

In this collection of folk stories from the Himalayas, retold and edited by renowned writers Kamla K. Kapur and Prawin Adhikari, the reader is taken on an enchanted journey through the shared sacred landscapes of India, Nepal, and Tibet/China. From magical flying horses and battles with mountain demons to the trials and tribulations of everyday people and pilgrims, the folk narratives offer a glimpse into the rich cultural tapestry of this unique landscape.

Recorded during a collaborative multidisciplinary study over a three-year period, these stories speak to timeless questions of love, sacrifice, heartbreak, redemption, and the search for meaning in life. The collection draws inspiration from the holiest mountains, called Kailas (and also known as Tise and Kang Rinpoche), and Lake Manasarovar, two important sacred sites located in Western Tibet. The stories speak to diverse and syncretic religious beliefs and everyday practices that can be found throughout the region and beyond.

SHARED SACRED LANDSCAPES

Kamla K. Kapur
Prawin Adhikari



VAJRA

SHARED SACRED LANDSCAPES

STORIES FROM MOUNT KAILAS,
TISE & KANG RINPOCHE

Edited & Retold by
Kamla K. Kapur
Prawin Adhikari

ICIMOD

THE NEW SCHOOL

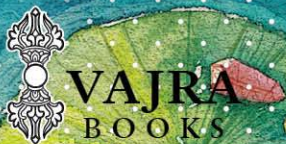
INDIA CHINA
INSTITUTE

www.vajrabooks.com.np

ISBN 978-9937-623-82-7

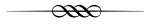


9 789937 623827



VAJRA
BOOKS

The Color of the Name



The villagers of Kudang, a mix of Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Bonpo, Pagans and Animists, with antecedents from India, China and Tibet, and indigenous people, were poor, old, sick, physically incapacitated and chronically hungry. Not much grew in the highlands and food was scarce. Even their goats and yaks were skinny and did not yield much milk. In the winter, the small lake froze and it was arduous work to dig up ice with their feeble bodies and heat it with fuel that was hard to come by. They felt helpless, bereft, abandoned by life because of, they feared, sins committed in their previous lives to which were added sins from the current one. They felt trapped in an endless round of accumulations of bad karma.

The main cause of their unhappiness was their frustration about their inability to undertake the long and difficult *yatra* to sacred Mount Kailas and do a *kora* around it. They believed that if only they were able to have a sight of the holy mountain, they would be healed and absolved of all their sins and be happy and rich ever after. They had heard stories, echoed down the generations, about all the gods and goddesses that meditated and sported eternally, joyously around the holy mountain, which was the very center of the universe, the very point, *bindu*, from which all life originates, and to which it returns.

One cold, overcast day, when the villagers were particularly morose, Sagar, a skinny, lame, half-blind, orphaned child, an outcast of mixed descent, whom the villagers considered a bit crazy, hobbled as fast as he could, followed by his bony dog and

lean cat, to the village square and shouted joyously:

“He is coming! He is coming! He’s coming to make us happy! My heart has been calling to him every day. I dreamt about him last night and he is coming up the hill to our village with another man following him! Padmasambhava is coming with a devotee!”

The villagers were convinced the boy, given to flights of fantasy, was just imagining things. Besides, no pilgrims ever visited their village, which was not on the way to Mount Kailas.

“Who is Padmasambhava?” someone asked. “Didn’t he live and die hundreds and hundreds of years ago?”

“Yes, but he is still with us, though he is invisible. His body is made of a rainbow, and his eyes can see the Invisible!”

“Like yours!” someone said to a peel of laughter.

“It’s all true! Padmasambhava was born as an eight-year-old boy in the blossom of a lotus! My father tells me all about him.”

The villagers rolled their eyes. His father had been dead for four years.

Sagar looked at them and said, innocently, “But he comes in my dreams to tell me stories. He told me Padmasambhava’s name means ‘The Lotus born.’ Padmasambhava can fly, and though he has been burned and destroyed, he is always here, and comes to the aid of those in need. He is a savior who kills demons that want to destroy mankind and he performs many miracles.”

