

May 2016

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Recommended Citation

(no surname), Lhashamgyal and Robin, Françoise (2016) "Entrusted to the Wind," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 36 : No. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss1/18>



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Entrusted to the Wind

Acknowledgements

This work was translated by Françoise Robin.

Entrusted to the Wind

Lhashamgyal
Translated from Tibetan by
Françoise Robin

A child shouted, “Uncle Tantrist!¹ The wind has carried your book away!”

How stubborn was the untamed, scattering wind of over fifty years ago! The wind was illiterate, but it blew with insistence from an opening in the flap of the brown little tent. Its mischievous and invisible hands made the pages of the worn out and filthy little *pecha*² fly onto the ground with a ‘*shog*’ sound. Just before that, the volume had been lying open on a low, greasy pinewood table, waiting for the return of its owner who had gone out for a pee. But the wind had stirred quite some trouble. Then, it gently lifted the long hair on the forehead of the child who was sitting next to the fireplace, playing with a fat yellow cat by the earthen oven. The child pushed aside the door flap, stretched out his neck and shouted towards the nearby stone heap. Someone was standing next to it, back turned, dressed in a loose Tibetan robe, with a tantrist’s headgear. The man was peeing, facing the wind.

“It must have been the end of autumn then,” the old monk Lobzang said, turning over the *pecha* in a burgundy piece of cotton.

The wind has blown fifty years away. The child is now standing in front of me. While wind itself does not stir any trouble for now, the invisible energy called ‘time’ has. Time’s mischief has left its mark on the lines of the child’s face and has tinted the beard and eyebrows white. It might as well have been the light, fluttering wind, or the impalpable time. None of these entities are visible, but they are full of energy. But, are invisible phenomena totally beyond imagination?

“It must have been the end of autumn then,” said the old monk Lobzang, stroking his white beard. “The late tantrist,

as soon as he heard my shouts, turned around from where he was standing, peeing. The wind blew up the side lap of his burgundy dress, and he returned with a very firm pace. I can still see his figure as if it were in front of my eyes. Ah... He was such an impressive tantrist...” The old monk Lobzang, hands shaking, made a knot with the string of the book cover. “Such elders are a rare sight nowadays...”

“The old tantrist of the Zurtsa family was very famous in the remote Martrang valley. In fact, elders once said that the Zurtsa family had a very good pedigree. And so do you...” The old monk facing me was then telling me the story of Uncle tantrist, my relative, of whom I knew absolutely nothing about. Is time like the invisible wind? What the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family was referring to had by then disappeared somewhere in the universe and was nowhere to be seen. Wind usually blows across mountain valleys supposedly without leaving a visible trace, but I knew that the wind that had disappeared in the distance had definitely carried something away – even if it was only a minute, fine atom

So far, I have not paid much attention to the footprints of time on my mind. Every time I have left that big city to return home for a holiday, I have not perceived any real change in the earthen-hued mountain village where my umbilical cord has been discarded. And, because of this motionlessness, I, like most of today’s youth, am filled with sadness and scorn every time I think of this ring of homes, and my desperate eyes do not find even a sesame seed’s worth of value in thinking that this is my own.

Even the peaceful pale mud walls of my home village exude this feeling too. The mountains, the tortuous paths, the green valleys and hills, and even the number of white

pebbles on the stone cairn by the side of the grey side path cutting across the valley—none of these things seem to have changed, and they welcome me in their lap. Following the grey side path in the valley, I can reach the end of the valley in less time than it takes to drink a cup of tea. There, a group of monastic cells face south and a tiny assembly hall lies below a golden roof, emitting a feeble golden light, with a little oven for fumigation in front of it. A few stray dogs are lying next to the oven, their heads on the ground. I keep following this grey side path. I reach the monastery and enter old monk Lobzang's cell. It has been a long time since I last came here.

