५८ ब्रॅट नक्षे नाम् राज्ये के ना (Dreaming at the Sage's Abode)

শ্ব प्राप्त Kelsang Lhamo

(Translated from Tibetan by Kelsang Lhamo and Miranada Smith)

Abstract: Kelsang Lhamo's Dreaming at the Sage's Abode (1999) is one of the first modern poetry collections composed by a Tibetan nun. This essay offers a brief biography of Kelsang Lhamo, and background on her composition of the work in Northern India in the 1990s, along with a translated excerpt from the book's Chapter 2, Wanderer. The translation features a section of the author's prose-preface, and three letters in verse that are part of a longer correspondence between the novice nun Kelsang Lhamo ("Lhamo" in the story), and local poet, editor and publisher, Gonpo Tsering. This essay discusses the collaborative translation process, formal features of the verse with a focus on metrics, and figurative language such as symbolism and metaphor.

Keywords: Tibetan literature, Tibetan women's writing, poetry, poetics, translation

Translator's Introduction

Tibetan poet and author Kelsang Lhamo was born in 1973 in the town of Lhokha, south of Lhasa, where she attended primary school through high school. While growing up in Central Tibet, she received primarily Nyingma teachings from Sheldak Khen Rinpoche and Dungkar Losang Tinley on the topics of Tibetan medicine and the Five Minor Sciences. In 1989, she left for India to pursue further studies. Kelsang belongs to the cohort of the earliest female Tibetan writers in India to have escaped from Tibet in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a group which also includes Chukyé Drolma and Tsering Kyi, both of whom have published poetry collections in Tibetan.

While in India, Kelsang received novice vows from His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama and, for a period of ten years, studied and received Lamrim (অমাইমা) and other teachings from Geshe Dupthob Rinpoche, and many other masters. She also studied Hindi language and the Vedas in Varanasi. Her first book of poetry, Dreaming at the Sage's Abode: Biographical Sketches of Four Living Tibetan Nuns was published in 1999. Kelsang moved to the USA in 1999 and for several years taught Tibetan language and culture to the son of Sogyal Rinpoche. During this time, she also translated Sogyal Rinpoche's Tibetan Book of Living and Dying into the Tibetan language with Ringu Tulku. In 2002, with the kind support of Alak Zenkar Rinpoche and Tashi Tsering, she joined the Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center (TBRC). Under the guidance of Gene Smith, BDRC's founder, she continued her study of Tibetan literature. Kelsang has taught Tibetan language and literature to many students. At present she is working as Senior Librarian and Cataloger at BDRC.

I collaborated with Kelsang in translating this excerpt from the second chapter, Wanderer (ব্ৰন্তম্ভাইন্), of her poetry collection Dreaming at the Sage's Abode: Biographical Sketches of Four Living Tibetan Nuns (1999). Kelsang composed this mixed genre work initially as a series of journal entries kept between meditation sessions as a nun in extended meditation retreat in Dharamsala, in an area of Himachal Pradesh known locally as "the Sage's Abode." After ordaining as a nun with His Holiness in India, Kelsang remained in retreat in Dharamsala for a total of nine years, approximately between 1989 and 1998, and also gathered notes for the book while in retreat approximately between 1993 and 1997.

The majority of Dreaming at the Sage's Abode is biographical, with four chapters recounting the life stories of the nuns Kelsang encounters while in residence at the Sage's Abode, such as the nun Tenzin Palmo and others. The book's second chapter, Wanderer (ব্দুম্মার্মা) is autobiographical, and describes Kelsang's early life and middle years, including her upbringing in Central Tibet, journey across the Himalayas, and life as a young nun in deep extended retreat in Dharamsala, India. The chapter features an epistolary correspondence that took place while Kelsang resided in retreat and showcases four letters exchanged between herself and local Tibetan poet, editor and language teacher Gonpo Tsering. Gonpo Tsering (better known as the poet Dhatsenpa Gonpo Tsering, and by the pen name Two-armed Gonpo [अन्तरळंत्र मः अर्गेतर में सुना निहेश]], also lived in Dharamsala at the time. Kelsang first became acquainted with Gonpo in 1992 when he reached out to her via letter, and they corresponded for about two years, meeting for the first time late in the winter of 1993 or at the beginning of 1994.