“Miracles!” someone scoffed.

“Mother always says that miracles are holes in the cloth of reason. I don’t know what she means, but she says it so many times that I remember her words. Can anyone tell me what it means?”

“Nothing,” someone smirked.

“If we listen carefully and walk on the path shown to us by Padmasambhava, we can drink the blissful drink of *amrita*, ambrosia!” Sagar exclaimed, his eyes sparkling.

“Amrita! Water would do.”

“But hurry! We don’t want to miss him!”

Most of the villagers went home, but a few, a mix of old and young people and children, followed the boy, his dog and cat at his heels. Sagar took them past the lake that froze solid in the winter, past the arid terraces where nothing grew for lack of rain, to the edge of the village, and pointed to the steep path ascending up to it.

“There! See, by the rock that looks like a bird. I see him clearly, walking with a *danda* staff, a *jhola* bag slung on his shoulder, a turban on his head, and a long beard. He is short, and a taller man carrying an instrument on his shoulder, is following him. The short holy *sadhu* man, in the long beard, is the same person, the very same that came to me in my dream. He laughed, picked me up, and held me near his heart! I woke up feeling so very happy! There he is, closer now, near the boulder that looks like a god with wings. He has come to remove all our troubles!”

The villagers thought the boy had lost his mind. They didn’t see anyone or anything. Several more returned home. Some of the adults and most of the children, however, stayed. They wanted to have some fun with Sagar, whom they bullied as often as they could. They knew nobody would show up and then they could beat him up. They never played with him because even the untouchable children considered him more untouchable than they were.

“Can you hear that?” Sagar said, straining his ears. “They are sitting in the shade of the boulder. The taller man has taken out some instruments, and is playing. They are singing!”

“We hear nothing,” the villagers said.

“Listen! Listen! Listen!” Sagar said, urgently. “You can!”

The villagers turned around and began to leave for their homes.

“You have come this far. Come further! Listen with the ears of your soul!” Sagar shouted. “Listen to the words of the song: ‘Don’t be one of those who are born only to die without hearing the music of worship.’”

Then, the strangest thing happened with Sagar’s words. Streams and filaments of a blue, diaphanous mist shimmering with light arose spontaneously around them, wrapped themselves around their heads, entered their nostrils and mouths and lifted them as if they

were made of air, and transported their brains with the speed of light into Sagar's spacious, open, wide innocent heart! Or was it Sagar's brain? It didn't matter, for Sagar's brain and heart were both in the same place, stimulating, questioning, guiding each other towards one goal. Although Sagar didn't know the name of this goal, he had been moving towards it like an unwavering arrow from the moment of his birth. No, perhaps even before it, even before conception, for our ancestors and guides have taught us that our souls have long roots that extend all the way to the beginning of time.

For an instant the villagers were bewildered and wondered where they were. They had never seen the world like this before.

Looking through the innocent child's eyes, the landscape was transformed. They saw it suffused with beauty. The bare mountain ranges surrounding a rolling valley lit up by the radiance of the early evening sun vibrated with subtle browns, blues, violets. In the distance they saw the snow-capped peaks standing tall and majestic, like guardians. Their practical, workaday sensibility that had been blind to the beauty all around them lit up with wonder; they began to see and hear invisible, unheard things.

They saw two strangers sitting by the boulder they had seen thousands of times without noticing that it looked like a god hovering from the ground up, wings spread wide in a gesture of protection; they heard drifting up on a current of air the musical strains of a song sung to the accompaniment of strings and the haunting melody of a flute. Though they could not understand the words, the language of music, beyond meaning and sense, penetrated their slumbering, despairing souls. Echoing through the valley, bouncing off the mountains, entering through the portals of their ears, reverberating in the hollow chambers of their hearts, it aroused in them a longing to connect more deeply with life, their own selves, and their gods; they tasted that hunger without which human life, no matter how luxurious and ease-filled, is a grind.

