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The Way of the White Clouds

Lama Anagarika Govinda

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Way of The White Clouds is the remarkable narrative of a pilgrimage which could not be made today. In 1948, Lama Anagarika Govinda made an unforgettable journey into Tibet before its invasion by the Chinese. His unique account is not only a spectacular and gloriously poetic story of exploration and discovery; it is also invaluable for its sensitive and clearly presented interpretation of the Tibetan tradition.

In the Foreword, Govinda first reveals he is interested in more than simple travelogue: 'Why is it that the fate of Tibet has become the symbol of all that present-day humanity is longing for.' In *The Way of The White Clouds,* he offers extraordinary descriptions of the landscape, monasteries and people of Tibet, a country very rarely visited at that time. He also describes the travels he made within being while there.

The Way of The White Clouds shows us what Tibet was really like before enormous change swept through it. We can also learn from the timeless spiritual explorations of its most unusual and articulate author, which explains why this book is still so interesting, relevant and helpful to us in the modern world today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1898 in Germany, Lama Anagarika Govinda was initiated into the Tibetan Gelug-pa sect. He was one of the most revered Western interpreters of Buddhism and the traditional Tibetan way of life. He died in California in 1985.

Also by Lama Anagarika Govinda

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The Way of the White Clouds

Lama Anagarika Govinda

RIDER
LONDON · SYDNEY · AUCKLAND · JOHANNESBURG

TO

LI GOTAMI

(Śākya Dölma)

MY COMPANION

IN THE LAND OF

THE THOUSAND BUDDHAS

Foreword

Why is it that the fate of Tibet has found such a deep echo in the world? There can only be one answer: Tibet has become the symbol of all that present-day humanity is longing for, either because it has been lost or not yet been realised or because it is in danger of disappearing from human sight: the stability of a tradition, which has its roots not only in a historical or cultural past, but within the innermost being of man, in whose depth this past is enshrined as an ever-present source of inspiration.

But more than that: what is happening in Tibet is symbolical for the fate of humanity. As on a gigantically raised stage we witness the struggle between two worlds, which may be interpreted, according to the standpoint of the spectator, either as the struggle between the past and the future, between backwardness and progress, belief and science, superstition and knowledge—or as the struggle between spiritual freedom and material power, between the wisdom of the heart and the knowledge of the brain, between the dignity of the human individual and the herd-instinct of the mass, between the faith in the higher destiny of man through inner development and the belief in material prosperity through an ever-increasing production of goods.

We witness the tragedy of a peaceful people without political ambitions and with the sole desire to be left alone, being deprived of its freedom and trampled underfoot by a powerful neighbour in the name of ‘progress’, which as ever must serve as a cover for all the brutalities of the human race. The living present is sacrificed to the moloch of the future, the organic connection with a fruitful past is destroyed for the chimera of a machine-made prosperity.

Thus cut off from their past, men lose their roots and can find security only in the herd, and happiness only in the satisfaction of

their ephemeral needs and desires. For, from the standpoint of ‘progress’ the past is a negligible, if not negative, value, bearing the stigma of imperfection and being synonymous with backwardness and ‘reaction’.

What, however, is it that distinguishes man from the animal, if not the consciousness of the past, a consciousness which stretches beyond his short life-span, beyond his own little ego, in short, beyond the limitations of his momentary time-conditioned individuality? It is this wider and richer consciousness, this oneness with the creative seeds hidden in the womb of an ever-young past, which makes the difference, not only between the human and the animal consciousness, but between a cultured and an uncultured mind.

The same is true for nations and peoples. Only such nations are truly civilised, or better, truly cultured, which are rich in tradition and conscious of their past. It is in this sense that we speak of Tibet as a deeply cultured nation, in spite of the primitive conditions of life and the wildness of nature prevailing over the greater part of the country. In fact, it is the very harshness of life, and the unrelenting struggle against the powers of nature, that has steeled the spirit of its inhabitants and built their character. Herein lies the unconquerable strength of the Tibetan, which in the end will prevail over all external powers and calamities. This strength has shown itself throughout Tibet’s history. Tibet has been overrun more than once by hostile powers and has gone through worse calamities than the present one—as in the times of King Langdarma, who usurped the throne of Lhasa and persecuted Buddhism with fire and sword. But the Tibetans never bowed to any conqueror or to any tyrant. When the hordes of Genghis Khan drowned half the world in blood and Mongols overran the mighty Chinese empire and threatened to conquer Tibet, it was the spiritual superiority of Tibet that saved its independence, by converting Kublai Khan and his people to Buddhism and transforming this warlike race into a peaceful nation. Nobody has yet entered Tibet without falling under its spell, and who knows whether the Chinese themselves, instead of converting

