



Budda on a Midnight Sea  
Short Stories

by Francesca Hampton



*This fascinating collection by Buddhist writer Francesca Hampton explores modern situations in both India and America through the prism of Tibetan Buddhist teachings. From a lonely paddle boarder contemplating suicide on the dark Pacific, to a wayward Tibetan lama on a Greyhound bus, to a journalist who reconnects with a journey begun in a previous life in an interview with the Dalai Lama, it is a welcome addition to the emerging genre of Buddhist fiction.*

# Buddha on a Midnight Sea

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Sea

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## **Buddha on a Midnight Sea**

**H**is strokes felt clean in the cool silvered water, strong and determined. With each pull, the paddleboard streamed forward, following a broad sparkling path of moonlight over the slow rising swells. He had traveled miles since he left the shelter of the small yacht harbor where he had parked the van. No one had seen as he pulled on his wet suit and dragged the long board across the sand of the small beach into the water. The yacht harbor restaurant had been shuttered and dark. Traffic had cleared to only an occasional vehicle passing on

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neighborhood streets. Only the moving searchlight of the lighthouse at the harbor's entrance had threatened to reveal him as he pushed the board's slim prow into the first rise of outer waters. But then it passed, and he was released into the dark, still unnoticed by any watcher on land. The lights of the city had faded gradually as he moved out onto the heaving expanse of the moonlit Pacific, one hour, more. Now the land was no longer visible, and there was only a dim glow on the horizon where the city lay.

He sat up, breathing deeply but not really out of breath. His arms felt like they had in his youth, tired but full of reserve strength. It was all still there. The difference was that at his age, when the morning came, the price would be high, a week of sore muscles to follow and maybe a flare up of tendonitis in his shoulder. Except that there would be no tomorrow, would there? He put back his head and closed his eyes. Tonight would free him of tomorrows. The dark thought filled him a thrill of euphoria.

This wasn't far enough. He still knew where land lay. He needed to know himself lost before he did it. He eased back down on the board. His back muscles protested this time, and his slight beer gut made the stomach down position less comfortable than it had once been. But he plunged his hands deep into the cold water, into inky blackness. Again. Again. He found the rhythm of the stroke, and his back eased. The water would be deep below him now. What? 200 feet? 300 feet? Where was the continental shelf? Was he over the abyss? Cold dark lay below like the end of all things. The white paddleboard had begun to feel tiny. A bare scrap of safety in the shifting black and silver all around. But he would abandon it soon. Why should he need to feel safe?

He tried to laugh but found himself weeping as he paddled, soundless, and he could feel tears warmer than the sea

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coursing down his cheeks. Would they even miss him? What would it take before they noticed the old man was not resident anymore in the condo none of them visited? His sons had retreated into their own lives, distant and formal when he called. His wife, after he left her, had remarried, so bitter she might never talk to him again. His new wife? He snorted. What had he loved in her? What madness had driven him to actually leave his family? He thought of Sonia's long tanned legs wrapped around him in the dark, her young woman's breasts bouncing as she entered a room, the painted arch of her dark eyebrows, perfect as a model's, her artfully plumped blonde curls.

Then she had begun to watch him oddly from her vanity mirror, lip-sticking a false smile as she assured him that of course she wasn't tired of him. But his instinct had been right. She had packed her bags and left with her new man only days later. And to add insult to injury, it had been one of the mechanics he had hired 10 years ago. The man wouldn't even meet his eyes as he threw her bags in the trunk of the car and opened the door for her. The two of them drove away, already laughing. Maybe at him. Probably at him.

He couldn't go any farther. He had to rest. He lay his face against the board for a long time, eyes closed. The sea's lift and fall was restful if he kept his eyes closed. When he opened them, fear tingled through him like cold rain. He sat up, straddling the board and looking around. It was disorienting to see the ocean, not only in the west, but in every direction. This was an alien world, with only the vastness of shining water everywhere he turned, lifting and subsiding. Nothing solid except an old man and a paddleboard. Even in the rasher moments of his youth, he had never paddled out half so far at night. The moon path was sharper now, narrowing as the moon descended toward the horizon. Moonlight flashed hard silver on

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the front of every smallest dimple of water and left deep shadow on the reverse. It was a mesmerizing display of illusory shape and dazzle, but fear prickled through him as the moon touched the rim where water met sky and began to diminish there.

