Excerpt from *The Master Director*

Thomas Shor

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**Recommended Citation**

Shor, Thomas. 2014. Excerpt from *The Master Director*. *HIMALAYA* 34(1). Available at: [https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol34/iss1/17](https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol34/iss1/17)

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Introduction

The following is excerpted from Thomas K. Shor’s latest book, *The Master Director: A Journey through Politics, Doubt and Devotion with a Himalayan Master* (HarperCollins India; eBook: Amazon.com; January 2014). The book tells the story of Shor’s close association with an enigmatic Tibetan Buddhist lama from the Darjeeling Hills in India’s eastern Himalayas known as Gurudev.

When Shor met Gurudev in 2001, he was arguably the most famous spiritual teacher in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim with thousands of followers from both the Hindu and Buddhist communities. Shor met Gurudev by accident when he was walking around Sikkim with no particular aim. He had just fled the violent political turmoil in the Darjeeling Hills following the assassination attempt against the Hills’ dictatorial political leader, Subash Ghising.

Shor, a self-described open-minded skeptic, became fascinated by Gurudev when the lama invited Shor to travel with him and even to stay with him at his family’s home outside Darjeeling. Gurudev was born in 1944 into a village of Nepali tea pluckers. At age eleven he already possessed such extraordinary qualities that when the Dalai Lama came to neighboring Kalimpong in 1956, the boy was tested by him. The Dalai Lama recommended he be specially trained and put on a pure vegetarian diet.

Later, the 16th Karmapa gave Gurudev his Tibetan name, Karma Wangchuk.

Over the next few years, for weeks and sometimes months at a time, Shor went with Gurudev to events held in the lama’s honor throughout Darjeeling and Sikkim, at which hundreds and sometimes thousands would gather for his teachings and blessings. The lama would have Shor right with him; they would eat together, or sometimes just spend a quiet hour.

Shor’s account of his close association with this lama probes the limits of charisma and skepticism, doubt and devotion, and treads the fine line of openness without credulity and questioning without prejudice. It offers the reader an intimate glimpse into the life of a Himalayan spiritual master.

This is where the story might have ended, if it didn’t turn out that Gurudev was also the guru of Ghising and many of his deputies. Ghising had led a bloody separatist movement in the Darjeeling Hills to carve a separate state for Nepalis out of the Indian state of West Bengal in the late 1980s, to be called Gorkhaland. Thereafter, he led the local government in the Darjeeling Hills, often resorting to violence to retain power.

Shor finds himself traveling with Gurudev to the houses of Ghising’s councilors. When he finds out he has been going with this master to the homes of murderers, it sets his moral compass spinning. Just what was Gurudev doing associating with some of the Hills’ most dangerous characters, even driving in a vehicle that was a gift of Subash Ghising?
The following are two excerpts from the book. First the Prologue, telling how Shor left Darjeeling following the attempt on Ghising’s life, and providing some background to the political situation. The second excerpt is from near the end of the book when Shor felt compelled to return to Sikkim to question Gurudev on his political alliance with Subash Ghising. This section leads to the climax of the book, which forced Shor to abandon both Darjeeling and the writing of the book—for over five years.

The author and Gurudev.
(Thomas Shor, 2001)
The Great Escape

It is a scene of mass exodus. Jeeps stuffed beyond capacity, buses with their roofs heavily laden with suitcases, boxes and men, and flatbed trucks packed with frightened people clog the narrow road south out of Darjeeling, trying to reach the safety of the north Indian plains.

I’m right in the middle of it, hanging onto the back of a jeep, trying to buck the flow and actually enter the city. We turn a corner and there, inching across the road like a phantom of the past, belching rhythmic jets of white steam and clouds of black coal smoke, is Darjeeling’s British-era narrow gauge ‘toy’ train, also leaving town. Its tracks run along the twisting road and cross it often, as if the colonial past is still entwined with the present. It adds another layer of chaos to the madness. In Darjeeling, the past seems always to be impacting the present, usually impeding the way.