the Tibetans to Communism, may not be subtly transformed in their ideas like the Mongolian hordes of yore.

One thing is sure, and that is, that while the Chinese are trying their utmost to crush Tibet by brutal force, the spirit of Tibet is gaining an ever-increasing influence upon the world—just as the persecution of the early Christians by the might of the Roman empire carried the new faith into the remotest corners of the then-known world, converted a small religious sect into a world-religion and finally triumphed over the very empire that had tried to crush it.

We know that Tibet will never be the same again, even if it regains its independence, but this is not what really matters. What matters is that the continuity of Tibet's spiritual culture, which is based on a *living* tradition and a conscious connection with its origins, should not be lost. Buddhism is not opposed to change—in fact, it is recognising it as the nature of all life—it is, therefore, not opposed to new forms of life and thought or to new discoveries in the fields of science and technique.

On the contrary, the challenge of modern life, the widening horizon of scientific knowledge, will be an incentive to explore the very depths of the human mind and to rediscover the true meaning of the teachings and symbols of the past, which had been hidden under the accumulated dross of centuries. Much that had been merely accepted as an article of faith, or that had become a matter of mere routine, will again have to be consciously acquired and resuscitated.

In the meantime, however, it is our task to keep alive the remembrance of the beauty and greatness of the spirit that informed the history and the religious life of Tibet, so that future generations may feel encouraged and inspired to build a new life on the foundations of a noble past.

The Way of the White Clouds as an eye-witness account and the description of a pilgrimage in Tibet during the last decenniums of its independence and unbroken cultural tradition, is the attempt to do justice to the above-mentioned task, as far as this is possible within the frame of personal experiences and impressions. It is not a

travelogue, but the description of a *pilgrimage* in the truest sense of the word, because a pilgrimage distinguishes itself from an ordinary journey by the fact that it does not follow a laid-out plan or itinerary, that it does not pursue a fixed aim or a limited purpose, but that it carries its meaning in itself, by relying on an inner urge which operates on two planes: on the physical as well as on the spiritual plane. It is a movement not only in the outer, but equally in the inner space, a movement whose spontaneity is that of the nature of all life, i.e. of all that grows continually beyond its momentary form, a movement that always starts from an invisible inner core.

It is for this reason that we begin our description with a prologue in one of the temples of Tsaparang, a poetic vision corresponding to that inner reality (or core) which contains the germs of all outer events that later on unfold themselves before our eyes in temporal succession.

In the great solitude and stillness of the abandoned city of Tsaparang and in the mysterious semi-darkness of its temple-halls, in which the spiritual experiences and achievements of countless generations seemed to be projected into the magic forms of images —an insight into hidden connections dawned upon me, which gave a new perspective to my life and revealed apparently accidental events and human relationships as being parts of a meaningful interplay of psychic forces. The coincidence of certain happenings and experiences, which are not causally connected and therefore not time-conditioned, seem to have their origin in a time-free dimension, which can be experienced only on a higher level of consciousness.

Indeed, the temples of Tsaparang seemed to be lifted out of the stream of time; preserving in them the concentrated atmosphere of a whole epoch of Tibetan culture. And this atmosphere grew in intensity the longer one dwelled in it, until the images took on a life of their own and an almost supernatural reality. Their very presence filled the temples with the voices of an undying past. What, therefore, may appear to the reader as merely poetical imagination, contains a deeper reality than any matter-of-fact description of outer

events and situations could ever have conveyed, because these events and facts become meaningful only, if seen against the background of inner experience.

