



Géshipa, performing a divination, 2005

There was a prophecy written in a *pecha*, or scripture, that when the time came to open Beyul Demoshong, the lama who would open the way would first announce himself at the Tashiding Monastery. Though none of the lamas of that monastery—nor anyone else for that matter—could tell me which *pecha* it was written in, let alone show it to me, it is a well-known part of Sikkimese lore. It is a belief that has changed the course of many a person's life. For when Tulshuk Lingpa and his followers arrived at Tashiding, though they arrived completely unannounced, there were people living there who had left their homes as far away as in Bhutan in order to be there when the prophesied lama arrived.

One such man was Géshipa. Now in his mid eighties, he left his native Bhutan when he was forty-six years old expressly to go to the Tashiding Gompa in Sikkim and await the arrival of the lama prophesized to open the door to the hidden realm. While others had been waiting in

Tashiding for years, Géshipa was an accomplished and well-known diviner, steeped in the prophecies. When he heard of the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the destruction of the monasteries, the incredible carnage, and the exile of the Dalai Lama he knew that all these negative signs pointed in a single direction: towards the ripening of the time for the opening of Beyul Demoshong. He arrived there only a few months before Tulshuk Lingpa first walked up the hill from the village.

When he was a child, Géshipa's grandfather, who was a great yogi, died while in meditation. They left him in the full lotus posture for months and, as is the case with many accomplished Tibetan lamas, his body did not decay.

At first the young boy did not understand what it meant for someone to be dead. His father explained it to him by reminding him of a dog that had recently died in the neighborhood. Géshipa had smelt it and seen its body rot and attract flies and maggots. When he understood what death meant, he didn't believe his grandfather was dead, so lifelike his body remained. Far from smelling of decay, there was a scent in the air of flowers in the vicinity of his grandfather's body. His father explained that it was his grandfather's spiritual attainment that prevented his body from decaying. Because the boy had grown up seeing his grandfather deep in meditation and not moving for days at a time, he still couldn't connect the state his grandfather was in with death. To make this connection clear, his father put the boy's hand to his own mouth and asked him what he felt. He felt the warmth of his own breath. Then his father took his hand and held it before his grandfather's mouth.

"What do you feel?" his father asked him.

"Nothing," he was obliged to reply. "It is cold."

It was then the boy realized something of the mysteries his grandfather explored while he was alive, sitting in meditation as if he were dead, and now that he was dead, appearing still to be alive, preserving his body from the fate of the dog after death.

It was then the boy decided that he would dedicate his life to exploring similar mysteries.

He became the apprentice of a high lama, a great diviner and soothsayer, the rainmaker for the king of Bhutan. As part of his training, he underwent a meditation retreat of three years, three months, and three days. Though most lamas undergo this meditation retreat, they usually do it in a group under close supervision and they are usually in their late teens or early

twenties. Géshipa retired into the mountains alone, where he lived in a cave. He was only in his early teens.

With hardly any food to eat, his diet consisted mainly of nettles, which he gathered himself and cooked over a wood fire. He ate so many nettles that his skin turned green, just like the famous Tibetan poet yogi Milarepa.

He had inherited his grandfather's scriptures and it was during this retreat, nearly starving to death and freezing, that he read in them about the Hidden Land. He read that in the Hidden Land you never have to worry about having enough to eat.

“Plant a seed in the morning,” he read, “and you can harvest by evening.” And you never had to worry about having enough clothing. No matter how cold it was, you'd always be warm.

Hungry, cold, and alone in his cave, these words left an indelible mark on his mind. He decided that he would devote himself to finding this hidden land. Now in his mid-eighties and having never returned to Bhutan, Géshipa lives north of Tashiding in Yoksum, the last village before the high mountains and the ‘Western Gate’ to the Hidden Land.

The Yabala family, the wealthy landholding family in the village who were major sponsors of Tulshuk Lingpa, puts him up in a wood-slat room above their cow shed where he lives to this day, and where I met him many times.

Géshipa is perhaps the happiest man I've ever met. Combining the innocence of a child with the wisdom of a sage, his belief is so direct that it is infectious. It was in his presence, more than in anyone else's, that I felt the lived reality of the possibility that the quest for Beyul represents.