Gonpo was born in 1963 in Manlho Tsokdzong (ক্লাইন্স্ন্), a county in Amdo. After attending university in Amdo, Gonpo arrived in Dharamsala in approximately 1989, soon taking on a position as teacher of Tibetan language. After his job as a teacher, he worked for Amnye Machen Institute, serving as editor for the journal Young Shoots (মুল্লাইন্) and the newspaper Democracy (ক্লাইন্স্ন্র্), publications which were started in Dharamsala in the 1990's.

This excerpt includes a section of prose preface, and three letters composed in verse that were exchanged between the poets. The letters are ornate verse compositions with lofty diction and rich metaphorical language, suggesting the refined poetic style of *nyan ngag* (अव क्षित्र)) that reflects Tibetan adaptation of Sanskrit verse forms. Kelsang's verse relies on long lines of classical Tibetan verse, elevensyllable lines and the typical four-line stanzas. Gonpo's verse has shorter line lengths which reflect the influence of classical verse as well as Tibetan folk song rhythms; his first letter is in the often-used classical meter of regular seven-syllable lines in four-line stanzas, while the second letter is composed in terse six-syllable lines of four-line stanzas, suggestive of Central Tibetan folk song rhythms, *zhay* (স্ব্যু).

In interview, Kelsang could not precisely recall how many letters were exchanged in total with Gonpo, but likely more than 10. Kelsang expresses uncertainty regarding how the four letters fit into the larger correspondence and the development of the relationship; difficulty dating the letters with precision adds ambiguity to interpretation for readers. The first letter was composed shortly after

their first in-person meeting, and Kelsang explains she selected these letters for inclusion because they express the pair's mutual curiosity while getting acquainted.

Throughout the translation process, I asked Kelsang for more explanation regarding the work's dense symbolism, Indic and Tibetan cultural references and biographical allusions. In interview, Kelsang explained the significance of extended metaphors in the letters; for example, in the first letter, the lotus offering suggests the depth of Gonpo's romantic feelings towards the young nun, who he personifies as a deer. In the second letter, Kelsang identifies as the vulture living alone in the rocky mountain.

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Dreaming at the Sage's Abode

He had a gaze that was genuinely loving, long and deep, and his personality was relaxed and unhurried; it's not that I didn't long for that, however, I always avoided him because this would not have been the right path.

He had empathy and was sensible. Nor was he stubborn or overly demanding, and he had an aversion towards misconduct. Nor did he focus on my physical or youthful aspects. The essence of our minds was inseparable, as one, and we were emotionally inseparable, but our paths would diverge. No matter the circumstances and at all times, whether joyful or sorrowful, he was continuously friendly and harmonious to be around. Not only that, in general he had no thought of dominating or manipulating others. Beyond having love for me,

he didn't scrutinize my skills and abilities or look in the direction of other women. Though his love for me was genuine, I couldn't be free from my personal restrictive vows. I was not an appropriate girlfriend for him. However, I cherished the letters he sent in verse, and needless to say, regarding his genuine good intentions, whenever I review our history of happiness together, what I remember first of all is that his sincerity has been my consolation in sadness and loneliness.

This was inside the first letter Gonpo sent me.

Rich people cannot buy it with wealth,

And the powerful cannot seize or control it.

This heart's personality like a just-blooming spring flower,

This one flower like a smile, to whom do I offer it?

The girl-practitioner who stays in a mountain retreat,

Having followed a female deity up the mountain—

If I were to offer her that uncontrived flower,

What's the use? Is there any need?

If there were a lady unshackled by nun's robes,

Nor dressed in the artificial clothes of ordinary women,

If there were a lady free of hypocritical conduct,

I'd want to place a suitable flower garland around her neck.

An old hunter man's bow and arrow

Chases a deer away from the herd, into the middle of nowhere—

She wanders into an erosion of frightening desert abyss.