“So, you have become a learned person: maybe you are following your family's lineage?” he remarks. Every time he and I converse in his cell, sitting in front of the fireplace, I have the illusion that the wind of time has never been able to shake this very cell. In fact, I have only very occasionally returned for holidays in my home village ever since I had been left behind in the Eastern metropolis, like some object that everyone had forgotten. It has been two years since I last came here. But, as I face the old monk Lobzang next to the stove in this cell, everything that I saw and did here two years ago seems to be a mere duplicate of a more ancient time. Chronology is completely tumbled out in my mind. The isolated and quiet cell, this neat and clean room, the fragrance of incense, the pale wooden floor, the chest shining from ample polishing, the oven, the low table, the book, the monk—how familiar they are to me! Even the sun drops that shine across the window, the atoms swiftly moving in each sun drop, the dragon motif on the cup—they all are utterly unchanged, they remain as they were before. But, is there really no change at all? If the breeze of time has blown, it has definitely carried something away. When I ignore all outer elements to focus on old monk Lobzang, I can feel that time has taken something away. The glint in his eyes has faded a little, his beard has whitened a little, and his wrinkles have increased greatly in number and depth.

“You have grown more handsome this year.” Old monk Lobzang can see I have changed. “You increasingly resemble your great uncle.”

“When our tantrist reached your age, it coincided with 1958. That year, they took him to prison in the Tsaidam basin...” The old monk Lobzang narrates the story of my relative which he has already told me. Before, when the old monk Lobzang would tell me this story, it used to trigger a short-lived wave at the surface of my heart. I do not know why but, in the last two years, and although I was living faraway, old monk Lobzang's cell has often haunted me. I have been remembering again and again my distant rela-

tive's life story as told by old monk Lobzang, and a violent tremor has prevented my mind from finding peace

From what the old monk Lobzang remembers, my relative is in fact my late father's maternal uncle. The vigor of the invisible entity called ‘time’ has meant that this great uncle and myself have never crossed paths of time or space: when I arrived in this human world, he had already departed for another world. The wind of time had carried him away from this ring of homes.

Still, the old monk Lobzang said “Still, the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family had in fact not gone far away at all. His bee-like *namshé*³ had been granted the freedom to go at its will, and it did not go far at all.” Old monk Lobzang was filled with faith and an air of deep conviction. He slowly put back his cup of milk tea on the low table. He bent down, as if he wished to share a secret. Stretching out his head, he scrutinized me with his bulging eyes, which had lost their luster. “Do you remember the tantrist's sky funeral?” He stared into my eyes for a while. His sharp gaze was searching for something from deep within. The old monk's intense, scrutinizing stare made me feel uneasy. While I was standing there, an unusual and mischievous smile appeared on his face. Then, with a laugh, he said, “Who could forget that sky funeral?”

“The year after we proceeded with the funeral of the late tantrist, a little boy, as round as a golden stone, was born in the Zurtsa family.” And he went on, repeating once more the story he had told me before. This old man loved telling stories of days gone by. His capacity to remember, with precision and detail, the persons and events of several decades ago, was indeed surprising. It seemed he had just appeared yesterday from the crack of several decades back, or else he had absorbed himself in a time that conflated the present and the past.

“Hardly had you been born that you cried and you were such a pain to the ears...” Old monk Lobzang laughed with joy. “Who could have blamed you? The late tantrist was strongly committed to prayer. His bodily support had changed, but we know that some habits are like an engraving in stone, they leave a deep karmic imprint.” At first, the old monk Lobzang's words puzzled me. In his words, two persons' stories melted into a single one: the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family and myself. Although coming from two angles, they had become one.

At first, I did not quite understand what the old monk meant. But, later, he clarified his thoughts. “The old tantrist's bee-like *namshé*, roaming in the narrow *bardo*⁴ corridor, finally found a way to return. This was due to his *namshé* having developed a freedom to go at its will. In the

end, it returned, in pursuit of its land, its home, and its people.”

