



**VAJRA DANCE  
MANDALA ODYSSEY**

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## & Other Stories

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*Obeisance to my gurus*

### VAJRA DANCE MANDALA ODYSSEY

Five weeks should be enough time to overcome all obstacles and paint the dance mandala. We already have a dance platform, near the hill with the prayer banners and just below the meditation yurt in the gully where David and Tsultrim were wed, a place smaller than the heart but larger than the world. My daughter Lulu is with me, and we have plans to go on a road trip through the Southwest. However, Lulu has had a taste of the Land, camping out, rising early to practice Green Tara, helping Brian in the kitchen, cooking gourmet deserts, and she wants to stay and paint.

The mandala will be painted on sheets of *tyvec*, a material used to wrap buildings. It has a surface like *Teflon*, but Brian's mom, Karen, who's visiting Tara Mandala on her way to Chicago to take up a position as an art instructor, says she has painted on this stuff and knows how to tape it together and fill the seams with caulk.

David's parents are also visiting, and Bob helps me lay out three long sheets of tyvek and tape them together and coat them with primer before I take off to visit my friend, Sky, in New Mexico. We hold the mandala down with cobble-size rocks during the cloud bursts and the wind bursts and the hundred degree heat that barbecues us when the sun shines. The sun radiates off the whiteness like a furnace, and the wind picks up the 30-foot diameter sheet of tyvec and whips it above our heads. It's like painting on the sail of a clipper ship in a hurricane, but we get the mandala ready, and I take off in the rented *Tempo* to the beat of The Beastie Boys.

It rains and rains. I know a little about rain, having lived two

years in the woods on the Alaskan panhandle and having planted trees in the Olympic Rain Forest. It rains, and it rains. This is definitely a wet summer in the Colorado Rockies.

When I return from my trip, I find that the design has been drawn on the mandala, and the inner circle and interlocking triangles are painted along with a first coat on three rings. Good work. An auspicious beginning.

Karen leaves for her job in the East, and Lulu returns to her responsibilities in the Northwest, and I get down to the business at hand. My plan—get some paint on this thing.

I repaint the triangles and the three rings, laying down a second coat of color—Jade Green, Royal Blue, Medallion Yellow, Summer Red—straightening the lines, cutting the darker colors into the lighter in increasingly larger circles. I follow my plan. I'm adding color to another ring, now, cutting in the fifth ring, the green against the red, roughly 100 feet of curved line along the outside, when it starts to rain, and the rain makes the paint run, and I have to roll up the mandala. There's not much I can do but run for cover. When the deluge subsides, I unroll the mandala and look at the splattered mess, blue and yellow making a yucky green, red and yellow making an orange, not at all my plan.

This is a lesson in impermanence. When it dries, I'll repaint it. And it dries, and I repaint it. And I'm proud of my work. The next morning after our work meeting, I take Tsultrim up the hill to show her the mandala, the luxurious colors, the clear lines. I'm gesticulating with both hands as we crest the hill and see the mandala scrunched up in a pile in the middle of the platform with a coat of frost still glistening in the morning sunlight.

We approach quietly and look at this tossed and twisted agony of a shape. We can see the paint is cracked and peeling, and my eyes well with tears when Tsultrim says, "You'll just have to start over."

Yes, Marpa. And Milarepa puts his rocks back where he got them and begins another castle. I stretch the tyvec out and put down more rocks around the edge and get out my pocket knife and start scraping the torn paint and sanding the edges and filling the gaps with caulk and coating the patches with primer and repainting the color and making the lines clean.

Another half mile of lines. This body, this world—curves in space

—I love it all. David, Alister, and Josh are at the stupa, making the wall of the bumpa. Jack is in the kitchen creating a marinade for his tofu stroganoff.

Brian is off with Tsultrim and the Dakinis burying the Kusali Devi's treasure vases at the four corners of the Land. I'm sanding and scraping when I hear the drum. Across the field of sage and wildflowers, glistening like the reflection of light on a lake, Tsultrim flows in luminosity at the head of a stately procession. The Dakinis follow in single file dressed in bright, flamboyant costumes and carrying parasols. Brian is at the rear, slowly beating a drum.

Along the ridge, like the players in *The Seventh Seal*, down the dry creek bed, around the edge of the pond, up the shale, and across the protruding spire of rock called the Dragon's Back, they near the dance platform.

They circumambulate the mandala once, as I scrape and sand. I think, should I get my camera and take a photo of this vision? No, I'm entranced and don't want to disturb the mood, taking in the pleasure of the color and form and the moment.

