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Pema Tseden

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The Doctor

Acknowledgements

This work was translated from Tibetan and presented by Françoise Robin is head of the Tibetan Studies section at Inalco (France), where she teaches Tibetan language and literature. Her research focuses on the contents, dynamics and social implications of contemporary literature in Tibetan language in the People's Republic of China. She has recently turned her attention to women's writings, as well as to the emerging Tibetan cinema. Besides scholarly articles on these topics and editing of special issues in various journals, she has also published many French translations of contemporary Tibetan literature.

The Doctor

Pema Tseden
(Padma Tshe brtan)
Translated from
Tibetan and presented
by Françoise Robin

1.

The day has broken. The river is flowing unceasingly. A few leaves grow from the young tree recently planted by the riverbank. The spring air is still a little cold and an iced wind blows unceasingly.

The sun slowly rises from east. Man A and Woman A crouch by the young tree and gaze at the leaves that grow on the trunk.

Man A says, without a blink:

“It’s only been a few days since this tree was planted, but its leaves are already growing. How strong vital force is!”

Woman A, without blinking an eye either, replies:

“Vital force will undergo birth, old age and death, like this tree. When one thinks about it, human life is totally absurd.”

Man A sighs deeply and says:

“Human beings are just like trees. Upon reflection, it is completely absurd.”

Woman A also sighs deeply:

“The world and *samsara* are utterly meaningless.”

Man A says, a wise air on his face:

“But the difference between the two is that human beings have faith and trees don’t.”

Woman A says, nodding her head:

“Right. With faith in the Three Jewels, life force acquires a meaning, in spite of its impermanence.”

Man A and Woman A, hands joined, pray:

“I take refuge in the Three Jewels.”

Man A and Woman A get up and scrutinise the opposite bank of the river. The boatman there is looking back at them.

Man A, upon seeing the boatman, calls out:

“Hey! What have you seen?”

The boatman replies in a loud voice:

“Nothing, I haven’t seen a thing.”

Woman A, too, calls him out:

“Pray watch carefully! The doctor is about to come.”

The boatman turns around. He glances and looks back at them. He shouts:

“No, I cannot see anything.”

Man A and Woman A sit again by the tree.

Man A sighs and says:

“If the doctor does not come on time, it will be extremely serious.”

“He’s about to come. It has been over one month since we sent him an invitation letter.”

Woman A sighs too.

Man A says, sighing ceaselessly:

“One fourth of the inhabitants of our Earth community has been stricken by ‘mnemokleptia,’ and the disease is still spreading. It’s really terrifying.”

Woman A stops sighing:

“By the Three Jewels! Will the doctor be able to cure this disease?”

Man A’s face instantly expresses confidence, as he says:

“There have been doctors in the human world for two millenia, people say. It is also said that an epidemic of ‘mnemokleptia’ strikes human beings once every century. Doctors have acquired excellent expertise in this field, so we could trust them completely.”

Having thus spoken, Man A looks at the opposite bank of the river, still with a confident look on his face.

Woman A stretches and says:

“I pray for the doctor to arrive on time.”

A din can be heard in the distance. Man A and Woman A turn around and look to where the noise comes from. A vehicle bursts and stops near them. The vehicle is wrapped in the dust that it raises. After the dust has settled, several people get out, whispering to each other.

One of them gets nearer and tells Man A and Woman A:

“We come from the Sun community, of which I am the head. We flee because we fear that our community be contaminated by ‘mnemokleptia,’ on account of your community.”

Man A asks, astonished:

“What? You are from the Sun community? How come I have never heard of it?”

The man replies, with a distant air:

“It is because you have not seen much in life. Tell me the truth: how can we cross the river? If you help us, we’ll let you have our vehicle.”

Woman A asks nervously:

“Do you really mean what you’re saying? If you do, we’ll help you.”

The men say, nodding their heads:

“Yes, it is true, it is true. This beat up car is of no use to us anymore.”

Man A and Woman A wave their arms to call the boatman who is on the other side of the river.

The boatman comes closer slowly, rowing his boat.

The men, once on board, order:

“Go, quick!”

The boatman glances at Man A and Woman A and says anxiously:

“So many people on board of one single boat, this is very dangerous.”

But the men, without the slightest hesitation, say:

“It is even more dangerous to stay here. Hurry up.”

The boatman prays “By the Three Jewels!” and starts rowing towards the opposite bank. When they are about to reach it, one man falls into the water, but the others do not pay attention. They just gaze, eyes wide open, at the body being carried away by the current.

Once they have reached the other side, the men say:

“Sacrificing one individual or two for the sake of the group is fine.”

The boatman, upon seeing this, is agape, eyes goggled.

2.

The heat in the heart of summer is intense. The tree trunk and its branches have fully grown and leaves are about to shrivel in the midday heat. The river bed has dried up, its stones shine brightly.