With the way blocked, the drivers cut their engines to save fuel, which is in short supply. I let my gaze go beyond the passing tumult and I am struck, as always, by the beauty of the place. Darjeeling, a hill station in India’s eastern Himalayas, was built by the British upon a mountain ridge that ends abruptly at its northern end where the land drops thousands of feet through steep-sloped tea gardens to the river at the bottom, marking the border with Sikkim. From Darjeeling, Sikkim appears as a series of wooded ridges rising to the razor-sharp heights of the Kanchenjunga Massif—a mass of snow peaks dominated by the powerful presence of the third highest mountain on the planet, Mount Kanchenjunga. Darjeeling’s northern horizon is a sharp jagged line of shining snow peaks marking the border with Tibet. There is peace in Darjeeling, but it seems always just beyond reach.

I jump off the jeep when I reach the market. I shoulder my way through the crowd and start climbing to the center of town. I’m after my bag, which I’ve left with a friend. There are only four hours left until the eight-hour break in the siege ends and it all starts up again. No one can say how long it will last. For the past two weeks, everything has been ordered closed: a shopkeeper caught selling as much as a potato would have been beaten and his shop torched. Till now, fleeing has been impossible since vehicles have been prohibited from plying the roads. Some have tried to defy the ban by putting a cross of red tape on their windshields and claiming they are ambulances, but the goons who patrol the roads have caught on and started beating the drivers. Supplies have run dangerously low.

This is not what I came to Darjeeling for. It was the winter of 2001, and I had come at the new year with the expectation of staying for some time and slowly immersing myself in the place. I hoped a writing project would emerge from it. My interest was Himalayan culture, especially its spiritual traditions. I wasn’t interested in the politics, which I knew were dark. But it seems you can’t escape politics in the Darjeeling Hills. In Darjeeling, you have to go down before you can go up. This is the second time I’ve had to flee. The first time, about six weeks ago, I fled immediately when the troubles began. When I heard it was quiet again I returned, but it turned out it was only a lull.

What I call a siege is really a bandh, or a strike, called by Subash Ghising, the political leader of Darjeeling, who recently survived a brutal assassination attempt. Some say the attack has left him in a disturbed state of mind. Like a madman putting a gun to his own children’s heads to get what he wants, he has ordered everything—from government offices, post offices, banks, shops, schools, tea gardens, transportation, restaurants, hotels, and whatever else you can think of throughout the Darjeeling Hills—closed, and has proceeded to starve his own ‘constituency’ to assert his demand, which he claims is to pressure the government to catch his would-be assassins. No one believes his motives: they say he is taking the opportunity to pressure the government into rounding up those who oppose him and throw them in jail, which he has them doing. Ghising announced only yesterday that there will be a relaxation of the strike today from 8 a.m. till 4 p.m. so that those who want to get out can do so, and those who don’t can stock up on food and provisions for the ongoing siege.

Schools, for which Darjeeling is famous, including the British-era boarding schools, have been closed and now the outstation pupils have been ordered to leave. Students in school ties and jackets with insignias of Saint Paul’s and Saint Joseph’s, Mount Hermon and Loreto College, are all pushing down the hill towards the jeep stand, weighed down by huge duffel bags and suitcases.

Tourists who were ignorant enough to blunder into Darjeeling before the siege began have spent the past two weeks huddled in their hotel rooms. They are fleeing too, the young Westerners with their backpacks and the Indians with huge suitcases and porters to carry them. Everyone fears being left behind with no way out of a situation that is turning increasingly violent. The road is clogged with escaping vehicles, their horns blaring. People are throwing themselves at the drivers, who are exacting exorbitant fares.
While all these visitors to Darjeeling—the 'Queen of the Hills' as it is popularly known—are like a tide rolling down the town's steep roads, the citizens of Darjeeling are rapidly emptying the market of every sack of rice and scrap of food, every candle and drop of cooking fuel left in town. People are paying increasingly exorbitant prices for the remaining scraps. As the porters drop the tourists and students at the jeep stand, they are then hired to carry goods against the tide of those fleeing, back up the hill to people's houses. With hardly a day's reserve of money or food under the best of circumstances, the two-week bandh has brought many porters to the brink of starvation.

