

## FOLKTALES FROM GCIG SGRIL: INTRODUCTION

Bsod nams 'gyur med

I was born in Khra la'i Village, Smin thang Township, Gcig sgril County, Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, in 1991. I have a brother, 'Gro phan, and younger sister, Pad+ma mtsho. My father works in the township hospital. Most of Khra la'i Village territory is grazing land for yaks, sheep, and horses. The landscape is very beautiful and the grassland, air, mountains, and lakes are unpolluted. People in my hometown are friendly and knowledgeable. Though elders never attended school, they know how to respect and be kind to others. Most locals think they were very fortunate to be born in such a nice place.

In some sense, however, we were considered backward, but this was not worrying, because our Buddhist faith gave us great consolation. It was enough for people here to live peacefully and help each other. They were glad to assist those who were in need out of the goodness of their hearts and did not expect a "Thank you."

Now, however, everyone has changed and we don't believe our village is the same as it once was. People are stingy and don't value being kind to elders. They are busy trying to get richer than others. They envy those who have good homes in the village. They are too busy to remember their traditional culture. They ignore elders' advice and only think about themselves. They don't help those in need. Instead, they are kind to those who don't need help, such as leaders and wealthy people. Though most children are very naughty, they are generally kind-hearted. However, the children of some leaders and rich people are unkind and tease poor children.

Metal stoves have replaced traditional adobe ones. Cars and motorcycles have replaced horses. Beautiful wilderness has become a collection of artificial scenic spots. People have become modern, not realizing that progress is hazardous. Few people talk about their past.

Elders sit together near their homes with prayer wheels and chant Buddhist scriptures. Sometimes their eyes and expressions tell us that they are recollecting their childhood. Childhoods are different and are comprehended differently. I cherish my childhood as a time when elders taught me how to be a good person, and to care for and cherish those who offered me

friendship. I reflect on my childhood when I see children in kindergarten. Though my childhood was full of challenges, we were somehow satisfied. Some say everything Tibetan is backward, but I believe that our spirit is not backward. I'm honored to have been born in a traditional Tibetan area.

Below, I give a short account providing a general context for my childhood within which folktales were told. This is followed by several folktales that I remember.

## MY CHILDHOOD

Father worked as a doctor in Smin thang Township Town and returned home only once every several months, because he had to care for patients at the local clinic. He neglected me and our family. Sometimes we children asked Mother, "When will he return?"

"He'll come back soon," Mother replied. Her eyes told me she hoped Father would soon return, because she really missed him. We thus waited eagerly for Father. When Father *did* return, he always brought candy, and I honestly don't know if I wished to see him or just wanted to enjoy the candy.

Mother was busy everyday driving our yaks and horses to the mountains, returning home, bringing the livestock back in the evening, and she was also busy caring for Brother, Sister, and me.

Brother got up one morning and used withered flowers from a bush to make a fire in the stove. It produced a very pleasant odor. The smoke dispersed in our tent, although most went up through the skylight and then slowly wafted into the sky. Sunshine was beaming into our tent as Sister and I got up. I took Father's big sheepskin robe, draped it around myself, and sat near the warm adobe stove.

I heard someone say to Mother, "Po po, where did you herd your yaks yesterday?"

"On Rdo ra Mountain," Mother replied.

"Did you see a big white yak and a black yak?" he said.

"I didn't see those yaks," Mother replied.

The man said goodbye and left.

Brother boiled milk tea and, as he was tidying the tent, he looked at me and Sister and said, "Put on your robes and wash your faces."

We ignored him. Then he picked up a stick and threatened me with it. I ran outside and said, "Mother! Brother hit me."

"Don't cry. I'll teach your brother a lesson," she said, picked up two full buckets of milk, and walked into our tent. "Gro phan, why did you hit your younger brother? He's your brother, not your enemy. You must not beat him," said Mother.

Brother quietly sobbed and, through his tears, he told Mother he was being scolded unjustly.

"Bkra shis don 'grub, boil milk tea and take care of Pad+ma mtso. Your brother will take our yaks to the mountains while I finish collecting yak dung on the grassland," Mother said.

