
 FAITH, FAITH, FAITH

Pad+ma skyabs བཱ་མ་སྐལ་མ།

The monastery had been just a haphazard collection of a few old, dilapidated buildings a few years earlier and then things began to change. The monastery now boasted a brilliant shrine, a large meeting hall, a *ma Ni* meeting hall, and a towering temple building. It seemed the monastery monks were competing to see who could erect the grandest building. Indeed, Reincarnation Bla ma 'Brong lived in a building bigger and taller than all the others. In his fifties and, though hair sprouted profusely from his neck, he was nearly bald. Locals commented that his big, thick ears indicated he was a pandita, and believed his former incarnation had been a renowned hermit who had displayed awesome, supernatural powers.

Most locals sincerely believed in Bla ma 'Brong who often said, "Life in this world is never peaceful." This seemed true, because he had heard that another monk in another monastery had declared himself to be his previous incarnation's embodiment. Bla ma 'Brong worried about this until the "imposter" died, whereupon Bla ma 'Brong led a less stressed life.

A large tribe of utterly devoted Buddhists lived near the monastery all spring if there was adequate grass for their livestock. These tribal members included Mkon skyid and her daughter, Klu sgron, who regularly took yogurt and milk to Bla ma 'Brong in the hope of having better future lives.

A river with many bobbing ice cakes flowed near the monastery one spring. This undulating line of water and ice resembled a serpent when viewed from a mountain top.

One morning, as cuckoos twittered from the branches to welcome spring's arrival, Klu sgron got up and said, "I have a toothache."

Her mother replied, "Well, it can't be very serious. You didn't complain about it yesterday. Go with our neighbor, Bkra shis, and sell the wool your father collected yesterday from our sheep."

"Yes, Mother," Klu sgron said, and went outside to wait for Bkra shis.

About an hour later, she was staring enviously at the wool sweater a young Chinese woman was wearing and said in embarrassment, "Chinese Sister, how beautiful your sweater is! What material is it made of?"

The Chinese woman sneered, raised her hand, pointed to the wool piled up like a hill on a truck behind her, and said, "Over there. It's made of wool."

Klu sgron looked at the clean, colorful, and attractive sweater again. The wool she had sold was mixed with dust. Looking at the wool sweater again, she said doubtfully, "Uh... Chinese Sister is joking."

The Chinese woman had given her 200 *yuan* for the wool. Klu sgron then went home with Bkra shis, after counting the money thinking, "Mother will give one hundred *yuan* to the Vajrapani Temple, contribute one hundred *yuan* for our reincarnation *bla ma*, who will visit each family this month. But I'm sure she will still borrow one hundred *yuan* for Bla ma O's consecration."

As she was walking home, the image of that beautiful wool sweater flashed repeatedly in her mind.

When she arrived, her mother took the 200 *yuan* without comment and asked, "How is your tooth?"

"It still hurts," Klu sgron said.

Her mother took out a picture of Bla ma 'Brong, leaned it against a small stone, and said, "You will be cured after prostrating to this picture one hundred times. Dear, take this yogurt to Bla ma after you finish your prostrations and ask him about your toothache. Maybe we'll need to invite some monks to chant."

Feeling a bit tired after hurriedly finishing her prostrations, Klu sgron rested for a few moments, took off her old sheep-skin robe,

put on a thin brown robe, and started down the zigzag path leading to the monastery. Sunshine bounced off the mountains under a cloudless blue sky. She felt better.

Bla ma 'Brong was getting out of bed when Klu sgron entered his chambers. After she prostrated three times, she told him all the details of her toothache. She was seventeen and not very beautiful. However, pert breasts, large eyes, and smooth lips made her attractive. Bla ma 'Brong gazed at her breasts and thought, "It's been too long since I engaged in my secrets," and then ordered Klu sgron to approach him. As he got ready to investigate her toothache, he held her cheeks warmly and said, "Open your mouth."

Klu sgron opened her mouth and closed her eyes...

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After a bowl of *rtsam pa* and a piece of fried bread for breakfast, Bla ma 'Brong still felt a bit hungry and began eating the yogurt Klu sgron had brought. While eating, he picked up a newspaper and scanned it. A story entitled *A Teabowl* caught his eye:

Don grub was an intelligent, wise man who easily solved difficult problems. If two men, for example, quarreled over a horse, he could determine who the horse's real owner was.

One lovely summer afternoon, sunshine splashed through the windows onto the tables in an office where Don grub sat in a chair pondering something important. Smoke entered his mouth and then slithered out from his nostrils like a black serpent. Sudden loud knocking at the door roused him from his meditations. Two monks entered, looked at each other angrily with dark-red faces, and said simultaneously, "Great Teacher! This..."

"Wait! Wait! I don't know who is right if you both speak at the same time," said Don grub. He pointed to the monk on his right and said, "You go first."