He put his forehead down against the dim whiteness of the board to steady himself. He had come here to die. What was the point of being afraid? He tried to resurrect the determination that had taken hold of him only three days before. When the trollop left, he had gone to the shop, not his shop anymore, of course, but still home somehow, or it had been, the mechanic's den where he had spent half his waking life for over 30 years, a place of male camaraderie, problems to be solved together, straightforward problems that yielded to strong hands wielding the right tools. And there had been jokes, the beers after work, the sympathy of men who mostly saw the world the same way he did and helped each other see the humorous side of their relationships with women. Only now, with a year passed since he had sold the business to his nephew, almost all the men he had known so well there had moved on and been replaced. No one called for that get-together beer or monthly lunch they had all promised each other. As he stood looking up at the undercarriage of a Volvo, the 20-year-old tinkering with her belly had looked out from under a wheel strut and informed him that customers were not allowed in the working area. He had retreated, trying not to show his shock, but his nephew, busy at the computer, had narrowed his eyes when he made as if to settle in the office and managed a scant minute of small talk before he excused himself to go buy a part.

There had been nothing to do then but go home. Open a beer. Sit one more time in front of the TV. Watch the news. Wheel of Fortune. A segment about ghosts in old houses. Two men dropping a car from a helicopter. A sad parade of would be fashion models, carping at each other between photo shoots.



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And all of it presented in tiny dribbles of continuity in a torrent of never ending TV ads, each one shinier and more cocksure than the last, presenting a thousand fragmented images suggesting lives sleek and perfectly lived somewhere else, with the aid of this product or that. When he snapped off the television, his mind felt bruised and worn, his thoughts a blowing pile of old leaves. He felt like he had thought every one of them before, a thousand times. Half plans. Abandoned efforts. Fading drips and drabs of nostalgia for things he could never have again, old stains of guilt and self-recrimination that had led to no resolution, watery dreams that could never seem to coalesce into a plan of action. Over and over. A seething tangle of useless thoughts, that nevertheless, never ceased their motion, their dull ache of yearning and frustration. They kept him awake far into the tossing nights. Some days he could barely summon the effort needed to get out of bed and plan his way through a couple of meals and a walk with the old dog.

Only the sea had brought relief. After the old dog died, he had continued to walk down to the bench near his house, but now when he arrived, he just sat, staring out at the vast changeable surface of light and space that was not part of the human world, though children dipped their toes at its edge. The sea touched, yet remained magisterially apart from the smallness of human lives. It was ancient past imagining, yet never aged. Seemingly that horizon of clean blue was made new and fresh with every dawn, warmed into midlife each afternoon, and settled its roughened surface back into quietude with the setting sun. Sometimes, when the other beach goers had left, he had gone down from the bench, stretched himself flat in his slacks and good shoes, spread-eagled upon the hot surface of sand, and let the wind ruffle his hair and the blowing sand sting his cheeks. He wanted to return to the elements, erase his life as if it had never been. And indeed, sometimes at least, he

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felt erased, with the hot breath of sun drying him from above and the vast bulk of earth supporting him from below.

Lying like this with his eyes closed one day, he thought about an old story his father had told him of the Viking death ceremonies. Those men had grown up knowing that life had an end. They had faced it as warriors. They didn't run to hospitals and then vanish into crematoria and obituary columns. They died in battle or in bed with their weeping dependents around them. They returned their abandoned bodies to the sea, and in that ceremony, even a stinking corpse was restored to some dignity, to something re-purified and proud. Or so it had seemed as he turned and sat up on the sand at last and looked out at the sea's timeless blue.

Now he sat transfixed as the last glimmer of moon vanished below the horizon, and an impenetrable dark settled over the liquid world around him. Swells were passing with a hiss that now filled him with only dread. What had he been thinking? This was madness. He could not die like this, alone and unseen by anyone at all, choking on salt and fear, in such a terrible vast dark. The moon would have set in the northwest. He could figure out his direction back to land from that couldn't he? Adrenaline surged as he swept with his right arm to turn the long board toward what he felt must be the direction he had come from. He was only four hours or so out, plus whatever the receding tide had added. He couldn't die in four more hours. There was nothing to worry about. Just a little scary to be so far out. Childish fears; this was not something to panic over. His mind pattered on. His hands dug again and again in to the cold seawater. The swells lifted and fell and lifted again. When he stopped again, panting, his shoulders burned like fire. He looked frantically around at every horizon. Black nothing. No city lights, no reassuring line of hills. No distant ship. No help.

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A faint sob escaped him. He searched the stars for some hint of direction. The North Star was connected somehow to the big dipper, wasn't it? Or near Orion's belt? He strained to remember which. He knew how to find Orion's Belt. Who could miss it? But looking up, for the first time in years, at a night sky absolutely ablaze with stars, he sat stunned. He could see the straight vivid line of stars that made up the belt but had no clue at all as to which, if any, was the North Star. But if it were in Orion's belt, logic finally told him, that would put it almost directly overhead, and how could that be useful? The dipper then, but when he tried to make out the big dipper, his searching mind created dippers everywhere. A damned cutlery display up there. He lay back flat on the narrow board, trying to calm himself. He could feel the dryness in his mouth after hours of exercise with no water. How could he have failed to bring water? And what a coward he had turned out to be. Self-loathing filled him.