I lay on Fathers' big sheepskin robe and began to tell stories with Sister. After a while, I heard someone call my name from far away. I lifted my head and listened. It was our neighbor's child, Gser thub, my playmate. I went outside and saw him waving, inviting me to play with him. When he saw me he dashed over.

"When Mother returns home I'll play with you," I said.

"OK! I'll wait for you," he replied happily, and then returned to his home.

When Mother and Brother came home, we had lunch together. "Mother, may I play with Gser thub?" I asked.

"Yes, but come back when I go to the pasture to bring back our yaks," Mother said.

"Can I go play with Bkra shis don 'grub?" Brother said.

"No, you can't play with him because I worry you will fight with Bkra shis don 'grub. Stay here with me and do some work in the tent," said Mother.

I then ran out of our tent to our neighbor's tent and called my playmate to join me at the bank of a small limpid stream that meandered through the grassland.

"Look! A big fish is under this stone," Gser thub said excitedly.

I began looking intently for the fish in the water. Meanwhile, Gser thub snuck behind me and shoved me. I jumped to the other bank as he laughed loudly.

At that moment I saw something in the water and said without thinking, "Fish! Fish!"

He quickly stood up and looked for the fish. I snuck up behind him and shoved him. He hopped like a frog into the water. His brother saw me shove Gser thub into the water, grabbed a stick, and ran at me, scolding me all the while. I was terrified his brother would beat me and ran home. When I reached our yak enclosure, I saw a horse near our tent and happily guessed, "Yes! It's Father."

Suddenly I heard somebody shout my name. It was 'Od pa standing in front of his yak hair tent. "My mother says you must come to our tent," he said angrily. I went to Uncle Rig 'dzin's tent and saw Gser thub lying on a big sheepskin robe. He wouldn't look at me, and seemed angry with me. "Bkra shis don 'grub, come here and tell me why you were fighting," said Aunt Phun chung kindly.

I bowed my head and told her everything.

Suddenly Gser thub lifted his head and said, "I saw the fish in the water."

We all laughed.

Aunt Phun chung listened to me carefully and said, "Don't worry. That's all right. You are children. I love my son, but he pushed you first. It's his mistake. You are a good boy and also Gser thub's good friend. Always be his good friend. Don't be his enemy." She then took some candy from her bosom.

I thanked Aunt Phun chung and returned to my family tent.

PRINCE BSAM PA'I DON 'GRUB

One chilly winter night, Father put me and Sister in front of him near our warm stove, while Mother and Brother prepared dinner. A dog barked very loudly, as though scolding the chilly weather. Father then told us this story.

'Brug rgyas was king of the great country of Byang thang and had three sons – Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan, Bsam pa'i nyi ma, and Bsam pa'i don 'grub. Their county was rich and the people who lived there were happy, until one day when terrible things began happening. After some time people became poor and hungry. The king decided that his three sons must find Bya mi la gser gron, the bird that could spit gold, and make the county rich again.

"Here are three cups of water and three trees. Plant each tree on top of a hill and then water each tree with one cup of water. Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan, you go to a big hill. Bsam pa'i don 'grub, you go to a small hill. And Bsam pa'i nyi ma, you go to a medium-sized hill. So long as your tree is in flower and the water doesn't dry up, I will know you are alive. But, if your tree doesn't flower and the water dries up, then I will know you are dead," said the king.

The king and his servants then escorted the three sons to three nearby hills. Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan and Bsam pa'i nyi ma went together to one hill. Meanwhile, Bsam pa'i don 'grub went alone to a small hill where he noticed two men arguing over a pair of shoes. "Why are you arguing over these shoes?" Bsam pa'i don 'grub asked in surprise.

"These shoes are *mgyogs pa'i lham lu pos pos* 'speedy shoes'. If you wear them, no one can catch you. I saw these shoes first!" one man said.

"No, I got these shoes first!" the other man said.

"I can solve your problem. You two go to the hill over there and run back as fast as you can. The one who gets here first gets the shoes," Bsam pa'i don 'grub said.

The two men agreed and ran to the designated hill. Meanwhile Bsam pa'i don 'grub put on the shoes and vanished.

When Bsam pa'i don 'grub got to the middle hill, he saw two men arguing over a big hat. Bsam pa'i don 'grub approached them and asked, "Why are you arguing over this big hat?"