Thus the pilgrimage in the outer space is actually the mirrored reflection of an inner movement or development, directed towards a yet unknown, distant aim which, however, is intrinsically and seed-like contained in the very direction of that movement. Herefrom springs the readiness to cross the horizons of the known and the familiar, the readiness to accept people and new environments as parts of our destiny, and the confidence in the ultimate significance of all that happens and is in harmony with the depth of our being and the universality of a greater life.

Just as a white summer-cloud, in harmony with heaven and earth, freely floats in the blue sky from horizon to horizon, following the breath of the atmosphere—in the same way the pilgrim abandons himself to the breath of the greater life that wells up from the depth of his being and leads him beyond the farthest horizons to an aim which is already present within him, though yet hidden from his sight.

In Tibetan Buddhism the symbol of the cloud is of such far-reaching importance, that a glance upon Tibetan Thankas (scrolls) or temple-frescoes would suffice to convince the beholder. The figures of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas (enlightened beings), saints, gods and genii manifest themselves from cloud-formations which surround their haloes. The cloud represents the creative power of the mind, which can assume any imaginable form. The white cloud especially (or even a cloud shining in delicate rainbow-colours) is regarded as the ideal medium of creation for the enlightened or enraptured mind, which manifests itself on the plane of meditative vision as *sambhogakāya*, the mind-created 'body of delight'.

Even the earlier Sanskrit-Buddhism speaks of the 'Cloud of Truth' or the 'Cloud of the Universal Law' *(dharma-megha),* from which descends the rain of bliss and liberating knowledge upon a world burning with passions.

Thus the 'White Cloud' becomes the symbol of the Guru's wisdom and compassion, and therefore 'the Way of the White Clouds' hints

at the same time at the way of spiritual unfoldment, the way of a pilgrimage that leads to the realisation of final completeness.

The relationship to the Guru, the highest teacher, is beautifully expressed in the Tibetan *Song of the Eastern Snow Mountain:*

'On the peak of the white snow mountain in the East
A white cloud seems to be rising towards the sky.
At the instance of beholding it, I remember my teacher
And, pondering over his kindness, faith stirs in me.'[1]

1· 'Quoted in Tibetan and translated by Johan van, Manen. Asiatic Society, Calcutta 1919.

PART ONE

THREE VISIONS

The Poet's Vision: Prologue in the Red Temple of Tsaparang

Clothed in facts
truth feels oppressed;
in the garb of poetry
it moves easy and free.

Rabindranath Tagore

IT WAS A stormy night over the rocks and ruins of Tsaparang, the abandoned capital of the once powerful kingdom of Western Tibet. Clouds were drifting across the sky, alternately hiding and revealing the full moon, throwing its ghostly spotlights upon the gigantic stage on which history played one of its immortal dramas. Immortal? Yes: because it was the same old theme of the impermanency of all things, the wondrous play of power and beauty, spiritual achievement and worldly splendour.

The power vanished, while beauty still hovered over the ruins and in the works of art, which had been created patiently and humbly under the shadow of power. The splendour crumbled while the spirit of culture and devotion retired into far-off hermitages and survived in the words and deeds of saints and scholars, poets and artists—illustrating the words of Lao-tse, that what is yielding and tender belongs to the realm of life, and what is hard and strong belongs to the realm of death.

The fate of Tsaparang is sealed. The work of man and the work of nature have become almost indistinguishable. The ruins have taken the form of rocks, and rocks stand out like Cyclopean buildings. The whole huge mountain looks like one huge block of marble, out of which a fairy city has been carved, with lofty castles, towers, and turrets which seem to touch the clouds, with mighty walls and battlements on perpendicular rocks, which on their part are honeycombed with hundreds and hundreds of caves.

The changing light of the moon made all this still more unreal, like a vision that flared up and disappeared as unexpectedly as it

came into existence.

The great Red Temple of Buddha Śākyamuni was filled with darkness and silence. Only from the golden face of the giant image of Buddha Śākyamuni a soft light seemed to radiate and to be reflected faintly on the golden images of the Dhyāni-Buddhas, seated on both sides below his throne.

Suddenly a tremor, accompanied by the rumbling sounds of falling masonry, shook the walls of the temple. The wooden shutters above the head of Buddha Śākyamuni sprang open, and the Buddha's face was lit up brightly by the rays of the full moon flooding the whole temple with a pale light.