The swells rose. The swells passed under him. And rose again.

Not a coward, some part of his mind pushed back. Just a man who wanted to live. So sue me. He splayed his stiffening fingers close to his thighs, tucking them behind his buttocks so they wouldn't fall off the board, closed his eyes, and let his body go limp, trying to ease his shoulders. He could FEEL the black of the water under him, cold and waiting. He tried to control his breathing, but his fear was a monster now, screaming in his mind that he must do something. It would not let him rest. He sat up again. The swells. What direction had they been coming from when he left? Toward shore of course, but that was always true. What about further out? What direction had they been moving? It seemed to him that they had shifted once he was out beyond the confines of the bay, moving away from a wind coming from the north. There wasn't much wind now. But if the

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swells were still moving north to south? He turned his board at right angles to their movement and began again the weary stroke.

He wasn't aware of losing consciousness, but a long time later he found himself waking from an exhausted sleep, his arms washing loosely in the slosh of water, holding him on the board only with their inertia. He pulled them quickly out, suddenly aware, as he had not been before, of the possibility of sharks. Not many left. But Great Whites still hunted northern California seas didn't they? And favored the night? He sat up, cold and stiff. The wet suit was not enough to keep him warm in the pre-dawn chill, exhausted as he was. He yearned for a hot shower, dry land, a bed, hot coffee. Although that wasn't the order in which he wanted them. He tried to make himself figure out what the logical order should be and looked about him groggily. The stars had gone, replaced with overcast, but it must be close to sunrise, there was a lighter quality to the dark of sea and sky. The line of the horizon was dim but clear. Thirst assailed him, and for the first time, real hunger. He strained again to see a sign of a boat or of land. Nothing.

Wearily, he began to paddle in the direction he had taken last night, in relation to the swells. But then he realized something. The wind had resumed, soft but steady, and now it countered the swells. His heart rose in his throat, pounding. Which had shifted? The sea or the wind? He sat for a long time, mind too tired to work on the problem, and finally, because it was easiest, and he had to do something, began to paddle in the direction the swells took, letting them push him from behind.

By late morning he could paddle no more. His arms were lines of fire from shoulder to elbow, tendonitis consuming them. And the wind had risen so that the swells bore white crests, still tiny, but, whenever they broke just as they passed him, the

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little waves threatened to knock him from the board. He could only hold to the bit of wood that sustained his life. When he could bear it no more, he groaned, long anguished moans that spoke, not only of these anguished minutes, but all the pain of all the days that had brought him to this nightmare.

Once more he fell asleep, but soon found himself floundering in the water, awake and wild with adrenaline, as the board drifted some 15 feet away. Frantically, he swam back to it, flailing awkwardly with his damaged arms, and once he had struggled onto it again, lay embracing it as tightly as a small child holds onto a mother's leg

Through the afternoon and the beginning of the second night, he lay in a kind of stupor, hands clenched on the board without sensation, as if they lived separately from him now, mind numb, throat dry as sand. Sometimes he lifted himself and scanned the horizon. Nothing. As the night deepened, the clouds gave way again and scattered. The wind died slowly.

As if in a dream, he saw the lights of a distant freighter appear for a time, following the line of the horizon, not growing closer. He tried to speak to it, but the harsh croak of his voice was so puny in the great space of sea and sky, it shocked him, and he stopped. The freighter, far beyond his ability to reach or contact, disappeared. But the sight of it revived his mind.

The sea had calmed again, no longer threatening to knock him off. He sat up and looked out at the endless ranks of swells coming toward him, the endless lines behind. Like all the human lives that have ever been lived, the thought came to him. They were pulses of energy that moved through water and moved through time, carrying none of it with them, just as the atoms of matter within a body are all replaced within a couple of years. He had read this remarkable thought somewhere and now, imagining this happening in the waves all around him,

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and seeing instead the phenomenon as human beings in speeded up time, he lifted his head and marveled at it.

It occurred to him that everything came, one way or another, in waves. Perhaps that was what the sea was – God’s metaphor. A big sign post pointing. He focused on one larger swell coming from far away and watched dreamily as it approached, lifted him, went on. What were waves? Movement, he decided, created by previous movement, making a momentary shape that his mind could call a wave. But where was the wave when it dashed upon the shore then? If the water it moved was only borrowed, where did the pulse of energy go? Scientists said energy is neither created nor destroyed didn’t they? So a human life was also a wave, wasn’t it? What was a human wave? What kind of energy was that? Where would he go when the end came?

