

ENTICEMENT STORIES OF TIBET

PEMA TSEDEN

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SUNY
P R E S S

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Our minds and bodies, surrounded by a myriad of worldly affairs, can hardly get a moment of peace. Aspiring to find quiet time may sometimes feel like an extravagant hope. For me, writing is a way to achieve such inner peace. This is especially true when I write fiction. It allows me to return to the past, face the present, and look forward to the future.

I was born in the Tibetan areas, but then left to go elsewhere. I have been nurtured by Tibetan, Chinese, Western, and other cultures. These experiences integrated into my life and my creations, deeply influencing who I have become and allowing my creative work to show its current force.

Sometimes I don't know what kind of person I am—how who I was and who I am are related or different, or who my future self will end up being. Often, in both my life and my creative work, I find myself in a bewildered and helpless state, to the point of not finding a sense of direction or an exit point. But when I enter an exceptionally creative writing mood, I seem to be able to break away from perplexity and passiveness. My body and mind slowly relax to follow that wonderful rhythm that allows me to enter into my inner world, into the inner worlds of the characters of my stories. In these moments I feel completely at ease.

This is also the time when I can see more clearly into myself—can see some of my inner passion, sincerity, fragility, pettiness. Many times I write fiction for no other reason than to enter this state in which I can see and know myself more deeply.

All the words you want to say can be found in the texts you write.



Wu Yao, *The Mark of the White Conch*

ORGYAN'S TEETH

Orgyan was a friend of mine from primary school. All that is well known.

Later on, Orgyan was identified as a reincarnate lama. All that is likewise well known.

These are not the main things. The main thing is that when Orgyan reached the age of twenty, he died. When I spoke to many people of Orgyan's death, they said it was not proper to speak of a reincarnate lama's death like that; rather, it was more appropriate to say, "passed into nirvana." However, the two of us, Orgyan and I, had been playmates when we were young and then were also classmates in the five years of primary school. If it is necessary to describe a friend of the same age getting lassoed and caught by the lord of death as "passed into nirvana," then it is hard for me to unravel what to actually say. But my father, and mother especially, said it was not right to speak in that way of his death. If I did, I would not be giving respect to a great, holy being more endowed with wisdom and merit than I.

After listening to my parents, I no longer wished to talk about his death like I had. I can certainly say, if asked, that Orgyan possessed greater merit than I. After he was recognized as a reincarnate lama, many people, because of his position, felt that they had to prostrate to him. One time, my father and mother said they would bring me to the monastery where he lived and force me to prostrate three times to him. I really did not want to prostrate to him. He, himself, in the midst of a gathering of

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people, said it was not necessary for me to do so. But my parents would not back down. Insistent, they said I must by all means prostrate three times. As I stood there not knowing what to do, they continued to berate me, saying, "Because you were a classmate of the reincarnate lama for five years, maybe you think that you are like him? Or you don't want all sentient beings seeing you prostrate to him? Why do you think you don't have to do it to him?" As they were adamant, I was not able to refuse them. Even if they had said more, many people were already lining up behind me to prostrate, and so I had no choice but to also prostrate three times to him. As I did so, he stared at me with a slight smile, while at the same time not showing any sign that it was not necessary for me to prostrate. At that moment, I was really unhappy. However, later on, I accepted the reality of the situation, and I felt more at ease, for the reason that having many people prostrate to him was proof that he had more merit than I.

Still, if one were to say he was more intelligent and knowledgeable than I, that wouldn't be something I could entirely go along with. As we were schoolmates from the first through the fifth grades, there was no one more familiar with him. I can say, from the perspective of being there, that not once from the first through fifth grades did he pass a mathematics exam or do his homework on his own. From the first grade on, all of his mathematics work was work of mine that I let him have. If I put it in this way, it is perhaps hard for you to hear. Indeed it would be the case that if others were to explain it like this to me, I myself wouldn't believe it. But that is the fact. I can say with the Three Jewels of Buddhism as my witness and can even take an oath that it is so. Each time, after the teacher would give out the mathematics homework, his sole task was only to stand by waiting for me to finish writing out the assignment. That was it. If I did not finish writing out the homework, then he would not wander off to play outside with the other kids. At that time, I didn't think to blame him at all. If, for instance, he had gone to play with the others, I wouldn't have been anxious about the homework and wouldn't have faced up to doing it then. Thinking about

it now, I think both of us clearly understood the situation. That is, if I didn't finish the homework, then he obviously knew that he too would not be able to finish it. When he copied my work, he was more meticulous than I. As soon as I had completed the homework, I would toss the writing book in front of Orgyan and run outside to play with the other classmates. Once, the teacher praised him, saying that his homework was very carefully done, which made me a bit unhappy.