The monk adjusted his cassock on his shoulder and said, "Great Teacher! Tshul khirms came to my home last night. I offered him butter tea in my silver teabowl. He said, 'It's so beautiful,' and looked at it

longingly again and again. In fact, I didn't want to sell it for even 2,000 *yuan*. We talked for a long time. During that time, I had to go out and pee. Tshul khrim was gone when I came back. I discovered that my teabowl was gone when I got up this morning and wanted to drink a bowl of tea. I looked for it everywhere in my home, but I didn't find it. You know, for a monk like me, I should find it in my room, but I didn't. Only Tshul khrim came to my room yesterday. When I politely asked him about the missing bowl, he angrily said, 'How unjust. We should go to court.' Great Teacher! Just think! How can I, a cassock-wearing monk lie?" Then he unhappily looked at the other monk, signaling that it was his turn.

The other monk emitted a short cough and began, "I went to Bkra shis's room, drank tea, and praised his teabowl. This is all true. But it's not true that I took his teabowl when I left. How could I do something like that as a cassock-wearing monk? Tibetans say, 'Digging black earth without a bottom, treating injustice without responding,' as if he thought I stole his teabowl. This is why we are here. Please make a correct decision. *oM ma Ni pad+me hUM, oM ma Ni pad+me hUM...*"

"Ha!" Don grub stood and said, "This happened between you two. For me it's easy! "

The two monks looked at Don grub's face in surprise. "In fact, this is a very easy question, but we don't know what punishment to give the thief. I'll give you a good way to identify the thief."

Bkra shis said, "Tshul khrim stole my teabowl."

Tshul khrim responded, "I vow by The Three Jewels that I didn't steal it."

Now forced to demonstrate his mysterious ability, Don grub stood up, closed the door, pulled the window curtains shut, and took an object wrapped in yellow cloth from his desk. It was a sculpture about thirty-five millimeters in length.

Forgetting their enmity, the two monks looked at each other in surprise.

Don grub said, "This is a real Buddha. You two must make an oath and touch this to the top of your head. The liar will leave this world in three days. Understand this if you still want to live."

He had resolved many different issues using this procedure. Don grub sincerely believed in this Buddha image and was confident he could quickly resolve this affair.

Bkra shis put the Buddha image on top of his head without hesitation and swore, "I will surely die in three days and then be reborn in Hell if I really stole Tshul khrim's teabowl."

Tshul khrim vowed, "I must go to Hell in three days if Bkra shis didn't steal my teabowl."

Don grub was amazed and said, "After three days the innocent will still live in this world and the sinner will be in Hell."

Then the two left, puzzled that such methods were being used to identify the guilty party.

Three days flew by and the two monks returned to Don grub, who was very surprised. He thought hard. His mysterious ability had evaporated. He hopelessly said, "A teabowl has no value. Go home."

"Hmph!" Bla ma 'Brong exclaimed, when he finished reading the story, and thought, "Don grub isn't a very clever man."

Suddenly, he remembered that Stobs ldan had invited him to his father's funeral. He put the bowl of yogurt down and was soon walking on a path, carrying several volumes of scriptures.

Stobs ldan was honest and his family was the richest in the village. "You aren't honest, you're a fool," his father had often said. "Helping others is expensive! Don't waste your money!"

Nevertheless, Stobs ldan helped others if he was able, ignoring his father's injunction.

When Bla ma 'Brong reached his destination, Stobs ldan said, "Lord, I regret that I am an unfilial son and couldn't serve my father well while he was living, but my heart is calm today for you have come to chant for Father. Please, bless Father's soul so he will be reborn in this world or in Western Paradise."

"Don't worry. I have a way to ensure your father will be reborn in this world. You will see him again," Bla ma 'Brong assured and began chanting.

On her way back home, Klu sgron realized something had happened when she saw many people gathered at Stobs ldan's home. She soon realized that it was a funeral. A moment later, her cheeks turned as red as apples when she caught sight of Bla ma 'Brong. She rushed home in embarrassment.

Locals were preoccupied with the funeral and ignored her.

When she got home, her mother had dinner ready. Mkon skyid said, "Daughter, is your tooth okay? What did our benefactor, Bla ma 'Brong, say?"

"Oh! my tooth is no longer painful," she replied.

"What did he say about it?" Mkon skyid insisted.

"Oh... he didn't say anything. He just puffed into my mouth," Klu sgron murmured, afraid to reveal what had really happened.

Later, she no longer wanted to take yogurt to Bla ma 'Brong, but her mother angrily insisted, "Daughter, this is our honor. If we do this for a *bla ma* in this life, we should be glad. We will be punished by the deities if you continue to cling to such a wrong, foolish attitude."

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A year passed as quickly as water moves in a fast-flowing river. The mountain peaks were light-yellow, resembling a Russian beauty's hair. Grass and leaves blew aimlessly in the wind as the local herders drove their livestock to the winter camp.