Such deep thoughts from a dying man. He managed a laugh that was a croak. But the novel sense of clarity and rush of insights didn’t stop. Now it seemed to him that the waves looked like thoughts, all the thoughts of his mind, jostling across the horizon, running into each other, moving purposefully into nothingness, creating, while they were visible, shape, place, *reality*. Storms and that terrible dark he had paddled through. Dawns with all the sweet delicacy of the beginning of the world. The dull flatness of overcast days. The crisp authority of white caps and deep blue. Whatever the sea was, it didn’t stay that way for long. All of it just moving waters and light. Illusion then. Real *and* illusion. How is that possible? This seemed a terribly important question, but his mind released it, looking upward.

The overcast above was lifting now. That immense jewel chest of stars above him was opening its cases. He lay back flat and stared upwards, imagining himself now, as he had as a boy, standing in the bay window of the Starship Enterprise

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looking out. But even then, he could only do it for so long. It was just too much to take in what his father said as he described galaxies and nebula and a hundred million other planets, “just in this galaxy alone,” and all of it, galaxies and space clouds and planets and “billions and billions” of stars, his father intoned, quoting Carl Sagan with the same ponderously over-stuffed syllables to make him laugh, moving outward at thousands of miles an hour from some unimaginable beginning, that, presumably, was not really a beginning but had something else going on before that. Only what was time in all this mass of impossible to take in confusion, since each star he looked out upon was not really there, but appeared as it had been thousands of years ago, or millions, or more, each star, in fact reporting its flash or glow from a different epoch of time. Too much too much too much... The human brain was only designed to process a few years at a time at this end of one galaxy on one very small world.

But now he was lost to this world, and the world would soon be lost to him. He was a fleck of energy, still pulsing, in that infinity of possibilities spangled above him. He had never been so alone.

He wept, open-mouthed, a lost wail of pure emotion that trailed away into voicelessness again. For the first time in his life he began to pray. He didn't have words. Only “please please please...” But that feeling was building in him with such passion, he felt his soul was turning itself inside out. And something else was happening. There was a tingling in his chest, a fullness and warmth was spreading through him, and most astonishing of all, the sense of being loved. His eyes snapped open. The sky was still there. The feeling was still there. What was this? At a flagging 67, this atheist beer drinking adulterous mechanically inclined lifetime skeptic was having a spiritual experience?

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Hah. He shut his eyes, trying to scoff at himself, but the feeling didn't end. The sense of being in danger was not so much gone as shifted, dread turned to something that, mysteriously, felt like immense gentleness. His useless life, his angst, his peril all seemed simply humorous, as if now he viewed them through compassionate eyes that had seen the beginning of the world. Oddly, the joke no longer seemed on him, but with him, as if he and omniscience were sharing a beer together at a pub, and could see from their corner all of striving urgent life for the cartoon it was on the corner TV, just an incident of the greater view.

A spiritual experience. Come to ordinary him. Right here in Trouble City with a capital T and that rhymes with p that stands for... No he was losing it again. Just your garden variety hallucination then. But pleasant for all that. He hadn't expected pleasant here at the end of death by exposure. He laughed in a rough hacking sigh.

He relaxed on the board, closing his eyes. The calming seas under him no longer threatened to dislodge him. He felt cupped, held, and riveted by this sense of a vast knowing smile inside him. It was still there dammit. What could there possibly be to smile about? Why did such insights come when people were in such extremis they couldn't use them? What did people in other cultures do about this? All those spiritual seekers in odd clothing. Or no clothing come to think of it. He remembered an article about Hindu "forest dwellers." Not a special group, but a time of life. Time to leave your home and your sagging nagging wife. Say "ta ta" to those unappreciative grown kids. and take to the road. To do what? Meditate on rocks? Talk to gladiolas? He tried to imagine this in Fresno CA where he had grown up. No, impossible in Fresno. Santa Cruz maybe. He could wear a serape and wander the hills below the



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university with the other madmen, trying to figure out what the hell had happened to him 20 miles out on a paddleboard.

Or church. Should he go to church? No one at church had hinted at such a state, or maybe he hadn't been listening closely. It had all been about the next potluck and being good when he was young and even better when he was newly married, or at least nominally better than he really wanted to be. Or he could make a larger donation than he really wanted to make and try for goodness again next week.

It came to him that now he did in fact want to be good. And he wanted to know why he was alive. If there was something to know after all, how much that mattered. How stupid it would be to drown and waste these last precious years of his life. Somewhere there were people who must know more about such experiences and what they meant than he did. He could find them. He could try.

He slept on the lapping sea and woke again as dawn came. He sat up with great difficulty, startled by the unfamiliar physical symptoms of his dying body. He had a dull expanding headache. He could no longer move his arms higher than his rib cage, and weakness made him pant at even the slightest movement. Yet he knew now where the sun had risen. He knew the way east. The entire length of California lay to the east. Who could miss it, if they had only to follow the rising sun?