I jested, “The best timing for returning would be spring or summer. Otherwise, the bee-like *namshé* won’t find even a flower’s stem to land upon.”

“You... Don’t make fun of an old monk like me again...” Old monk Lobzang addressed me as if I were an old acquaintance.

I asked, “When have I ever teased you?”

“The bee-like *namshé* of the late tantrist landed on a flower which had newly blossomed in the Zurtsa family. *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ.*” The old monk Lobzang joined his hands in prayer.

“...” I did not reply to this. In fact, I did not even know what to say. This conversation had taken place such a long time ago. At that time, I was about to leave this round little village where my umbilical cord had been discarded and, before hitting the road, I had set foot on the small side path and had gone once more to the monastery. It was on that day that the old monk Lobzang had mentioned for the first time in a clear manner about my *namshé* being transferred from that of the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family.

When I was a child, the elders in my village would spend time in the sun, turning their prayer wheels. It feels like the wind of time back then was not as quick as that of today. Nights and days would follow each other over and again, endlessly, like the motion of prayer wheels in their hands. I had grown up next to these elders. They would tell me I was the *namshé* of the tantrist Uncle. Elder males would say, “Old tantrist of the Zurtsa family, come here and recite *maṇi* with us.” At that time, I would not pay attention. I did not know then what *namshé* was.

“Uncle tantrist. The wind has blown away your book.” Old monk Lobzang was facing me, and he was telling me about that late autumn day, over fifty years ago: at the end of that autumn, a nomadic family had invited the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family to perform rituals. The impressive old tantrist had been praying in a loud voice for about half a day. The housewife had poured so much tea that he had had to frequently go outside to urinate, his bladder bursting. Once, as he was standing by the stone heap, urinating, a cold autumn wind blew and lifted intermittently the lap of the untied Tibetan dress of the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family. He then heard a child shout something from inside the tent flap behind him

The child cried, “Uncle tantrist! The wind has blown your book away!”

When he heard him, the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family turned around and walked back towards the tent door. His pace was extremely firm. The mountain slope, fifty year ago, was serene. In the swamp close by, some cattle were looking for puddles of water and a snow grouse was calling [with the sound of] ‘*chudrug, chudrug,*’ from the midst of the azaleas facing the mountain.

The old tantrist of the Zurtsa family seated himself again, cross-legged, in front of the low, oily pinewood table at the rear of the tent. He undid the ivory rosary coiled around his wrist. “Boy, come over!” He waved at the child with a snotty nose standing at the entrance of the tent.

The boy released the fat yellow cat and walked timidly towards the back of the tent.

“On your way, pick up the pages of my religious book.” The child picked up the pages that the wind had scattered on the ground and placed them in the old tantrist’s hands.

The old tantrist from the Zurtsa family frowned as he proceeded to sort out the order of the scattered pages that the child had picked up. But he saw that the child had already replaced them back in proper order.

He exclaimed, “Oh! What a marvel, what a marvel!”

But the boy with snot dangling on his upper lip was standing in front of the old tantrist like a complete idiot.

The old tantrist from the Zurtsa family addressed the young boy. “Tss.... Do something with this snot!” and carried on, “Go, go. Haven’t you heard the grouse sing ‘*chudrug, chudrug*’? It is looking for its *chudrug*⁶ pounds of grain that it has lent to the partridge. Go and tell the grouse that the partridge is not here.”

The child cursorily sniffled his snot and went towards the entrance of the tent. Soon after that, the old tantrist heard the child imitate the call of the partridge, saying, “Okay, okay.”

“When I think about it now,” old monk Lobzang brought the milk tea bowl to his lips, took one mouthful, and swallowed the tea in one gulp, his Adam’s apple moving up and down. He continued, “When I think about it now, the late tantrist seemed to have had a premonition of what my life would be, after I would leave the tent.” Then he enjoined me, “Have some tea, have some tea.”