The faces of Man A and Woman A are emaciated and cracked. It seems both have aged a little.

The man wipes swiftly the sweat on his face and says:

“What a heat! I would never have thought I would experience such an agony. Better to die than to live like this.”

Woman A wipes also swiftly the sweat on her face and says:

“Have you never heard the phrase ‘There is no happiness whatsoever in *samsara*, which is like the tip of a needle’? In *samsara*, everyone ineluctably experiences suffering. Without that, they could not feel the urge to grow.”

Man A says, waving his arms, as if he had not heard:

“By the Three Jewels! By the Three Jewels! I cannot stand it any longer. Better to die quickly than to undergo such agony!”

Woman A says with a sneer:

“Aren’t you driving the Three Jewels towards something evil, by saying such things? You are a breathing being. Could the Three Jewels, who cultivate love and compassion, make you die?”

At that moment, Man B, of the Earth community, runs towards them and says, out of breath:

“Everything’s going wrong. Everything’s going wrong. ‘Mnemokleptia’ has contaminated half of our community. Something terrible is in store.”

Man A says, fidgety:

“Alas! What to do? Why hasn’t the doctor arrived yet?”

Woman A, concerned, says:

“As long as the doctor does arrive, it is fine. We have been waiting for him here for the whole spring. What bothers me is that I still have some little things to do at home.”

Man A joins the palms of his hands: “By the Three Jewels! By the Three Jewels! May the doctor be here soon.”

A tractor comes near the tree in a racket.

Man A asks the driver:

“Where are you from? Where are you heading to?”

The driver replies, reluctantly:

“We come from the Moon community. We flee because we fear that ‘mnemokleptia’ that strikes your Earth community will contaminate us in our turn.”

The driver presses strongly on the accelerator and moves straight ahead from the river bank. Blue smoke rises from behind the vehicle.

Woman A can be heard saying:

“These people are amazing. Don’t they know that the doctor is due to come? What kind of an escape can be expected if fleeing like this?”

3.

The autumn wind blows fiercely. The leaves on the well-grown branches of the tree, withered, are falling. Man A’s forefront, that of Man B and that of Woman A are wrinkled and all look weary. The afternoon sun shines horizontally into their faces.

Suddenly, the sky is shrouded in dark clouds and a violent rain falls. Man A, Man B and Woman A take shelter under the tree.

A torrential rain keeps falling. One woman, Woman B, runs towards the tree. Her clothes are soaked by the rain, making her shiver.

With a trembling face, she says:

“All is lost, all is lost. Three quarters of our community have been affected by ‘mnemokleptia’. And the toll keeps rising.”

Woman A takes Woman B by the hand and tells her:

“By the Three Jewels! My parents, my siblings, my husband and my kids are still there. May the Three Jewels protect them!”

Woman B says, her face still trembling:

“Some cases of incest between parents and children and between brothers and sisters are happening in the community. Try as we might, we cannot prevent them. It is really terrifying.”

Man A says, worriedly:

“We have no option but to wait for the doctor, wholeheartedly. We have no choice.”

Man B sighs and says:

“But, that so-called ‘doctor,’ does he really exist after all? We have been waiting for him for two seasons without seeing were it only his shadow. Sometimes, I lose faith in him.”

“We have no other option but to wait for him. He will be able to cure this disease. But we are helpless.”

They leave the tree and call the boatman by his name. He is on the other side of the river and does not hear, as a strong rain keeps falling. He scrutinises the distance, totally motionless.

A hand-driven tractor, coming from nowhere, arrives by their side. A few men get down, and pester loudly while kicking it.

“This heap of junk cannot outdo a man when it comes to driving in the mud. For sure, driving it is out of the question any longer.”

Man A asks them:

“What is your community? I have the feeling that I have never met you before.”

They reply:

“We come from the Star community. We flee because we fear that ‘mnemokleptia’ that is striking your community may contaminate us. In times of need, this heap of junk is more useless than a human being.”

Seeing that they are about to leave, Woman B asks them:

“If you are going to flee, would you consider giving us your tractor? We badly need it.”

“Take it, take it! We didn’t know how to get rid of it.”

They head towards the river bank after saying that.

Man A stands in their way and warns them:

“The river is big now. If ever you venture there, there is a great danger that it carries you away.”

“Let it carry us away! We have no intention whatsoever to stay here anyway.”

Without heeding Man A’s warning, they go ahead.

Upon reaching the middle of the river bed, the current carries them away. No trace of them is left.

When Man A, Man B, Woman A and Woman B see this, their mouths agape, eyes fixed, say:

“It is really terrifying.”

4.

It is a freezing winter. The tree branches have grown in all directions, a pitiful sight. As the sun is about to disappear behind the mountains in the west, the sunset rays shine on the creased faces of Man A, Man B, Woman A and Woman B. The river has frozen into a thick layer of ice. The four of them, their necks stretched, are looking towards the opposite bank.