With great difficulty he brought his legs under him and tried to paddle in a kneeling position. The pain in his shoulders tore at him, and he stopped, readjusted his legs so he was seated with them in front of him, and started again. The only useful movement he could tolerate was a tiny stroke of only three inches, almost entirely with his hands alone. But ever so slowly, the board began to move east.

All morning he traveled, with short breaks, his exposed face and hands burning slowly as the sun rose. At noon, he looked

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up from his fixed gaze on the water just in front of the board and stared about him, and was astonished to see, perhaps a mile off, a fishing boat, small and sturdy. He bent his knees up and rubbed his face on them, since he could not lift his hands so high, shaking his head to rouse himself. He looked blearily up again. The boat was still there. No sign of the man who must surely be in the small cabin. Had the boat laid a net? He saw no poles.

He tried supporting one arm with the other to wave, and croaked a hail. But the fishing boat was much too far away, and lay to the northwest. West. He could hardly bear the thought of going west again after struggling eastward with such pain for so long. He sat, staring at the tiny faraway shape of the boat. It was hard to focus his eyes, and he was struggling now even to stay conscious.

A small roar came across the water, and he started awake. He had not noticed falling asleep again, his arms trailing in the water as he lay on his back. The motor of the boat had started up. The tiny figure of a fisherman was rolling a dragline in with the help of a mechanical winch. He had to be seen. With shaking arms he repositioned himself once more on the long board and tried to stand. Almost immediately he fell off again, helpless with weakness. Even with adrenalin pounding through him, it took every bit of strength he had left to haul himself back to the board's meager safety, and he lay panting. Malaise rolled over him like a cloud. He vomited, and for a long time could not raise his head. The fishing boat would leave. He would die. That was that.

He fell into unconsciousness one last time.

He did not notice the motor until it was cut, as the small fishing boat, hardly longer than his board and with a gunnel two feet above the water line, coasted towards him. With great difficulty, he turned his head to look upward. The sun was

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behind the boat's captain, but he could make out a quizzical expression.

"Lost, are we?" the captain said, and spat tobacco into the sea nearby.

The man on the paddleboard lifted himself slowly into a sitting position, struggling to return something with even a bit of wit. The phrase "and found" shaped itself in his mind, but all that issued from his throat was a sound like a rusty door trying to open.

"Well, come on then," his savior said. "I don't have all day."

The man tried to move the board closer to the boat and managed to close the gap to a few inches. But then felt himself leaning forward into darkness again.

"Here," the captain nudged him, gruff but not unkind. A bottle of water loomed in his dim vision. He could not hold the bottle high enough to drink for himself, but he put his head back and opened his mouth as his benefactor poured, leaning over the gunnel. Water, sweet blessed water, spilled across his face and down his throat. The captain, himself not young, braced himself and took the man under his arms, hauling him gracelessly aboard, ignoring his yelp of pain. He was left to sit up against the side of a low cabin on his own, but a hand came one more time into his vision to brace another opened bottle of water between his clenched knees. Awkwardly, he drank again.

The motor had started again. He tried again to speak as they began to move, and again failed.

"Sorry but there is no way I can take the board," the captain yelled from his place behind the tiller, taking his guest's effort to speak for protest.

The man looked back, suddenly aware, to the abandoned long board. It rose and fell on the waves as he watched, growing smaller as the fishing boat moved away from it. Only a piece of white wood, but he had to repress the urge to cry at its loss.

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His vision was clearing with the water, and he drank a third time. He was going to live. He looked out at the darkening tangle of gold on moving water, and felt once more the spirit move inside him. That inner smile was growing again, and he turned it on the captain, feeling beatific with gratitude. He realized he probably looked crazy. The other man snorted and did not return his smile. Who else but a crazy man would be out on a paddleboard so far?

He worked hard against the impulse to laugh hysterically, and closed his eyes until he could get the tension to ease away. Holding in his secret joy, he took a slow deep breath and craned his head back against the cabin wall. He could just make out the tiny speck of white far behind them now, rising, falling, rising again, until it was lost at last in the bright path of the setting sun.

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## Teachers

In the small kitchen behind the meditation room, the fire was going even in the late afternoon, heating milk and water for Tibetan tea in large dented aluminum pots set on the grill. The ventilator shaft above the flames was curved, and the smoke curled up to it lazily, discouraged by every small draft back into a tour of the low-ceilinged room. Walls and ceiling had long ago taken on a thick fur of soot, and the fading light that crept into the kitchen made little impression on the midnight walls. Even with his face turned partly toward the door, the young monk did not notice when the foreigner crept into the room.

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In the farthest corner, away from the fire, the man settled down on his haunches, long thin knees in the air, back against the wall, and stared mercilessly, as he always did, at the person who had his interest.