"This is *mi rig zhwa mo nag re* 'the black hat of invincibility'. If you wear it, you become invisible," one man said.

"I saw this hat first!" the other man said loudly.

"No, I did!" said the first.

"Oh, don't argue! I suggest you two turn around, and then turn back and look at me. Whoever sees me first gets the hat," Bsam pa'i don 'grub said.

The two men agreed and turned around, but when they turned back, Bsam pa'i don 'grub had put on the hat and vanished.

Later that afternoon, Bsam pa'i don 'grub climbed a tall mountain and saw two men arguing over a club with many nails in it. "Why are you arguing over a piece of wood with nails in it?" Bsam pa'i don 'grub asked.

"This once belonged to Dgra nag zangs ma'i dzer ru can 'the evil foe with copper nails'. No one can bully you if you hold it," a fat man with a mustache said.

"I found it first!" the other, weaker man said.

"No, I grabbed it first," the fat, mustachioed man said.

"Don't quarrel! I suggest that whoever climbs that mountain first can have the club," Bsam pa'i don 'grub said, pointing to a nearby peak.

The two men then raced toward the mountain.

Meanwhile, Bsam pa'i don 'grub took the magic club, fled into the night, and anxiously searched for a place to sleep.

Eventually, he came to an enormous cave and heard sounds inside. He put on the hat and approached the dark cave. At that moment a woman with one pendulous breast dragging on the ground and the other slung over her shoulder emerged from the dark cave. She seemed to realize that someone was near the cave and looked here and there, and then she returned inside. Bsam pa'i don 'grub followed her. The cave was very large and smelly. When his eyes had adjusted to the dark, he saw his two brothers tied to a big rock. Their faces were gray. The demoness was busy tending a fire, intending to

cook his brothers. "Kill the demoness," Bsam pa'i don 'grub said to the nail-studded club, which immediately beat her to death. He thus rescued his brothers.

"How did you do that? You are so heroic," his brothers said enviously as they walked out of the cave.

Bsam pa'i don 'grub told his story about finding his magical items. The brothers then took shelter under some boulders and slept. The sun was shining when Bsam pa'i don 'grub awoke. He called his brothers, but they were gone. Bsam pa'i don 'grub wept sadly, realizing he had been robbed of his treasures and abandoned.

He walked for a long time and encountered some white yaks and some white-skinned people wearing white clothes, playing and laughing. When they saw Bsam pa'i don 'grub wailing, they beat him. "We are very happy to have finished our work for the ghost king, so you mustn't cry!" the people said.

Bsam pa'i don 'grub then started to laugh, and left. More time passed and he came to another place where there were red yaks and red-skinned people wearing red clothes. They were gathered in a red house and wailing sadly. When they saw Bsam pa'i don 'grub laughing, they caught him and demanded, "Why are you so happy?"

"I met some people wearing white clothes who said I must laugh," Bsam pa'i don 'grub giggled.

"Where are you from and where are you going?" the people asked.

"I'm from Byang thang and I'm looking for Bya mi la gser gron," Bsam pa'i don 'grub said.

"That's a very difficult task," the people said.

"Do you know where I can find this bird?" Bsam pa'i don 'grub asked.

"It is in the forest in front of this mountain, but only we know how to catch it," the people said.

"Please tell me," Bsam pa'i don 'grub said.

"We'll help you, but only on one condition," the people said.

"What is it?" Bsam pa'i don 'grub replied.

"Every year, we must give the king of the ghosts a boy and a girl to eat. If we don't, he will come to our village and kill everyone.



Please help us," the people said. Bsam pa'i don 'grub agreed to do whatever was necessary to stop the killing. The local people were overjoyed, stopped crying, and prepared to take Bsam pa'i don 'grub and a girl to the cave where the king of the ghosts stayed.

"What do you know about the king of the ghosts?" Bsam pa'i don 'grub asked the girl.

"I don't know much, but I heard he has nine heads and is huge," the girl said anxiously. Bsam pa'i don 'grub saw an old sword on the ground, picked it up, and sharpened it for a long time until it was very sharp. Then they waited for the king of the ghosts to appear.