At the same time the air was filled with the moaning and groaning of innumerable voices. It was as if the whole building were groaning under the weight of the many centuries of its existence. A huge crack appeared by the side of the White Tārā, almost touching one of the flowers flanking her beautiful throne.

The spirit who inhabited this flower rushed out in fear, and with clasped hands prayed to Tārā: 'Oh, Thou Saviouress of all who are in danger, save us, save this sacred place from destruction!'

Tārā looked with merciful eyes in the direction from where the voice came and asked: 'Who art thou, little spirit?'

'I am the Spirit of Beauty, living in this flower by your side.'

Tārā smiled her motherly smile and, pointing towards the other side of the temple, replied:

'Among the priceless treasures of wisdom which are collected in those ancient half-destroyed manuscripts, heaped up in the corner, there is one called Prajñāpāramitā. In it these words of the Tathagāta are recorded:

'"Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream."'

The Spirit of Beauty had tears in his eyes: 'Oh, how true are these words, how true! And where there is beauty, even for a flashing

moment, there some immortal chord is touched in us. Yes, we are all in a great dream, and we hope to awaken from it, as our Lord the Tathāgata, who in his mercy appears before us in his dream-form in order to guide us towards enlightenment.'

The Spirit of Beauty, while speaking thus, bowed down towards the gigantic statue of Buddha Śākyamuni, which had come to life like all the other images in this magic hour.

'It is not for myself,' the Spirit continued, 'that I pray for help. I know that all the forms which we inhabit have to perish—as even the priceless words of the Tathāgata, stored up in those dust-covered manuscripts. But what I pray for is: let them not perish before they have fulfilled the purpose for which they were created; let them not perish before we have delivered the great message which is embodied in them.

'I, therefore, pray to thee, O mother of all suffering beings, and to all the Buddhas here present, to have mercy upon those among humans whose eyes are covered with only a little dust, and who would see and understand if only we would linger a little in these our dream-forms until our message has reached them or has been handed on to those who are able to spread it for the benefit of all living beings.

'Our Lord Śākyamuni himself was deterred thus by the gods from entering Parinirvāṇa after the attainment of Perfect Enlightenment. May I appeal to him again with the same motive and take my refuge in him and all his innumerable forms of appearance.'

Again he bowed with clasped hands before his forehead towards the mighty, radiating figure of Śākyamuni and to all the assembled Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Tārā raised her hands in a tender attitude of blessing and wish-granting, and Śākyamuni's radiant features smiled in approval.

'The Spirit of Beauty has spoken the truth and his heart is sincere. And how could it be otherwise? Is not beauty the greatest messenger and servant of truth? Beauty is the revelation of harmony through forms, whether visible or audible, material or immaterial. However transient the forms may be, the harmony they express and embody

belongs to the eternal realm of the spirit, the innermost law of truth, which we call Dharma.

'Had I not expressed this eternal Dharma through perfect harmony of word and thought, had I not appealed to humanity through the spirit of beauty, my teaching would never have moved the hearts of men, it would never have survived even one generation.

'This temple is doomed to destruction like those precious manuscripts, in which ardent disciples have recorded my words with infinite pain and devotion. But others have copied them and carried on my teachings both in word and deed. In a similar way the work of those devoted artists and saints who created this sanctuary may be saved for future generations.

'Thy wish shall be granted, Spirit of Beauty! Thy form, as well as that of the others inhabiting this temple, shall not perish until their message has been delivered to the world, their sacred purpose fulfilled.'

A stir went through the rows of Dhyāni-Buddhas inhabiting the temple.

Akṣobhya, whose nature is as vast and immutable as space, said: 'I will give stability to this sanctuary until it has fulfilled its purpose.'

Ratnasambhava, whose nature is gift-bestowing, said: 'I will bestow the gift of the Dharma on those who are ready to receive it. I will inspire the generosity of those who are able to contribute to the preservation of the Dharma.'

Amitābha, whose nature is infinite light, said: 'Those who have eyes to see, I shall make them see the beauty of the Dharma. And those who have minds to understand, I shall make them discern the profound truth of the Dharma.'