It was the intensity of that stare that made Sherab aware of him. With a start, he looked up from his work in the plastic orange basin of half-washed cups and saucers on the floor. The man's freckled, long-jawed face under its raft of red hair, the furious glint in the pale green eyes, sent a shock through him.

"This one is a little crazy," the guest master had confided the day before, "and he has no passport. The Indian police will be angry with us."

As well as he was able under the Westerner's gaze, Sherab kept his face still. But he stood up, and in a motion unconsciously defensive, flipped the trailing end of his red linen shawl expertly over one shoulder.

"*Chu tsapo?*" he inquired, "Hot water?" The water for the kitchen came from a good artesian well, but the western visitors seemed to regard it with suspicion. Another pot, full of hot water, simmered over the fire all day to keep their minds at rest.

The man shook his head; his stare never wavered. Sherab stood perplexed. "Cha? Would you like tea? I am make *Tibeti* tea now." The troublesome visitor made no answer. He had abruptly covered his face with his hands, but not so well the young monk could not see the spasms of laughter that contorted his face and then subsided.

He studied the crazy man, indecisive, then searched along the line of battered aluminum utensils hung on the walls, past a neat row of flower-painted thermoses on the table. Some simple diversion might satisfy the foreigner and encourage him to leave.

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An odd sound shifted his attention back. With dismay, the young man realized that the foreigner was now weeping, though except for that first moan, there was no sound. His hands still covered his face, but his body was shuddering with efforts at suppression. Sherab watched him, embarrassed by the man's lack of self-control.

At last he went to the foreigner and squatted beside him, tucking his monk's skirt back between his ankles. He put out his hand and lightly touched the unsteady shoulder. "You are sick?" he asked softly. He was fairly sure the man was not sick. He struggled to remember other English words that would express sympathy better. The man still did not answer.

Sherab looked uneasily toward the open entrance to the kitchen. The last crash of cymbals and Tibetan trumpets had died away. The prayers were over. The monks in the meditation hall would be expecting tea. And the Rinpoche was with them. He could not fail to bring tea to the household's master, the most famous lama in all the monastery.

He began to rise but the madman clutched his hand. "Please don't go yet," he pleaded.

Sherab was unsure of the meaning of the word *goyet* but please and the look in the man's eyes were clear. He stood, nonplused between this new responsibility and his old one.

Within the frame of the kitchen door, a small head had appeared. The knowing, impish face of the boy-monk Ngawang was bright with questions. Before Sherab could explain his plight, however, the normally reliable little boy had flicked out of sight like a startled sparrow, back to the meditation hall.

Sherab knew he had to do something quickly. "Please come," he insisted. Pulling gently but persistently on the man's arm, he got him to rise and took him to a long bench under the window.

“You watch,” he ordered. “I make tea.” the man looked at him, his unnerving pale eyes filled with unhappiness, but Sherab turned away. Working as rapidly as he could without an outward display of tension, he cut a thick slice off the black brick of Assam tea that Ngawang’s father had brought as offering to the monks and dropped it into the boiling water. He churned hot milk in the butter churner until it frothed with air, and then, more quickly than he would have liked, added it with butter to the boiling tea. He was struggling with the salt, trying to loosen it with the butt end of a knife, when he sensed a shadow cross the door. He froze with his hand still buried in the long container. The senior monks of the household were going past. They had not waited for the tea.

Through the opening he could see the old Rinpoche being helped up the stairs to his room. The other monks were dispersing. No one looked through the wide doorway to the kitchen, not even the three who were to help him with dinner. He didn’t move. What did this mean? The foreigner’s expectant gaze was prickling the back of his head.

Sudden as a grasshopper, Ngawang reappeared in the room. With childishly deft motions, he slapped two cups and saucers onto a small tray. He poured a large dipper full of the buttered tea into a flowered thermos, waited poised for instant motion while Sherab pinched salt into the steaming opening, and was gone.

As the little monk disappeared, the foreigner jerked to his feet as if pulled up by a force outside himself. Standing, he was a head taller than Sherab and weighed a fourth again as much. Against his will, the 16-year-old felt a tremor of fear.

The man was talking now.

“He pretends he doesn’t know who I am, but you know, don’t you?”



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Sherab looked at him noncommittally, struggling to make sense of the rapidly spoken words. Restlessly, the man was circling the small room. He muttered as he went, slapping his open palm for emphasis against the sides of the pots. His words sounded like nonsense to Sherab.

“The Indian holy man knew me. And the dreams do not lie. I am his teacher and he knows it. Why does he say he doesn’t know it?” The foreigner sounded vexed. He pounded the last pot with violence and turned to face Sherab. “Is it because I let the policeman touch my head?” The man’s voice had turned abruptly plaintive, almost childlike. With hesitant fingers he reached up to explore his head, as if it were some precious relic. “I am the one who was lost,” he suggested hopefully. He looked at his hands and giggled.