Bsam pa'i don 'grub and the girl finally felt so tired that they sat on the ground to rest. Suddenly, a very loud sound came from inside the cave, terrifying the girl. Bsam pa'i don 'grub clutched his sword, went to the cave entrance, and waited for the ghost. Smoke wafted out from the cave and, with a loud sound, the ghost's first head poked out from the mouth of the cave. Bsam pa'i don 'grub swung his sword and cut off the first head. The ghost shrieked in pain and lunged back inside the cave.

Bsam pa'i don 'grub and the girl returned to the village and reported what had happened. The local people worried that the king of the ghosts would recover and take revenge. The locals then built two big stupas at the entrance to the cave to suppress the ghost. Then, they gratefully said to Bsam pa'i don 'grub, "In the forest in front of the mountain you will find a very tall tree, where many beautiful birds live. Take an ax and hack at this very tall tree. All the birds will say that they are the one you are searching for, except one gray bird, which will say that it isn't the right bird. That is the bird you must catch."

Bsam pa'i don 'grub took an ax, went to the forest, did exactly what the villagers said, and caught *Bya mi la gser gron*. He then returned to the village and thanked everyone. Before he left, the villagers gave him a herd of yaks in appreciation for liberating them from the king of the ghosts. Bsam pa'i don 'grub mounted one of the yaks and rode off, driving the other yaks before him. *Bya mi la gser gron* sat on his shoulder and spat gold. When Bsam pa'i don 'grub reached a bridge, he saw his two brothers there. He was very happy to

meet them, and they were also glad he had found Bys mi la gser gron.

"How did you find the bird?" asked his brothers. "You are now our king."

Bsam pa'i nyi ma led the way as Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan drove the yaks behind Bsam pa'i don 'grub. When they were on the bridge, Bsam pa'i nyi ma said, "Look! There's a huge fish in the river!"

As Bsam pa'i don 'grub looked down to see the fish, Bsam pa'i nyi ma shoved him into the water, which was so deep that Bsam pa'i nyi ma and Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan couldn't see him. Assuming he had drowned, they happily drove the yaks and took Bya mi la gser gron back home. When they arrived, many locals and their father received them. They asked Bsam pa'i nyi ma and Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan, "How did you find Bya mi la gser gron?"

"We went to a very big forest and found it," the two princes lied. The king joyfully celebrated with his two sons, sure the county would be rich because Bya mi la gser gron spat gold. Sure enough, day by day, the country became richer and richer.

One day while the king and his servants were out hunting, a minister saw some deer and chased them into a forest. After a long time, he lost the deer and had also become lost himself. Suddenly, he saw something behind a big tree. He quietly approached the tree and saw a boy chopping it. "Who are you?" the minister asked.

"I am Bsam pa'i don 'grub," the boy replied.

Not believing his ears, the minister said, "Please say your name again."

"I'm Bsam pa'i don 'grub," he said and looked at the man.

"Oh! You are Prince Bsam pa'i don 'grub! How wonderful!" the minister said, and then the two embraced.

## SELFLESS FATHERS AND SELFISH SONS

"Fathers always think about their sons, while the sons only think about property," is a common saying. This story is often told to illustrate this saying.

Don 'grub had three sons. Their mother had died when they were children, leaving only their father to care for them. He worked hard every day for a wealthy family and, as his sons matured, he became more frail and wrinkled. In time, his eldest son married and took half of the family property. Several months later, his other two sons took the remaining property. There was now no one to care for Don 'grub, who had no home, and lived despairingly in a gully near the village. Though some villagers gave him food, and consoled him, his three sons were never kind to him nor did they give him food.

One evening Don 'grub sadly considered suicide, but then he saw a stranger and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm a merchant, not a robber," said the stranger.

"I'm not afraid of robbers because I'm a beggar who has nothing to steal, I just want to know who you are," Don 'grub said.

"I'm from another village and have come here to buy antiques. I have nowhere to sleep. If you don't mind, may I stay with you for just one night?" said the stranger.

"If you don't mind lying on the ground, you can lie on the ground with me," Don 'grub said.

"Why do you live here?" the stranger asked.

