

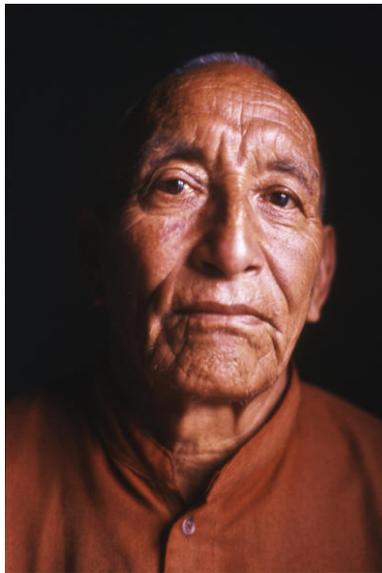
A Step Away from Paradise

EXCERPT No. 6

Lama Tashi

From Chapter 21, The Aftermath

When I went to Shrimoling to investigate this story, I was greeted and instructed there by Lama Tashi, a large and powerfully built man who, at the age of eighty-one, exuded authority in everything he said and a strength of mind that matched his almost super-human size. A close disciple of Tulshuk Lingpa, and a learned lama in his own right, Lama Tashi was the *umzay*, or head of rituals, at the monastery in Shrimoling during Tulshuk Lingpa's time, a position he holds to this day. I had met others who were close to Tulshuk Lingpa, others who had studied the ancient writings concerning Beyul, others who, I was certain, when they spoke of such matters were only scratching the surface of their experience and sworn to secrecy concerning the depths—but none spoke with the weight, command, and certainty of Lama Tashi. Tulshuk Lingpa had chosen him to break the path through the deep snow on that fateful day, and I understood why: his faith was as solid as an ancient tree, his learning was well-founded, and though it was over forty years since that fateful day when he gashed open his head and broke his arm and three ribs in the white tide of snow, his large-boned frame was still wrapped a musculature like that of an athlete's. His high cheekbones and prominent eyebrows made me feel as if I were in the presence of an American Indian elder.



Lama Tashi, the *umzay* of the Shrimoling monastery

Over the course of the two extended visits I made to the monastery in Shrimoling, Lama Tashi and I spent hours sitting alternately in the monastery courtyard, wrapped in jackets to keep out the frosty summer wind that swept off the surrounding snowy peaks, and in the monastery kitchen, warming ourselves by the wood fire, drinking salted and buttered Tibetan tea. He not only answered my questions carefully, but thought deeply about our discussions and raised issues and topics he thought would be important for my research. He spoke with the reasoned authority of a learned professor, one for whom the reality of Beyul was an unshakable truth.

Writing this book put me in the presence of many who had given up everything to go to Beyul, those for whom the failure and tragic ending of the expedition caused not the slightest diminishment of their faith, those for whom Beyul remains a reality greater than the world we presently inhabit. It was by being in their presence, more than any reading I did on the subject or any discussions I had with people whose knowledge was from books, that I came to understand what it means to be on a quest for Beyul. And among all those I sought out in both the eastern and the western Himalayas, it was in Lama Tashi's presence that Beyul was the most palpable, an unmistakable and unshakable reality. Never did I feel closer to that crack than in his presence.



Lama Tashi performing a ritual at Shrimoling