Amoghasiddhi, whose nature is to accomplish the works of the Dharma by the magic power of compassion, penetrating the four quarters, the ten directions, of the universe, said: 'Those who are fit to do the work of the Dharma, I will inspire them with energy and compassion.'

Vairocana, who is the embodiment of the all-comprising reality of the Dharma, said: 'I will combine all your efforts and direct them

towards the individuals ready for this task.' And with his heavenly eye penetrating the four directions of the universe he said: 'Even in this age of strife and spiritual decay there are some saintly men, and among them in this very country of Tibet there lives a great hermit, whose abode is in the Southern Wheat Valley. His name is Lama Ngawang Kalzang. I shall request him to go forth from his retreat into the world and kindle the flame of the Dharma in the hearts of men.

'I shall call him through the mouth of the Great Oracle to the sacred spot, where heaven and earth meet, and where Padmasambhava, the great apostle of the Buddha-Dharma, left the traces of his magic power in the miraculous spring of Chorten Nyima. In the utter solitude and purity of this place I shall allow the radiance of our transcendent forms to appear before him. Having acquired during long years of meditation the power to communicate his visions to others, he will open their eyes to the eternal beauty of Buddhahood and guide those who will be able to save these our perishing forms from oblivion, so that all who understand the language of beauty will be inspired and uplifted and be put upon the path of deliverance.'

2

The Guru's Vision

A lonely hermitage on a mountain peak,
Towering above a thousand others—
One half is occupied by an old monk,
The other by a cloud!

Last night it was stormy
And the cloud was blown away;
After all a cloud is not equal
To the old man's quiet way.

Ryokwan

THE LAMA NGAWANG Kalzang had been meditating for twelve years in various caves and retreats in the wilderness of the mountains of Southern Tibet. Nobody knew him, nobody had heard of him. He was one of the many thousands of unknown monks who had received his higher education in one of the great monastic universities in the vicinity of Lhasa, and though he had acquired the title of Géshé (i.e. Doctor of Divinity), he had come to the conclusion that realisation can only be found in the stillness and solitude of nature, as far away from the noisy crowds of market-places as from the monkish routine of big monasteries and the intellectual atmosphere of famous colleges.

The world had forgotten him, and he had forgotten the world. This was not the outcome of indifference on his part but, on the contrary, because he had ceased to make a distinction between himself and the world. What actually he had forgotten was not the world but his own self, because the 'world' is something that exists only in contrast to one's own ego.

Wild animals visited him in his caves and made friends with him, and his spirit went out in sympathy to all living beings. Thus he never felt lonely in his solitude, and enjoyed the bliss of emancipation, born out of the exalted visions of Dhyāna.

One day a herdsman in search of new grazing grounds had lost his way in the inaccessible wilderness of rocks high above the valley when he heard the rhythmic beats of a *damaru* (a small hour-glass-like hand-drum, used by Lamas and wandering ascetics during their invocations) mingled with the silvery sound of a ritual bell. At first he did not believe his ears, because he could not imagine that any human being could exist in this forbidding place. But when the sound came again and again fear filled him, because if these sounds had no human origin then they could only have some supernatural cause.

Torn between fear and curiosity, he followed the sound, as if drawn by the irresistible force of a magnet, and soon he saw the figure of a hermit, seated before a cave, deeply absorbed in his devotional practice. The hermit's body was lean but not emaciated, and his face serene, lit up with the fire of inspiration and devotion. The herdsman immediately lost all fear, and after the hermit had finished his invocations he confidently approached the Lama and asked for his blessing.

When the hermit's hand touched the crown of his head he felt a stream of bliss flowing through his body, and he was filled with such unspeakable peace and happiness that he forgot all the questions he had wanted to ask, and hurried down into the valley to bring the happy news of his discovery to the people there.

These people at first could hardly believe the news, and when the herdsman led some of them to the hermit's cave they were wonder-struck. How could any human being live in this almost inaccessible mountain fastness? From where did he get his food, since nobody knew of his existence? How could he endure the hardships of winter, when the mountains were covered with snow and ice and even the smallest footpaths were obliterated, so that neither fuel nor food could be obtained? Certainly only a hermit endowed with superhuman yogic powers could survive under such conditions.