Though I decided to weather the storm this time, within days I regretted my decision and decided to escape again. But by then the roads were closed and there was no way out. A few days ago the mood in Darjeeling turned especially ugly after a home-made bomb went off next to the courthouse. So I took refuge in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery just on the outskirts. It was peaceful there, but still I couldn't leave. Food was running low, and I knew I'd become a burden. Last night, a tinny loudspeaker strapped to a jeep driving past the monastery's gate informed us of today's temporary relaxation of the bandh. Now I am pushing against all those escaping, so that I can retrieve my bag and join the exodus, if there are any vehicles left.

I grab my bag and make my way back towards the market, walking a knife-edge, knowing I am approaching a major fork in the road. I could go south with the exodus for the safety of the north Indian plains. This would be prudent, and it is what I did last time. But if I flee the mountains again, I will probably give up the entire enterprise and never return. I also contemplate going north to Sikkim, the formerly independent Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan kingdom. The only problem is that Sikkim, now a part of India, is ringed on three sides by a horseshoe of high snow peaks at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. The passes have been closed since the 1962 border war between India and China. The only roads in or out of Sikkim are from the south and go through the Darjeeling Hills. Therefore, when Darjeeling is closed, supplies to Sikkim are cut off as well, and there is no way out. During the last strike, the army was forced to evacuate tourists from Sikkim by helicopter.

At the bottom of Nehru Road, a young guy in a black T-shirt and reflecting sunglasses stands beside what must be the last unoccupied vehicle in town, a beat-up Maruti van. It's as if he's been waiting for me. He sees my bags and asks if I want a ride. "Siliguri? Sikkim? I take you."

As I said, there are only two options, up or down.

I hear my voice say, "Sikkim."

At the edge of town, there is chaos at the gas station as vehicles crowd around the pumps, trying to get gas before it runs dry. There are so many vehicles that they spill onto the road, clogging it. Since we need gas to get to the border, we have no choice but to nose our way into that tight knot of vehicles. Drivers are abandoning their vehicles and elbowing their way to the two available pumps with cans, water bottles—anything that will hold liquid.

Three hours later I am dumped at the bridge that marks the border with Sikkim. I walk across the bridge, which is strewn with colorful Tibetan prayer flags, and pass beneath the Tibetan-style gateway into Sikkim. It is difficult at first to realize that I am back in a land of peace. It is also a land of spectacular natural beauty.

Black Money

I returned to the States and wrote a book, an earlier version of this book, about my time with Gurudev, but when I was done I realized I had airbrushed out the entire political angle of the story. This was largely because I just couldn't comprehend how someone who taught love and a wisdom beyond any particular doctrine or religion could have dealings with such dubious politicians.

So I returned to India and to Gurudev in order to ask him directly what his relations were with Ghising and his party. I had to finish the book. I wanted to ask him in private, with a trusted interpreter so I could get it right, but the opportunity never arose. Always the door would open and people would flood in just as I was about to ask him. Finally, I was with Gurudev in Sikkim. It was the afternoon before his departure, and I had to ask him under less-than-ideal conditions, with others present.

Gurudev was holding court in the master bedroom of his wealthy sponsor's house below Gangtok. Though the house was crowded because of his presence, a moment came when there were only a handful of us sitting on the floor around the bed: the sponsor, a few members of his family, and some attendants. I was sitting next to the attendant with the best command of English. My desperation that Gurudev would leave the next day without my putting my questions to him was acute. This might be my last opportunity.

So with a pounding heart, I asked the attendant if he would interpret something for me. He agreed, and I said to him, "Please ask Gurudev this: What is your relation with Subash Ghising?"
The attendant, a boy from a tea garden in Darjeeling, laughed nervously at my request. But I insisted. “It’s my question, not yours. Please ask him for me.”

