

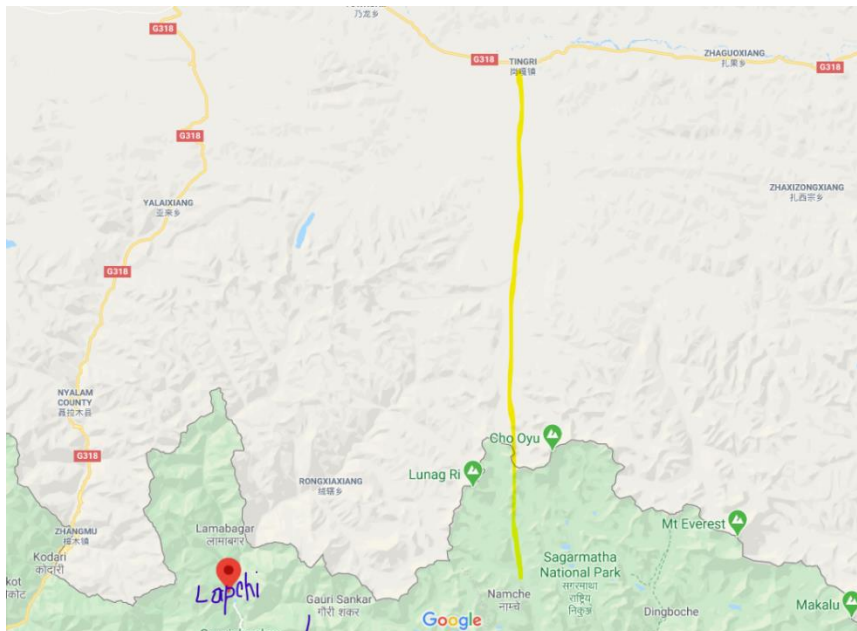
Part 14 – Faith

Just after the sun had set, Chetsang Rinpoche started his journey in the direction of Cho Oyu, the sixth highest mountain on Earth, in the same range as Mount Everest - the highest mountain in the world - to Nepal. He had no camping gear and no mountain climbing gear. Several hours later, he saw the Chinese army camp in the distance – black shapes of buildings with one pale light on in a window. He went on a big detour around it so he couldn't be spotted just in case someone looked outside.



He walked toward a glacier, a huge river of ice that has been frozen for thousands of years. Flowing from it was a stream of melted water that he needed to cross. So he took off his shoes, rolled up his pants and found a place where the water wasn't too deep.

Then he rested a little while. When he started walking again, the trail was not very clear especially in the dark, but he could vaguely make out a path that branched to the right.



The route near Cho Oyu was between Mount Everest and the sacred mountain of Lapchi, where Milarepa had meditated and then later where Jigten Sumgön had sent thousands of yogis to meditate alone. When the sun rose, he found that he had gone quite far up the mountain, but someone would still see him easily as a dark speck in the endless snowfields, so any Chinese army troops wandering through the area might find

him. The path became more steep, and he could no longer walk as quickly as the night before.

When he first saw parts of the glacier in front of him, he saw two men far ahead climbing up the path. He couldn't tell if they were Chinese soldiers on patrol, Tibetan nomads, or Nepalese traders. He hid himself as best he could while he studied the two men, their clothes and their movements. They didn't seem to be soldiers. He quickly but cautiously approached them. They were two Tibetans, an elderly man and his son, who appeared to know the area very well. They said they were going to visit relatives beyond the border in Nepal and sell the sheep's wool blankets they carried in their backpacks. Rinpoche was relieved they weren't soldiers and joined them. They seemed to silently accept him, although he was wearing completely inadequate shoes for climbing snowy mountains.

The route became more and more difficult, and they had to trudge through deep snow and carefully inch their way over ice-covered slopes. There wasn't any path that could be seen unless someone was familiar with the area, so meeting the two men had been incredibly lucky. He had known his journey would not be easy before he left, but now he realized that without assistance he would very likely have gotten lost in these extremely challenging mountains.



Once they were on the glacier, there were deep crevasses of ice, extremely deep cracks in the ice that one could fall far down into and not be able to climb out. Sometimes the crevasses were hidden by a layer of snow. So every step was a life-or-death decision. The trader in Lhasa had warned him about this, and said it was an old trade route for yak caravans, but

many traders had fallen to their death in the icy crevasses, even with knowledgeable guides.



