

the golden stores

CHAPTER 20

“He whose longing has been aroused for the indescribable, whose mind has been quickened by it, and whose thought is not attached to sensuality is truly called one who is bound upstream”.

The Dhammapada

Jeff’s foot slipped on the rock and he stumbled. He went down with a grunt of pain as his knee made contact with the hard trail surface. He was tired. They had been walking since before dawn. There had been only a short break for lunch when lamas in the party had portioned out tsampa and hot tea, heated over portable braziers on a wide space in the trail. The wind had blown dust into everything. Tsang had grumbled something about steak sandwiches and beer. It amused Jeff at the time. But, now it was late afternoon, and the air in the shadows had turned chilly in spite of the fact it was high summer.

He stood and winced as his knee straightened. He rubbed it and stood there for a moment, looking around. Mountain peaks climbed into the sky in every direction he swung his gaze. He stood on a narrow trail climbing out of a gorge with a roaring mountain river plunging down from the eternal snowfields. The trail here was still below the tree line, and the slopes were heavily forested, with the smell of evergreen in the clear air.

His side of the canyon was in shadow, the sun hitting the upper slopes on the opposite side. He could feel the chill breeze now that he had stopped. Looking down through an opening in the trees, he saw the river far below him. The trail below him was a steep ascent, and looking back down he saw Tsang struggling up to join him. He looked up the path and saw it continue to climb, and turn out of sight around a rock cornice.

“I think it’s the going up, and down, that’s the worst,” said Tsang behind him. He came up and stopped beside Jeff, gazing back down the path they had climbed. “Are you okay?” he asked, turning back to Jeff.

“Yeah, I’m fine, just a bit tired.” Jeff glanced at Tsang, and saw a tired face looking back at him. “How about you?”

"If we could just go in a straight, level line to wherever we're going, it would make it a hell of a lot easier," Tsang said, bending over to grab his knees and catch his breath. He looked up at Jeff with a scowl. "We must cover twice the distance up and down as we do moving forward. Ridiculous way to build a country. Why didn't we just take the road and ride, anyway?"

"I would imagine the Chinese would have had something to say about that method of travel," Jeff replied, his voice raspy. "It's a good thing we are in as good a shape as we are." Jeff grimaced to punctuate the statement.

"Yeah, well, there's that," laughed Tsang. "Thing is, we're not anywhere on the map I can see. There's no evidence of a trail or road anywhere near where I think we are. That's, of course, if I'm even vaguely correct as to where we are on the map."

"There are trails into Tibet that have been used for many centuries by those who do not wish their movements known," Major Singh said, as he strode down the trail to see what had happened to the two Americans. "It is a difficult country to map, you see, even with satellite, due to the convolutions of the land. If you are ready to continue, we are near our journey's end for today. It is just a short way further, now."

"Halleluia!" Tsang sang. "Lead me on, brother."

The two Americans followed the Sikh up the trail for another quarter hour, and coming around a turn of rock saw a remarkable sight – causing them to stop and stare. High above them the sheer rock cliff arched out over the trail. A waterfall plunged over the lip of the arch and cascaded down outside the trail, creating a sheet of water hiding the trail from the canyon. The trail ran under the overhang, passing behind the falls. Under the overhang, the cliff curved back into the mountain, creating a large grotto. From the level of the trail, the falls continued down the side of the mountain in a cascading rapid, where it joined the river far below. Huge ferns and rhododendrons grew everywhere, making the area virtually hidden from sight. Major Singh was standing under the grotto, and beckoned to them before moving back and disappearing.

"So now we jump into waterfalls," cried Tsang over the roar of the water.

"Hey, we wanted adventure, didn't we?" shouted Jeff. "Let's go see what this is all about." He headed under the falls with Tsang following.

As Jeff came in under the falls, he saw the back of the grotto was the entrance to a monastery carved in the living rock. A massive wooden door bound with iron bands was open, and torches were lit on either side in the gloom. The grotto had a damp chill, and the roar of the falls drowned all other sounds. There was mist in the air that immediately clung to their clothes and hair.

Major Singh stood in the entrance, and waved the Americans forward. As Jeff turned to head to the door, he noticed the trail seemed to end under the falls. A sheer cliff blocked further progress up the gorge. He wondered how they were going to continue

their journey into Tibet. He didn't relish going back down the trail they had just come up.

