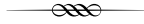


You Don't Die Till You're Dead



A herbalist, a stone carver and a cook were very close friends, even though the herbalist was a Bonpo, the stone carver a Buddhist and the cook, a Hindu. They had a lot in common: they were weary of their wives and their children's demands. Their wives nagged them to get better and bigger houses, better kitchens to cook the family meals, more and more land to grow fruit and food, better conditions for their children and their families, while the children were fighting bitterly among themselves and with their parents for the family's inheritance.

All three felt tormented by their wives and mauled by family conflicts. They decided that life was not worth living on these terms, and what they really wanted was to renounce "Maya," the illusion of the material world, all attachments and possessions, and take a holy vow to go on a quest to affirm, protect and worship the sacred in nature, undertake a pilgrimage to the holy Mount Kailas whose one glimpse washes away sins, enlightens the soul and elevates it above attachments and afflictions. They would gain merit by circling the inner, more difficult path at its base, then spend the rest of their lives meditating, the way Lord Buddha had done under the Bo tree, or Shiva had done in the lap of the sacred mountain near the holy lake, Manasarovar. Lord Buddha, too, had left his young, beautiful wife, Yashodara, their son and kingdom. Lord Shiva had shunned the

comforts and struggles of a household, left his wife, Parvati, for solitude and peace in the very navel of Mother Earth. Both had learned to control their minds so strictly that they did not stray to material things.

They decided, as many before them who had taken the same path to liberation, to perform their own funeral rights as a symbolic gesture of dying to the world, to everything profane including their bodies and their incessant needs and cravings, before leaving. In the middle of the night when the villagers and their families slept, they made their way to the village cremation spot by a pool on the banks of the river. They placed effigies of themselves on piles of wood that served as funeral pyres, poured ghee on the effigies, and set them ablaze. Throughout the burning they chanted mantras and prayers for their own souls. When the effigies turned to ash, they took fistfuls of their own remains and consigned them to the river in a ceremony that included the lighting of lamps and feeding the fish the cooked rice and lentils they had brought with them in lieu of feeding the villagers, to whom they owed a feast on their deaths.

At three in the morning, when the ceremony was over, the friends left their sleeping wives and children and set out on their journey with only the clothes on their backs, the shoes on their feet, and their begging bowls. But each, without telling the others, had sewn up money in his clothes. The reason for the secrecy was because they did not want to appear to be materialistic. They also wanted to keep the money safe from the many deadly dacoits whose profession it was to guiltlessly rob and often kill pilgrims as they trudged devoutly on in their quest towards godhood in the difficult, dangerous terrain and inclement weather to the very center of the world: the axis from which one made it to another dimension, known to the gods as Mount Meru, and to humans as Mount Kailas.

They climbed throughout the day, chanting “The tree is holy; the dirt on the path is holy; the stone is holy; the river is holy; the sun, stars, moon are holy; all nature is holy, holy.”

In the late afternoon they rested in the shade of a boulder at the foot of a mountain of sheer rock devoid of vegetation, their feet,

limbs and joints hurting, their mouths parched with thirst, their bellies growling with hunger. But they had to keep up appearances and did not admit any of this to each other.

Finally the cook, feeling faint, said, "It would be so good to have some tea."

The herbalist licked his lips at the very thought, tasting it on the tongue of his mind as his wife made it, with yak butter, honey, pepper and spices.

He said, "Why don't we make some basil tea? I know the sacred herb, *tulsi*, grows here! It is Vishnu's own plant, and it is so magical it will infuse us with energy and quell all our hungers!"

"And I will go collect some stones to make a fire pit. Hopefully I will find some dried yak dung or prickly bushes for fuel," the stone carver said eagerly.

"And I know just how to brew it!" the cook replied. "I'll go fetch some water from that stream."

It took a while for the herbalist to find a stunted little bush with tiny blue flowers, purple stems and leaves. As he reached his hand to pluck some leaves and stems, he paused.

How can I pluck something that is so holy? he thought. *Tulsi is a goddess, after all, a manifestation of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and consort of Vishnu.*

An image of his Hindu wife worshipping the plant that grew out of a pedestal pot in the center of their courtyard flashed before his eyes. Each morning she bathed, wore clean clothes, swept the area around it, fetched water in a pot scrubbed clean with ash, lit incense, lovingly washed the plant, and circled it, chanting prayers to the holy herb.

The herbalist withdrew his hand. No, he could not pluck it. He started back for the campsite empty-handed.

The stone carver, on his quest for stones to make a fire pit found, after a great deal of wandering, a cairn of *mani* stones that other pilgrims on the same journey had left as an offering to the spirits of the place. He knew from carving the prayer *Om Mani Padma Hum* on them with utter devotion all his life that these stones were

altogether too sacred to make a fire pit. Besides, misfortune always befell those who used them as anything other than prayers to the deities. How could he profane them to make tea? For the briefest moment his desire for tea overcame his conscience and he reached out to pick up three of them. But he withdrew his hands instantly.