Sherab thought he understood at last but said nothing.

The man’s confident posture was slowly fading. He did not seem to notice that Sherab had not answered. Another thought had claimed him, and his expression curled into a scowl. “The bitches won’t even talk to me!” he exclaimed. “Those American bitches!” He circled the room once again, banging the counter with his closed fist this time. “And the Rinpoche said, ‘Go out.’ He dared to say to me, ‘Go out!’” The man’s voice was rising in frustration. “He is the one who should go out! I am his teacher!”

Sherab studied him as he circled the room as third time. He was amazed at the rapid fluctuations of pride and sorrow and anger. He had never witnessed any mind so out of control, and he flinched as the man began to curse the high lama. It was terrible karma this westerner was sowing. It would bring him much pain if he were not stopped.

Searching his memory, the monk strained for a simple teaching he would be able to say in English that might calm the man. Often enough he had observed the effects of pride in the monks around him. He himself had felt, briefly, symptoms of

the illusion that gripped the westerner. Was it not sweet to dream in secret that you were a *tulku*, a highly evolved one who had taken rebirth only to help others? You knew it was wrong, yet you yearned for the lama to acknowledge this quality in you, for others to begin to honor you as *tulkus* are honored among Tibetans when they are discovered. As a monk in the monastery, you were quite safe. Sooner or later, the lama would destroy your fantasy, as mercilessly as other people swat flies. He might scorn you, or mock you in public, or he might refuse to speak to you at all. It was a great humiliation. It hurt like fire. It cured you at once.

With sudden pity, the young monk realized that among westerners who studied the Teachings, very few had such a close spiritual friend.

Coming close to the man, Sherab took him by the arm. "You are tired now. You sit," he said gently. "I make tea." To his vast relief, the man sat.

Together they sipped the hot rich, salt-laced Tibetan tea from metal mugs. Sherab watched the madman discretely as he lighted the evening lantern. In its light the tension that pulled at his face seemed to have lessened. He looked younger, more innocent, and exhausted.

"All beings have Buddha-nature," Sherab offered at last. He placed the teaching lightly into the air between them, not looking at the westerner, with an exaggerated humility he hoped would not arouse the man to pride again.

"All beings avoid me," the man whispered. Sherab looked up, startled by this sudden gleam of sanity. Surely the web of fantasies the man had spun and cherished could not be escaped so easily? The shadowed eyes of the visitor gave no clue, and Sherab stayed silent, sipping his tea. He knew now that something extraordinary was happening. Not one monk had come to help him with dinner. Not even the Rinpoche's

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attendant had come to complain. In the dark outside, each in his separate room, he could sense the presence of the others. He remembered one of the now hundreds of verses he had been assigned to memorize.

*When you meet a being of bad nature,  
Pressed by violent sins and sufferings.  
Do not turn away,  
But treat him as a precious  
Treasure, rare to find.*

The words calmed the quiver of panic he had felt in his belly. He must try to live what he had learned for once. After he had given the man a small meal, he took him again by the arm. "Now is sleep," he said firmly.

The westerner looked up at him wonderingly, already distracted by some new rush of splintered thought, but he did as he was told. Together they marched out into the dark, past the well and the low shed where five water buffalo snorted softly at their passing. The stars across the south Indian sky were distinct as flung embers. A sharp-edged new moon hung low above the horizon.

In his room, the crazy man undressed with surprising obedience and got into a worn sleeping bag. Sherab went out onto the long veranda and dragged in one of the straw-packed mattresses piled there. On this he sat cross-legged, several feet from the bed. The westerner watched him with a bland, childlike acceptance of all his actions.

"Sleep," Sherab ordered. "I stay."

The man looked up at the ceiling for a while, limp, as if for the moment, all the energy of his self-preoccupation had spent itself. After awhile, Sherab saw that his eyes were closed.

Leaning back against the wall with the prickly mattress beneath him, he closed his own eyes. He needed to think. He had never before tried to help a person through meditation on

his own. He had memorized many texts in recent years. He had said mantras for dying animals. He had sat with the younger boys through their fevers. But in the lessons on ritual or philosophy with the high lama, or in the crucible of the debating courts, he felt that he had failed to become more than the most indifferent student. At least the great lama had never praised him. Not once could he remember praise since coming here at the age of twelve. With brief shame, he pushed the unworthy self-pitying thought from his mind.

Now he was alone with this stranger in great distress, and he must try to help. In the weak light from the bulb on the veranda, he could make out the man's face. Even at rest it still sometimes flickered with emotion as the mind within followed its dialogues down the tunnel of sleep.

