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Dhondup Gyal

Riga Shakya

University of Toronto

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The Narrow Footpath

Dhondup Gyal
Translated from Tibetan by Riga Shakya

The clearest painting on the walls of my heart is that of
the narrow footpath. The narrow footpath the tempest of
months and years could not erase. The raindrops of time
could not destroy our narrow footpath. This narrow foot-
path is the only path in my village. For how many centuries
have generation upon generation left countless footprints
on this path? How many hardships borne? How many
obstacles overcome? How much sweat fallen upon this
footpath? So every time I remember this narrow footpath,
I’m powerless as these images flash before me like a film
on a projector screen. The pleasing cadence of these half
remembered stories pulsates in the bottom of my heart, the
space between my lungs and my bowels. These truly are the
stories of distant and long gone times. Those enchanting
ancients, fond of babbling, would spend an entire spring
day in discussion. Tears of joy and sorrow trickling down
their wizened faces. “Those foolish ancestors of ours! Such
an arid land! What were they thinking when they settled here!”
they’d cry in anguish and resentment.

At times like these they would discuss our village’s narrow
footpath until the sun set. Whenever they’d talk about the
footpath they’d break out into argument. ‘What are you
talking about? I’m a descendant of one of the eighteen clans
of Dong, chiefmost of the four high clans of Tibet! During
the time of my ancestors, Dong Zupa Gelek riding his steed
Garuda Zilnön subdued the Chang Ta clan. The narrow
footpath down there originates from Garuda Zilnön’s hoof
prints’ the old man of the Thong clan declared assuredly.

“And may not have seen it with my eyes but the story has
been told for generations. That narrow footpath is part
of the ancestral history of the Ling clan. The King of Ling,
the Great Female Lion Drukmö’s protector, the Great Lion
Norbu Dadul atop his steed Kyang Gò Yerba dragged the
wicked King of Hor, Shanpa Merutse in chains past our
village and left a trail that became our narrow footpath,”
another ancient related without a trace of uncertainty.

Upon hearing the second story, all the assembled venera-
bles began to relate stories of their own. Some said yonder
path was the road travelled by Chenresig in the form of the
Monkey Jangchub Semba when he went to Mount Ta La Ru
to meditate. Some claimed the footpath was the route used
by Lhalung Peldor to escape after he killed King Langdar-
ma. A few suggested they were just goat trails. This narrow
footpath was a great subject of debate for all the elders of
the village and they could never reach on an agreement on
its provenance.

It goes without saying that these debates left a lasting im-
pression on me. Every time I close my eyes I see the narrow
footpath. Of course those debates aren’t the only thing I
think of! One day it was drizzling rain. With a satchel on
my back I followed our village’s narrow footpath to school
for my first day of school. The path ran down unobstructed
from our village. I can remember the rain that day very
clearly, it was wet and the path glistened with moisture.
A gentle wind caressed the branches of the few scattered
trees and shrubs, making them sway from side to side. The
narrow footpath bent around the neck of the mountain just
like a writhing turquoise dragon. A great yearning for my
homeland sprung up in me. I couldn’t help but remember
the words of those ancients. The path was so alive. Wonder
and amazement rose up in me. What kind of being carved out this narrow footpath? Were they divine or earthly? Whoever they were, we are indebted to them. The thought of building a path on such a perilous mountainside arose in the minds of our forefathers. But this footpath wasn’t just a result of their intellect. That they managed to implement such an idea is testament to their creativity and initiative. This winding footpath, so narrow and precarious. Our ancestors, the first people to leave their footprints on this path! How immense were their spirits? How great their courage? Oh, how far reaching was the vision of the hero who first climbed up to the peak of the mountain? Why? Our ancestors built the first road in the history of mankind! That hero created the first path, a basic necessity for mankind. In doing so he tread a path for the future. Yet he left us nothing but this accomplishment. We don’t even know his name. His name has been lost among the sands of history’s meandering river. You shameful people, you! Instead of being grateful for the path carved out by your ancestor. Instead of honoring his name and accomplishment, you voice your misgivings and complaints. “Those foolish ancestors of ours!” you utter disparagingly while sitting on the side of their path. Doesn’t a sense of shame rise up in you?