The sound, pouring into their ears like *amrita*, stilled all the noises of worry, anxiety and doubts in their heads. It unfurled a silence they had never heard before, nothingness, a *shunya* opening

petal by petal like a lotus, space upon limitless space, empty space, without stars or clouds. In that silence something stirred, like a slumbering seed in the ooze of mud and waters. It awakened them to the sweetness of a long-forgotten dream: a path visible through the surrounding darkness winding soulfully up into the unknown to a magical perch, a perspective that turned every sorrow into mulch and slush from which blue lotuses bloom.

“They are singing, ‘Remain awake and aware. Do not fall asleep!’” Sagar, who understood all languages of the heart, translated for them.

The words were like bolts of blue lightning that tore through thick veils in their minds. Passion awakened in their hearts. One young girl remembered how she used to sing when she was a child; another recalled with what joy she used to spin and weave; a young, how he used to collect colorful pigments from the mountains and paint images of gods and mandalas on stones; another remembered his desire to become a herbalist and curing sickness. In that instant they resolved to pursue their long-forgotten dreams.

When the strangers were done singing, they picked up their bags, musical instruments and resumed their climb up the hill. Though the path was steep, they climbed up lithely, like birds cruising on an invisible current of air.

The strangers came closer. Though they had obviously undertaken a long journey, they looked fresh, vibrant, glowing with health and well-being.

They were not dressed in any garb that would distinguish them as belonging to any religion, though the taller one may have been Muslim, by the cut of his beard. They wore no saffron clothes, *rudraksha* beads, or matted hair to indicate they were Hindus; no maroon robes, shaved heads and begging bowls, like of Tibetan lamas. Though their countenances were radiant, like the faces of gods, they looked just like ordinary men in ordinary Indian clothes.

Sagar ran to the shorter of the two men, the man he had met in his dream, and threw himself at his feet. The stranger helped him up and Sagar instinctively clasped his neck with his arms and clung to him, sobbing and weeping with joy. Though the villagers fed Sagar

now and then, nobody, other than his parents, had ever embraced him like this. One day he ate leftovers in one home, the next day in another, and he slept with the yaks on the straw on someone's ground floor.

Sagar's dog leapt on the strangers, and his cat purred and rubbed herself against their legs.

The villagers, moved by the sight of the holy man embracing the ragged orphan, bowed and touched his feet. As they did so, they felt remorse at their treatment of the orphan child. They also touched the feet of the other stranger, who shone brightly from long proximity with the Enlightened One.

Without a word, the villagers followed Sagar, his dog and his cat galloping ahead of them, as he led the holy visitors back to the village. Passing by the terraces the stranger with the long beard took a handful of some grains from his bag and scattered them wide. On the next terrace, he took out a ball and threw it to Sagar, who caught it. They played so vigorously and joyfully that the other children who had accompanied their parents to the edge of the village, children who had never played with Sagar, joined them, jostling each other, running and shouting.

Later, on the way to the village, the stranger stood by the lake, plunged his *danda* with seven knots in it into the waters and stirred it, as if churning something up, laughing all the while. By the time they reached the village, a sweet rain had begun to fall. Everybody rejoiced, for they hadn't had any rain that year and the buckwheat and barley were drying up. Leaping and skipping, Sagar proceeded to the barn that he called home. A few roosters and hens greeted the throng, for that was what the meager few had become.

The dog and the cat that had followed Sagar to welcome the guests curled up on the straw in the barn that the boy called his bed, and fell asleep. When it was very cold, Sagar burrowed beneath it to stay warm.

The villagers surprised themselves by running to their homes to fetch precious food for the strangers. They discovered to their surprise and delight how much more food than they had thought

they had. They brought buckwheat and barley cakes, tea leaves and yak butter for tea, dried yak meat, not just for the strangers, but also for Sagar and the others, and even something for the dog, the cat, and birds. Some brought extra mattresses, quilts, and hand-woven blankets.

Everyone partook of the feast. Even the holy stranger with the long beard ate heartily and moderately. Then he lay down on one of the mattresses, and fell fast asleep.

The villagers asked the taller stranger his name. He said he was Mardana from Punjab. “Most people call me Bhai Mardana.”