As Jeff and Tsang moved to the door, several monks came forward with torches and escorted them inside. The doors were closed with a boom. The sound of the falls was abruptly shut off and a deep silence filled the antechamber.

"My god, this place must be ancient," said Tsang looking around.

"This part is more than two thousand years old," replied one of the lamas in Tibetan, but who obviously understood English.

"This part? You mean there's older parts to it?" asked Tsang, switching to Tibetan.

"Oh yes, much older," the monk smiled. "Please follow me, and I will show you where you may refresh yourselves before the meal."

The lama bowed and led them from the antechamber through a side passage lit with torches. The hall seemed to follow the natural fissures in the rock, yet had definitely been shaped by man. Off the corridor were various rooms, some looking like storerooms, others with no discernable purposes Jeff and Tsang could see as they walked past. Walls were covered with carvings or tapestries rich in color, but extremely old in appearance.

"These frescos and images do not look like they come from the Buddhist pantheon," Jeff said, as he stopped to glance at a particularly vivid hanging. "Or even the Bon religion, for that matter." He reached out to touch the brilliant emerald color of a leaping dragon. It was woven into a fantastic landscape of mountains, stars, mythological beasts, and strange machine-looking objects. "In fact, I've never seen anything like this."

"It can't be Buddhist if it's more than two thousand years old. Buddhism did not get into this part of the world until the eight hundreds or so," Tsang said, as his fingers traced a fresco carved into the rock wall of the corridor.

"The air within the monastery protects the thankas and hangings," the monk said. "It is a particular quality of the air that is unique. If you will come with me, please," requested the monk, who had paused waiting for the men.

Jeff and Tsang followed the monk. "Thankas? What are those?" queried Tsang.

"For a Tibetan, you are remarkably ignorant of your country's religion. Thankas are silk paintings depicting various deities and esoteric truths in the Mahayana, or Higher Vehicle, form of Buddhism practiced in your country." Jeff looked askance at his friend.

"Hey, you know I don't go in for that stuff, padre. That's your bailiwick – I do the language thing, remember?" Tsang said, clapping his friend on the back. Jeff shook his head in mock frustration.

As they talked, the monk led them up a long flight of stairs. They entered a room, where the walls were covered with more Tibetan thankas. The room was filled with long, low tables arranged with cushions for seating. Butter lamps burned in various places on the tables, and a large hearth stood at one end where a huge fire blazed. The room was warm, and the light mellow. Jeff wondered how they handled the smoke.

The men followed their guide across the room and through another doorway leading to a series of rooms off another corridor. They were finally shown to a spacious room where their gear had been stacked neatly. Two mattresses were made up with colorful bedding of Tibetan wool and linen. A window on the far wall let in the golden evening light. Jeff walked to it and looked out, trying to figure out where it was in relation to the entrance to the monastery. He saw he was to the left and above the lip of the falls over the trail. He was high enough above the trees he had a clear view down into the gorge, several thousand feet below. Tsang came and stood next to him and looked out.

“What a place,” he said, half in awe.

“You got that right, my fine Tibetan friend.” Jeff said, punching Tsang on the shoulder. “What say we get out of these clothes and into something drier and warmer – and go find the food?”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all day. Never let it be said a Tibetan travels on his feet alone. It’s his stomach that’s most important.”

“You travel on your stomach? Isn’t that painful?”

“I have you know there is a Tibetan tradition where a pilgrim prostrates himself clear around Mount Kailash – and if that ain’t traveling on your stomach, I don’t know what is.”

“Well, I’m going to put some food in my stomach, and get some answers about where we are, and what this place is. I’m not going wait for you to prostrate yourself down to the dining room.” Jeff turned and began shedding his damp clothes, changing into dry and clean garments from his gear.

After a warm, steaming meal of rice and vegetables in the dining room with Tsang and Major Singh, Jeff excused himself from his companions, and wandered alone through the monastery. He became lost in the art covering the walls. He was so absorbed in the strangeness of the works he failed to realize anyone else was around, until he heard a voice behind him.