Rinpoche's companions pulled a long wooden slat out from where it had been hidden near a cliff. They tied themselves – including Rinpoche – together with a rope, laid the board over the first crack, and crossed one at a time over their little bridge, while they were held secure to the other men by the rope. Then they very carefully pulled the plank across and placed it over the next crevasse. It was essential that the plank not slip from their grasp and fall into the crack, as that would leave them stranded in this huge area of crevasses.

The trek over this difficult terrain seemed endless. Icy winds began to blow, which was dangerous because particles of snow could be blown into the men's lungs. After many hours they reached the high pass – a lower area at the top of a mountain range that is easier to go over than the sharp peaks. Marking the very top of the pass were

some traditional piled up stones with prayer flags. Rinpoche could see them under a layer of snow and ice, as the wind had blasted clouds of white crystal ice against them. It was the custom to turn around and cry out “Victory to the gods!” when crossing over a mountain pass. But Rinpoche didn’t do that. It seemed like all the traditional gods had left Tibet when Communism took over.

Luckily the winds weren’t so bad as they climbed down the other side of the mountain, and they were able to go farther and faster in the calm weather. From the Nangpa glacier they trekked down into Nepal, in an area known for its legends of mysterious shaggy huge human-like creatures called yeti, and known for the Sherpa people who are famous for guiding foreign trekkers and carrying their gear and baggage through the high mountains.

After the exhausting journey over the mountain, that night they found a place to rest in a nomad’s tent in a tiny settlement, and ate a simple meal. Rinpoche gave his companions the rest of the food that he had packed, and fell into a deep sleep. The next morning, he took off alone, hoping to get as far away from the border area as possible, so he wouldn’t be caught escaping Tibet.

Much later, when the Drikung lamas living outside Tibet heard about his escape, they were sure that the two companions who accompanied Rinpoche over the border were miraculously created by the goddess Tara or by the Drikung protector Achi Chokyi Drolma, and the lamas were sure that they had vanished afterward, like a mirage. When Rinpoche heard the lamas say this, he just smiled. It is almost certain that he never would have escaped Tibet alive without the help of the two men. Whether one sees this as a lucky coincidence – the two men just happened to be there when Rinpoche was there - or the miracles of a supernatural being depends on the purity of one’s mind, the purity of the way one sees the world.



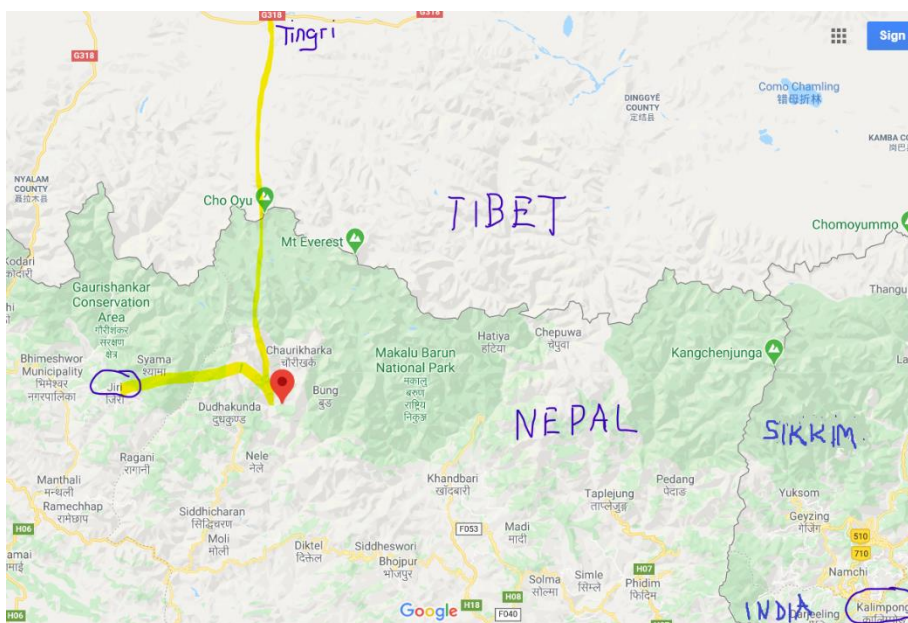
Rinpoche followed the path along a stream of melted glacier water down from the high mountains to the first tiny villages. He walked far around them because he assumed that border soldiers would be everywhere looking to catch people escaping Tibet. In front of a hut he saw some Nepalese policemen playing cards, but they completely ignored him.