The child who, on that day of a late autumn fifty years ago, had put back in order the pages of the religious book that the wind had blown away (an act that the old tantrist had considered as auspicious), was none other than the old monk now standing in front of me. He had since then entrusted his life to religion. The late old tantrist called the

boy's parents and when he shared his opinion, saying he had seen auspicious signs, the couple was moved as their vision was blurred by floods of tears

"A saying goes: 'Tibet is the world of auspicious signs.' If you entrust now your boy to the holy religion, it is absolutely sure that he will later develop a love for religion. It is possible that he used to be a religious person in his previous life." The old tantrist of the Zurtsa family was sitting cross-legged, at the rear of the tent, talking to the couple sitting at the entrance. At that moment, the child was still imitating the partridge, "Okay, okay," outside the tent.

"Soon after that, the 1958 movement started, and the old tantrist was taken away to a prison in the Tsaidam basin," recalled the old monk Lobzang. "When he returned from jail, his tantric braided hair had been completely shaven. The impressive tantrist of old days had become emaciated. He said that this was due to stomachache, extreme heat, hunger, thirst, and endless toil in the prison in the Tsaidam basin. *Om maṇi padme hūm.*" The old monk Lobzang became absorbed in the past. "He was stranded for more than ten years in jail."

As the old monk Lobzang rightly remembered, the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family was retained for ten years in the prison camp in the Tsaidam basin and, when he was released, the Cultural Revolution was just beginning. Undergoing various sessions of struggle, he was labeled a class enemy and a reactionary, and underwent all sorts of torture. Wind came back to my mind. As I was facing the old monk Lobzang, quietly, I thought once again of the invisible wind. Wind-like movements had now vanished in this part of the territory... What kind of trouble had the wind brought? And, still, in what direction of time had the wind carried away my great uncle? This was now impossible to see. But the old monk Lobzang had told me that the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family had not gone far away at all. And he told me once again about the sky funeral, thirty years back.

"The old tantrist could not recover from his stomach condition. Two years before his demise, villagers refrained from seeing him, even by his door. Night and day, he remained in the adjacent room of your family house." The old monk Lobzang carried on, with a secretive look, "At that time, it was still completely forbidden to pray. But after he entered the small adjacent room, the old tantrist would get up in the middle of the night, and would pray ceaselessly, it is said. Your parents knew this well. Come on! Don't tell me you don't know about it."

"Later, the situation worsened," the old monk Lobzang carried on.

A little more than thirty years ago, the stomach condition of the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family worsened and he became bed-ridden. The old man, as he was confined in bed, became extremely weak, so he called my parents to express his one final wish. It was twilight then. The sun-rays, golden and soft, radiated from the western Dzagan Mountain and illuminated the wall through the lattice window of the adjacent room.

The old tantrist of the Zurtsa family, lying in bed, spoke in a low voice. "This sunlight is so soft... this soft twilight sunlight is that of reincarnation. The sunlight of next life has now risen. This means that time has come for me, the old tantrist, to go." He gestured towards my parents, implying that he wanted them to raise him in bed.

After he had risen to a sitting position in bed, the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family slowly arranged his legs in a lotus position, as square as a dice, and addressed my parents once more. "Time has come for me to go. Each and every one's birth ends up in death, and no one can go against this. Look. The tradition holders in the portraits pasted on the wall have died one after the other, haven't they?" He was smiling a little while pointing at the celebrated masters' images pasted on the wall of his adjacent room.

The old tantrist of the Zurtsa family finally told them, "This short human life is like a small breeze. *Namshé* is like wind. So, after I'm gone, please entrust my corpse to the wind." Then, he slowly joined his hands, arranged a *mudra* posture, and he slowly closed his eyes.

"When I returned from my herding assignment, your father, calling me from the roof, asked me to visit them during the night," said the old monk Lobzang. "At that time, I had been forced to discard my monk's robes and I had been appointed as the cattle herder of the production brigade. As soon as I heard your father call me, I knew something bad had happened."