After they circle the stupa they take the trail towards the sweat lodge, disappearing through the scrub oak like a caravan of rainbows.

I scrape and sand and paint in the afternoon sun knowing I've seen something miraculous, and I keep my concentration on the mandala, which I now realize is outside as well as within, as I merge with the elements.

At the next work meeting, I report that in another day, if the weather holds, I'll be back to where I was three weeks earlier. And the weather does hold, and I paint my way into the outer rings.

Then, one morning on my way to practice, I look down the hill and realize the mandala is missing. I run down the hill to the dance platform and discover an upturned can of paint still dripping through the boards and the mandala and the plastic milk container with the other cans of paint in a heap in a ditch by the pond. I pull it up and find another mess of spilt paint and twisted, cracked fabric.

Yes, Marpa, I know, put the rocks back and begin again. I mean this has to be an important test of some kind. Alister suggests I do the *Long Protectors' Practice*. The Dharmapalas are unhappy with me and don't want me disturbing things in this location. I had best

get myself aligned with the forces at play if I'm ever going to finish this project.

I sit at the stupa and burn juniper and do Long Protectors every day. *Eight classes, all-powerful guardians, I speak to you, please accept these clouds of desirable objects, filling the sky! Magnify all that is wholesome, pacify all that is bad! Be of service day and night and fulfill my wishes, easily, swiftly!*

I lay out the mandala in the center of the dance platform, and Bob buys some strips of lath to secure the mandala, which is what I could have done in the first place. I'm learning, and now I know, and now it's done, and I clean up the mess and start again. The mandala is covered with patches of white paint and looks apoplectic when Tsultrim returns from Santa Fe.

She looks at my work and says, "It doesn't seem to have changed." I say, "Yes, Tsultrim, it has changed; believe me, it's changed. I just haven't made any headway."

I clean up the patches and straighten out the lines. I must have painted nearly a mile of lines by now. The paint is drying, and the mandala is finally stable. I've been doing Protectors, and the mountain gods seem peaceful. I have put a heavy rock shaped like a heart in the center to keep the occasional breeze from making the mandala plane and take off for the wide, blue yonder, but the rock has scraped the surface of the white paint. I'm repainting it just as thunder clouds roll over Ekajati Peak.

It doesn't rain right away, but in the middle of the night it breaks loose with flashes of lightning and blasts of thunder. I know it's raining hard because there's a river running through my tent, blowing in from the unprotected side.

And the mandala? I don't want to think about it. I give it a quick glance on my way to practice. That's enough. I can tell something's wrong since it seems to be covered with a misty vapor.

After practice, I go down to the platform to sweep off the rain and do a set of Qigong exercises. The white paint from the center has spread over half the color and is still standing in pools. Yes, Marpa, I know nothing lasts. Clean it up, and chill, dude.

So, I swab up what paint I can and let the rest dry. It only requires a light coat of each color to bring it back, no problemo, another mile or two of lines to be cut in, and, if the weather permits,

I'll be back on track in a day or so. I'm maybe three-fourths done, and there's still a week to go. David sighs and says it's lucky I started when I did. He empathizes with my situation, as he's knocking all the rock off the curved part of the stupa, called the *bumpa*, because of a small miscalculation. Rinpoche will arrive soon, and there's new energy on the Land. Different projects are being worked on simultaneously, all nearing completion. We are left to our own devices, all of us going through our various traumas of creation and destruction and recreation, processes of stone and paint, wind and sun and rain.

Kim is working on *tsatsas*, and I ask if she can help me finish the mandala before Rinpoche arrives. She has Desmond with her. He's three years old and a handful, but Kim is nothing if not a great mom, and we work out a system. Des plays in mud puddles part of the time, and Tanyia or Deborah take turns with him, and we make progress on the mandala.

Sure, Des runs through the wet paint occasionally, leaving bright, buddhababy footprints across the mandala, but this is as it should be, easy to paint out a few prints I tell Kim, relax. Once, while I'm working on another project, Des takes two paint rollers, one green, one white and paints green on white and white on green. Kim has this cleaned up before I return, and I only guess there had been a mess because of the telltale signs.

Clouds and rain. I finish touching up the lines in the center, and I rush to the stupa site to grab a tarp. I don't want a repeat of the last fiasco, so I put the tarp over the wet paint, not noticing the tar on the flip side of the tarp.