“Bhai Mardana Lama,” Sagar bowed to him.

“And he is Guru Nanak,” Bhai Mardana said.

“Padmasambhav Rinpoche Nanak Guru,” Sagar said, prostrating before him as he slept. “Does he kill demons?”

“All the time,” Mardana laughed. “But the demons he teaches us to subdue – not kill; for they are unkillable – are the demons in our own minds.”

“What is your relationship to Guru Nanak Rinpoche?”

“I am nothing if not the minstrel, companion, servant and devotee of my Guru. And he calls himself his Beloved’s minstrel and slave. The Beloved has made him his instrument and sings through him. Baba Nanak doesn’t speak much these days, unless he has to.”

“Who is the Beloved?”

“The One who lives in all hearts, regardless of caste, color, race, class, nationality.”

“But what is the One’s name?” someone queried.

“The One is Nameless, though people call it by different names. Some call it Energy, some Mystery, some the Universe. The One has as many names as there are people who worship them and call them Shiva, Brahma, Durga, God, Tara, Shakti, Durga, Bhagwan, Allah, Rab, Waheguru, and thousands of others.”

“Is the One a man or a woman?” a woman asked.

“Both and neither,” Bhai Mardana replied.

“Yes, yes, my mother says that, too. She made a painting, there, that one, Shiva and Parvati, together, one body, one mind, one soul.

She called it Ardhanarnari.” Sagar went to the wooden wall of the barn where he had tacked his mother’s paintings, and pointed at one of them. In the light of the lamp the villagers saw one body, half male, half female in its dress and anatomy, the former blue, unclad, the latter green and adorned with jewels. Their boundaries were fluid, merging into one another, dancing, changing, getting more and more abstract, almost invisible towards the top of the painting where waves of clouds dissipated into an undifferentiated blue.

“Mother father God!” Sagar said, exuberantly.

“Exactly!” Bhai Mardana said.

“What is your religion?” they asked.

“The religion of Nature and its Maker: the religion of the Creator of rivers, wind, fire, mountains, lakes, all of Nature inside and outside us. We are slaves of Banwari, the Lord Creator of the Universe, the Husband for whom all Nature, animate and inanimate, is bride, adorned in all her finery for her wedding night. We travel all over the world to worship beauty and to meet people from all countries. Whenever Baba Nanak sees any awe-inspiring place, he goes into a deep trance, marveling at and praising the grandeur of this Earth, and falls in love all over again, with the intensity of first love, with the Beloved. We have traveled all over the world, seen many places, met many people, seen their customs and rituals, and though there are different countries, different ways of living and worshipping, Baba knows the beautiful Earth, mother of us all, though she is cut off and parcelled into small countries, is one country, and all the people, in all their amazing distinctions, beliefs, and many-colored variety, are one people.”

“What do you call yourselves?” Sagar asked.

“Sikhs.”

“What does it mean?” The villagers, hungry with questions, asked.

“It comes from the Sanskrit word *shishya*, which means a student devoted to learning in all its forms. Above all, a Sikh yearns passionately to know, examine, explore the unknown country inside himself or herself, for that is the ultimate knowledge. Baba knows that this is the inward path that takes us to the Beloved.”

“What else do you believe in?” someone asked.

“Baba tells his followers to live their lives fully. He himself is a farmer, a guru, a husband, a father, and performs all his roles well, participates in and engages with every aspect of his life dispassionately and detachedly. He lives like a hermit amidst life, like a lotus, unsullied by the dirt and slime out of which it springs. He tells his devotees to earn their living honestly, share what they earn with others, and treat everyone equally. Baba also says don’t get stuck in superstitions. Live bravely and without fear. Use your mind but know its limits. Use the senses but know their boundaries, and above all, remember! Remember, remember the Great God’s Great Name, especially when you are suffering!”

“Why?” a child asked.