The village of Yoksum, Sikkim

The first time I ventured to Yoksum to meet Géshipa, I had the grown son of the Yabala family, who was well educated and spoke English perfectly, translate for me. When I communicated my reason for being there, that I wanted to speak of Tulshuk Lingpa and Beyul, Géshipa was reticent.

“These are secret things,” he said. “*Tantra*. I can tell you nothing.”

I tried to get him to mollify his stance, but my interpreter had to be somewhere and left Géshipa and me to our own devices without a language in common. Though Géshipa had lived in Sikkim for over forty years, his Nepali—the lingua franca of Sikkim—was still rudimentary. He lived in a world that appeared only to intersect with ours, and it was a world one couldn’t help feeling immediately drawn into. By merely looking at him, one knew he held the keys to great mysteries—for not only did he look every bit the part of the Eastern sage, he lived with the simplicity of one.

When I was on my way to Yoksum and mentioned his name, people told me he was famous throughout Sikkim for performing divinations and controlling the weather. He was an accomplished rainmaker. It seemed whenever there was a drought, people would come to him, as they would if there was need for a dry day in monsoon. Shortly before I visited him, a newly constructed monastery nearby was to be inaugurated with a three-day ritual to which some high lamas were being helicoptered in, including a representative of the Dalai Lama. It was the middle of monsoon, and monsoon in Sikkim is severe, often raining incessantly for days at a time, and only rarely is there a twenty-four hour period without rain. The lamas of this new monastery came to Géshipa, who performed rituals he had learned as a child when he was apprenticed to the King of Bhutan’s rainmaker. Those three days were dry. It is a matter of record.

On another occasion, Géshipa related to me a story from the time after his teacher had died and he became the King of Bhutan’s rainmaker. One day, three representatives of the king arrived at his retreat in Eastern Bhutan with a letter from the king. The rains had failed and crops were beginning to wither in the fields across the kingdom. The letter, which had been sealed with the king’s own seal, instructed him to make it rain, which he did with his usual alacrity. It rained so hard that within three or four days everybody in the Kingdom had forgotten the drought and were now in grave danger of floods. The king sent his representatives again, this time without the pleasantries of a letter, but with instructions for him

to stop the rain immediately. They had with them a heavy rope and instructions from the king to use it if within a day of their arrival the rain did not stop. They were to tie him up and douse him in water with only his nose above the surface until he stopped it.

When we found ourselves alone that first time with hardly a language between us, Géshipa pulled a kerosene cooker out from under his bed. He poured water from a plastic bottle into a pot, pumped and primed the cooker, and started boiling tea. He was squatting on his haunches mixing in the tea and sugar, and though we tried, we couldn't converse. So I undusted one of the few Nepali expressions I had at my disposal. "*Kay garnu*," I said, What to do?

Géshipa found it so funny that of all the possible things I might know in Nepali, I knew that expression, at once so common and so expressive at the same time of the simple wisdom of accepting what is and finding happiness in the present. This was something Géshipa seemed a master at, just plainly being happy at the passage of time, and he started rocking with laughter, squatting over the pot of boiling tea, saying, "*Kay garnu, kay garnu!*"

Then he said, "Englayshee?" He wanted to know the English equivalent.

"*Kay garnu*: Nepali," I said. "English: What to do."

"WaDoDo," he attempted, and I repeated it until he got it right.

Then he took out an ancient and battered address book and wrote phonetically in Tibetan script first *kay garnu*, and then 'What to do', the whole time repeating it and laughing like a tickled Buddha. This seemed to have great importance for him, so he wrote it in a few other places as well, so he couldn't possibly lose the English for *kay garnu*.

The next time I visited Géshipa was about nine months later. Wangchuk [Tulshuk Lingpa's grandson] had taken well to his role as interpreter between his father and me during our long interviews in Darjeeling. Now we had taken our collaboration on the road, tracking down people and places in Sikkim connected with his grandfather's story. Speaking both Nepali and Tibetan fluently, Wangchuk was acting as my interpreter and wonderful companion as well as undergoing his own journey of discovery about his grandfather, about whom he had grown up hearing stories, but with none of the details we were uncovering.