"Mutton is for monks in autumn, yogurt is for brides in autumn," goes a local saying. Indeed, monks did wait for mutton and milk. Some monks put on a big smile and welcomed those they saw coming with a heavy bag along the path to the monastery.

Most visitors asked, "Does Bla ma 'Brong live here?" When the answer was negative, they kept walking, as the disappointed monks pretended to have come out to urinate. When they re-entered their domestic quarter, their smiles had evaporated.

Bla ma 'Brong enjoyed his many gifts but, sometimes odd things occur and, one beautiful morning, Bla ma noticed Klu sgron

was pregnant. Hardly able to believe his eyes he inquired, "Are you pregnant?"

Klu sgron bowed her head, her face seemingly illuminated by bright lumps of coal glowing in a fire.

"Who is your baby's father?" Bla ma 'Brong demanded.

Her bright eyes looked at him once coyly. She remained silent.

"Did you tell others about this?" Bla ma 'Brong asked.

"Nobody," Klu sgron uttered quietly.

"Good. Keep our secret in your heart forever. I will create a good destiny for the baby," Bla ma 'Brong promised.

"The government is strict about birth limits and my family is poor. Mother often asks me about the baby's father. She wants the father to live in our home. If he refuses, we will give the baby to him after it is born," Klu sgron said, tears trickling down her cheeks.

Bla ma 'Brong gently moved the prayer beads around his left wrist and said, "Go home. Tell your mother to come see me."

Bla ma 'Brong scowled, pulling the wrinkles on his forehead together, but a moment later an idea occurred to him and his eyes glinted contentedly. He unconsciously murmured, "That's right." He had recalled that Stobs Idan had entrusted him to identify his father's reincarnation.

"You needn't worship. Don't do that," he said when Mkon skyid got ready to prostrate upon her arrival. "What's your plan for your daughter?" he asked.

"I'm hoping to receive guidance from you, Lord Bla ma," Mkon skyid declared.

"How fortunate that the baby is the reincarnation of a wealthy man. The family will locate and identify the baby, who will help your family when he is an adult. Don't ask her who the baby's father is. She might commit suicide or to do something rash if you pressure her. She is young and very timid. What would you do if she really does commit suicide? It would then seem as though you had taken two lives - the girl and her unborn infant."

"Lord Bla ma, how true. What would I do if I lost my daughter?" Mkon skyid sighed, and quickly made three prostrations to Bla ma 'Brong.

The Bla ma suggested, "This business will go better if you don't talk about it to others."

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Spring came as it always does and it was the death anniversary of Stobs ldan's father. Stobs ldan visited the monastery and gave one hundred *yuan* to each monk and contributed 1,000 *yuan* to Bla ma 'Brong. While prostrating to Bla ma 'Brong, he said, "My dear father has gone to another world. Already one year has passed. He often appears in my dreams. Where has his soul been reborn?"

Bla ma 'Brong closed his eyes, moved his beads in his hands, and then proclaimed after a few moments, "Indeed! I promised you that he would be reborn in our village as a boy."

Stobs ldan's only reaction was to open his mouth wide for a second and then clasped his hands above his heart as a sign of devotion to Bla ma 'Brong, who kept his beads moving.

Bla ma 'Brong intoned, "Your father was reborn in Mkon skyid's family. The child's name is Chos skyong."

Two years later, Stobs ldan took Mkon skyid's family with him to the monastery to circumambulate and worship. When Bla ma 'Brong saw Chos skyong looking at a painting on the wall of the meeting hall, he went near and said warmly, "Good boy, I'll give you a lot of candy if you tell Uncle Stobs ldan that the beads around his neck belong to you. If you don't do this, you are a bad boy and I'll give you nothing."

Eager to get the candy, Chos skyong approached Uncle Stobs ldan and said, "You are wearing my prayer beads!"

"Oh, The Three Jewels! Chos skyong is my father's soul, isn't he? He surely recognizes his beads," exclaimed Stobs ldan. He took the beads from around his neck, presented them to Chos skyong, and embraced him warmly.

Startled, Klu sgron believed that each *bla ma* had his own way to save sinners from darkness, but mere mortals often just didn't

realize it. Klu sgron regretted that she had ever questioned Bla ma 'Brong.

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

bkra shis བཀ་ཤིས།
 bla ma ལྷ་མ།
 bla ma 'brong ལྷ་མ་འབྲོང་།
 chos skyong ཚོས་སྐྱོང་།
 don grub དོན་གྲུབ།
 klu sgron ལུ་སྒོན།
 ma Ni མ་ཎི།
 mkon skyid མཁོན་སྐྱིད།
 oM ma Ni pad+me hUM ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧུཾ།
 pad+ma dbang chen པདྨ་དབང་ཚེན།
 pad+ma skyabs པདྨ་སྐྱབས།
 rtsam pa རྩམ་པ།
 stobs ldan སྟོབས་ལྡན།
 tshul khrim ཚུལ་ཁྲིམས།
 yuan 元