Really, all they left to us was this narrow footpath. In these hundreds of years, the fact we couldn’t widen and improve this path is something we should be ashamed of. How can we blame our ancestors for this? This narrow footpath left to us isn’t by nature an ordinary path. In the history of the land of snows, this is the path taken by those mountain dwelling Tibetans when they first made it to the peak of the mountain. Traversing the boundaries of the library of the five sciences, they were able to settle on the roof of the world. From that time on, the red faced Tibetan clans were able to prosper without interruption. All you shameful people! Not only do you dare to tread upon this ancestral path. But you tarnish that hero’s name with insults. You haven’t learnt from their courageous innovation, from their wisdom! Perhaps you were unable to. Who does it benefit if you blindly scorn the accomplishment of that hero?

When I remember this, the veins on my face bulge outwards with embarrassment and my heart fills with regret. I too am a descendant of those red faced Tibetans. But I haven’t raised a pick or dug even a spadeful of earth in order to improve this footpath. How many footsteps have been left on this path? Countless! Never has the brilliance of this path come to mind, nor has a feeling of loyalty arisen. What bigger shame is there than this? What greater regret could there be?

Today there are highways, railway tracks, airlines and shipping routes. Even the palace on the moon is accessible. But our people still ride donkeys lazily on this narrow footpath. Oh! The man in the middle of the path is a Lama. His steadfast and dignified footsteps imprint themselves on the surface of the footpath. And as he cries “I take refuge in the lama,” the sound of his voice fills the surroundings of the narrow footpath. Following him is a monk. “I take refuge in the sangha,” he cries, his voice becoming one with the Lama’s. Then together they cry, “I take refuge in the dharma!” Of course, they have clear and well-grounded beliefs but with every footprint they take they follow this narrow footpath.

In my mind I cannot establish the relationship between the people who travel on the path and the narrow footpath itself. However, the fact there is a contradiction between our people and this narrow footpath is obvious. Perhaps it is akin to our mind following a teacher on the excellent path of liberation. It could be so. From the threshold of the path of liberation, is it possible a one and only protector can really free us from the suffering of all beings? Whatever may be may be. This narrow footpath is the root of all my joys. Yet the same narrow footpath is the root of all my sorrows.

One year the heavy rain eroded away the earth and the narrow footpath was left looking like a large nosed man with a cleft lip. How astonishing! There was nobody to protect the narrow footpath. There was nobody to repair the narrow footpath either. One day a herder led his goats along the path. The rain had washed away stretches of the footpath, leaving it hard to follow so the goatherd carved out a new path as he struggled along. Of course, this serpentine path had become twisting long ago. Just then, those laconic ancients began to argue again. The old man of the Dong clan, the Ling storyteller, the old woman with the blessings of Chenresig in her mind, the adherent of Lhalung Peldor and the hunter were all so keen to refute each others stories that they were unable to decide who was the winner. Hearing their stories, a traveller on the path remarked, “Instead of widening this road, they’ve succeeded in making it even narrower.” “What did you say? This path belongs to the earth deities and the demons, if we dug up even a spade of earth we’d contract leprosy and be condemned to certain death!” the elderly protested. From then on, no one even thought about widening the narrow footpath. The debate between those venerable ones never ended.

After the Peaceful Liberation, the government built a highway for the mining trucks so they could begin to extract the abundant mineral resources. The much bigger highway ran below our narrow footpath. But we the people of this mountain kept following the narrow footpath. Not one of us travelled on the highway. Later with the introduction of cars, coaches, tractors and all kinds of vehicles all the
young men and women began to understand the benefits of the highway. Those people with woven baskets slung over their backs probably still travel on that narrow footpath. They think these kinds of vehicles are a terrible danger! In their minds the wider road was far more precipitous than the narrow footpath could ever be. I think of long trips on the rigid earth and how my feet would ache. The next year when a meeting was called, an argument broke out between the motorists and the basket carriers. The two sides grew further and further apart every year.