When we walked up the dirt trail from Yoksum and climbed the old wooden stairs above the cow shed and entered Géshipa's room with *katas*, the ceremonial scarves one presents to lamas, as well as a bag of fruits and biscuits to present to him, Géshipa stared at me, obviously recognizing me but trying to figure out from where.

So I raised my index finger to the heavens, twisted it, and said, “What to do?”

Géshipa almost fell out of his robe. “What to do?” he repeated. “What to do?” He was howling now with laughter. “He’s calling you Mr. What-To-Do,” Wangchuk said as he handed Géshipa the fruit and biscuits and they started speaking Tibetan. I didn’t pay them much mind as I took my seat on the bed opposite Géshipa’s. Then I noticed Géshipa was writing in that same battered address book, and Wangchuk was helping him sound something out.

Géshipa turned to me, and reading carefully off the page, which he held close to his eyes to focus, he cautiously mouthed out the words, “Bout do die. What to do? A-bout to die—what to do?” and he burst out laughing, even more intensely than before. He poked his finger to his chest. “About to die.”

Then he said something to Wangchuk in Tibetan, which Wangchuk then interpreted. “He’s saying that he’s very old now, and that he’s about to die.”

“What to do?” Géshipa repeated with the levity of Zorba when the towers came crashing.

Wangchuk had a girlfriend in Delhi, with whom he was always trying to communicate using his mobile phone. But in Sikkim, the towers are far apart and the mountains high; even though he was forever pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket and trying to get a signal, he couldn’t get a signal strong enough to place a call. While we were sitting in Géshipa’s room conducting our interview with him, he quietly took out his mobile phone. He turned it on, and even in the dim interior of that room towards sunset, I could see the surprise on Wangchuk’s face.

“Look,” he said, “a perfect signal!”

And it was true. He quickly called Delhi. When he got his girlfriend on the other end, he stepped out the door of Géshipa’s room onto the old wooden staircase but the signal faded the moment he crossed the threshold of Géshipa’s room. The only place during that entire trip that his mobile phone worked was inside the room of that wizard.



Géshipa's room above the cows

The third time I went to Yoksum to visit Géshipa, I went with both Kunsang [Tulshuk Lingpa's son] and Wangchuk. Kunsang and Géshipa hadn't met in over forty years. When we arrived this time, the rickety wooden staircase leading to Géshipa's room above the cows was full of black dogs, thirteen to be exact, who started barking and howling at us and blocking our way. Since they were both barking and wagging their tails, they seemed harmless enough, so we pushed by them and into Géshipa's room.

After Kunsang and Géshipa exchanged greetings and comments on how the other looked—such as was natural for the first meeting in over forty years (Géshipa was in his late forties and Kunsang eighteen when last they met)—I asked Géshipa why there were so many black dogs guarding his door.

“It is because of the *dip shing*,” he replied.

I asked my faithful interpreter Wangchuk what *dip shing* was. He didn't know, so he asked his father.

Kunsang knew well.

“*Dip shing* isn’t known to all lamas,” he said. “It is only known to *tertons* [special lams who find hidden treasures]. It is a potion for becoming invisible. I remember my father teaching Géshipa and Namdrul and Mipham about it. But you need some ingredients that are very difficult to obtain. Géshipa has been working on this for decades.”

Géshipa just started speaking, and it was all Wangchuk could do to keep up with the translation.

“The black dogs are a long story,” Géshipa began. “I lived in Tashiding until about two years ago. And ever since the time Tulshuk Lingpa was here I was collecting the ingredients. Some of the ingredients are easy to find, like the afterbirth of a black cat. Namdrul had that. He dried it, and had it with him all the time in a little pouch tied to a fold of his robe. He had it with him when we went to open Beyul.

“The hardest ingredient to get is top secret, and I cannot talk about it.” He then proceeded to speak of it with Kunsang, but in such low tones that Wangchuk couldn’t catch what he was saying.