The people threw themselves at the feet of the Hermit-Lama, and when he blessed them they felt as if their whole being was transformed into a vessel of peace and happiness. It gave them a foretaste of what every human being can attain to when he realises

the dormant powers of light, which are buried like seeds deep within his soul.

The Hermit-Lama merely made them participate in the bliss of his own achievement, so that they might be encouraged to follow the same path towards liberation.

The rumour of the wondrous hermit spread in the valleys like wildfire. But, alas, only those who were strong enough could venture to climb up to the hermit's cave, and since there were many who were thirsting for spiritual guidance, the people of the valley implored the Lama to settle among them for the benefit of all who needed his help. The hermit knew that the hour had come for him to return to the world of men, and true to his Bodhisattva-vow he renounced the bliss of solitude for the welfare of the many.

There was a very small and poor monastery in the valley from which the people had come, called the Monastery of the White Conch (Dungkar Gompa). It was situated on a steep hill with a rocky crest in the middle of a fertile wheat-growing valley called Tomo ('To' = wheat). This place was given to the Hermit-Lama, who from now on was known as 'Tomo Géshé Rimpoché', 'The Learned Jewel of the Wheat Valley'.

Soon monks and laymen came from far and wide to learn at the feet of Tomo Géshé, and in a very short time the Monastery of the White Conch grew into an important place of study and worship, with beautiful temples and spacious living-quarters. In the great hall of the main temple Tomo Géshé erected a gigantic golden statue of Buddha Maitreya, the Coming One, as a symbol of the spiritual future and rebirth of the Eternal Truth of the Dharma, which is reincarnated in every Enlightened One and is to be rediscovered in every human heart.

Tomo Géshé, however, did not content himself with the success of his work at Dungkar. He erected statues of Maitreya in many other places and made the followers of the Buddha-Dharma conscious of the fact that it was not sufficient to bask in the glories of the past, but that one must take active part in the shaping of the future, and thus make it possible for the coming Buddha to appear in this world by preparing our minds for his reception.

In the midst of all these activities an event took place which was as startling as the Hermit-Lama's discovery and return to the world.

It came about through the intervention of the State Oracle of Lhasa (Nächung), which directed Tomo Géshé to make a pilgrimage to Chorten Nyima, a place sacred to Padmasambhava, who was the first to establish Buddhism in Tibet and who, therefore, is held in the highest esteem, especially by the older schools of Tibetan tradition.

This is of particular significance because it throws light upon the interesting fact that one of the most important events in Tomo Géshé's life was thus connected with the earliest period of Tibetan Buddhism, in which Western Tibet—and especially Tsaparang—played an important part.

Chorten Nyima is situated in one of the highest parts of the Tibetan plateau near the northern border of Sikkim. The place is wide and open, with snow-peaks here and there piercing the deep blue sky characteristic of these altitudes. It is a place where heaven and earth meet on equal terms, where the landscape has the vastness and rhythm of the open sea, and the sky the depth of universal space. It is a place where you feel near to the celestial bodies, where sun and moon are your neighbours and the stars your friends.

And here it happened that those very Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who inspired the artists of Tsaparang and took visible shape through their hands, appeared again in visible form before the eyes of Tomo Géshé Rimpoché. They appeared against the dark blue sky, as if woven of light, dazzling in all the colours of the rainbow, while slowly moving from the eastern to the western horizon.

The vision was first seen by the Rimpoché alone, but just as a great artist is able to make his visions visible to others by re-creating them in various materials, the Guru, by the creative power of his mind, made this wonderful vision visible to all who were present. Not all of them were able to see the full extent of it, or to see it as completely as the Guru. It varied according to the capacity or receptivity of the individual mind.

It is not possible for anybody who was not present, and perhaps even for those who were, to put into adequate words the sublime beauty and the profound effect of this vision upon the beholders. However, in the Śūraṅgama Sūtra we find the description of a similar event (said to have taken place in the presence of Buddha Śākyamuni), of which a paraphrase may serve as the nearest approach to the vision of Chorten Nyima.

'The Blessed Lord, sitting upon the throne in the midst of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas from all the ten quarters of the universe, manifested his transcendental glory, surpassing them all. From his hands and feet and body radiated supernal beams of light that rested upon the crown of each Buddha and Bodhisattva assembled here.