When I pull the tarp up after the rain has subsided, there are black splotches scattered over most of my near perfectly-painted center designs. Oh well, this cleans up with gasoline, which lifts the tar but also lifts some of the soft paint and leaves yellowish smudges everywhere. A few more coats of paint. This painting is beginning to have real character, a texture and patina like an old masterpiece from so many repairs.

We're painting the twelve black lines that divide the mandala into sections. We've laid down two strips of masking tape leaving about an inch for the black lines. We've painted two lines, and I'm laying

down the third or fourth set of tapes, when we discover if you pull up the tape, the underpainting comes with it. Kim is beside herself. It's a sweltering day on the mandala, and we're blowing it. Kim is pulling her hair, and I try to soothe her, but she is inconsolable. I decide that it's best to shut up when I did.

Kim, yelling obscenities and tears bursting from her eyes, grabs a brush and proceeds to paint all the lines without any tape, one after another, one brush width, right on, no error, straight as you could want. Like what might have taken all day takes 20 minutes, tops, and all I have to do is patch a few spots, retouch the lines, and were done.

The bumpa on the stupa has also been rebuilt. The ten *bummis* have been placed on the spine, and during a thunder and lightning storm we have placed the umbrella with the sun and moon on top. The scaffold is still standing, and the masonry needs to be washed, but the stupa, too, is completed.

Rinpoche arrives, and the sky clears. "Bene, bene," he says, "very hard work, very good. Bene." Prima Mi is with him, and she will teach the Vajra Dances. She looks at the mandala and says that it is very beautiful. Now we can begin the practice.

There are twelve of us and Prima Mi. Nine women and three men to dance *The Dance of the Liberation of the Six Lokas* and *The Dance of Three Vajras*. These dances are not performances. They are Dzogchen meditation practices, which integrate sound and movement. Prima is not so sure at first if this is going to work. She has never taught this practice under these conditions.

She wants to start early, but in the morning there is frost on the mandala. This melts, and then we mop the mandala. We have to dance barefooted because shoes scrape the paint and socks get soaked, and soon it's too hot for bare feet on the dark colors, and the winds whip us, and the lightning cracks on the hilltops, and we're not at all sure we can survive the elements.

But we are unanimous we want to learn these dances. I bring a box covered in black plastic to house our shoes, so they won't get wet, and I bring a tarp to huddle under when it pours. We bring water bottles and incense and a tape recorder and a crystal ball to put in the center of the mandala to represent the Dharmakaya. It's perfect, and we're captive. Wilderness, fresh air, and a heaven of

wildflowers surround us. No distractions obstruct the path. We have the mandala beneath us. We are ready to enter the immutable space of Vajrasattva and purify the six realms of beings, leaving our worldly cares behind and liberating the God Realms, the Realms of the Asuras, the Humans, the Animals, the Hungry Ghosts and the Hell Realms. And so, our training begins.

## **PAGOOSH SUMMER IDYLL**

Lightning flashes and thunder rolls very near town, so the management at The Springs asks us to leave because of the risk of lightning striking us in the hot pools. The man at the desk gives us a rain check and says we may have to wait more than an hour, so we decide to go to dinner. Jack, Marta, Susan, Horse, Tommy, and I meet at the Hunan Chinese Restaurant. We have just finished the ten-day Family Retreat, and we are trying to integrate back into the life of Pagosa Springs.

Four Corners. Pagosa Springs. Tara Mandala. My friends. My faith.

Until a few years ago, Pagosa Springs was a one-horse town. These days Pagosa Springs is one of the fastest growing communities in the United States. Nestled in the mountains near Wolf Creek Pass, this is where east meets west. The headwaters of the Colorado River run west towards the Gulf of California, and the Arkansas River runs east to join the Mississippi, which eventually empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The area south of the San Juan Mountains is geographically a part of the Southwest. Here are high mountain valleys covered with wildflowers and more wildflowers. This is where all the wildflowers go when they die—a heaven for wildflowers.

Pagosa Springs was settled around a deep, sulfur hot spring next to the San Juan River. The name comes from "pagoosh," a Ute word some of the locals say means healing water and others, stinky water. I've overheard a teenager refer to Pagosa as "Rotteneggville." This stinky, healing water does smell a little weird until you get used to the odor.