He saw some Tibetans here and there, but he didn't feel comfortable telling anyone that he escaped, because he had lived for so long among many informants and spies. He continued alone and silent until he saw a Sherpa speaking Tibetan, who looked like someone he could trust. Rinpoche sold him the deer musk for much less than their real value, as he urgently needed money – Nepalese rupees – and clothing that looked Nepalese, not Tibetan, so he would blend in with the local people. He bought pants like the local people wore and a black umbrella. He continued walking through many villages, and occasionally he ate in roadside taverns. When he had to pay with the rupees, he didn't know which coins to pay with so he just held out some money and took whatever change he was given.

He tried to avoid talking to people, asking as few questions as possible about directions, but he ended up making a wrong turn in Kharikola, the crossroads of many trade routes. He went too far south, so he had to turn back and take the footpath north after having traveled quite a long time in the wrong direction.



He was focused on reaching his destination as quickly as possible. He knew almost nothing about it except that it would be a place where he could live a free life. If he hadn't been so focused on moving fast, he might have enjoyed the beauty of nature as he walked the path, with the steep meadows and views of majestic mountains, and beautiful forests of flowering rhododendron.



He continued his journey on the dirt paths to Jiri, where there was a gravel road on which a car could travel. There he could wait in a tea shop on the side of the road for the bus to Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. (Route from Tingri to Jiri. See Kalimpong, bottom right, where he stayed with his family as a child)

When the bus arrived, Rinpoche took a window seat in the back. The bus wasn't very comfortable as it bumped up and down along the rough roads, but after long days on foot, worrying that he might be caught and asked to show his papers, he was finally able to relax a little. The landscapes seemed to be glowing green everywhere, compared to the rugged dry landscapes and snowy mountains of Tibet. At one point in a dreamlike vision, he thought he saw shadowy shapes of Chinese soldiers, brutally marching people away to prisons, like he saw long ago in Chengdu. But out the window there were only the wooded hills and mountains, hazy in the dust that whirled up from the gravel road. Rinpoche dozed off into nightmares that stayed with him from Tibet.

The city of Kathmandu was dusty, busy and loud. Rinpoche found a room to stay in a simple hostel for travelers near the bus station. He was hesitant to go out in the street because he looked obviously Tibetan, not like Nepalese people, so someone might guess he escaped Tibet. But he found that there were many Tibetan businesses there, so maybe he wouldn't be noticed as someone who had just fled from Tibet. He cautiously started to explore. Once, he thought he recognized a Muslim woman from Lhasa who used to sell tea. He and his friends used to go to her shop to drink tea after soccer games. In those days she was poor, thin and ragged, but now she had gained a lot of weight and was very well-dressed. He thought maybe she recognized him too, but they passed each other without saying anything. Another day a young man stared at him as though he knew him. Rinpoche continued walking past him, but quickly glanced back and saw that the man was still staring at him. Maybe he suspected Rinpoche escaped and would tell the Chinese. Rinpoche got nervous and ducked into an alleyway, and then walked quickly into another one, as he had gotten to know the area well and he definitely didn't want that man following him. Later Rinpoche found out that the man indeed was an informer who worked for the Chinese and filed a report whenever he spotted a possible refugee. Rinpoche was very lucky that the man didn't report him!

Rinpoche carefully thought out how he could start living without having to hide. He didn't dare go to the Nepalese government offices, because they might hand him over to the Chinese government. He slowly became friendly with a young Tibetan shop owner who seemed educated and trustworthy. One day when they were alone in the store, Rinpoche bluntly admitted he was a son of the Tsarong family and that he had fled from Tibet. He asked the shop owner,

"Do you know anything about how my family is doing? I heard some time ago from a Nepalese trader in Lhasa that my parents had a business of operating a bus line between Kathmandu and Kalimpong, India."

The Tibetan man said, "Yes, they had such a business years ago, but they moved to the United States. I think one of your brothers is living in Dharamsala."

Rinpoche asked, "Where is Dharamsala?" He had never heard of it.