'And equally from the hands and feet and bodies of all those Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the ten quarters of the universe went forth rays of glorious brightness that converged upon the crown of the Lord Buddha, and upon the crowns of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and Saints present.

'At the same time, the waters and waves of brooks and streams were singing the music of the Dharma, and all the intersecting rays of brightness were like a net of splendour, set with jewels and over-arching them all.

'Such a marvellous sight had never been imagined and held all who were present in silence and awe. Unwittingly they passed into the blissful state of Samādhi. And upon them all an unspeakable peace and happiness descended like a gentle rain of soft petals of many different-coloured lotus-blossoms, all blending together and being reflected into the open space of heaven in all the tints of the spectrum.

'Moreover, all the differentiations of mountains and waters and rocks and plants, and all that makes up our common world, blended into one another and faded away, leaving only the indescribable experience of primordial unity—not dull and inert, but vibrant with rhythmic life and light, with celestial sounds of songs and harmonies, melodiously rising and falling and merging and then fading away into silence.'

After the party had returned to Dungkar Gompa each of the eyewitnesses described what he had seen, and from the combined records, with the final sanction of the Guru (who reluctantly gave in to the wishes of his disciples to have the scene recorded in the form of a fresco), the painting was conscientiously executed.

One of the last witnesses of this memorable incident is the present abbot of Dungkar Gompa. He not only gave his permission to take photographs of this interesting fresco in one of Tomo Géshé's private apartments, but explained every detail of the painting, while relating his own experiences of this pilgrimage. He pointed out what he had seen with his own eyes, and also what he had not been able to see, but what apparently had been visible to others. He also mentioned the strange fact that the vision had remained visible for hours, so that all who saw it could observe and point out to each other the minutest details.

This vision had far-reaching effects upon Tomo Géshé as well as upon his disciples. It invested him with that superior authority which in Tibet is ascribed only to Tulkus, i.e. whose in whom the Bodhisattva-spirit, or the ideal of Buddhahood, has taken firm root, so that they have become its living embodiment. They have the power to direct their future rebirths according to the needs of their fellow-men.

And from now on Tomo Géshé conceived the idea to bring the teachings of the Enlightened Ones not only to the people of his own country but to the world at large, irrespective of race, caste, colour, or creed.

And so he stepped out of his quiet valley and travelled all over the countries of the Himalayas and to the sacred places of Buddhism in India. And wherever he went he planted hope and inspiration in the hearts of men; he healed the sick, taught those who were ready to receive the truth of the Dharma, and left in his wake many a disciple to carry on the work which the Buddhas had ordained him to do.

3

The Monastery of Yi-Gah Chö-Ling

IN ORDER TO understand the significance of events in our lives, in fact, in order to perceive the strange patterns of our destiny (which according to Buddhist conviction are the outcome of our own Karma, our own former deeds), which condition our present thoughts and actions, we have to look back from time to time and trace the origin and the course of the main threads of the complicated fabric which we call life.

Sometimes a glance, a few casual words, fragments of a melody floating through the quiet air of a summer evening, a book that accidentally comes into our hands, a poem or a memory-laden fragrance, may bring about the impulse which changes and determines our whole life.

While writing this, the delicate resinous scent of Tibetan incense is wafted through the shrine-room of my little hermitage and immediately calls up the memory of the place where for the first time I became acquainted with this particular variety. I see myself seated in the dimly lit hall of a Tibetan temple, surrounded by a pantheon of fantastic figures, some of them peaceful and benevolent, some wild and frightening, and others enigmatic and mysterious; but all full of life and colour, though emanating from the depth of dark shadows.

I had taken refuge in this temple during a terrible blizzard which for days on end covered the roads with snow and ice. The suddenness and violence of the storm were something which even the local people had not experienced in their lifetime, and for me, who had come straight from Ceylon clad only in the yellow robes of a Theravāda monk and a light woollen shawl, the contrast was such that I seemed to live in a weird dream. The monastery itself, situated on a mountain-spur jutting out high above the deep valleys which surround the Darjeeling range, seemed to be tossed about in a