"When everything was dark, I went to your home. The old tantrist was sitting cross-legged in his bed, palms joined. He had already departed." The old monk Lobzang, wiping the tears that pooled in his eyes with a small handkerchief, carried on. "His tantric yogi hair had grown long again. He had not braided it for a long time and it covered half his face. He was absorbed in a *thukdam* meditative state. I informed your parents."

My parents, after they heard what the old monk Lobzang had to tell them, were at a loss what to do. In those years, struggle sessions were raging, attacking 'monsters and demons' superstition. What would they do if people were to see such a religious posture? It was a time when the red wind of terror was blowing. My great uncle had passed

away at such a time, but he put those who remained behind in an irrepressible state of fear.

“Remorse still oppresses me now. *Oṃ maṇi padme hūṃ*. I must confess something: we stretched out the limbs of the tantrist, trying to undo his *thukdam* posture, because we all feared at that time that someone may get hold of such a sight. But whatever force we exerted, he would not let go. What a negative act we performed then...”

Old monk Lobzang’s throat choked and his speech was unclear. In the end, my relatives decided to carry the corpse to the sky burial site that very night, and to wait for the vultures to descend.

They waited and waited, but not a single vulture even hovered above the corpse. It was a wintery scene: the wind was whistling, running like a madman across the funeral site and agitating the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family’s tantric yogi hair. He stood like the great meditators one hears about in oral tradition, sitting cross-legged at the sky funeral site, palms joined. From a distance, it looked exactly like he was alive, just muttering prayers.

“Vultures did not descend once in seven days. We were at a loss.”

Old monk Lobzang took to describe the proceedings of the funerals. “Vultures did not descend once in seven days, so we were all puzzled. When he was alive, he was such a great, formidable tantrist. Now that he had died, vultures would not descend. Isn’t it said that a bad reputation lasts longer than a lifetime? We were in trouble.”

So, after much pondering, people who were looking after the corpse left and asked the old monk Lobzang to warn the corpse that, if vultures still did not fly down, there would be no option now but to entrust it to earth.

“I told the late tantrist, ‘If you do not show any sign now, we have no option but to entrust you to earth.’ I know that if I said this nowadays to today’s youngsters, they would think this is a madman’s talk. But, hardly had I talked to the corpse that some yellow fluid dripped from his nostrils. Then, his *thukdam* state ended and he collapsed like a heap of stones by the Three Jewels.”

Old monk Lobzang had unconsciously joined his hands and he carried on. “By the Three Jewels! Right at that time, black vultures came in mass, flying towards us from the mountain Sinpo Dzagen.”

“If I told the events of that era to a person living today, they would not believe me. But I, the old monk, have seen it for real. My belief has not changed till now. And you have not changed either, that’s for sure,” he said to

me. “The following year, a baby boy, as round as a golden pebble, was born in your family. The bee-like *namshé* of the tantrist had fallen unto you.” Through his words again, the old tantrist from the Zurtsa family and myself had been reunited into one.

I had had too much tea, so I interrupted the conversation with the old monk Lobzang and headed outside for a pee. The mountains and the valleys of my home region, in front of this very high, small monastery, were pale and grey. A cold northern wind was blowing with a mad hum on all ridges and valleys. I stood for a while in the wind. The feeling of standing in the wind was beyond words. It was the feeling of a visible entity confronting an invisible power. What had the wind taken away? In other words, what had time taken away? Where was the old tantrist of the Zurtsa family? Had he been entrusted to the wind?

“Uncle! The wind has carried away the *pecha!*” shouted a child.

I was standing in the wind, absorbed by these questions that day, when I heard a child call from a monk cell behind me. I turned around and searched with my eyes: all monastic dwellings of the small monastery were silent and quiet, and the shouting child was nowhere to be seen.

Endnotes

1. In Amdo, a cotton-clad yogi is called a *hwon*, a tantrist. All endnotes provided by translator.
2. Unbound texts.
3. Consciousness.
4. State in between death and rebirth.
5. Prayers.
6. Sixteen.