If there were a deer in this condition, I'd

wish to help her and give her a garland,

A welcoming gift, to comfort her—

If there were a deer like this, I'd be her savior.

Secret tears gather inside, while outside,

I exhale a long, painful sigh.

If there were a sick person with a disease

hard to cure, I'd offer this heart's flower

As medicine, comfort and cure.

If there were a beautiful girl with hundreds of doubts

At an intersection, not knowing which way to turn,

I would give her good guidance and direction.

Without grasping weapons

Such as bow and arrow, spear, or sword,

She wins the war and repels demons.

Courageous warrioress holding a pen,

With raised hands, I would offer you this flower.

Between bone and skin, root extends,

Sustained and nourished by warm vital blood.

This priceless lotus flower—

Will you accept this flower in both hands?

He sent me this. I had already decided to become a nun, so the words of love letters were long dead in my mind; I had been satisfied not to act on those feelings in the past. Now that I received his letters, feelings which I'd thought were dead revived and came back to me like a zombie, and I felt scared and very uncomfortable. Then I sent him a reply.

In the past, when yogis practiced Chod in the cemetery with kangling flute,

No one ever summoned me, the vulture.

In the mythical story, the lonely vulture stays by herself in the sunshine of a rocky mountain nest.

Then I heard your voice, and reflecting upon the account of my loneliness,

I sighed a deep yawn.

Though I'd lived in the rocky-mountain nest a long time, it was an uncomfortable life and without relaxation.

Then one day, I tired myself out and lost consciousness— I fell into the deep abyss without reference points.

I, the white vulture, fell, and woke up in the middle of nowhere.

I'd been unsuccessful my whole life—then between out-breath and inbreath,

I saw your hand waving and giving me courage.

My one friend through laughter and tears—your comfort is too late for me now.

You know, when my goal was to farm a big fenced-in vegetable garden with edible fruit,

Some of them didn't grow well, even with hard work,

So I gave up gardening;

I'm not admiring the queue of those pursuing worldly aims such as riches, good reputation, and scholarship—

I don't want to be stuck waiting in a long line, legs crossed.

Yes, of course, loneliness is sorrowful,

But even with two together, there isn't always a happy ending—this I've always heard.

If there is no permanent happiness up on a high throne,
I'd prefer my feet wet, walking along a dewy grassland path.
If your heart wasn't pure as a convergence of bright moons,
I wouldn't waste time or money, or ink on paper.
But it wasn't just the many great masters and lamas

Who lived a long time in wilderness— I, Lhamo, would like to follow them up the mountain.

My dear friend from Amdo who sings his feelings out loud, Please don't send me this heavy, hoarse moaning. These feelings, whether enticing, or feelings of sorrow and sadness,

Please, I don't need them—

I don't want to be a prisoner in iron chains.

He sent me many letters, but this was his final letter to me.

A vision of Sarasvati

Really entered my heart,

But Sarasvati's niece hurts my heart.

She totally broke my heart—

You, Lhamo, follow the paths of others.

Lhamo has given up everything to do this.

Then, following Lhamo,
I gave up everything.
You, Lhamo, giving up everything,
You injure me.

But I am a hardy youth. I can take loss and defeat—I can be patient.

Lhamo, your feathered arrow

Has injured this small child.

My rope, like the magician's rope in the jataka tale of King Norsang, Couldn't catch the dakini Lhamo as she flew away.

You, Sarasvati's niece,

Are like a rainbow in the sky.

I am like a deluded young innocent Chasing it, but with no way to catch it. Lhamo, I beg you, please go, go, go To the Pure Land!

As you leave, I offer you a fresh white lotus flower—
As you go higher and higher,
Never look back.
It seems there's no better friend than the Buddha dharma.

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He wrote many other painful poems just for me. Each letter seemed alive—full of living words for my sake alone, but I wanted to adhere to the Buddha's discipline and keep the nuns' Vinaya, so I felt that even if I turned him down, I wasn't really a bad friend.