This was a health spa long before recorded history. An Anasazi

kiva can be found at nearby Chimney Rock. In the 1880s, the Utes and the Navajo contested the ownership of the springs. The Utes chose an U.S. Cavalry Scout to challenge a Navajo warrior. The Navajo was defeated in a knife fight, and the Ute tribe became the nominal custodians for Uncle Sam. Today, there is a postmodern bath house being built at The Springs, an eclectic blend of Frontier Saloon, Mexican Adobe, and Roman Villa with a touch of neon—a style architect Julia Donaho calls "Southwest Renaissance."

Mountain meadows were an incentive for cattle drives, and a settlement around the springs was inevitable. With snowcapped mountains to the north and east and 14,000 foot pyramidal Pagosa Peak rising above town, with the effulgence of sunsets on the massive granite wall of the Continental Divide, this is one of the most scenically beautiful spots in the world.

Tara Mandala is 15 miles from town, our land wedged between the San Juan Forest and the Ute Reservation. We awake each morning by the conch being blown. The staff holds a Green Tara practice in the yurt, and everyone is invited to attend. Breakfast is at 8:00, and there is just enough time after practice to do a set of the Five Tibetans exercises on the dance platform before the breakfast conch sounds.

We meet for breakfast beneath the mother tree, a giant box elder that shelters the kitchen. The kitchen evolves. This year there is a bar across the refrigerators and a double set of hooks on the cabinet doors to prevent raccoons from ransacking the foodstuffs. Each year there is a special animal that makes its presence felt. Last year it was a badger, the year before, a wildcat. The chipmunks, however, are perennial. They get so fat from eating dropped food that their bellies drag on the ground. I suspect Tara Mandala is a prestigious place to be reborn in the animal realm.

The family retreat has several parts. The adults receive teachings by Carol Fitzpatrick on Green Tara and by Lorain Fox Davis on the Medicine Wheel. White Horse Hubble will lead a vision quest, and Lorain's daughter, Cris, who is an experienced Outreach leader, will lead the teens on an overnight hike. Also, there is a plan to build a cob oven.

Robert Francis Johnson has a metaphysical approach to building a cob oven. Clay, sand and straw are the essential ingredients.

Wisdom, strength and beauty are the metaphorical supports. A firm foundation is essential to erect any edifice. On this foundation is placed a mound of wet sand, called the "void." Loving hands mould layers of cob to create the oven around this void. There is no smokestack on a cob oven. The proportion of the door size to the chamber after the void has been removed allows for the fire to kindle and the smoke to escape. Cob ovens are used throughout the world to bake bread. At the highest temperature, the cook can bake pizza, and at lower temperatures, start yogurt. The cob is prepared in a similar manner to pressing grapes. Cob people, young and old, remove their shoes, join hands and mix the ingredients with their feet. In the process of building this oven, a chain of friendship beams outward to heaven and inward to the central abyss.

Men and women, boys and girls, all with legends. In the marrow of our lives our dreams fly, while overhead the clouds in a larger current move across the sky.

I listen in prayer and look up through the branches of the box elder. The camp is stirred with frantic search plans for a boy lost returning from the overnight hike. David and Damchü have ridden out to look for him on horseback. The voices of those searching on foot crisscross on walky-talkies. While we are in the prayer circle, Carol envisions the boy seated under a tree along the trail. Later, David tells us that he followed footprints he spotted along a dirt road and found the boy exactly where Carol had seen him in her mind's eye. The boy said he was not really lost. He had overshot the trail he was looking for and was back-tracking his way to camp when he was found. So much can happen to us in a minute.

Horse and Lorain are both trained in the Lakota tradition but by different teachers. Their styles of teaching being different, they have to work out their routine. At the sweat lodge, Lorain leads the pipe ceremony, and Horse drums during the sweat. Before the sweat, Horse brings out a *Tanka*, a buffalo skull with the horns wrapped in red cloth, one side painted with red and white stripes and the other side of the skull painted yellow with white dots. Horse holds the Tanka above his head, and he psychically transforms himself into the whole beast. Lorain tells us about having recently attended a gathering of the pipe holders where the bundle with the pipe from the time of White Buffalo Woman was

opened, an event that hadn't happen for many, many years, and that all the pipes were touched to the original pipe to rejuvenate the lineage. Tommy, Horse's assistant, holds Lorain's pipe for each of us to smoke, and then we enter the lodge. I can feel the power of tradition in my cells.