Lhashamgyal (Lha byams rgyal) is a promising representative of the new generation of Tibetan fictional writers. Originally from Amdo, he now works as a researcher at the Tibetology Center in Beijing. He is the author of several well-received short stories (he is among the rare authors who were four times awarded a Sbrang char literary prize) and one novel, *Tibet's Beloved Child* (*Bod kyi gces phrug*, Beijing, 2012), which was translated into Japanese in 2014 by Professor Hoshi. His works describe today's new generation of Tibetans, and their insertion in a radically new social environment, that of China's Tibet.

Françoise Robin's research focuses on the contents, dynamics, and social implications of contemporary literature in the Tibetan language in the People's Republic of China. She has recently turned her attention to women's writings, as well as to emerging Tibetan cinema. In addition to scholarly articles on these topics and editing special issues in various journals, she has also published many French translations of contemporary Tibetan literature.

Translator's Note

Lhashamgyal (Lha byams rgyal) is one of the most promising young Tibetan authors of fiction. Between 2009 and 2015, four of his short stories have received the sought-after *Drangchar* (Sbrang char) prize, awarded only eight times since its inception in 2001. On his acceptance speech given in Xining in August 2015, Lhashamgyal insisted that, far from being a source of joy, the award should be interpreted as indicating a worrying lack of competitors on the contemporary fictional scene—thus underscoring a looming crisis in fiction writing in the Tibetan language, a major field of artistic activity since 1980 now yielding to other literary genres (mostly essays), arts (cinema), and perhaps signaling the decline of the use of Tibetan altogether.

Lhashamgyal's literary talent has been noted beyond Tibet as well. His semi-autobiographical novel, *Tibet's Beloved Child* (*Bod kyi gces phrug*, Beijing, 2012), which captures the childhood and coming of age of a group of young Tibetans of the author's generation, was republished by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala (2014), an unusual event for a text initially published in Tibet, that demonstrated the interest that this Amdo-born author has generated even among Tibetan exiles. The novel was also translated into Japanese by the linguist and literature specialist Hoshi Izumi (Tokyo University) and published in Japan in 2014.

Lhashamgyal was born in Amdo in 1977, holds a PhD from the Southwest Institute for Nationalities (Chengdu, 2014) and is currently working as a researcher in religious studies at the China Tibetology Center. Almost all of his writings revolve around the lack of anchoring and search for meaning among Tibetans of his generation in an ever-shifting world and many of his texts are inspired by his own experience of being an uprooted Tibetan in Beijing. He is currently working on the question of memory and remembrance among Tibetans.

The short story translated here takes as its core topic the belief in reincarnation. Through the interaction of three characters, a deceased tantric practitioner (*sngags pa*), an old monk and a young man, the various lives and attitudes towards reincarnation prevalent in three generations of Tibetans are portrayed: the tantric practitioner who died at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution symbolizes the pre-1950s generation, who grew up in a full-fledged, traditional Tibetan environment and never questioned reincarnation; the old monk, who was a young man during the Cultural Revolution, has witnessed the passage from a consistent Tibetan cultural environment to the advent of a Sinicized Tibet, as well as undergone huge hardships. Still, his beliefs are not shaken and he is adamant that his old master has returned to the village as a young boy. The young man, born towards the end of the Cultural Revolution and a friend of the old monk, belongs to the new world in which Tibetans now live, subjected to multifarious pressures and sweeping changes of all kinds (language, values, education, culture, beliefs). Concepts that his father's and grandfather's generations adhered to without any question, such as reincarnation, are now a matter of debate for his peers.

The short story is carefully edited, moving between several eras (Cultural Revolution, the narrator's childhood, and the present time), blurring the limits and showing the continuity as well as the rupture between generations. The wind plays a prevalent role, bearing complex symbolism: changes of time and the invisible hand of politics, but also the consciousness (*rnam shes*) that circulates from one life to the other.