The cook, dipping his begging bowl in the stream, also stopped midway in the act.

He thought, *How can I take away this holy water from a stream that is most probably a tributary of the most sacred of all rivers, Ganga, the goddess who flows like the liquid stem of a lotus flower from Vishnu's very toe!*

He stood beside the stream and recalled yet another myth of Ganga's descent to the realm of matter. Daughter of the Himalaya, descendant of Mount Meru, the mythic name for Mount Kailas, Ganga was very angry when – in response to the pleading of the gods – her father ordered her to go to earth for the good of humankind.

Who in their right mind would abandon the bliss of heaven and descend to the land of suffering? Besides, being a goddess, Ganga could see far, far into the future and see herself dammed, polluted, abused by ignorant, foolish, exploitative and short-sighted human beings with no respect or understanding of nature and her ways.

But her father brooked no argument and forced her to go.

Expelled from heaven, she landed in a fury, cursing and swearing, on Shiva's head as he meditated in isolation and utter peace on the high peak of the mountain. In order to save the world from the destruction Ganga could unleash in the world, Shiva braided the river, like a strand of jasmynes, into the coils of his matted hair and checked her headlong course. He held her till she calmed down, reconciled herself to her fate, and learned patience to wait for millennia for *Homo Insapiens* to truly become *Homo Sapiens*, respect and honor her, and all the rivers of the world for the goddesses that they were.

Then Shiva released her into a lake from which she flowed into many tributaries and distributaries, blessing the land she gushed and

meandered through, irrigating it to create an abundance of food and fruits, and quenching many material and spiritual thirsts.

No, I cannot make tea out of this goddess! the cook thought. *I won't commit this sacrilege!*

So, all three friends gathered together again with empty hands. Each related his experience to the others. Though they were comforted by the knowledge of their similar reactions, they could not help be disappointed. They had given up hope of sustenance, but their stomachs still growled. They sat dejectedly in the fading light, too tired and too hungry to move.

As they sat thus, an old shepherdess with her goats, yaks and sheep passed by, wending her way back home from a green valley. Her face beneath her headscarf was wizened and wrinkled in the harsh weather, her teeth missing in her mouth, her eyes sharp and piercing. She saw the three men sitting forlornly by the boulder, stopped her twirling spindle with which she spun yarn rapidly, and said in a less than friendly voice:

“And what is the matter with the three of you? You look like you have swallowed dung!”

The three men began relating their story to her.

“Hurry up, I don't have all day!” she snarled. They told her about their wives, children, funerals, quest to become gods above the mess of human existence, their thirst for tea, and how they dare not disturb and consume holy things.

“The grass is too holy for my cattle and food and drink too holy for you? Everything is holy except you and your human needs? Don't you know the Great Being that made us made all things for our use? Everything is food, fools! Everything is a sacrifice for holy life! You will feed worms when your time comes, feed fire and wind and fish in the ponds! Learn to be fully human before you can learn to be gods!”

“But,” said the cook, “We have to protect nature from predation by man! We have to respect water, plants, trees – all that is holy in Nature!”

“We can't abuse sacred things!” cried the carver.

“Everything was made for our use and for our benefit. Use, don’t abuse it. Make sure to replant seeds to replace the things you consume, ensure the water of life continues to be pure, abundant and free for all, that holy stones remain holy when you clean and return them to the cairn after enjoying your tea. You don’t die till you are dead. Morons!” She added in a whisper loud enough to be heard. Then, resuming her spinning, calling and whistling to her cattle, she moved away.

Her words were like hammer blows on their heads. That one word, “morons”, pierced through the veils of their perceptions, revealed their folly to them, and woke them up from their unrealistic desires. They admitted that they had been wrong in reinforcing these desires in each other, of not questioning and examining them in themselves, of being afraid to mention their own truths. They also confessed about the money they had stashed away in the lining of their clothes.

Convinced that they and their needs, too, were holy, they reverentially fetched the stones and water, plucked the *tulsi*, made their tea in one of their iron bowls, and sipped the warm fluid with much pleasure. Resolving in the next town to buy provisions, hire donkeys to carry them, and have a comfortable journey, they proceeded to Mount Kailas.

After braving a fierce storm and more hunger, they arrived in a town, relieved and happy to find barley flour, lumps of brown sugar, tea, biscuits, flints, ghee, lentils, wheat flour, umbrellas, bedding and balms. As they were loading up their donkeys, the cook said, courageously:

“But what about after our pilgrimage? Do we want to go back to our wives and our homes? I do.”

“But a householder’s life is so much trouble and conflict!” the stone carver said.

“Life is trouble and conflict. You don’t think the storm we went through was any less trouble? We have to learn to become enlightened, which for me means gaining the right perspective and not allowing

ourselves to waver with every whim of circumstance and event,” the herbalist replied.

The three men succeeded in completing their pilgrimage in as much comfort as such a difficult journey allows. Praying that Mount Kailas would wash away their ignorance, teach them to listen to, respect and love their own holy selves and all of nature, to take conflict in their stride, they made their way home.