His new friend replied, “In India. It’s the home of the Dalai Lama and the location of the Tibetan government-in-exile.”

Rinpoche was shocked. The Tibetan government is governing the Tibetan people from another country - India? The Dalai Lama is the leader of Tibet in *India*? The Tibetan man suggested he go to the Tibetan government office in Kathmandu and sketched out a map for him so he could find it.

In May 1975, Rinpoche went to the Tibetan office and told his story of the route he took to escape Tibet. The representatives didn’t believe him. How could he possibly have crossed over that extremely dangerous mountain region alone? The few refugees who escaped through that route were local people who knew the terrain and weather conditions, and traveled in groups. It had been a long time since anyone from central Tibet had made it across the border. They also didn’t believe he was Tsarong’s son and the tulku of the Drikung Kagyu lineage. He had been missing for 15 years and once had been declared to be dead!



But they found a place for him to stay and arranged a meeting with the home minister of the Dalai Lama’s government who just happened to be visiting Kathmandu at the time. Rinpoche expected he would look like the government officials he remembered from when he was a child, wearing a Tibetan silk robe, a long earring and a little metal amulet box in his pinned-up long hair, like this photo.

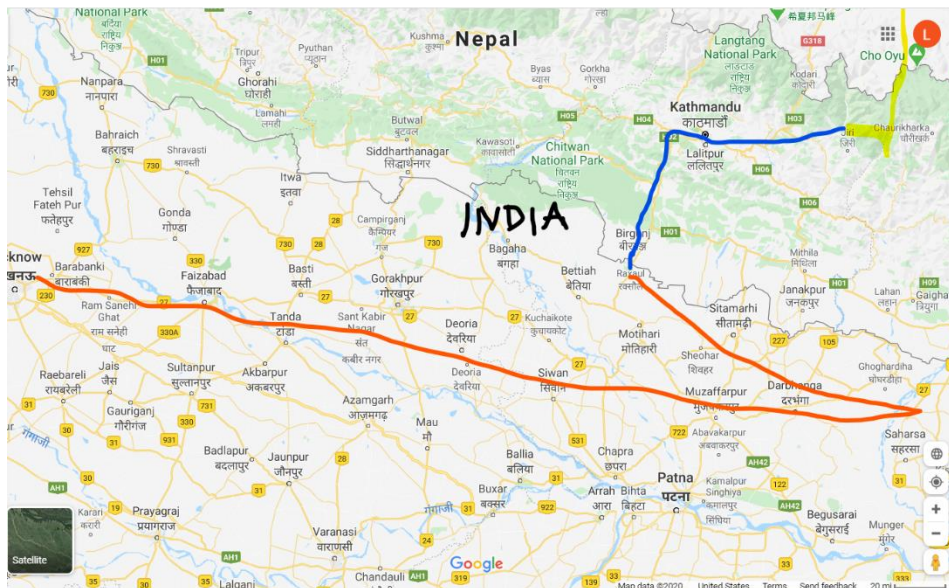
But he was surprised to be greeted by an older gentleman in a Western suit and short haircut. It was the home minister, now living in modern times. It was extremely lucky for Rinpoche that he was in Kathmandu just then, because he knew Rinpoche’s father and brothers and sisters very well. After talking to Rinpoche, the minister was certain that this young man was no imposter – he really was the son of Tsarong, the tulku Chetsang Rinpoche.

The home minister told him that his sister Namgyal Lhamo was now married to a brother of the Dalai Lama, and that his older brother Jigme was living in Dharamsala. Rinpoche definitely wanted to go to there and visit his brother. But it wouldn’t be easy. The minister and Rinpoche agreed that it would be better not to inform other members of the Tibetan government-in-exile or the Nepalese government about where he was staying or his intention to go to India. It was dangerous now because the relationship between the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Nepalese government was strained. He assured Rinpoche, “I have experience in getting people across the border to India. I’ll take care of things for you.”

And he did. He sent an employee of the Tibetan secret service in Kathmandu to meet with Rinpoche at a restaurant. The secret service man introduced him to a foreign-looking man with long hair who said he would take Rinpoche to his brother in Dharamsala, but he didn’t explain

how he would do it. The next morning at the bus station Rinpoche met the long-haired man, who had third-class tickets for the Indian train from the border of Nepal. The third-class train would be uncomfortable, but as a gift, the secret service man gave him a bed sheet to sit on to protect him a little from the filth on the train.

