

The Master Director

EXCERPT No. 7

Bladder & Other Miracles

(from Chapter 19)

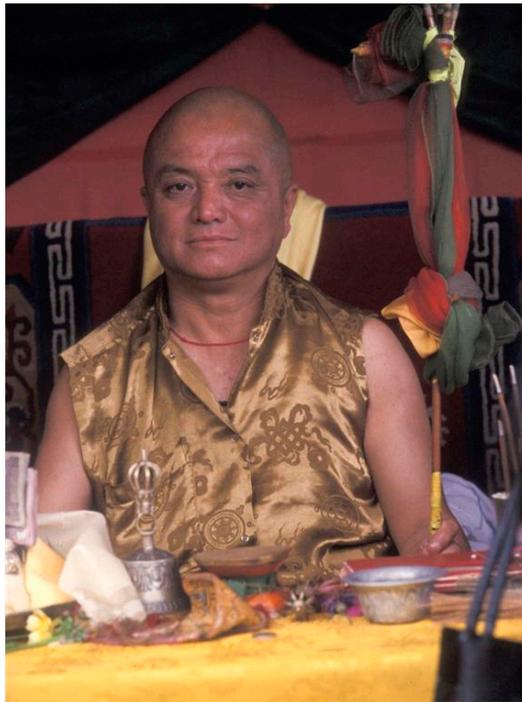
The following excerpt takes place when I was on extended travels with Gurudev in the mountains around Darjeeling. We were traveling from one huge ritual to the next, each one attracting thousands of people who streamed from their remote villages to catch a glimpse him.



Travelling with Gurudev was like being in a pressure cooker. Questions raged through my mind I could not ask. I was alternately ready to flee and feeling blessed that I was even allowed to be there.

It was shortly after the event in Singamari with Bimal Gurung that we went to the biggest event of our entire tour. The local schools had been closed for the day and the driveway to the field, where huge tents were pitched for the event, was lined with schoolchildren as we arrived. Gurudev sat on his throne before 4,000 people and again he had them all laughing—for eight hours! An amazing feat—as was the fact that in those eight hours he didn't once get up. This posed for me a tremendous mystery. They were continually bringing him tea, and for eight hours he spoke and sang and chanted and cracked jokes and never got up to relieve himself. How miraculous, I thought. Though I was always questioning his superhuman reputation, his bladder did seem rather remarkable.

It was later that I saw his ruse. Gurudev always sat on his raised platform cross-legged. In front of him was a long, low wooden table, which was closed in front towards the audience but had a shelf accessible from the back. I was standing to his side as he was singing when I noticed him fiddling with his robes, opening them towards the shelf. There was a jar on the shelf, which he put under the folds of his burgundy robes, very subtly so that no one would notice. The low table shielded him nicely. He manipulated the jar into position. Then he placed his hands on his knees and finished the song. He looked out over the crowd with a faraway, blissful look, his lips parted in an enigmatic smile. To the assembled multitude, he was entering a trance-like state.



Appearance and reality were often at odds in Gurudev. A man who can urinate in front of 4,000 people without them knowing clearly has the powers of a conjurer. And in fact, there were times when I saw his entire show as one continual play of illusion, especially if I took the testimony of his devotees. I sometimes looked at them all as positively delusional and felt myself surrounded by fools.

A case in point: That evening I was alone in the room with Dawa and Gurudev. Dawa got a plastic basin and Gurudev sat at the edge of his bed as Dawa washed his feet. It was like a scene out of a Bible picture book. We talked a while and then Gurudev stood up, took a few steps, slipped into his sandals, and walked out of the room. Dawa leaned over towards me, wonder filling his eyes. 'Did you see,' he said in a hushed, reverent tone, 'he left no footprints! His feet were wet and he left no footprints!' Dawa's losing track of the time it took for Gurudev's feet to drip-dry had been transformed into a miracle.

Then, as if to compound his folly, Dawa leaned over again and said to me, in an earnest, confidential tone, ‘You would be surprised, but Gurudev actually knows English.’

‘Come *on*, Dawa.’

I was so tired of hearing fantastic and clearly farcical stories about Gurudev.

‘I can tell you exactly how much English he speaks,’ I said, ‘Gurudev knows some words; he can put together simple sentences. You know this too: why else would you always be interpreting for us?’

Dawa neither refuted my argument nor saw my point.

