

## Notes to the Father on the 49th Day of His Passing

Jigme Trinley

(Translated from Chinese by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani)



Pema Tsenden and his son Jigme Trinley, Chumar (Amdo), August 2017 ©Hoshi Izumi

**Abstract:** These farewell notes are written by Pema Tsenden's only son, Jigme Trinley, on the 49th day of his passing, which is when as per the Buddhist belief the deceased passes from this world to the next. Jigme Trinley recollects his childhood days with his father among other memories while he prepares to send him off to his final journey.

**Keywords:** village, Tibetan words, the Potala, rainy days

## I

A long time has passed. The leaves of the poplar trees in the backyard have been rustling continuously. From far away, I hear a rooster call. These days, I have been thinking about a lot of things. I have been thinking about you, who at a much younger age than me, already knew the taste of loneliness. And how you, all alone, have been able to walk so firmly until now. I am thinking, why is it that you, after experiencing so much hardship, still had to rush about for so many people's lives when you could have just taken a break? I have some answers in my heart, but I feel that these answers don't clarify much.

When I was a child, you used to take me for walks in the village pointing out at every object we passed on the way and teaching me how to say those words in Tibetan: pine trees, willow trees, poplar trees, stones, electric poles, motorcycles, cow dung, goat dung eggs. Over and over again. After a while, you would point to these things we had just passed and teach me all those words again. At that time, I wondered why you wanted me to learn those Tibetan words. I also remember the time we went to visit an old man in the village. When we came out of his house, the Tibetan mastiff that was tied up, suddenly struggled free from the iron chain and dashed over. I panicked. You picked up a stone from the ground and forcefully waved it in front of the Tibetan mastiff. The Tibetan mastiff then stopped in front of you. After the owner of the house took the Tibetan mastiff away, you casually threw the stone in your hand on the ground and turned towards

me, smiling, teasing me for panicking.

Tonight, I don't want to say anything sentimental to you; I just want to quietly talk, like this, about your images in my memory. But there is not much time left, just like in the past every time I was about to say something from my heart, I would be called away by other things. But we both know what those words in my heart are.

The family has already woken up, and I also need to prepare to send you off on your final journey. You'll have to listen slowly to the rest of my words some other time.

Your son,

Jigme Trinley

On the early morning of June 27, 2023

## II

I have ordered two cappuccinos; one is for you.

I purposely chose this coffee shop where you can see the Potala. If you're not in a hurry, let's drink our coffee here.

I am not sure why but looking at the Potala in front of my eyes, I just remembered a time when we were going through airport security. A security staff rudely threw my bag from the moving belt to the floor in front of me. I demanded that he treat my bag with care and, staring at me, he asked me to repeat what I had just said. Defiantly, I looked at him and said it again. Seeing that we might come to blows, you walked

over to stop me and told me to pick up my things and leave. Once we left the security area, you told me I should learn to refrain bad temper to avoid problems in the future. Yet, when sometimes I gave you similar advice, you acted like an unstoppable wild yak.

Lhasa's sun was fierce today. Holding you in my arms, I circumambulated the Jokhang Temple three times. In front of the main entrance, I prostrated three times to Jowo Rinpoche. On the road, I saw tourists wearing thick sheep fur-lined jackets taking pictures under the scorching sun. I thought you must have been secretly laughing, just like me.

I remember asking you what kind of weather you liked, and you told me you liked rainy days. I was skeptical: on rainy days you have to carry an umbrella and going anywhere is inconvenient. Why would you like rainy days when sunny days are so good? Once I went to Golog to spend the night at a classmate's house to dig caterpillar fungus and I saw his father limping his way under the rain to tie the horses. When he came back smiling and said he also loved rainy days, I think I understood what you meant.

It feels like I have become a different person lately, more taciturn than before. Sometimes I want to try to talk a bit more, but I can't really say anything. The eighth day after you left us, I returned from Trika to where the film crew was. Before filming, we went to the Buddha Hall at the Pelkor Chode Monastery to light butter lamps for you. When we were leaving, an old man told me he was sad for me because I could not keep you company for the full forty-nine days. I nodded and didn't reply. But I think you know what I was thinking. My

film crew friends also knew what I was thinking. My words are just becoming fewer and fewer.

The sun is about to set behind the mountains. Aren't those last rays of sun on the Potala Palace beautiful? I had half of my coffee; how much have you drunk? Let's wait until we finish our coffee to go back. But I need to drink it slower, I just want to stay with you a bit longer because tomorrow you will follow the Yarlung Tsangpo river far away. I don't know when, but you will come back and let me have another cup of coffee with you. Next time don't look for a Starbucks though, we will find a better coffee shop. Or let's come back here. From here we can see the golden roof of the Jokhang Temple.

I remember a picture of me when I was three years old at the gate of a temple, wearing your glasses, smiling foolishly at the camera. When you saw this picture, you smiled and told me that before I had even learned to say a word, you carried me to worship at many temples in Tibet, tied with a blue belt to your back. That was the first time I came to Tibet. Today, holding you in my arms, I pray this is not the last time you come back here.

The sky has already gotten dark. I finished my cup of coffee. Many thanks. Let's go then.

Your son,

Jigme Thrinley

At dusk on June 27, 2023

### III

I feel I can't say anything anymore.

Today is the day I say goodbye to you, so I want to find a quiet place to stay for a while and write something more.

I don't know why, but it is very difficult to find a place where you can put your mind at rest in Lhasa. I came to the Gorkha Inn where we came together last year.

Walking further in from the courtyard, there is a simple study room with a few Tibetan-style hanging lamps radiating warm light, and three Tibetan-style wooden pillars standing in the middle of the room. Surrounding the pillars there are wooden bookshelves with some scattered Tibetan books on them.

I can't remember clearly when it started, but whenever you arrived at an unknown place, you always observed the style of its decor with much interest. Then, pointing to some detail you would tell me: "We could borrow this idea for our home." I remember you and mother never consulted me when renovating the house, and often there was something I was unhappy about. It wasn't until I went to college that you gave me the right to design. Although I said that you guys had finally made the correct decision, I also understood that it was because you were simply too busy. During the process, I would argue with mother, and finally argue with you. Sometimes we even quarreled about it. But when the project was finished, you both were grinning and that made me feel beside myself with joy. You always smiled, shook

your head, and sighing softly told me that I didn't know the vastness of heaven and earth. You forgot who raised me to be that way.

Later, I would only say this sentence silently to myself.

It just rained loudly, but it stopped after a little while. It left a sweet scent of trees and earth in the air, just like this morning when I accompanied you to walk around the Potala Palace. I remember that when I was just admitted to the film academy, you and I went to see somebody from an older generation. He told me that sometimes people can help you, but there are things that you must do alone; nobody can cross those thresholds for you. I saw your serious expression at that time, but you didn't say anything.

You were worrying about me, weren't you?

These past days so many people have been taking care of me. I am very moved. We pat each other on the shoulder, and hug tightly. I am in awe of the wonderful people you were surrounded with. I am in awe of the wonderful people you were surrounded with.

On the road ahead, there will be many people walking shoulder to shoulder with me. It will be like that first time I climbed a mountain with you to burn incense; when tired, I will look at the broad river in the distance, trying to identify the location of our home among the densely packed houses at the foot of the mountain. Afterwards, smiling, I will continue climbing up the mountain. There, we will all shout your name loudly, while countless paper prayer flags will float farther and farther away.

There is no need to worry about me anymore; just put your mind at rest  
and drink a cup of butter tea.

Goodbye, Dad.

Your son,

Jigme Trinley

On the evening of June 28, 2023