“Because when we remember someone, that person comes alive in our memories and our minds, becomes present; because as soon as you remember the name of your Beloved, the Beloved is there! Repeat it whenever you can, make it your friend, so when you can’t even remember to remember it, when you are in the deepest distress, it will remind you to remember. Ah, the name of our Beloved is our closest friend whose long, strong hand reaches down through the layers of thick snow when you are buried in an avalanche, plucks you to safety, and lights a fire in the blizzard to warm your bones! On our way to Mount Kailas we encountered a blizzard and let me tell you...”

“You’ve been to Mount Kailas?” the villagers asked in a chorus.

“Yes, we’re returning from a *yatra*, a pilgrimage to Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar, where Baba and I swam with the fishes,” Bhai Mardana said.

As soon as the villagers were reminded of their unattainable desire, the source of all their misery, a swirling, whirling blizzard with icy, furious winds flung them out of their warm, cozy corners in Sagar’s expansive soul and hurled them back into their own unhappy brains. The storm that blew them out was nothing like the hurricane in their heads that raged furiously with wailing sounds, deafening them with its frightening cacophony. As they sat in the barn a change

came over their bodies, too. Their limbs and bodies collapsed, slumped, their faces became long, their eyes mournful. Their moaning, groaning and whining began as they complained to Bhai Mardana about their miserable lives, their feeble and diseased bodies, their inability to undertake the pilgrimage that would cure them of their diseases, and absolve them of the sins accumulated over lifetimes.

“So that’s why both of you are pure and radiant!” someone said bitterly. “Your sins and curses dissolved in the sacred waters and you have been made holy by your pilgrimage! Well, welcome to our unholy village.”

“Kailas and Manasarovar are splendid sights, indescribable, but they are no holier than any other awe-inspiring place in Nature, no holier than your own village, homes and bodies,” Bhai Mardana said.

“Blasphemy! Mount Kailas is the most special place in the whole world. It is the center and navel of the universe!”

“There are as many centers of the world as there are people and creatures,” Bhai Mardana said. “Mount Kailas was and is a mythic metaphor before it was ‘real.’”

“What do you mean? What is a metaphor?”

“A metaphor is a physical object, like Mount Kailas, that stands for a truth that cannot be described any other way. Mount Kailas stands for what Hindus, Buddhists and Jains call Mount Meru, or Sumeru, around which the sun, planets and stars are said to circle. Some say Meru is in the middle of the Earth; some say it is in the middle of an ocean; some say it is the Pamirs, northwest of Kashmir, some that it is Mount Kailas; most believe it is the place where all the gods live, the high mountain from which humans can climb into heaven and paradise,” Bhai Mardana explained.

“Yes, we believe this, too!” the villagers cried with one voice. “But we will never be able to reach it! We are doomed!”

“But we must not make the metaphor the thing itself. If you worship an image made of stone, or a mountain, and forget that it is only an image, a representation, a reminder, then you close yourself off from the boundless, imageless, formless One that no metaphor

can describe, the One who is not confined to any one thing or place. We must question our beliefs when they limit us and the Limitless One. On my way to Mount Kailas I was wondering what the word 'Meru' meant. I asked many priests and holy men but none knew. And then one day I realized that it must be an affectionate variation of the word 'mera,' mine. 'Mera' has a lot of ego in it, but 'Meru' has sheer love. And in a way, it is all mine. In this sense, the whole universe is mine. This belonging happens when I enlarge my ego, like a balloon. But unlike a balloon that bursts as it enlarges, the ego stretches to include everything there is. Everything. Nothing left out. This is who we truly are, tiny but at the same time large enough to house the whole big universe!

Though people think Meru, or what you call Mount Kailas, exists in different places, yogis know it exists inside us. Enlightened ones of all times have known that our spine, which they call *merudanda*, the staff of Meru, is the axis and center of the world. We have to learn to climb from our baser instincts to the higher ones; from the bottom of our spine, where Mara and his many demons live, up through the nodes and knots in the spiral of our spine that lead to the thousand-petal lotus on top of our skull. This is the true pilgrimage, what Baba calls 'the pilgrimage to yourself.' It is this journey that makes us aware of our sins and with the Beloved's aid, makes us pure."