In early June of 1975, on an awfully hot day, Rinpoche and the man with long hair, who was never introduced by name, traveled toward the border on an awful bus on an awful road. The bus broke down twice, once at night, and it took hours to fix it. A lamp was set up so the bus could be repaired, and all kinds of extremely large and unpleasant insects were attracted to the light. Some unfamiliar animals were making an unbelievable loud racket nearby. Rinpoche was curious - what animals were making that noise? He asked his companion, who said it was the singing of tree frogs in a nearby lake. It was hard to imagine that little frogs could make such a big noise!



(The yellow line shows the route Rinpoche took walking from Tingri to Jiri in Nepal, the blue line shows the route by buses to Kathmandu and then over the border to India, and the red line shows the route he would take by train to Lucknow, going toward Dharamsala)

The next day, they reached the town of Birganj near the border of India. The long-haired companion seemed nervous, and put the documents and letters that he was carrying for the Tibetan government-in-exile into Rinpoche's pouch, saying they might be searched and frisked. They each held a new thermos, because they were pretending to be businessmen who sold thermos bottles. The companion said, "Don't say anything no matter what. I'll do the talking."

Rinpoche wasn't sure this was a good idea especially since the man seemed so agitated; maybe the authorities would suspect they are crossing the border without permission. But it would be better that he talked rather than Rinpoche, who could only speak in Tibetan or Chinese.

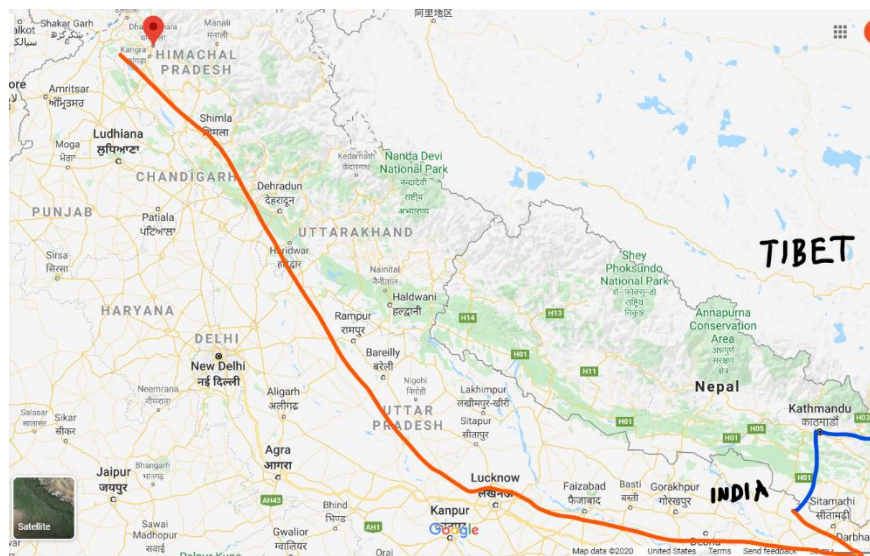
They climbed into a rickshaw that would take them to the border crossing. They waited in a long line of vehicles, as those ahead were being thoroughly inspected. When it was their turn to be checked, the long-haired man got out and approached the border guards. But it was very strange - they remained seated by their guard house and went on playing a game of cards.

They didn't ask him to show them anything. They didn't inspect anything. They had only asked. "Where are you coming from?" and when the man answered, they said "Ok you can go."

The long-haired man looked shocked and confused when he returned to Rinpoche. That had never happened before! Every time he had crossed the border, the guards had thoroughly inspected his papers. He couldn't believe that this time they didn't even want to see his papers! What unbelievable good luck! He looked at Rinpoche, bewildered. Rinpoche just sat there serenely in the rickshaw with an expression that seemed like a solemn smile.