There are four rounds to the sweat, one for those being born, one for the young, one for adults, and one for the aged. We are all invited to pray and partake in song. Lorain adds a lot of water at the end of each round, which raises the humidity considerably, and Horse drums with passion. Sometimes, I feel like I'm the victim of a sweat, that the red man wants to give the white man the "full treatment." The ceremony this afternoon, however, is nothing if not inviting, even when Horse jokes that Grandma Lorain will throw the whole bucket of water on the hot stones to "cool us off."

Water was a teacher this year. The season started off fine, but by the end of the family retreat, the well seemed to have dried up. We added more solar panels to increase the flow of electricity to the pump. We added another ten feet of hose and lowered the pump. We bought a new pump. Finally, it was discovered that the well had been incorrectly cased and that we would have to drill a new well. As the well diggers were backed up with projects, we solved our problem for the summer by filling a large storage tank with water hauled from town, and then we poured the water into the well so it could be pumped up the hill to the holding tank. With gravity flow, we had pressure in the pipes. It was a long way around in order to get back a short distance correctly and many climbs up the hill to see if the tank was full. "Fire is water falling upwards," said sage Heraclitus.

Water? What water? The water isn't a problem for the seasoned veterans of Adzom Paylo Rinpoche's Intensive Longchen Nyinthig Retreat. These people get so deep into practice that they become one with the elements. "Sometimes I don't know what is going on," says Steve, "but I just relax and let it happen, figuring, what the heck, everything is everywhere."

As below, so above. The night sky is fine, and the conjunction of Mars and the Moon in Scorpius is intense, Mars being the esoteric ruler of Scorpius. This summer, Mars is closer to Earth than it has been in years, and it is also in proximity to Antares, a red star in the

tail of the Scorpion, which is sometimes referred to as Mars's rival. All in all, a powerful visual and symbolic configuration that portends great spiritual accomplishment.

It does get intense—looking for a way through this buddhadrama, an exit out, an exit in. Instress. Inscape. From the head by way of the ear. From the heart by way of the breath. Keeping faith that every blade of grass will attain liberation and the grasshoppers jump for joy.

Everything arises from emptiness. Early morning—the dew on the grass is singing. Robert Olander wears his baseball cap and Mac MacCarthy has on his battered straw cowboy hat, a shortstop for Buddha anda cowboy yogi having a quiet talk.

The light filters down on a Tara, light on Susan standing in a green t-shirt with a bucket and a broom. A high lama, a low lama, she wears the hat of assistant retreat coordinator and that of chief latrine supervisor. She is compassion in action.

I watch Robert Petit waltz with a board. Shifting a sheet of half-inch plywood, his hands move gracefully, touching the corners, edging the board into place. He uses a cordless screw gun, which has an entirely different rhythm than a hammer. I'm nostalgic for the rap rap rap of a hammer, although screws do hold the wood firmly. Today, the process is to screw and glue—anything to prevent the erosion of barbarous time! Robert stands back and scrutinizes his project, pulls out his tape measure, looks for his square, picks up his pencil, makes another measurement, takes another step in his carpenter's dance.

We have not one head cook but two. James and Brian are the two-headed cook. Their assistants are Vanessa and Roy. They rise with the sun to stir up something delicious, always reaching far enough to find their joy. Breakfast over, lunches are packed, and the retreatants leave in a caravan for Hidden Valley to do their practices. The day is poised in exultation.

And night is a time for song and dance. After the Riwo Sangchod Retreat, we party at Tsultrim's and David's new house. Tulku Sangngag feels expansive and dances the Warrior Dance of King Gesar, jabbing at the air with an African spear. Ani Tersing tries to translate one of the tulku's poems. Although her English falters, her voice is star-flecked. She knows more than she knows she knows.

"Red bird...big bird...a vulture...eating dead people on the mountain." We are inspired to sing 'Blackbird Singing' and, much to David's chagrin, 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' and, then, 'Om Tare Tutare' to flute and drum. Given the right rhythm, even the dead can dance.

So many decisions, so much chance for derision—the deadly wind of praise and blame. Birget's luscious Tara statue stands before the throne, but Tulku Sang-ngag says he would prefer it stood on the altar with the mandala offering placed in a lower position. However, he does not mention which direction the Tara statue should stand on the altar. Should it face the lama when he's teaching or should it face the entrance? We opt for Tara facing the throne, and Rinpoche laughs uproariously when he enters the yurt and finds he must prostrate to Tara's posterior.