But there was nothing I could do for him, as a friend, when taking the midterm or final exams. If someone was caught spying on another's exam paper, then both students' exams were torn up and each score marked a zero. Therefore, when we took our exams in the classroom, no one was able to get someone to cheat for them. Orgyan and I were also like that, we didn't cheat. Our math teacher was a woman in her thirties. We heard that she had separated from her husband and now lived alone. Later, we understood from what we heard others say that she had had a child, but that the child had died from a severe disease. Behind her back, the school's teachers said that was why her temperament was like it was. In any case, throughout primary school, Orgyan could not pass even one of his exams in mathematics.

All this was what we did when we were young.

I continued on through middle school and high school. In our area, the only middle school was in the main town of the district, and so it was necessary for me to go there. After graduating from high school, I found a job in a small town and the days passed by. However, after primary school, Orgyan was not able to continue on in school. As he was an only child, his parents said it was okay for him to stay at home. He himself did not want to continue going to school.

Once, during the summer retreat, I asked him why he didn't continue in school. At first he said it was his parents' wish that he do so, and I pretended that was true. Later, he asked if I wanted to know the real reason he didn't go back to school. When I said I did want to know, he replied that he was afraid of mathematics. I laughed a bit and said, "You

could have copied my homework." He said that from the first grade on, each time he would take and copy the mathematics homework, he felt like he was making a mistake. Hearing him say this, I thought he was a pure man.

When I graduated from high school, we had both turned eighteen. As I explained before, I left our small town to go look for work, without thinking of him any longer, and he was recognized as a reincarnate lama. The next summer, when I came back home, he invited me to come to his monastery, which was very close to our hometown. After he had been recognized as a reincarnate lama, we had met just once, on the day that he was enthroned at his monastery. In our area, as a reincarnate lama, he had the highest status of anyone. Many of his followers from the surrounding area were part of his monastic community. On the day he was enthroned, a large number of devotees gathered to meet with him. Everyone brought offering scarves and other such offerings, and were prostrating to him with immeasurable respect. Was it not at that time that my parents compelled me also to prostrate to him?

This time when I went to see him, I took to his monastery offering scarves and other sorts of gifts. A monk led me to his room. He was sitting in the cross-legged meditation posture surrounded by Buddhist texts, rosaries, and other such religious items. After sending away the monk who had led me there, he looked at me, smiling. I felt at that moment, however, that there was automatically a sense of distance between us. After respectfully giving him a ceremonial offering scarf, I didn't think it necessary to prostrate to him. He motioned to me with his hand to come squat next to him. I saw then an expression on his face that was like when he was young, and seeing it, I felt that the distance between us was gone. Smiling, he said to me, "Last time, your parents made it hard for you by making you prostrate."

Though it was necessary to reply, I didn't really know how, but I did finally say, "Doesn't everyone have to prostrate to you? So it was okay for me also to do so."

Looking steadily at me, he said, "Now, as there is no one else here but us two, you don't need to have any worries about that."

Even though he spoke in that way, I still wasn't able to relax very much, so I gave him yet another ceremonial scarf.

He then asked me, "You were good at mathematics, like an expert. Why didn't you go to the university?"

There were many reasons I didn't go to the university, and as I had no desire to clearly spell them out for him, I found some excuses to give.

"I understand all that," he said. "Still, it is too bad."

Gradually, I began to relax. It felt like when the two of us were together when we were young. Likewise, he said, "Now you look like when we were young."

Because now it felt like there was no distance between us, I playfully asked him, "Are you still afraid of mathematics?"

Smiling and shaking his head back and forth, he said, "Remembering that, it still gives me a headache."

I replied, "Now, are you happy because no one at all can force you to do any work that you don't want to do?"

He replied, "Even though I'm a reincarnate lama, how could I just sit around doing nothing? These days, my teacher is teaching me astrology. And while even that has a connection to numbers, it is still easier than the mathematics we did when we were young."

Growing amazed, I said, "From all that I have heard, astrology is very complicated, several times more difficult than our primary school mathematics."

He replied, modestly, "I don't have a great understanding of it."

Again looking at him closely, I asked, "After you were recognized as a reincarnate lama, didn't your intelligence burst forth?"

Smiling as before, he said, "Nevertheless it became a habit at that time to rely upon you for the answer."