He did.

“The foreigner is asking what your relationship is with Subash Ghising.”

The buzz in the room suddenly stopped. You could have heard a petal from one of the flowers piled on Gurudev’s table glide through the air and hit the floor.

“He is a devotee,” Gurudev replied, “like many. That is all.”

“But isn’t it true that he is your main sponsor?”

“Sometimes Subash Ghising is my sponsor,” he replied. “Not always.”

I screwed up my courage to say what I thought. I could feel the blood pounding through my ears. “Everybody knows that Subash Ghising is a dangerous man,” I said. “Some even say he uses violence to stay in power. Most people I speak with say they are afraid of Subash Ghising and wish he were gone. Yet when I ask them why they don’t say something, the most common answer is that they don’t want to become six inches shorter. You are from Darjeeling. You must know what that means. They are talking of a gang of goons coming with khukuri [the Nepali machete] and beheading them. This is no imagination on their part. This is no idle threat. This is very real, and everyone in the Darjeeling Hills knows it.”

My interpreter proved quite good, and interpreted what I said, sentence by sentence.

I continued: “You know, Gurudev, that I have the highest respect for you and your teachings. The one thing I cannot understand is your relationship with Subash Ghising and his deputies. It confuses many of your devotees as well. So please tell us, how can you deal with such men?”

Everyone in the room started speaking at once, but Gurudev put up his hand to silence them. “Each person is different,” he said. “Some are deaf; some are mute. You might think one is good, the other bad. The mother has equal love for each of her children, the same love for the one that is good and the one that is bad, a thief or a good man. So it is that everyone is equal to God. That kind of love is God’s love. Equal love for all.

“I must give love to all people and guide them in the right direction. If I call Ghising a bad man and have no relations with him, how can I influence him? And with a man like Ghising, it does not always work. Ghising was attacked some time back. I went to see him in his hospital bed in
Siliguri. Ghising said he wanted to call a general strike, a bandh. I know how much suffering bandhs cause ordinary people. So I told him not to call this bandh. But he did not listen. What to do?”

I looked around, and the room was suddenly full of people. They had heard what was going on, and they came to see. It was a far cry from the private discussion I had envisaged, but it was too late to put the cork back in the bottle. Pema, Gurudev’s nephew and closest disciple, came in. He stood protectively at the foot of Gurudev’s bed.

“I cannot make anyone do anything,” Gurudev continued. “After I told Ghising not to call the bandh, he said if he didn’t achieve Gorkhaland he would start a Third World War. I told him if he did that I could not protect him. Ghising is like bin Laden, like George Bush. Dangerous—same-same.

“Each of us has two qualities within—the good qualities and the bad qualities. If the inside is good—good. If outside is good, and inside not good—not good. George Bush— white outside, black inside.” He laughed.

“We are used to saying there are good and bad people. But if we make an operation on ourselves, we’ll find our stomachs very dirty: there is dirtiness within us all.”

He made his finger like a flying insect. “It is like the bee. If we do good to the bee it will give us honey. If we do bad to the bee, it will sting us. It is like the poisonous snake. Isn’t the poison also used as the medicine?”

Since I had returned, Gurudev was riding in a fancy new vehicle with the plastic still covering the seats. I asked him about it.

“But Gurudev,” I said, “how about your new vehicle? Isn’t it a gift from Subash Ghising?”

“Yes, it is.”

“How can you accept a gift from such a man and then enjoy it? Everybody knows Ghising is the head of the Hill Council. He gets a salary from the government. He is a public servant. He cannot possibly earn enough clean money to buy his guru such a nice vehicle. Let’s say someone steals a TV and gives it to you as a gift. If you know the TV was stolen and still you accept the gift, in most countries you can also be found guilty of theft—you can be thrown in jail. Now, you know Ghising cannot possibly afford through legal means to buy you such a vehicle. Therefore it must be black money that bought that vehicle. You accepted it, and now you ride in that vehicle, enjoying the comfort. Please, Gurudev, tell me, how can you justify this?”