"Because my cruel sons took all my property," Don 'grub sadly said, and then told his story.

The stranger said, "Don't worry, I have an idea. I'll give you this beautiful piece of cloth. Use it to wrap up a stone. Tomorrow morning, I'll go to the village and tell everyone I've come to buy antiques. Then you bring this stone to me."

The next morning the stranger went to the village to purchase antiques. Many people met the businessman and showed him their treasures. Don 'grub also came and said, "I have a precious antique

passed down from my grandfather's father. Now I must sell this antique because I have no other choice."

"May I see it?" said the stranger.

Don 'grub handed the stranger the stone wrapped in the beautiful cloth. The stranger unwrapped it, gasped in surprise, and said, "I've never seen such a precious antique! I don't have enough money with me to buy it from you. I must return to my village and bring more. Wrap it back up and don't sell this to others." The stranger then jumped on his horse and galloped away.

The village was soon abuzz with news of what had happened. When Don 'grub's three sons heard the news, they were delighted, and went together to greet their father, who they all suddenly fawned upon. The sons then decided to care for Don 'grub, agreeing that each son would take care of him for a year in turn. He lived with his eldest son for a year, and when the second son came to take Don 'grub to his home for a year, the eldest son disagreed, because he was afraid Don 'grub would die in his brother's home and then he would get nothing. Finally, Don 'grub lived in each son's home for only one month, and then moved to the next son's home. Each son prayed that Don 'grub would die in his home so that he could claim his precious antique.

One summer morning, Don 'grub died in his oldest son's home. When the other sons heard this news, they ran to the home, searched in Don 'grub's bedroom, and found the wrapped-up stone. Before they could unwrap it, other villagers arrived and said, "First you must hold a good funeral for your father, then the village will give you this antique."

The three sons held a grand funeral with many monks who chanted scripture for their father. They also made many offerings. Finally, the villagers gave them the antique. Some days later, the merchant returned to the village and Don 'grub's three sons offered him the antique and said, "It is our forefathers' precious treasure."

The merchant slowly unwrapped the beautiful cloth and then shouted, "This treasure has become a stone."

"Why did the treasure become a stone?" the three sons asked in surprised.

"Because you only valued the antique and didn't take good

care of your father, the treasure felt depressed and became a stone."

Don 'grub's three sons did not know what to do and fearfully returned to their homes, knowing that their wives would scold them.

## BECOMING A BUDDHA

An old Tibetan woman and her daughter, Me tog, lived in a very poor village. Their only livestock were two yaks and two sheep. Me tog was a very good, lovely girl. Many boys were attracted to her but no one wanted to marry her because her family was so poor. The old woman worried about finding a husband for her daughter. Every day, she prostrated to Red Sgrol ma, beseeching her to provide a good husband for her daughter.

One night, a devil passed by the village near the old woman's black tent and overheard her praying for a good husband for her daughter. The devil then went behind the tent and said, "Tomorrow morning a good man will visit your home. Give your daughter to him and he will bring your daughter happiness all her life."

The old woman then happily said to her daughter, "Our Red Sgrol ma ma has spoken!" She pulled out an old trunk, took out the few coral and other ornaments that she owned, and dressed up the girl as best she could. That night they were very happy and didn't feel tired or sleepy. The next morning, a stranger came to the old woman's tent. The old woman generously served him tea. The girl felt shy and stayed near the stove. The stranger was soon ready to leave. The old woman agreed that her daughter could go with him. When the stranger and the girl left, the old woman watched until they were out of sight, rubbed her bloodshot eyes, went inside the tent, sat in front of her Red Sgrola ma, and began praying.

When the stranger and the girl reached a river, he tied her with a rope, put her in a box, and said, "I am a demon. Tonight I will eat you." He closed the box, shoved it in a cave in the riverbank, and went searching for some vegetables.

Meanwhile, the local king's son and a minister's son were hunting. When they went near the river, the minister's son saw the box. The prince said, "Whoever hits the box with a stone first wins the box." The minister's son agreed and threw a stone, but missed. When the prince threw a stone, he struck the box. They ran over, opened the box, and found the beautiful girl inside.

"Why are you inside the box?" the prince asked.