After some moments of this top-secret association, Géshipa sprang up on his bed with surprising agility for someone his age, and taking a scripture wrapped in cloth and sealed to its dusty shelf with an intricate lace of cobwebs, he sat back down, unwrapped it, searched for the right page, and started reading softly to Kunsang about this secret ingredient, which Wangchuk thought might be of human origin.

Then Géshipa continued in a louder voice and Wangchuk resumed interpreting: “The second most difficult ingredient to find gives this potion its name. It is also the most important: the crows’ nest. You need the twigs from a crow’s nest, but only from a very special crow’s nest.”

Wangchuk whispered in my ear that *dip shing* literally means ‘invisibility stick’ in Tibetan, the stick in question being the sticks with which a crows’ nest is constructed.

“There was a boy in the neighborhood,” Géshipa continued, “who was always climbing trees. I took him with me and we walked from Tashiding up to Ravangla. This was years ago. We went into the huge, ancient forest on the mountain above the town and we walked until we heard crows in the distance. We followed the sound until we saw the crows. Then we followed them until we were on the back side of the mountain and after three or four days we found where they made their nests high up in the trees. I had brought the boy because he climbed like a monkey. I sent him up with a rope to get a nest. The rope was for him to tie himself to the

trunk before he climbed out the branch. But he refused to use the rope, and the more I insisted, the higher he climbed, out of my reach, and started swinging from branch to branch, laughing at me.

“He scampered up to the crows’ nest, disturbing the crows, who let out a raucous chorus of impotent protest. I yelled up to him to make sure the crows were completely black. Sometimes crows can have purple tails or wings, you see, and these won’t do. He assured me of their black color. So I told him to take the nest from the tree and bring it down.

“The nest was practically as big as the boy, made out of hundreds of sticks. I started examining it, but the boy said we should hide it, so no one could see what we were doing. And though there was no one else there, he was right. These are secret things. *Tantra*. So we put the nest in a sack.

“We slept in the forest again that night, and in the morning we walked down to the river. It isn’t just any stick from a black crows’ nest that will work in the potion of invisibility. You have to test it.

“So we went to the river’s edge, it was really a mountain stream, bounding down the mountain, but the flow was swift and it would do. I broke off a piece of the nest, a stick about three inches long, and I dropped it into the flow. The boy had no idea why I was doing this, but what he saw sure made him stare with wide eyes. For the stick hit the surface of the swiftly moving flow and moved *upstream*! This was exactly what it had to do if the nest had powers. The boy broke off another piece of the nest and tried it himself.

“‘Stop!’ I shouted. ‘We were lucky to find such a nest. Others have spent years looking. Don’t waste it!’

“But the boy kept breaking off pieces of the nest, throwing them into the stream, and watching them float against the stream’s current—eyes full of wonder—until I grabbed the nest, threw it back in the sack, and started back up the slope towards Tashiding.

“When we got to Tashiding, I put the nest into the metal chest under my bed with the other ingredients I had collected for the *dip shing*. As you can see, it isn’t easy collecting the ingredients for the *dip shing*, though once I had the crows’ nest, the black cat’s afterbirth was easy.”

“Sure,” I quipped to Wangchuk under my breath, “You just have to find a black cat, get it pregnant—and wait.”

Géshipa, though not understanding what I'd said to Wangchuk, laughed along. Then he continued, "The *dip shing* takes years. But it is worth it. In the end, you apply just a little bit like a black paste on the forehead between the eyes—and like that, you're invisible."

"One can make a potion to become invisible," I said, "but it's another thing if it really works."

"Working," Kunsang said curtly in English, as if to put a complete stop to any doubt. "You need piece of crow nest. Black-cat-born-time."

"He means the afterbirth of a black cat," Wangchuk interpreted.

"Two things, these ones," Kunsang continued, "and third is black cat shit. Forth one, very useful—but top secret. I know, but cannot say. I putting little inside my bag, then tying bag to one shoe. Doing mantra, then my bag is—I-am-loosing. Everybody notice bag gone; they no see, I no see."

"Tied to shoe?" I asked Wangchuk. "What the hell is he talking about?"

I was beginning to feel as if I'd entered the land of topsy-turvy.