"Easy for you to say all this because you have been there," someone said angrily. "But we are physically debilitated, poor, hungry, and very unhappy. Our crops are blighted every season; the winters are so harsh that we lose many from our community; our children don't have enough to eat and many die before their first year."

"We have rotten karma, we are decayed from the inside out, stained and grimed with sins. We will never get to Mount Kailas, the *Dharma Dwar*, the gateway to heaven, that will make us healthy and whole again," a woman began to keen.

"Baba says in one of his songs: When your clothes are soiled and stained by urine, soap can wash them clean. But when your mind is stained and polluted by sin, it can only be cleansed by the Color of the Name."

But the woman continued to cry. Bhai Mardana despaired. He felt the villagers hadn't heard or understood a word he had said. Only Sagar was listening to him intently, eating and digesting all his words. Perhaps he had not been sincere enough, or sermonized too much, Bhai Mardana thought. He doubled his efforts.

"There is hope," he said. "I too was full of sins. I have doubted, cheated, lusted, raged, envied, coveted, held 'me' and 'mine' too tightly, been proud, arrogant and ungrateful. But Baba has helped me to become what I am, a *gurmukh*, one who faces the Guru of all Gurus, God himself, instead of his own ego. He has also taught me that what I was truly seeking beneath my searching for wealth and fame was the fountain of *amrita* that is within me. It is wherever I go. You don't need to go anywhere to be happy and healthy. Now that Baba has come to you, you have to trust that all will be well. You too will learn that your village, your home, your body is blessed and beautiful."

"What's so blessed and beautiful about it? What do you see here?"

"You have to learn to open your eyes," Bhai Mardana said.

"But our eyes are open," they replied. "We are not blind!"

"See?" Bhai Mardana said, looking at the gallery where Sagar had hung his mother's paintings. He pointed at an image of two eyes shaped like fish and a third sitting calmly above them.

"See with your third eye, the one that unites our conflicts, our double vision and shows us the Truth. When you see through it, your sorrows become lotuses, and your curses turn into gifts."

"Tell us how to do it," the villagers pleaded. "We will work very hard to open our third eye."

Just then a loud chuckle was heard from Baba Nanak as he turned over in his sleep. Bhai Mardana shut his eyes and was silent, as if listening to something his guru had just conveyed to him. Then he opened his eyes and said, "Effort is important but will get you nowhere. See, I have been making so much effort to explain all this to you, but I am a fool. I forgot something very, very essential. I should have begun with a prayer to ask the magnanimous Fulfiller of

Dreams to help me in my efforts. Without the One's aid, all our efforts are straw in the storm."

"We pray a lot but nothing ever happens," the villagers complained.

"But how do you pray?" Bhai Mardana asked.

"With our mouths, of course."

Bhai Mardana laughed.

"Learn to pray with your heart. Be present. Know that the One you address is present, more present than what you see with your two eyes. 'He is! He is! He is! He is, He is – I say it millions upon millions, millions upon millions of times,' Baba sings ecstatically. The Truth of the One is Guru Nanak's most important message. Remember that when you take even one step towards trying to open your third eye, the Beloved, if you have remembered to love the Lord of the Universe, to ask for His aid on your pilgrimage, He will come towards you a thousand steps to help you to see. There are many, many precious rewards for our love. Baba says, 'If you listen to just one thing the guru says, pay attention to and act on it, keep it in your ear and heart, your mind will become a treasury holding precious rubies, pearls, coral and diamonds.'"

"Is it really true that the guru can give us wealth and precious stones?" someone asked.

"Our real wealth, the highest and best, is the One, in loving whom we can get both material and spiritual gifts, the most important of which is learning to see with the Third Eye. It is the Magical Eye that can turn ugliness into beauty, poison into *amrita*, and, as Baba sings, 'our sorrow into the most health-giving of tonics.' There are ways of seeing things from a height, as if from a star, as if from the pinnacle of Time that is far, far larger and vaster than our own past, present and future. Let me give you an example."

Bhai Mardana reached for his bag and took out a handful of seashells, worn smooth with age, some brittle, some whole.