“It is truly amazing, is it not?” Jeff turned, and saw the abbot of Shambhala standing to his right looking at the silk painting in front of them. “It is over 2,000 years old, and the artist who painted it has long been forgotten. But it looks as if it is almost new, so bright the colors.”

“This is not Buddhist, is it?” Jeff asked, looking back at it.

“No, much older. In fact, much of this monastery was here long before Buddhism. We have become its caretakers. These paintings speak of a much older philosophy, though not dissimilar to ours.”

“What is this place, Holiness?” Jeff asked. “And what are we doing here?”

“Perhaps you would like some tea?” the old abbot asked, gesturing for Jeff to follow him as he began to walk down the hall. He led Jeff to a room with a window on the gorge, and cushions on the floor covered with silk and wool. More of the strange

paintings hung on the wall and butter lamps lighted the room. It was warm and intimate. The abbot sat down, and indicated Jeff should sit next to him. Within minutes, a monk delivered tea and both men sat in companionable silence while they refreshed themselves. Jeff felt no need to speak, and there was no awkwardness about the quiet. The abbot seemed to be waiting for Jeff to say something, but Jeff didn't feel compelled to. He certainly had questions, but they seemed unimportant in the peaceful space between the two men.

Finally, the abbot shifted slightly and looked at Jeff. Jeff became immediately aware of a change in the room, a feeling the present moment was very important. He looked at the abbot and began to ask his questions.

"I know you want to take me to Tibet. I know why I want to go to Tibet. But why are you specifically interested in me? And I find any idea of some past life connection to you or to Tibet pure fantasy, if you'll forgive me for saying so."

The abbot took a moment to reply. "Would you think a man who considered gravity a fantasy to be someone with whom you could discuss Newton's Law with any reality?" he asked.

"Gravity is a scientific fact of existence. Past lives are part of a religious belief system. It's like comparing apples and oranges," Jeff replied, feeling as if he were being corrected for some childish error in logic.

"Is it?" asked the abbot mildly. "Tell me your understanding of Buddhism."

Jeff leaned back, and took a deep breath, trying to shake off the mild rebuke. "Buddhism. The short version of my understanding is it is a system of belief that considers the transcendental nature of the human spirit through successive lifetimes. And this spiritual journey can be toward an ultimate liberation from this endless cycle of birth and death. However, it depends on karma.

"Karma is the inevitable reward or penalty of deeds performed in life," Jeff went on. "It is through one's actions one's future is determined, good or bad. Hence the Buddhist belief good deeds, or rather deeds which benefit life more than they harm, lead one toward Nirvana, which is the cessation of the birth-death cycle, and the final emancipation of the spirit.

"Nirvana is variously interpreted in the West as the Void, or the All-ness, depending on which side of the equation one looks. Basically, it is a state where all opposites are reconciled and a person is free from illusion. It is believed by penetrating this illusion of the material world one will find the transcendental reality that is Nirvana. It is believed the greater the store of good karma, the easier it is to pursue this search."

Jeff gathered his thoughts. "So basically Buddhism is a benign philosophical belief in good will and benevolence for all of life, in the hopes of a future emancipation.

"In Tibetan Buddhism there is a pantheon of deities who represent inner states of awareness, or conditions of spiritual existence. Outwardly these appear to the uninitiated

as a worship of multiple gods and demigods. This is a common Western fallacy. As a teacher, this is one thing I have to disabuse new students of.”

Jeff began to warm to his subject, as he slipped into his academic role as a scholar and a teacher. “Tibetan Buddhism teaches contemplation and realization of the concepts these deities represent through intense meditation – which will bring about changes in consciousness. These are steps on the road to enlightenment. Combined with selfless deeds done for the benefit of others and a respect for all life, the Buddhist belief is this will bring about a change in the person where he will lose a singular identity as ‘self’ and merge into a union with all of existence down to the smallest atom.

“Another basic belief is that of karmic debt built up through ignorant, and wrongful actions brought about from desire. To work off this debt can take many lifetimes of this benign activity and contemplation to achieve enlightenment. In some cases, with extraordinary individuals, this has been achieved in one lifetime. Buddha and the Tibetan saint, Milarepa, are historical examples.