Tulku Sang-ngag meets life with humor and forbearing. He was incarcerated in Chinese prisons for ten years, and while he was there he received many teachings from great lamas. He relates how happy he was when he discovered the blissful state of samadhi and could enter it while he was working at cutting logs, but how this got him into trouble with the guards and the beatings he received. He teaches us how to enter this state with the breathing exercise called *tsalung*, but while he is teaching this practice, a pickup arrives, and the port-a-potty man begins pumping out the honey box. Tulku Sang-ngag is explaining how the seed syllable in the crown chakra melts into nectar when the odor of excrement wafts through the meditation yurt. Eyes roll, noses lift, but everyone seems determined to maintain their composure as they realize the essential unity of the relative and the absolute. Then, Tulku Sang-ngag laughs, and we join him in our appreciation of the irony in this occurrence. I drift in infinite space, or no space, an illusion of myself in an obscure place, a floating reflection. Emptiness holds me up. And so, what is the next thing to see?

Marta and I are driving along Trujillo Road and see big drops of rain spaced a foot apart turning to hail. Next, a fat, jagged lightning bolt appears to shoot right into town. "Wow, look at that," exclaims Marta. When we get to the Tara Mandala office, Jack is standing in the doorway waving a newsletter, airing the acrid smell of burned electrical wiring from the room. He says, "Sparks flew out of the

postage machine and the fax. The computers are down, and the lights are out. The lightning must have struck pretty close." La Plata Electric Co. is soon on the scene, working on a pole up the street, and after the lights come on, the main computer starts up but can't boot its programs and won't shut off, which doesn't bode well for getting any work done in the office today.

Back on the land, everything is peace. I enter the quiet where flies buzz and leaves rustle in their immortality. The silence ends at a yellow bird, a Western Tanager—I looked him up—atop a stalk of last year's mullein. Each moment has its climax.

Tsultrim is in a yearlong personal retreat, but she makes a brief appearance to attend Adzom Rinpoche's teachings. We are instructed to avoid eye contact and not to ask for interviews, but near the end of the teaching cycle, the situation loosens up, and I get a chance to relay a few messages from the sangha in California. Tsultrim says I must take the Sky-like Nature of Mind Retreat, that it will be good for my practice. I tell her I have to keep working on the layout of *A Brief Biography of Golchen Tulku*, but she insists, and I know by the way she looks at me, a look from the molecular level, that she knows best. I'm afraid of shamata practice because I don't think I can sit for lengthy periods in one-pointed meditation, but what I find is that I enjoy these sessions, that my years of tantric training have served me well. My body has been trained to sit. A teacher is the source of all accomplishments. I am blessed by having Tsultrim for my teacher.

During pointing out instructions by Tsok Nyi Rinpoche, a fly flies in my mouth, and I wonder if I will ever get it. Stabilize in rigpa, that is. I'm sitting, and then the fly flies in, and I sit with this fly in my mouth, all revved up, but I'm sitting still, and the fly walks out of my mouth and along my upper lip and onto my nose and then buzzes off into space, and I am left feeling empty and a trifle confused. During the question and answer period, I ask Rinpoche, "If I am sitting in rigpa and the fly is inside me, is the fly in rigpa?" Rinpoche says, "We'll have to ask the fly."

Samsara is an airport surrounding a delayed flight. I'm stretched out with my eyes closed listening to the travelers and the intercom in the Phoenix Airport. "...want my money back..." "...want to be in San Francisco, now..." "...really no reason for this..." "...is it really

raining there?..." "will my luggage arrive?..." "...will the pilots for flight 2807 please report to Gate A6?..." All this inside me.

Now, I am standing in the family room of my house near Sebastopol, looking into the middle distance, a newspaper at my feet. I'm conscious of the upside down headlines. The world is going topsy-turvy, and things are getting desperate, as I reflect on the limp, blue sky of a summer idyll.

## **THE LAMA AND THE CARPENTER**

Around midnight, I am called to fix the Lama's bed. Somehow he has knocked his bed loose from its moorings. Adzom Paylo Rinpoche is a big man, well over six-foot tall. He's going to be hard on the furniture. The path is visible in the moonlight, so I make my way from my tent to the shed near the kitchen where the tools are stored. I gather up some more blocks, a hammer, a few nails, and my level, and I wend my way through the scrub oak to Adzom's tent.

I can see his bulk sitting on the bed. There is a battery-powered lamp in the tent, and it casts a feeble light, but I can see the bed has a radical tilt. Anne Klein is seated on a cushion on the floor; she will translate. Anne says, "The bed is lower at this end, and Rinpoche can't sleep with his head lower than his feet, and if he turns the other way, his feet will be pointed towards Tara."