"I know!" Sagar said. "They are called 'shells' and they are found on the ocean floor."

"What is the ocean?" someone asked. They lived so far away from the ocean that they hadn't even heard the word, let alone understand

the concept. But somehow, somewhere, in the deep recesses of their memories, the ocean roared in their dreams.

“It is what my name means, Ocean!” Sagar said excitedly. “It is a vast body of water that . . .”

“Like Manasarovar?”

“Nothing like Manasarovar! There is much more ocean than there is land on this earth!” Sagar said excitedly. “My parents told me all about it! The ocean is so deep that there are mountains in it, large mountains and volcanoes. We know very, very little about it, it is mysterious and without limits, like God. They told me to always remember what my name means, that I have an ocean in my heart, and I must never forget it! Maybe that is what Rinpoche Mardana is talking about! Even though I have never seen it I feel it in my heart!”

“How can that be? We haven’t seen it!”

“We have to admit to ourselves that many things exist that we can’t see with these eyes,” Bhai Mardana responded. “Did you know, for example that your high plateau and Mount Kailas were once the ocean floor? These shells are proof of it. Baba and I collected them on our way to Mount Kailas.”

It took a while for the villagers to understand what Bhai Mardana was saying. They were silent a long time, trying to stretch their minds to envision Mardana’s words.

“Nothing is forever on this earth. Mount Kailas, too, one day, will be beneath the sea again. But the mythic Mount Meru will never perish. It is within us. But I have been talking too much. Come, let us meditate and pray together.” Bhai Mardana sat cross-legged, and instructed the villagers in a few brief sentences how to pray and meditate. His voice was gentle and full of compassion as he said, “Sit comfortably, shut your eyes, know that we are in the presence of the One who is within, like breath, and surrounds us, like air. If many thoughts crowd your mind, let them be, but gently steer yourself back to the presence of the One. Be grateful for what you have before you ask for what you want. Today, ask for help to embark upon the journey of all journeys, the journey to the home of the Beloved in your heart, the Beloved that erases suffering.”

Their brief sojourn in Sagar's trusting and hopeful heart had made the villagers want to return to that place where they saw, heard and felt things that had filled them with hope. They were sick of being sick and sorrowful. They did as they were told.

When they opened their eyes after meditation, they felt something had shifted in their consciousness. They had moved on from their locked in, habitual mode of thinking and feeling. Their minds, which had been stagnant for so long, were flowing again.

Bhai Mardana yawned. It had been a long night, and he had talked too much. He smiled to himself as he recalled the sound of Baba's chuckle. In the silence that followed he had asked for help to help the villagers. After all, that was the reason Baba had suddenly changed course in the middle of his travels and headed towards Kudang. He went where he was needed.

The villagers, relaxed into peace, began to yawn, too.

"I have a message to convey to you from Baba," Bhai Mardana said, as the villagers began to touch his feet before leaving for their homes.

"Tomorrow morning, when the night is drenched in dew, and the stars are still twinkling brightly in the sky, gather in the center of the village and follow Baba and me to the crest of the hill that separates your village from the next village, Sosa. Baba will take you to the *dharma dwar*, the gateway and threshold of all that is sacred. By visiting it whenever you feel you need to, you will dissolve your suffering. It is a place holier than Mount Kailas and more sacred than Manasarovar."

Although their old minds still whispered to them that the crest was too high to climb and that they would never be able to do so, the villagers, eager to follow Bhai Mardana and Baba Nanak on the path that would give their suffering wings, agreed.

At dawn the next day, all of them, including some old people and children, assembled in the center of the village. The dog and cat were there too, excited at the prospect of an adventure. They too were eager to follow a path that would help them reincarnate as humans in their next life. Guru Nanak, whom the villagers now called

Padmasambhava Rinpoche Nanak Guru, was vital and energetic. Bhai Mardana Lama too was glowing with energy and health. More than anything else, their aspect and appearance, conveying well-being and vitality, made the villagers trust them.