“I have to tell you, Holiness, I consider the Buddhist philosophy one of great merit in its central theme of compassion and love. I also think a life lived toward the betterment of mankind, and all life, is something this world needs more of. It’s why I study and teach the subject. It’s why I have spent time helping the Tibetan cause. It’s something I attempt in my own life, because it just makes sense. But when you get into this transcendental practice of meditation, and the belief in past lives and karma, you lose me. I can’t go there. I would have to admit such things as the death of my wife and parents was bad karma, and such an admission would demean the memories of three beautiful people who were the kindest and most loving people I have ever known. Their deaths because of a balancing of karma makes no sense, and I do not see any logic or validity to it. Nor any proof,” he added finally.

Jeff paused, and there was grief in his eyes he struggled to contain. He took a deep breath and looked up at the abbot. “A belief is a belief, a fact is a fact.”

The old lama sat, and appeared to be thinking over what Jeff had said. He took a long time, and Jeff slowly relaxed as the grief eased away. He began to feel calmer, and the quiet figure of the abbot seemed to sooth him.

Finally the old monk spoke. “Your knowledge and grasp of Buddhism is quite extensive,” he said.

He then did something unusual. He took a small fruit from a bowl and tossed it up in the air and caught it. “When I threw this up into the air I believed and expected it to come down. But until it comes down, there is nothing more than the belief it will. Continual observation of this phenomenon has led to the general agreement that should this event reoccur in the future, the fruit would fall back into my hand. So our expectation and belief is justified by this observation, and the general agreement of which we are a part. Would you concur?”

“Yes,” Jeff replied immediately. “Scientific laws are based on observations of phenomena codified and proven through repetition of the phenomena, producing the same result. That’s a bit simplistic, because there is a scientific methodology for observation, and recording. It can be complex, but that’s it essentially.”

The abbot tossed the fruit into the air again and at its apex it vanished. “When is it a belief then becomes a law?” asked the abbot.

Jeff looked at the abbot’s hand which now lay in his lap. There was no fruit. It had simply vanished as he had thrown it up into the air. He sat there confused, slightly disoriented.

“Was there a fruit there, or did you imagine it? Or did you imagine it vanished and yet it is still here in my hand?” asked the old lama.

Jeff looked again at the abbot’s hand, and there was the fruit. He laughed. “You’re a pretty good magician, Holiness. Or hypnotist.”

“Or did it truly disappear and reappear?” the abbot smiled mischievously at the American. “When is it a belief becomes a law?”

“A theory, which is really a postulated reality, or belief something may be so, becomes a law when enough scientific methodology has brought in enough evidence to bear out the theory’s validity,” Jeff replied.

“Do not the laws of today in the scientific world continue to change as more evidence comes to view? Many of the former laws are found to be incomplete or even wrong?” asked the abbot.

“Well, yes. There are always new breakthroughs in science changing our view of reality. But these changes are based on new observations of things inherently occurring in the physical universe. It’s not putting something there that is not there.”

“Or taking it away when it should remain?”

“That, too,” laughed Jeff.

“Is this where you see the division of belief and fact?” asked the monk.

“Yes,” answered the American.

“How do you explain the journey we took to rescue your friend and my chela, and the energy we used to heal them?”

“I can’t. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t a logical scientific explanation for those events.”

The abbot paused for a moment, and looked out the window. Then he asked, “If there were a philosophy of life based on fact, rather than belief, how would you be able to tell the difference between it and one based on belief?”

“There would have to be scientific proof of the fact that would stand up to scientific methodology,” Jeff replied with certainty.

The abbot nodded. “Do you believe man has a spiritual nature, Jeff?” asked the old monk gently.

Jeff thought for a moment. "I do believe there is a life force of some kind separate from the body, because scientific instruments have measured it, and when a person dies, the energy is no longer in evidence. As to whether it survives body death, I don't know."

"If such a spiritual life force was not of this material universe, but rather impinged on it from a different universe, would the scientific methodology of this universe be able to be used to prove its existence?"

"That's quite a postulation, Holiness, and has the danger of being not provable either way and so wins the argument by default. But it also loses the argument at the same time."

The abbot laughed gently. "If there were ways of ascertaining the certainty of a spiritual belief, and methods of observation could place it in the realm of fact, would it matter which universe those ways and methods came from? Even if they were not the same methodology used by science?"