I take off my shoes and bow in obeisance. Adzom motions me to sit. I push back the covers on the bed and put my level on the frame, and, sure enough, it is way out of kilter. Adzom is curious, and he climbs down and sits on the floor next to me. He asks to see the level, so I hand it over to him, and while he is occupied, I go around to the other side of the bed and look at the legs. The bed has slid off the blocks. I set them back under the legs, and when I look up, I see that Adzom is moving the level back and forth, this way and that, with a big smile on his face. I take the tool from him and again lay it along the edge of the bed frame, so he can see that the bubble is in the middle of the glass tube, which indicates that the structure is level. Adzom gets really excited. "I understand; I understand," he says. "I am very smart." He's like a big kid with a new toy. I start to

collect my things, but Anne asks me if I would like to stay and have an interview. I hadn't planned on this, as I am not registered for this retreat. I came to Tara Mandala to do karma yoga, but since I am here, I say, "Sure, why not?"

The smell of incense is heavy. The lamp casts a shadow off the statue of Tara on the wall of the tent. I am high in the Rocky Mountains sitting at the feet of a master. This could be Tibet a thousand years ago. I sit down again, and Adzom climbs back up on his bed. He looks at me, and his eyes roll back in his head, and he asks me, "Do you want my mind essence?" Whoa! This dude is serious. "Yes," I say, "yes, I most certainly do." He asks me a question that I feel could be answered in a number of ways. I tell him I have been working a lot with my energy because I have prostate cancer, and cancer is said to be caused by an interruption of the energy field, a possible break in the immunity system. Adzom says I should meditate on the question further and come back in a couple of days. I stand and bow and pick up my tools. As I am leaving, he says, "I might have to steal your level."

A few days later, I stop at the hardware store in town and look for a small level, something Adzom can pack in his suitcase. I find a short carpenter's level with replaceable bevels made by Stanley, not as classy as the antique I use, which was patented in 1896, but more portable. It will serve the purpose. Near the levels, are metal squares of different sizes, and next to them are brass plumb bobs. I have an idea. I am a Past Master of the Order of Freemasons, and the secrets of Masonry are transmitted through the use of sign and symbol, just as in Dzogchen. And, just as in Buddhism there are the three jewels: the Guru, the Dharma, and the Sangha, in a Lodge of Masons there are three objects that are called the movable jewels: the Plumb, the Square, and the Level. These are the working tools of a Fellowcraft Mason. So, I buy these tools to present to Adzom Rinpoche. I know I risk being disemboweled and having my organs thrown to the beasts of the field for revealing Masonic secrets, especially as I will have to communicate them through the translations of a woman, but, damn me, I am frustrated by these limitations. It is traditional to maintain secrecy in esoteric matters, and I will not reveal the secrets of how to enter and open a lodge; I will only show Adzom the parallels between a set of symbols in the

two traditions. There is great importance in forging links between minds of different cultures. I feel Adzom is a great master who is leading me to enlightenment, and I have a rare opportunity to share some of my experience with him and enter into the field of his wisdom.

A Gana Puja, a feast, is planned for the next day because it's Padmasambhava's birthday and a full moon as well. This is an auspicious day to practice, and all benefits of practice will be greatly multiplied. Rinpoche arrives. His assistant, Lama Tsering, has a video camera and is documenting the event. I shoot a picture of him—a lama in his robes with a video camera—a classic cultural cross-over. The sun is beating down harder now. This is going to be an ordeal. There is not any protection from the blazing sun, and Adzom will recite the whole text because he is a Dharma machine. We are fried by the time the practice is dedicated, and we are on the verge of heat stroke by the time Adzom starts discussing his vision of a temple on this site. I was right; he is a temple builder; and I know he needs a plumb, a square and a level.

Tsultrim wants me to make the Green Tara practice into a chapbook. She is having Erik Drew and Anne both go over her rendition. Getting them to agree is going to be an interesting process, and getting the book finished before the end of the retreat will take some finesse.

Adzom wants to learn how to can peaches. Tsultrim is telling him how, step by step. Erik is translating. Adzom is taking notes, and he is also giving Tsultrim a short version of the Tara practice, which he wants included at the end of the main text. Adzom is giving it out word by word, and Tsultrim writes each word down in phonetic Tibetan, and Erik translates it into English. Then, Tsultrim gives another step in the process of canning peaches, and Erik translates that into Tibetan, and Adzom writes it down in his notebook. Adzom then gives another line of the Tara practice, and Tsultrim writes that down, and Erik translates.