After a prayer led by Bhai Mardana, the villagers took their first step in the direction they had never gone before. Although some of the villagers huffed, puffed and groaned a bit, they all made it up the hill to the crest. They were amazed at looking down the path they had climbed, it seemed in retrospect, so easily. They saw their village as if for the first time. How lovely, cozy, heartwarming it was, their collective home, tucked into the sides of their mother mountain, as if in the folds of Parvati's protective body.

The villagers felt invigorated, healthy, alive after the exercise. Their bodies sang with gratitude and joy. This, they knew, was the purpose of the ascent, for Mardana Lama had already told them they contained Mount Kailas, the axis, the center of the universe where gods meditated and sported. The lesson was driven home on the summit of the crest.

Morning had not yet dawned though there was enough light to see by. It was the brief and fleeting time of day when gates to others world are wide open for all to walk through. The indigo sky was still embroidered by stars as the holy current of healing and awakening dawn breezes, that sages in India called *malyanil*, blew gently down from the peaks of the high mountains, caressing their limbs and entering their lungs.

Guru Nanak pointed his staff to a large arch in a huge rock eroded by the elements of wind, water and time. Through it towered snow-capped peaks that were so high that their tops were veiled with clouds and mist, peaks unseen by any human eye. The sight filled the villagers with wonder, and as one body, they bowed down in worship and awe that something existed so close to them without their knowing it. The sight opened their hearts and minds to humility: how little they knew! How closed and blind their sight had been as they huddled in misery in their village of Kudang, without venturing out of the borders of their minds!

The insight, accompanied by harmonic chords of music, filled them with amazement at the mystery of their own existence within the presence of the universe. They turned around from the sight of the peaks to see that Bhai Mardana had taken out the *rabab* and was playing it. Baba cleared his throat, shut his eyes.

A note, emanating from somewhere deep within him, was carried on the waves and currents of air all around them till the mountains, valleys and high peaks echoed with it. It drifted back into their hearts and minds, enlarging them in a way they had never dreamed possible.

The note, unfurling in its many permutations, under and over tones, morphed like a wave into another note that reflected and contained it, and then another, and another, all strung together like prayer beads on a string, till it became an irresistible melody that penetrated, possessed and suffused their beings with its magical, transformative power. All their suffering and Bhai Mardana's sermon the previous night had ploughed, cleared and prepared their hearts and minds for Baba's song and message, for blessed music and winged song reach to the depths and pinnacles of our soul where no words can go. They did not understand the words Baba sang but since they had already imbibed its lesson through Bhai Mardana, the song worked its magic in their souls. They would never be the same again.

They understood that though the *dharma dwar* existed for those who wanted to make an external pilgrimage, they didn't need to go anywhere to reach the fountain of healing within them. All they had to do was sit in the comfort of their own homes, meditate the way Bhai Mardana had taught them to, and bathe in the holy waters of Manasarovar at the foot of Mount Kailas within them.

Bhai Mardana and Baba Nanak got up, picked up their bags and began their descent to the next village that needed their presence to open its eyes. Sagar was about to cry but understood instantly that he would never again be separated from his Padmasambhava, who had come to transform his life.

The villagers strained their eyes to follow them down the long and visible path to Sosa, but they never caught sight of the strangers again. They had disappeared as if they had never been.

In the days, months, years, and decades that followed their sudden appearance and disappearance, the villagers saw green shoots of rice spring out of the soil in the terraces that Rinpoche Nanak Guru had strewn with seeds of rice; the lake didn't freeze where their holy visitor had roiled its waters with his *danda*; the child Sagar grew up and funds arrived magically for him to open up a *gompa*, a small temple of religious learning; the villagers, much more prosperous than before Baba Nanak paid them a visit, told, retold and embellished the story of the visit of the holy ones to their children and grandchildren. They and their descendants often wondered if the story was just a myth and a dream – a dream that had changed everything.

The Color of the Name

Collected from Chaudhans, Uttarakhand, by Himani Upadhyaya.
Retold by Kamla K. Kapur. Translated into Hindi by Chandresha Pandey. Illustration by Rabin Maharjan.