They had a little time to rest at the train station to wait for the train that would take them over the border to India. Rinpoche rested a little with the pouch under his head, but he was uncomfortable in the hot, damp climate after living all his life on the high plateau of Tibet. It was even more uncomfortable in the train car, where they sat on a hard wooden bench and the train grew more crowded at every stop. Foul odors became an unbearable stench in the sticky air inside the train. Rinpoche was suffering. He tried to stay tranquil as the train stopped every 15 minutes and there was a chaotic pushing, shoving and yelling as a few passengers got off and even more got on. When Rinpoche opened the window to let out the stench and heat, the outside air was no cooler, and the hot diesel smoke from the train engine blew in, so he had to shut the window again. He had crossed frozen rivers on the high mountain ranges with only light clothes on, and his body wasn't used to the extremely hot humid air. He was drenched in sweat and extremely thirsty.

The long-haired man sent him quickly to the toilet during the stops when police boarded the train and checked a few passengers. During these breaks, Rinpoche went to the sink, turned on the faucet and quenched his thirst in great gulps. When he returned, his companion told him, "You shouldn't drink from the train! The water is foul and contaminated! You might get sick!" Although Rinpoche had drunk his fill a few times, he didn't get sick.



They had to endure the heat and discomfort traveling on the train through a long route going east near Darjeeling and then back west to Lucknow, where they stayed overnight in a simple hotel, and then traveled further northwest toward Pakistan to the town of Pathankot where they could get a bus to Dharamsala, near the border of Pakistan.

QUESTIONS:

1. Who helped Rinpoche cross the dangerous area of crevasses and travel over the border to Nepal? (an old Tibetan man and his son)
2. What is a crevasse? (a deep crack in the ice)
3. Later, when Rinpoche told his story about the men helping him cross the glacier and mountain into Nepal, what did the lamas think they two men actually were? (miracles created by Tara or Achi)
4. Where were his older brother Jigme and the Dalai Lama now living? (Dharamsala)
5. When Rinpoche and his companion were at the border crossing from Nepal into India, what did the border guards do? (played cards and just asked “where are you coming from?”)
6. Did Rinpoche get sick when he drank water that was probably contaminated in the train bathroom? (no)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Faith:

Rinpoche made it safely over the dangerous glacier and mountains across the border into Nepal although he started alone, was not familiar with the route, and had inadequate shoes.

He escaped from the informer in Kathmandu who may have suspected he had crossed the border illegally from Tibet.

He got across the border from Nepal to India without getting inspected. If he had been inspected, the border guards may have suspected he escaped from Tibet and either not allowed him into India or turned him over to the Chinese.

He was lucky to meet the home minister who just happened to be at the office in Nepal, who knew his family, confirmed that he really was the tulku Chetsang Rinpoche, and arranged for someone to help him cross the border to India.

He didn't get sick from the contaminated water.

All these incidents seem like extreme luck, again and again. Rinpoche was in the right place at the right time. Or was it just luck?

The Drikung lamas didn't think it was just luck meeting the two men at the glacier.

They had faith in Tara and Achi Chokyi Drolma as powerful deities who protect their devotees, especially a great devotee like a Drikung tulku.

So, the power of the deity's blessings gave Rinpoche the help he needed.

How would they know whether it's just luck or a deity?

Because the lamas had a more pure mind than the average person.

A person with a pure mind can see things we can't see.
They might not talk about it because they don't want to seem to be showing off.

You might hear your parents or others refer to a lucky situation as a "blessing" or the protection or guidance of a deity, the Buddha or a great lama.
They may not be able to see clearly who or what caused it, but their faith in the Buddha, deity or lama and their gratitude for the help makes them see it as a blessing.
And they know that when they are doing spiritual practice, and being generous, kind, and helpful, they are making good karma (merit), which causes not only automatic good effects due to karma (cause and effect), but also causes blessings to flow from the Buddha, deity or lama – to protect, guide, and provide whatever help is needed.
They have faith in the holy beings plus confidence that they might receive blessings.

Thinking about holy beings with faith, confidence, and gratitude purifies the mind, and brings more blessings!

Have you ever experienced something extremely lucky?
Did you think maybe it was a blessing? Or the result of karma, cause and effect?
It's best not to be too skeptical, and not to just follow along with what friends or classmates may say if they don't believe in karma or spiritual beings.
Also we shouldn't just take for granted that we're lucky, and expect that things should go the way we want, because that leads to disappointment and anger when something doesn't go well.

When you are lucky, it's best to have a positive, humble and grateful mind, and you might think about the pleasant possibility that you were granted a blessing!