*OM CHAG TSAL JETSUN TARE*

*OM Homage to Jetsun TARE Goddess*

*Wash jars, rinse. Place jars in hot water.*

*TU TA RA E YI DUNG WA KUNCHOB*

*TU TA RA E Save from all suffering  
Pack the sliced peaches into hot jars.  
TUGJE TOGMED TURE PALMO  
Unimpeded compassion TURE Glorious One  
Leave one finger of space at top of jar.  
DAK LA DRUPCHOK TSOL CHIK SWA HA  
Grant me the ultimate siddhi SWA HA  
Cover with boiling sryup, leaving headspace.*

I call this the Tara-Peach transmission. I sit outside the tent, chuckling to myself, waiting for the text to emerge, so I can run off another edition of the book.

Lama Tsering has been having stomach cramps. He has been to the local clinic, but they can't find anything. The cramps persist, so I am asked to take him, with Harvey to translate, to Mercy Hospital in Durango.

Sitting in the emergency room lobby, I wait for Lama Tsering. An obese lady to my left, wearing shorts and a t-shirt, paints her toes copper. A tall Indian in formal dress—a set of tails, no less—with his hair tied back in a braid, a turquoise and bone necklace, dark glasses and cowboy boots, paces the floor. Sitting across from me, a tough-looking guy with a mangled right eye and a dragon tattoo on his calf bounces a baby on his knee. *Aliens 3* is on the TV. Which realm is this? Which planet am I on?

They couldn't find anything wrong with Tulku Gyurmey Tsering at Mercy Hospital. On the road home, we pass through the small village of Gem, and I point to a twenty-foot stack of elk antlers in front of a shop, probably a tannery, where there is a sign, "The Buck Stops Here." Lama Tsering's eyes get big, and his automatic mantra machine kicks into overdrive. Within a mile, a rainbow arcs across the road. "Man, Tsering," I say, "you liberated a whole herd of dead elk."

The next morning, I am called from breakfast to fix the Lama's bed. He has broken the boards. I get my tools, and I take the plumb, level and square I want to give to Rinpoche. Adzom is eating breakfast at a table under the awning, so I go into the tent and look under the bed and see that the screws that hold the brace that supports the cross structure has given way on one side. I remove the

covers from the bed and turn the frame on its side, and in doing so, I bump against the altar and tip some water out of the offering bowls, that spills on a notebook. The top page is soaked. I grab my handkerchief to wipe it up before the ink runs, but I am too late, and I smear the letters. I just hope these are insignificant notes and not a sacred transmission from Jigme Lingpa. I finish my repairs and put the covers back, just as Adzom returns. I point to the mess I made, but he doesn't seem disturbed. He sits on his bed and bounces a couple of times and smiles. Anne is nearby, and I ask her if she will translate for me. I tell him that I have some tools I would like to give him, and that it occurred to me that he might like to know their esoteric significance. I tell him that I don't presume to be teaching him, but that I would like to share this information with him. He smiles broadly and asks me to sit.

I give him, in turn, a small plastic level, a steel square, and a brass plumb with a string. I explain that the Level is symbolic of equality, the Square of morality, and the Plumb teaches rectitude of conduct. The plumb is an instrument used by operative masons to raise perpendiculars, the square to square their work, and the level to lay horizontals. I recite from rote that in Speculative Masonry the Plumb admonishes us to walk upright in life, squaring our actions by the Square of Virtue, and to remember that we are traveling on the Level of Time towards that Temple in Heaven not made by human hands. Anne does her best to translate this into Tibetan. Adzom nods with enthusiasm, and he says it is unusual for him to be giving mind training while receiving training in carpentry in return.

When my little talk is over, Adzom asks me if I have meditated on his last mind-training question. I tell him I finally understand, and I give him a new answer. He gives me further private instructions, and when I leave, I realize he has turned me around again. I am walking up the trail to the stupa, when something hits me. I am completely aware but not "thinking." I am just there, everywhere, on the trail, in the universe.

*that presence*  
*that is all*  
*that is*

*given each  
breath*

Tears shoot out of my eyes—I can't help it—I have such gratitude for what has been revealed to me. I lean my head against the upper part of the stupa. A dakini comes around from the other side of the stupa, and asks me what is wrong, and I say, "I just feel incredibly blessed." "Yes," she says, "the stupa is a powerful, living entity, giving off its blessings. It's a wonderful place to cry."