Though Wangchuk had grown up the son of his father, grandson of perhaps the craziest treasure revealer Tibet had ever produced, and could understand the language of wizards, he came down solidly on the side of his generation. Skeptical, rational, and modern in outlook, Wangchuk was not only a good interpreter, but a bridger of worlds. He respected, though not necessarily followed, the ways of his ancestors.

"Tied to shoe," Wangchuk explained, "so you don't lose the bag when it goes invisible."

"Yes, yes!" Kunsang concurred, "Only string seeing. If not tied, losing bag. Crows' nest *very* powerful."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You need a piece of a black crows' nest, a twig that when you put it in the water, it goes upstream. That twig. And then you need black cat afterbirth."

"Oh, this one very important!" Kunsang exclaimed. "Third one, shit of black cat."

He then said something to Géshipa in Tibetan about black cat shit, and Géshipa started telling the story of how he secured his supply.

Wangchuk interpreted:

"Since I was not owning a black cat, I went into the village looking. I am not so young, so it wasn't easy. Seeing a black cat behind someone's house, I chased after it and caught it, with my own two hands. I caught it and put it in a sack and brought it home. I tied its leg to a string

to wait for it to shit. But in the morning, the string was broken and the cat was gone. It had climbed a tree nearby and was meowing. The string had gotten wrapped around a branch. It was stuck there. So I sat under the tree, waiting. I knew it would have to shit sooner or later, and sure enough after a few hours, I saw it drop. I scooped it up and got the boy to climb the tree and free the cat. Black cat not important; black cat shit important.”

“So that’s the third,” I said to Kunsang. “The forth, what’s the forth?” I was trying to trick Kunsang into divulging the secret ingredient.

“Fourth one is—” Kunsang said, catching himself. “Fourth-one-I-forget. Géshipa show me in book. But I don’t know. He know, he know.”

“You just said you know,” I shot back. “You said, ‘I know, but I cannot tell.’ Now you say you don’t know.”

“I don’t know, really. He know. I forget, but he show in book. Difficult to find. Very difficult!

“Can a person also go invisible?”

“Sure thing! Then nobody will see you. *Kema, kema*: incredible! I don’t do this kind of work. Fourth thing, very difficult to find. Géshipa found it.”

“Why would you want to go invisible?” I asked.

“Sometimes necessary.”

“Why? To hide from the police? What did you do?”

Laughter.

“Have you gone invisible before?”

“No.”

“Do you know people who have?”

“No. Only Stories.”

“The fourth ingredient is from human beings?”

“No, no, no—I forget.”

“You don’t want to say?”

“Géshipa had the secret ingredient,” Kunsang said. “I remember years ago, Géshipa telling me, ‘If one day I go to the Hidden Valley, I’ll bring one small leather bag with everything in it—snake meat, frog meat, all dried. And black cat, too, all dry. Black dog meat, dry. I’ll make

everything dry and take it with me.’ But what to do? He had everything. He even had elephant liver, cut in little pieces. But all stolen.”

“Stolen?”

“Yes,” Kunsang said. “Stolen.”

“What happened? Wangchuk, ask Géshipa what happened.”

“It had taken years to collect,” Géshipa said, “and I had almost all the ingredients. I was living at the Tashiding monastery in those days. As I got each ingredient, I put it into the locked metal box under my bed. Then, one day I went to put something else into the box and the box was gone. It hadn’t gone invisible; it was stolen, along with one hundred and fifty rupees. So I had to start all over again. That’s why there are so many black dogs at my door.”

I couldn’t divine the connection. It had been my first, and I thought quite innocent, question. So I asked again, almost in desperation, “But why all the black dogs?”

Géshipa got up from where he had been sitting cross-legged on his bed to squat on his haunches before his kerosene cooker and start a fire for tea. He poured water into a pot, opened a can of tea, and threw in a huge handful. Taking a flat rock off the top of another rusted old can, he reached his hand in and threw handfuls of large-grained sugar into the water as well, oblivious of the ants that were feeding on it.