I felt emboldened to continue on my reckless course by knowing I was asking about Gurudev’s relationship with Ghising not only for myself, but for all those devotees who were made uncomfortable by it, but could never ask. And Gurudev’s relationship with Subash Ghising confused many. Once I had been riding with a carload of devotees, following Gurudev’s vehicle to the next event. Somehow, the subject of Subash Ghising came up. I think there had been the threat of a bandh. It was clear none of them were in favor of Ghising or his underlings. So I asked them what they made of Gurudev’s relations with these people. “None of us can understand it,” came the reply. “We all wonder, but how can we ever ask?”

I am sure no one had ever questioned him about it, not so directly. The room was buzzing again.

Gurudev put up a hand again to silence the crowd, which was growing by the minute as word spread about what was happening.

“As you know,” Gurudev said, “this is not the first vehicle I have accepted from Ghising. The first was a Marshal and I used it for quite some time. But I returned that vehicle. I returned it when Ghising acted with particular violence, as I told him I would. This is how I engage Ghising. Ghising felt guilty that I had returned his vehicle in that way. So he presented me with this new one, even better. I accepted it, but only under one condition: I told him that if he does anything violent I will return the vehicle, publicly. I gave back that first car. He knows I will do it again. He will have to think of that before he commits violence again. Maybe it will stop him. Maybe not. This is my way to try to stop him from creating violence in the Hills. It is a balance. For peace.

“If I don’t engage these people,” Gurudev continued, “how can I influence them? I accept his gift in order to engage him. Look, George Bush is searching for bin Laden. If he would search for bin Laden with love and with peace he would get him. But he has made a war, so he has not caught him. It is just like that. We have to catch that man with love and peace. If I push Ghising away, if I reject his gift with negative judgment, it would be an act of violence, and then he would repeat that violence. Instead, I love him. And through that I try to transform him, for the good of all.

“If you want to control someone, even a member of your family, maybe a son or a daughter, if you scold them, if you beat them, if you treat them like an animal, then definitely one day that person will attack you.
“There is a very bad situation for Nepali people in Bhutan. The Bhutanese king has been making problems for them. He has kicked many out, and others have had to flee. There are now about 100,000 refugees in Nepal, living in United Nations camps. I go to these refugees in their camps, and they are angry. I tell them not to try to attack the king of Bhutan or say anything against him. I tell them to love him. If you do so, I tell them, one day you will definitely be able to go back to your homes. The king will change; through love and affection and through peace the situation will transform.”

Gurudev’s fist came down on his open palm. “Sometimes to do good you must smash a diamond. And to prevent something bad, you cannot give even one penny.” He snapped his fingers. “You see, sometimes you have to accept the gift, other times you cannot—for the same effect. A knife in the hands of a thief can kill a hundred people. The same knife in a surgeon’s hands will save a hundred lives. Only the way of thinking is different. The knife is the same. Money also can be used for good or to harm others. And money is just like blood. It must flow freely. Never hold on to too much of it and block it. Free it. Let it circulate. It has to circulate, it has to move.”

Gurudev was silent for some moments. “I can only do my work according to my ability. Within that limit, I always try to help those in need. Suppose there is a car going to Siliguri, and you want to go there. And suppose that car is full. If you get in that car it will be beyond its capacity. It could tip over into the river. The car can take only up to its capacity. In the same way I can do only to my capacity. Often Ghising doesn’t do as I advise. I never get angry. Still I give him my love.”

There was a hush in the room.

“Subash Ghising is like a broken-down engine,” he continued. “Doesn’t the mechanic have to go to the engine?”