I stand in between the narrow footpath and the highway, remembering all the events of the past. I think of the peacefulness of that solitary narrow footpath. I am a listener to the blaring horns and the roaring engines of the trucks, buses and cars on the vast highway that cuts across the waist of the mountain. My people and my homeland swell up in my heart. From the thousand radiant and glowing spheres before me, a clear path emerges and I’m unable to stop myself from stepping towards the highway.

Dhondup Gyal (don rgrub rgyal) was born in 1953 in Chentsa (gcan tsha), Amdo and is widely regarded as the founder of modern Tibetan literature. A prolific essayist, historian, Sanskrit translator and poet, he was widely acknowledged as the first Tibetan writer to break away from traditional rules of versification and meter and develop what he termed free form composition (rang mod rnyan tson). Critics and readers alike lauded the free form composition style. In 1998 the Nationalities Publishing House in Beijing published his collected works, consisting of seven volumes and over a thousand pages. Today, free form composition is commonly acknowledged as ‘modern literature,’ and Dhondup Gyal’s essays and poems are set texts in elementary and middle schools.

Riga Shakya is a student in East Asian Studies department of the University of Toronto. From 2012-2014 he studied at Tibet University in Lhasa. He enjoys translating contemporary Tibetan short stories, poems and essays. However his main research interests lie in the autobiography of the 18th century Tibetan minster Dokhar Tsering Wangyal (mdo mkhar ba tshing dbang rgyal), which he is currently translating.

Translator’s Note

Writing in the 1970’s and early 1980’s, Dhondup Gyal was critical of traditional Tibetan culture as responsible for Tibet’s underdevelopment. Dhondup Gyal saw literature as having a definite social purpose and his texts served a didactic role. Most of his work focused on national character and deal with encroaching changes on the Tibetan plateau in the post-Cultural Revolution era. His most well known work is his 1983 poem Waterfall of Youth (riung tsho’i rbab chu). Revolutionary in both style and content. The poem seems to typify Dhondup Gyal’s iconoclastic spirit, appealing to a new generation of Tibetans to embrace modernity to revitalize an ailing culture.

The essay The Narrow Foothpath (rkang lom phro mo), a polemical essay published in Light Rain (sbrang char) in 1984, sees Dhondup Gyal address the problem of modernity. The child narrator wonders, if the ancestors had the audacity to traverse and carve a path in such a desolate place, why the present generation lacks the courage and ingenuity to improve it? When the narrator in The Narrow Foothpath reproaches the superstitious villagers, he also reminds us of his own guilt. ‘But I haven’t raised a pick or dug even a spadeful of earth in order to improve this footpath.’

In his essay Dhondup Gyal explores the urgent need for Tibet to modernize. Tibetan Historian Tsering Shakya explains, “A Narrow Footpath was published under a pseudonym and was seen by many as an attack on traditional culture, which offended conservative sections of the Tibetan community. Dhondup Gyal reportedly received death threats after its publication. However, he remained undaunted and continued to explore the theme of tradition versus modernity.”

The discourse on Tibetan literature positions The Narrow Foothpath and his work as a radical departure from literary tradition. Yet today The Narrow Foothpath has become a set text for students in middle school as well as for Tibetan majors in university. The work has influenced a generation of Tibetan writers and continues to remain relevant. I am guilty, through my selective translation, of reinforcing such a narrative. Dhondup Gyal’s reworking of the Ramayana hints at a writer who sought to reposition the individual in relation to tradition rather than create a radical break. For a more nuanced understanding of Dhondup Gyal, I hope the reader will consider some of his lesser-known works in addition to The Narrow Foothpath.

Find the original Tibetan at <http://bit.ly/1JmWU1e>