After a long time, they circle the old tree and make small talk.

“We are old now, like this tree. Our bodies will certainly not be able to bear such a cold weather.”

“By the Three Jewels! Down in this world, we have no option but waiting. I might as well die now. I do not feel any longer like waiting for this doctor who is not coming anyway.”

Man B asks, with a sigh:

“Don’t human beings spend their life waiting for something? But waiting for what, nobody knows. We have never seen this so-called ‘doctor’, so how could we know what we are waiting for?”

Woman B, contrary to the other three, does not sigh when she says:

“If you do not know what to expect, why wait then?”

The boatman’s eyes still look carefully the distance.

Man A sees his wife run towards him. He steps forward to welcome her.

Man A’s wife stares at his face as if she had lost something and she asks him:

“Who are you?”

The gaze of Man A becomes blurred, as if he too had lost something. He steps forward and asks Woman A:

“Who are you?”

The gaze of Woman A too becomes blurred. She steps forward and asks Man B:

“Who are you?”

The gaze of Man B too becomes blurred. He steps forward and asks Woman B:

“Who are you?”

The boatman then shouts in their direction:

“The doctor has arrived! The doctor has arrived!”

The doctor, followed by the boatman, runs in their direction, walking on the frozen river.

The gaze of Woman B becomes blurred. She asks the boatman, looking at him:

“Who are you?”

The gaze of the boatman becomes blurred too. He turns around, glances at the doctor and asks him:

“Who are you?”

The gaze of the doctor becomes blurred, as if he had lost something. He reflects for a while, examines himself carefully, and asks:

“Who am I?”



Pema Tsenden (born in 1969 in Amdo Tibet, Qinghai province) has reached a relative fame in the art world scene as the leading Tibetan art filmmaker of the 2000s and 2010s. His three feature films (*The Silent Holy Stone*, 2004; *Looking for Drime Kunden*, 2009; *Old Dog*, 2011) have won acclaim and reaped prizes at international art film festivals. For those who follow the film scene, Pema Tsenden is thus primarily a filmmaker. Still, Pema Tsenden began his public and artistic career as a fiction writer. He published his first short story, “Men and Dog” (Mi dang khyi) in 1994, and has been writing continuously since then.

Two collections of his short stories have been published so far in Tibetan language and a number of his works have also been translated into English, French, Japanese and German. One notable feature is his ability to write equally well in Chinese and in Tibetan, with different audiences in mind. His Tibetan short stories aim at a Tibetan readership, and take the Tibetan cultural background for granted, while his short stories published in Chinese, sometimes self-translated and adapted from a previous Tibetan version, are suited for a non-Tibetan—mainly Han Chinese—readership, and thus go to greater lengths to include and explain Tibetan cultural components. As his writing matures, he tends to write more often in Chinese, and with a non-lyrical, tongue in cheek, minimalist style, which differs from his more lyrical, naturalistic and, somehow classical, Tibetan language style of writing.

The short story translated here first appeared in 2004, and can be set apart from Pema Tsenden and most, if not all, other

Tibetophone Tibetan writers’ language fiction production, in that it is almost detached from any perceptible Tibetan ethnic background. In “The Doctor,” characters do not bear names other than A and B, their language is very plain and repetitive, a feature that has been deliberately kept in the translation, they do not exchange culturally-informed conversations, with the exception of references to Buddhism (samsara, suffering and the Three Jewels often appear in the text). “The Doctor” is thus a rare instance, among the vibrant world of Tibetan short stories, of a text that eludes almost any trace or hint of the ethnic origin of its author. This voluntary “dis-” or “unethnicization” is a relatively little treaded path for Tibetan writers, but it is gaining currency among a group of original and committed writers such as Kyabchen Dedrol, and we can expect to read more fictional texts in this guise in a near future.

Absurdity, helplessness, and waiting that set the tone of “The Doctor” may appear familiar to some Westerner readers. That is not surprising; this short story is modelled after *Waiting for Godot*, which Pema Tsenden has read in Chinese. His four main characters, who are only described through their talks, their hand gestures, and their motion but not their faces nor thoughts, are desperately waiting for a doctor who has been called to cure a fast spreading “mnemokleptia,” the “theft of memory,” that affects all communities. In the end, the doctor does come, but things turn out differently from what one expected.

What does Pema Tsenden mean by this disease? Is there a hidden script in the text? Does the collective loss of memory that affects communities one after the other in the short story, refer to loss of cultural values consecutive to the takeover of Tibet? Does it echo a universal human phenomenon, that of loss of tradition in the encounter with modernity? Does it reveal a deep existential anguish? All hypotheses are plausible and Pema Tsenden, in his usual manner, invites the reader to put forward her own exegesis, without giving any clue for a preferred interpretation.

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