Géshipa spoke so matter-of-factly of fantastic things that one could easily imagine their reality. There was a gentleness to him, an innocence that was alien to any sort of guile. He lived with the simplicity of a man for whom the material world around him was of so little concern because the scope of his creative imagination was so immense. His eyes were at once innocent and deep. They sparkled as if they wanted to communicate what no words could—the accumulated wonder of their eighty-six years of looking on a world that was just plainly more fantastic than the world most of us look upon.

When he had poured tea for the four of us, he sat back down.

“The black dogs?” he said. “They are quite necessary. For *dip shing* you need black dog meat. It started like this: one day I was walking through the village when I saw a black dog that had just died on the side of the road. That’s how it is with this *dip shing*, sometimes you have to wait for such an opportunity. One of the ingredients is the meat of an entirely black dog. Since I am Buddhist, I cannot look for a black dog and kill it. Therefore I have to wait. I

took the dog—it was a big dog—and I held its front legs and I swung it over my shoulder and brought it home on my back. And there I cut off strips of meat and dried them.”

Kunsang turned towards me, bursting with laughter: “The meat of a black dog and the stick from a crows nest—flowing upstream. Incredible, incredible; insane, insane.”

“If you got the meat,” I asked Géshipa, hesitatingly, “why the thirteen black dogs at the gate?”

“Oh them?” he said, as if it were obvious. “They’re for the shit, not the meat. And they’re not for becoming invisible. They have nothing to do with *dip shing*; they’re for making rain. There are other methods for making rain, but using black dog shit is the most effective. You have to dry the black dog shit and grind it. Then you have to mix it with *tsampa* and make round balls out of it. You mix *tsampa* and water and form it into a *vajra*. First you touch the tip of the *vajra* to the shit. Then you dip it in a natural spring. That’s how you stop rain. You also have to throw shit into the fire at the same time.”

Though I couldn’t quite believe I was having this conversation, I asked him, “How much shit do you need? Does it have to be the combined shit of thirteen black dogs?”

“No,” Géshipa said in a measured way as if he were a theologian discussing a fine point of doctrine. “It actually has to be a black dog with a white sun and moon on its chest, over the heart.”

“Then what are the other dogs for, to keep it company?”

“It is like this,” Géshipa said, “I told Yab Maila—the owner of the big house, my *jinda* [sponsor], who owns the this cowshed—I told him that I needed a very specific black dog. So one day he saw a black dog and he offered the owner 2,000 rupees. The owner liked the dog, but 2,000 rupees is 2,000 rupees, so he sold the dog to my *jinda* and my *jinda* gave it to me. But the dog wasn’t right. He doesn’t understand about the white marks; he thinks the more dogs the better, so a few days later he came home with another dog, this one he had purchased in Gezing for 2,500! But again it wasn’t right. It wasn’t until he came with the thirteenth dog that he got one with the proper markings, a little white moon and star over its chest. Then I told him to stop. But I think he’s still keeping his eyes out for more.”

Kunsang gave me a wink. He got up, and excusing himself he braved the gauntlet of black dogs to find a bush on which to pee. He was gone quite a while.

“I just saw Yab Maila, the owner of this land, Géshipa’s sponsor,” he said when he returned. “He was also a big sponsor of my father. We hadn’t met in over forty years! It seems Géshipa has been speaking seriously about making another attempt at Beyul. He made me promise to convince him not to. He’s too old, and has a heart condition. Yab Maila said Géshipa’s mind is like a child’s. The old man may be crazy, but the young man is the one going around finding him black dogs, and paying for them!”

Kunsang looked at me with wide-eyed mirth.

“Is all of this true,” I asked Kunsang, “or is this crazy?”

His reply was simple and to the point, “It is truly crazy!”

As Kunsang, Wangchuk, and I were walking back to the village in a merry mood, a black dog was laying in front of someone’s house. “Oh, look,” I said, “I think it has a white spot!” At that moment the dog jumped to its feet, the hair on its spine bristling. It lowered its head and growled.

“Don’t touch my shit,” Kunsang growled back like a ventriloquist, without moving his lips. “*Don’t touch my shit!*”

“Smart dog,” he said, “maybe the incarnation of some lama. I don’t know. Some crazy bad lama!”



Géshipa and Kunsang
Yoksum, 2006