I continued to stare intently at him.

He then asked me, "I've heard that some expert has proved that adding one plus one can make three. How can that be true?"

I said to him, "This is an exceedingly deep mathematical problem. A few very skilled mathematicians have only now been able to prove it. From primary school through middle school, the fruits of my study were very good, but this problem I am completely unable to answer."

He went on to say, "I don't know any more besides that one and one makes two, two and two makes four, three and three makes six, four and four makes eight, five and five makes ten, six and six makes twelve, seven and seven makes fourteen, eight and eight makes sixteen, nine and nine makes eighteen, and ten and ten makes twenty."

I thought he would continue on in the same manner up to one hundred and one hundred makes two hundred, but he stopped at adding ten to ten to get twenty. I relaxed and breathed out a sigh, wondering how he had been able to learn astrology. But I only said, "really fast."

As if not hearing me, he said, "Even so, I cannot understand how one and one can make three."

Orgyan separated from the world of humans when he was twenty years old. I, however, have lived in the world of humans past the age of twenty. I know it is not proper to say of Orgyan that he died, separating from the world of humans, but I can't inwardly accustom myself to say of a friend of the same age that he "passed away into nirvana."

Still, this is not the main point. The main point is that now our ways have parted forever.

The very last time that Orgyan and I met was on New Year's Day in the year of his death. We both had reached twenty years old as the New Year celebrations began that year. I had found work in the town, but since then, no such luck had come in anything else that I did. In the past, I heard that people from our village and other villages, whenever starting something important, would go to where Orgyan lived and ask for assistance, and that afterwards, they would have good fortune in all their activities. I didn't have any faith in things like that, but in those years, I had met difficulties in just about everything from all directions and so, since it was the New Year, thought I could go to him and ask for help.

After Orgyan had been recognized as a reincarnate lama, the people in the village said that there had been many marvelous signs at the time of his birth. Some said flowers blossomed on fruit trees in the middle of winter. Others said that though there were not even clouds as small as a bird's head in the sky, the roar of thunder could be heard. Still others said a five-colored-rainbow encircled the sun. There was much talk then of many wonders. I had no belief in wonders like these; still it wasn't that I absolutely did not believe. As it was known that Orgyan and I had been friends in primary school, I was asked what especially distinguished qualities he had. In regard to that question, other than remembering that he had never done well on mathematics exams, I couldn't think of anything else.

Once, I did suddenly remember something that Orgyan had done when he was young. Through the meaning of that act, one was able to know that Orgyan, even as a young child, at least had an enlightened heart. This is what happened when we were in third grade:

One day we were playing on the banks of the Machu river. On the banks of the Machu there was a strange, unusually large boulder, and Orgyan liked to go there regularly to play. According to legend, once when Padmasambhava was going along the Machu, after coming to that place as it was nearing darkness, he, along with his older and younger wives, rested with their backs against the rock for the night. It was said that at daybreak, the shape of his back was visible, imprinted in the face of the boulder with the impression of his older wife on one side, that of his younger on the other. Usually there were many religious pilgrims who visited that place. Also, there were many Nyingma monasteries there because of this legend (as Padmasambhava is said to be the founder of that sect).

That day though, there was not even a single pilgrim around. After wandering around, playing for about half a day, we started to return home. On the way, as we were going along the sandy bank of the river, we saw a fish wriggling in the sand. As soon as I saw the fish, I said, without thinking much, "That is a big fish! We can sell it to the Chinese there doing road work. They will eat it."

Orgyan, paying me no attention, ran over to the fish in the sand and, after taking hold of it, said, "No, it's not right to act like that. I will put it back into the water."

Seeing him gently take the still wriggling fish into the palm of his hand, I said, "Put it down, put it down now! From here to the Machu is a long way. The fish will die before you get there."

Orgyan said to me, "You go back home. I'm for sure going to put this fish back in the water." After which, grasping the fish, he ran off in the direction of the Machu. I watched his back as he ran and, after waiting for a moment, ran after him.

On the way, seeing that the fish didn't quiver at all, I said, "Throw it away. It really is dead." But Orgyan kept running in the direction of the Machu, ignoring me.

When we arrived at the Machu river, we were both panting, gasping for breath.

Orgyan gently put the fish in the water. At first, it just floated on the surface, not moving at all. Orgyan and I stayed there, staring at it, also holding our breaths. Then the fish quivered, then once more. And then, in a flash, it quickly entered the depths of the river.

When I would talk about this event, people said that there were certainly many distinctive qualities that made a great person like him different from ordinary people.