Recently I had stumbled upon a story from the Bible that seemed pertinent, and I told it to him. I had read it in the Sacred Space column in The Times of India. It was from the Book of Matthew. Jesus was seen having dinner with some tax collectors. Tax collectors were a particularly corrupt lot in Jesus’s day, members of the community who extracted money from people to give to the occupying Roman Empire after keeping a hefty slice for themselves. They were considered the worst kind of traitors, inflicting pain on their neighbors for personal gain. Afterwards, people complained to Jesus’s disciples, wondering what kind of master he could be, accepting a meal from such bad characters. When Jesus heard of this, he gave them a spiritual lesson: he said it is not the healthy who have need of a physician, but those who are sick. Jesus came, he said, to help those in need.

“If you know this so well,” Gurudev said when I was finished telling him the story, “how can you ask me about my going to Subash Ghising? You should know why. We should never condemn, but always extend our hand.”

For so long it had hurt my heart to question Gurudev’s motives. Now, it seemed, I’d tested him and once again he’d come out shining. There was a palpable release of tension in the room. Gurudev held out his hand. I jumped up and we shook hands.

“If we discuss like this,” he said, “we will all gain knowledge. No knowledge without college! These are very important questions—very important for your book.”

And with that the meeting broke up and we cleared the room so that Gurudev could rest.

That night I woke up and glanced at my watch. It was 3:35 a.m. I was sleeping on the floor next to Dawa. He had arrived in the early evening, after my rather pointed discussion with Gurudev, and I was very glad to see him. I trusted Dawa. I knew him from the first moment I stepped into Gurudev’s sphere, and there was something clean about him, inside. He combined intelligence and innocence, and we had developed a true friendship over time.

I was especially glad to see him because of the behavior of the other attendants since my talk with Gurudev. Call it paranoia, call it noticing the obvious, but I swear these guys had eyed me all evening with such a cold glint in their eyes that if Gurudev wasn’t in the vicinity they would have come after me. They were too young and impetuous to understand Gurudev’s answer to my questions. All they had registered was that I had publicly questioned not only the guru, but the political leader as well—and all in one breath.

We were sleeping in the room next to Gurudev’s. There was a glass panel over the door to Gurudev’s room and I could see that the light was on. I could hear agitated voices—those of the young attendants. I could also hear Gurudev. He was obviously trying to calm them down. I sat up and cocked an ear. They were speaking rapidly in Nepali and I could make out only a few words. “… Thomas … Subash Ghising … black money … vehicle … Thomas … Subash Ghising…”


Dawa sat up, instantly alert. He stared at the door, and a serious look crossed his face. “Oh,” he said, and listened some more. “Oh ma-ma, oh my, oh …”
“What, Dawa, what? What are they saying?” He put his hand up to quiet me so that he could listen more.

“I think you better not go back to Darjeeling for some time. It might be dangerous for you.”

“What do you mean, dangerous?”

“The boys are angry,” Dawa said in a measured tone as if making a summary, “and though Gurudev is trying to calm them down, word of what you said, what you did, might get back to Darjeeling.”

“And then?”

“They can be quite violent over there. It isn’t like here in Sikkim.”

“Yes, Dawa. I know. My God! What have I done?”

“It isn’t that bad,” Dawa whispered. “If you wait some time, you’ll probably be all right.”

“Probably?”

The light in the other room went out. Dawa went back to sleep. I lay the rest of the night not daring to close my eyes, my body tensed, fearful of the door opening and of a glint of steel.

Thomas K. Shor is a writer and photographer who was born in Boston and studied comparative religion and literature in Vermont. With an ear for unusual stories, the fortune to attract them, and an eye for detail, he has traveled the planet’s mountainous realms—from the Mayan Highlands of southern Mexico in the midst of insurrection to the mountains of Greece, and more recently, to the Indian Himalayas—to collect, illustrate, and write stories with a uniquely personal character, often having the flavor of fable. Shor has lectured widely on his writings and has had solo exhibits of his photographs in Europe and India. He can often be found in the most obscure locales, immersed in a compelling story touching upon fundamental human themes. Learn more about Thomas’s work by visiting www.ThomasShor.com.