"You're talking about a different discipline with no broad basis of agreement in the world, and would therefore be doubted as real," Jeff replied. "Science insists on an external reality separate from the observer, uninfluenced by the observer. Objective as opposed to subjective."

"Are you so sure there is not a broad basis of agreement in the world for such a methodology? I believe you have a Western saying: 'putting a round peg in a square hole,' said the old lama. "It may be a matter of using the tools that apply to the job at hand."

"Are you saying tantric meditation is such a methodology?" asked Jeff.

"Perhaps it is more pervasive than that. Forgive me, but I wish to ask you a personal question. Did you love your parents and your wife?"

"Of course I did, very much," said Jeff, a shadow of grief passing over his face.

"Prove it," said the abbot, abruptly.

Jeff sat stunned. "I..." he began. "Well...I can't." He struggled with the concept. It was like he had been slapped. "I know I love them, but the only way you would know it was true is if you saw me demonstrate my affection. And I can't do that." Tears began to slide down Jeff's cheeks. He was not aware of them.

"Does the fact you cannot prove your love for your family make it any less real?" asked the abbot.

"Of course not. I know I loved them. I have that certainty."

"What is it about your love that makes it a fact to you?"

Through his sorrow, Jeff looked at his feelings, and he could feel the bond, and the loss, rising in his heart. "I just know I love them. I can recall the many shared moments of our joy together, and the feeling I had for them. Feelings I still have." Tears flowed freely now, and Jeff wiped them absentmindedly from his face. "The feelings are very real to me, because I can experience them right now."

He choked as the loss overwhelmed him. “I still miss them,” he managed to say before he became unable to speak further. He began to cry quietly and hung his head, lost in grief.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It touched him gently, and a calm flowed into him. It contained compassion, and an acknowledgement of his grief. There was no sympathy, no denying the reality of the loss. There was a full understanding of it – and for the first time since the tragedy, Jeff felt someone finally understood what it had done to him. This began to ease the pain, and he lifted his head to look at the abbot.

“You really see, don’t you?” Jeff asked, looking at the old lama through eyes blinded with tears. “This has been an impossible point to go beyond in my life. No one seems to understand what a struggle it has been to carry on in life and to find any meaning anymore. You see that, you understand.”

“Yes,” was all the abbot said, his soft gaze on Jeff’s face.

Later in his room, lying on his back, listening to the sounds of his friend sleeping on the mat across the room, Jeff recalled the moment of understanding.

He realized his original questions about the origin of the monastery had gone unanswered, as had the reason for the abbot’s interest in him. Looking back at the conversation, he also perceived something undefinable had occurred. Somewhere between a dialogue about reality, and one about his personal loss, he had moved off some stuck point in his past. There was a greater feeling of acceptance for the death of his family. The pain was less. There was still the love, but in place of the overwhelming sorrow, was a hope for the future – both for his family and for himself.

In his mind, too, the concept of a static reality was drifting apart. New ideas of what constituted existence rose and fell. Was it perception alone determining what was real? Or was it one’s own knowledge and certainty? Or maybe it was simply what everyone agreed upon. Was reality an internal construct or an external one, or both?

He was no longer sure what he perceived was actually reality. Or if anything was there at all, outside of his perceptions. He wondered if this is what druggies went through on their search for a super-reality in an altered consciousness. It may be what drove some of them mad. If you shake a man’s certainty enough, doesn’t it drive him insane?

Jeff finally fell asleep, but it was as if he was still awake, so vivid were his perceptions. Pictures and stories out of time moved across his awareness. There was a sense of immediacy to it all, but at the same time he felt detached. He somehow perceived the images were part of him, part of his past. But they were not memories from this life, and some of them contained great emotion or pain. Across them all was a beautiful sadness coloring everything with a nostalgia that was achingly sweet.

Yet it all meant less to him than he felt it should, as if these occurrences or images were supposed to guide and shape his life, but they no longer did. He was puzzled and curious about these mixed feelings. But in the end, it was just what it was – and had no

more significance than a sunrise. On the other hand, perhaps as much significance as a sunrise – he couldn't tell. Strangely, the thought calmed his racing mind, and he dropped into a deep sleep. But before he did, he had a fleeting thought – much more than he had ever anticipated lay in store for him in the tomorrows to come.