About Orgyan, there was various talk about unusual things, and that, along with my memories of the time when he was young and the many small things that he did, gradually made him appear to me as having especially distinguished good qualities that were really different from others. Because of all that, on the first day of that New Year, I prepared some gifts and a long, spotless offering scarf and went to meet with him.

As before, Orgyan treated me like a close friend; however, unlike before, I felt a spontaneous sense of faith in him arise within me.

After respectfully presenting the offering scarf and gifts to him, I stepped back and was just about to prostrate to him.

Laughing, Orgyan said, "Between the two of us, it's not necessary to do that." After which, he gestured with his hand, saying, "Sit here next to me."

I, however, prostrated to him three times.

He sat cross-legged, looking at me.

I stammered out, "Orgyan, Orgyan, Rinpoche, because all my work this past year has not gone well in any way, this year by all means please give me some assistance."

Orgyan, smiling, asked me, "Do you have trust?"

Respectfully, I replied, "Everyone says that you have blessings."

The smile on Orgyan's face widened more than before and he said, "My very good friend, certainly I will fully grant your request for help."

After he said this, he closed his eyes, chanted many prayers, gave me a spoonful of water from the altar to drink, and finally bestowed upon me a protective cord that he had blessed, and said, "Always wear this protective cord."

I thanked him over and over from the depths of my heart, but again he said, "Between the two of us that is not necessary."

Then, as if suddenly recalling something, he said, "Last month, I met someone."

"Who?" I asked.

"If you think a moment, you'll know who."

My head spinning, I said, "I don't know."

Still smiling, he said, "Think about it a little more! It is someone to whom we both have a connection."

But after thinking more about it, my head was still spinning.

Finally, he said, "Our mathematics teacher from when we were young came here."

Now, getting what he was saying, I really was surprised, as I had not seen her at all since finishing school.

He went on, "She came and asked for my help."

"Was it her?" I questioned.

"It was. It really was her. She had married and given birth to a child," he answered.

"Did she talk about when were young?" I asked.

He said, "She didn't. When I talked to her about when we were young, and that the results of my mathematics studies were very poor, she didn't want to talk about it. I said I accumulated many faults."

I did not believe that was the case.

He went on, "She prostrated to me three times and fervently requested help for her child."

"And then?" I asked.

He replied, "I promised to always help her, and she said thank you to me as she left."

I said, "That really is inconceivable."

"She hadn't changed much, a bit more peaceful than before," he said.

I said, "When we were young, she certainly faced many difficulties in her life."

He said, "Do you know what question I asked her?"

"I don't know."

"I asked her the reason why if you add one plus one, you get three."

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said she was only a primary school math teacher, so she couldn't comprehend the profound theory of something like that."

I again recalled the time before when he had asked me about this question.

He continued on, "In the future, I want to clearly know the reason why if you add one plus one you get three."

After that New Year, I heard that Orgyan had forever parted ways with the world of human beings. Now, even though I am able to call Orgyan's separating from this world of humans as "passing into nirvana," still, that is not the main point. The main thing is that after Orgyan passed away, the monastery and the faithful around the monastery made preparations

to construct a memorial stupa to him and, after intensive discussion, said that Orgyan's teeth were to be placed inside as an offering. However, the important point isn't the construction of the stupa. It is not unusual to construct a memorial stupa for a reincarnate lama who has obtained a high status.

The important point is that they prepared to insert fifty-eight of Orgyan's teeth into the memorial stupa.

In the usual person, how can there be fifty-eight teeth? Even for an unusual person, it's not possible for there to be fifty-eight teeth.

But to speak truthfully, before this, I also didn't know how many teeth a person usually has. Therefore I asked an elderly person, "How many teeth does a person usually have?"

The elderly person thought it over and said, "Most have thirty teeth."

But they couldn't be certain about their answer, so I again asked another elderly person, "How many teeth does a person usually have?"

That elderly person answered without having to think about it at all. "Thirty-two."

As that elderly person looked quite sure of his answer, I wanted to take that number as the right one.

But to decide conclusively if that was the right number or not, I went to an internet café.

The supervisor of the internet café said, "You must put your name in the register."

I said, "Why?"

"It's the rule of the higher authorities," he replied.

"I have something I am looking for. It won't take more than a few minutes. If I don't sign the register is that okay?"

"You have to sign it. It's the rule of the higher authorities."

I said, "You are really being irritating about this."

He replied angrily, "I'm just a worker here. I'm only making four or five hundred yuan each month. Why are you talking to me like this?"