Instead, he told me that Gurudev spoke German too and that he had been to Germany. He started telling me a story that had echoes of the life of Jesus. There were twelve years, Dawa explained, when Gurudev was a young man and no one knew where he was. Gurudev had told Dawa that for some of that time he had been in Germany. He had devotees there, people who became his followers, but it was before he was a master. He told Dawa that he wanted to return one day to show them what he had become.

Gurudev came back in and I decided to test what Dawa said. How did I know where Gurudev had or hadn’t been? The story sounded ridiculous—I doubted it greatly—but it was worth a test. So I picked a moment when all was quiet. I watched him closely and said, ‘*Wie geht es Ihnen*,’ which means ‘How are you’ in German. If he knew German, something would register. It didn’t.

While travelling with Gurudev I had only a small daypack with me, the same pack I had when I met him in Timi on the second day of my pilgrimage in search of the present moment. It contained not much more than a change of clothes and a toothbrush. The very nature of my pilgrimage was definitely not to find, but to dispense with, any intermediaries I might encounter. Nothing could have been further from my intention than to find a guru, especially one so shrouded in mystification, one whose followers were so delusional. There is a saying in Buddhism: ‘If you find the Buddha, kill the Buddha.’ Meaning: find out for yourself. Experience yourself. I wouldn’t have to kill the Buddha; I could simply lift up my light pack and start walking, wherever I was. All roads are equal when you have no goal but present living. I couldn’t imagine Dawa was lying to me when he told me what Gurudev had told him about Germany. Yet it was incomprehensible: Why would Gurudev make up such a story? Was he playing with Dawa’s credulity? Was he telling him these stories, knowing Dawa would mention them to me? I already knew that Dawa reported to Gurudev on our private conversations. Were we all actors in Gurudev’s movie? I bristled at the notion. What was I doing there?

It was with my hand on my pack that I confronted Gurudev. It was my turn to test him. One wrong move and I’d be out of there, happily wandering down the road without a backward glance.

‘If you are a man of truth,’ I asked him, ‘why is it the closer I come to you the more I seem to be surrounded by illusion?’ Dawa was in the uncomfortable position of interpreting what I said next: ‘Take Dawa, for instance, your close disciple. He is full of illusions about you. All you have to do is take three

steps and he'll see a miracle. He literally believes you speak all languages. He says you speak English. Do you speak English?'

'No,' Gurudev responded. He seemed both detached and slightly amused at my fiery, defiant expression.

'Dawa told me you speak German. Is this true?'

'No.'

'He also told me you've been to Germany. Is this true?'

'I have only been to India, Nepal, and Bhutan.'

'Everywhere I go with you, people are telling me you are not really a human being. They say you are a god. What are you? Are you a god?'

'No,' he said, 'this is only what my disciples say. I am not a god. I am a human being. I am a teacher, a guru. I am a master. That is all.'

'I understand the goal of Buddhism is to dispel illusions,' I said. 'Yet the people around you are full of illusions. I've never seen people so deluded. How can this be? How can it be that the closer you get to a man of truth, the more deluded the people are? Does this mean you are not a good teacher? Why don't you correct them? Even Dawa says you are a god.'

My defiant tone fell like a stone in a still pond, plunging without causing a ripple. Gurudev was unflappable. I had the distinct impression he liked my recalcitrance, as if he were playing with the reality around him out of a sense of compassion, for the purpose of creating conditions for others to wake up. If this were true, no matter what my reaction, it would be an opportunity for my awaking.

'A disciple is like a plant,' Gurudev said. 'All you can do is give it the right conditions. You can put it in the sun. You can give it food. You can water it and you can give it love. But you cannot make it come to bud. You cannot make it flower. You cannot make it come to fruit. These things, given the right conditions, come on their own, in their own time, by nature.'

For a brief moment my mind unhinged from its habitual ruts and I had a flash of understanding. Gurudev was just busy being what he was. He neither asked disciples to gather round him nor did he invite or invent stories about himself. Nor was it his function to correct others. He took others exactly where they were. His nature was like a spring, overflowing with love. In a way, he was absolutely nothing. His answer made me see how much of my reaction to him was just that, a reaction, originating in myself—reflecting me and not him. And what better function for a teacher than to provide the opportunity to know yourself. He then said something very beautiful, a metaphor for compassion. Because the roads are so steep in the Himalayas, there is a rule of the road that is observed there, which he then cited: 'The car going up the hill has the right of way.'