"A devil bound me, put me here, and said he would kill and eat me tonight," Me tog said.

"Don't worry! I'll save you! You will be my queen," the prince announced proudly. The girl was so moved that she put the prince's hand on her head as a sign of deference and appreciation. After this, the two hunters put their ferocious, tiger-like dog in the box and left. That night the devil happily returned to the river, carrying many wild scallions he had gathered in preparation for cooking the girl. When he opened the box, the tiger-like dog lunged at the devil, tore out his throat, and devoured him.

Me tog was very happy to marry the prince and enjoy the king's wealth. Although she missed her mother, she never told her husband she had a mother or a family, because the king and his son believed she was from Heaven – that the deities had sent her to be the prince's wife. While she loved living in the palace with her husband, she constantly worried about her mother.

Meanwhile, the old woman missed her daughter terribly and prayed every day for her wellbeing. Me tog's mother often gazed in the direction where her daughter and the stranger had gone. The old woman's face soon became lined with even more wrinkles.

Me tog climbed atop the tallest palace building one day, and looked toward where her mother lived. Deciding that she must take care of her old mother, she summoned her servant and ordered him to bring her old mother to her room. She also cautioned the servant, "This is a secret between just you and me. I will punish you if you expose our secret."

The servant brought her mother, hid her in the king's storehouse, and cared for her.

Me tog was very afraid that her husband would discover this secret. The old woman prayed every day and saw her daughter only once every several months. Nevertheless, Me tog was happy that her dream had been realized and that her mother was well cared for.

After the old mother died several years later, Me tog sadly wrapped her corpse in a big robe, and put it in a box in the

storeroom. Some days later, the prince said, "Father will inspect our storeroom to see how much treasure we have,"

Me tog worried that her mother's corpse would be discovered. When the king and many servants came and began checking the storeroom, Me tog nervously stood in front of the box containing her mother's corpse. The king came near Me tog and, seeing a box he didn't recognize, said, "What is this? I've never seen this before."

"It's from my home. Please don't open it," Me tog pleaded.

"Oh, we never saw what you brought to the palace. We must see it," the king said curiously. Me tog then ran to her husband. When the king unwrapped the robe, he and his servants knelt in front of the box. The girl and prince were amazed, walked over, and saw that the old mother's corpse had become Red Sgrol ma.

NON-ENGLISH WORDS

'Od pa འོད་པ།

'Brug yul འབྲུག་ཡུལ།

'Gro phan འགྲོ་ཕན།

Pad+ma mtsho པདྨ་མཚོ།

Dgra nag zangs ma'i 'dzer ru can དྲག་ནག་ཟངས་མའི་རྩོར་རུ་ཅན།

Bkra shis don 'grub བཀྲ་ཤིས་དོན་འགྲུབ།

Bsam pa'i don 'grub བསམ་པའི་དོན་འགྲུབ།

Bsam pa'i nyi ma བསམ་པའི་ནི་མ།

Bsam pa'i rgyal mtshan བསམ་པའི་རྒྱལ་མཚན།

Bsod nams 'gyur med བསོད་ནམས་འགྱུར་མེད།

Bu sems rdo thog འབྲུ་སེམས་རྩོ་ཐོག།

Bya mi la gser gron བྱ་མི་ལ་གསེར་གྲོན།

Byang thang བྱང་ཐང།

Don 'grub དོན་འགྲུབ།

Gcig sgril གཅིག་སྒྲིལ།

Gser thub གསེར་ཐུབ།



Khra la'i ཁ་ལའི།

Me tog མེ་ཏོག།

Mgo log མགོ་ལོག།

Mgyogs pa'i lham lu pos pos མགྲོགས་པའི་ལྷན་ལུ་པོ་པོ།

Mi rig zhwa mo nag re མི་རིག་ལྷ་མོ་ནག་རེ།

Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོ་ན།

Pha sems bu thog ཕ་སེམས་བུ་ཐོག།

Phun chung ཕུན་ཚུང་།

Po po པོ་པོ།

Qinghai ཀུང་མཚོ།

Rdo ra རྡོ་ར།

Rig 'dzin རིག་འཛིན།

Sgrola ma སྐྱོལ་མ།