Having no choice, I gave my name to him for the register.

While writing my name and so forth at the top of a page in an old notebook, he said, "You look, here is the register of all who have come in here. This is the rule of the higher authorities. I don't have any choice."

I stood there, paying no attention to him.

After filling out the register, he asked me, "What are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for how many teeth a person usually has."

While grinning at me, he said, "You don't know even that?"

Angered, I said, "Well, you tell me! How many teeth does a person usually have?"

After thinking about it, he scratched his head, saying, "Strangely enough, if I had to say how many teeth a person usually has, I don't really know. How many? Maybe more than twenty?"

I laughed and said, "Next time, you should count precisely!"

Then I went to go online on the computer. On the way, I turned back, and as I looked, I saw he had put his finger in his mouth and was carefully counting the teeth in his mouth.

I typed into the Google search bar, "How many teeth does a person usually have?" and immediately more than one hundred results appeared.

I opened up one result that had many replies to it.

Someone called "Beautiful Dentist from Peking" wrote only two digits, the number "28."

Another called "Winter's Cuckoo Bird" had answered like this, "28+4 as some people are not born with the innermost teeth, the wisdom teeth."

Someone else called "Even if One Will Die Tomorrow, Learn!" wrote, "A person with a full set of teeth has 32, but as some do not have wisdom teeth the number can be 28-32."

Still more, someone called "I am King" had written in inordinate detail. Looking at it, I was taken aback. Up to now I had had never known that even teeth had so many qualities and that it was not possible to know, once and for all, how many there could be.

After thinking about this, the opinion that came naturally was that one should, in the future, take good care of one's teeth.

But all of that aside, the monastery was able to clearly know that all of the fifty-eight teeth found to give as offerings in the stupa were not all Orgyan's teeth, that some were other people's teeth.

The manager of the monastery had no choice but to go to Orgyan's father and mother with the teeth placed in an offering scarf for them to identify which were not their son's teeth. However, Orgyan's parents said they had previously finished giving the monastery Orgyan's teeth and all other things connected to him from when he was young, and now they said it was difficult to distinguish which were really their son's teeth and which were not.

When the stupa was near completion, the monastery's manager, having exhausted all means to figure out whose teeth were whose, put the fifty-eight teeth, religious texts, and so forth into the stupa as an offering.

Following the completion of the stupa, many religious pilgrims, and even I, got accustomed to going there regularly.

One time, when I was making a circumambulation of the stupa, I suddenly recalled something from when we were young.

One day, after being let out of class, Orgyan said to me that we'd do the homework after going to his house. When we arrived at his house, I began to do the mathematics homework, and he waited next to me. After I had finished writing out the homework, I handed it over to him, and he meticulously copied it.

At that moment, one of my front teeth suddenly started hurting, and as I could not bear the pain, I cried out.

Orgyan went to get his father, and they came back together. His father, after looking at my pained tooth for a moment, said, "The tooth has to be pulled out."

I was extremely frightened at having my tooth pulled, and even though I did whatever I could to avoid him, he chased after me with a thread. After wrapping the thread around my hurting tooth, he gestured to me in an up and down direction.

I felt a sharp pain inside my mouth, and then that tooth was in his father's hand.

Smiling, he gave me the tooth and said, "Wrap it in wool and throw it out the window to the roof!"

After wrapping the tooth in wool and bending my head upwards, I worried that I could not throw the tooth out the window and up onto the roof.

Orgyan's father, smiling, said, "Do you know what should be said when you throw the tooth away?"

Nodding my head, I said, "Sure, I know."

Bending my head upwards, looking out the window, I recited, "I abandon my bad tooth, like a pig tooth. In return, may I have a perfect white tooth like a white conch." After reciting this again, I tossed the tooth wrapped in wool out the window and up on the roof.

Orgyan's father said, "That's right, now you'll surely grow a good tooth," and I was happy.

Arriving at this juncture in my story, I also remember something else. Soon after Orgyan had been recognized as a reincarnate lama, some monks came to Orgyan's house and said to his father and mother that, among various things of Orgyan's that they had taken, a few teeth were still missing. Not taking any time, they went to the roof of the house, searched again, and found some of Orgyan's teeth from when he was young, wrapped each of them carefully in an offering scarf as if they were pearls, and carried them away. It was in this way I think, that the tooth of mine, which I had thrown out the window and on to the roof, was also carried away by the monks and is now among those things put inside the majestic stupa and held as objects of faith by all the devout.