Deliberately, Sherab relaxed. His tense legs eased down onto the mat. He straightened his back into the erect posture of meditation. Breathing slowly, he let his heart open in sympathy and tried to imagine the experience of the obsession. Subtly at first, and then with increasing power, he began to feel it. A sense of great loneliness came, vast distance from others. Then, like shocks of lightning, came the exaltation of certainty, rearing arrogance. It had become so sweet, so important for this westerner to believe he was extraordinary. Others, people he once respected, had begun to tell him he was crazy, yet he could not yield to that shocking idea, for then this new exhilarating sense of himself would cease to exist. Yet more and more everyone avoided him. Everything was going wrong. Between despair and excitement, the man's mind arced back and forth, trapped in self-absorption so profound there was no room for any other interest. The stress was breaking down the harmony of mind and body, and odd physical sensations and mental images had come to add to his confusion - and to his

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fascination. He had lost all will to find his way back to the conventional truths and simple curiosity where he had begun.

Sadness for the westerner's predicament overwhelmed the young Tibetan. Surely, if he meant to practice the teachings, he must at least try to help. It was to him the westerner had come.

He gathered his concentration, breathing slowly, letting his mind calm and deepen as it rode on the waves of breath - in, out, in, out. Then, with feeling, he prayed to the high lama to help him with his effort.

As he had been taught, he tried to visualize the lama in the form of Chenrezig, Buddha of Compassion. With startling suddenness, without effort, the image leapt into his mind, clearer than it had ever come to him before. The wide calm eyes of the deity seemed actually to regard him from the center of the room. Its graceful limbs were shaped of white light. They radiated light throughout the room, bright rainbow colors that shimmered in a soft halo. Easily, Sherab could visualize the four hands of Chenrezig, holding on the left side a pure white lotus, on the right a crystal rosary, and in the two, cupped hands in the center, the sparkling jewel that fulfills the wishes of all beings.

The clarity of the figure, the powerful sense that it was really there, sent a shiver of excitement through the young monk. But he caught himself. Without breaking concentration, he let cool awareness wash excitement away. He must not let his motivation become debased.

As his mind grew quiet, his concentration on the image deepened. In visualization, he made prostrations to it, and then made symbolic offerings of all beautiful things for which he himself had ever yearned. He offered flowers, fresh water, sweet smells. He offered light, food, sound, caress. He offered up himself - his body which was useless if it were not used to help others; his speech which had no point if he could not teach

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others the Way; his mind, which was the root and heart of suffering if he could not see clearly the true empty nature of all things. And then he prayed to Chenrezig to grant him the real ability to help another by meditation.

In his visualization, that now seemed so real, light began to glow in the heart of the awakened being, shining right through the transparent body. He felt a stretching in his own heart, a sense of energy pouring through his chest. Then, in a waterfall of light, the image of the Buddha dissolved and poured into him, through him, around him. In the intensity of the experience, he forgot himself completely. Sherab fell away like a dream.

All that was left was a simple awareness that filled a vast expanse of infinite clarity. Within the clarity came a low hum without source or direction, an all-pervasive gentleness. Its sound was Om Mani Padme Hum...

Very gradually, he let himself conceive his own mind as that sound. Sound became light. In piercing focus, light became the letters of the mantra and the secret syllable of Chenrezig. Resolving out of that image, the mind of Sherab itself became Chenrezig.

For a long time he let consciousness rest there, feeling, without holding, the bliss of it, the marvel. He looked down at the translucent clarity of his body, the luminous, light-sculpted perfection of fingers, feet, flowing blue-green robe and white lotus. He sat in space as clean and open as a dawn sky.

Then he focused inward. Chenrezig focused inward. He felt himself opening to care that extended throughout time and space, without limit. He let himself love, cherish every being in existence as tremulously as a mother loves her new child. Their faults did not matter. He loved them fiercely, as a general loves the city he goes out to defend. He loved each one particularly, watchfully, shrewdly, as a teacher loves a favorite pupil. And he

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saw them with delight, his precious friends, as the awakened beings they did not yet know they would become.

Remembering his purpose, Sherab visualized the western man in front of him. He placed him there at first just as he looked - unkempt, his hair unwashed and unruly, his face rigid with tension. About the man, he caused his obsession to become visible as a foul, dense smoke. Repeating the mantra to himself, he began a slow inhalation. With the breath, he took in the smoke, pulling it deep into his own lungs as Chenrezig. When repulsion rose, he was ready for it. He took in the blackness even further, and opened his defenses back out into a total concern for the westerner. The black smoke at his heart was transformed. With the out breath, he exhaled light, an elixir of wisdom that gradually penetrated the figure in front of him. With each completed breath, the darkness around the westerner cleared and his inner light grew.

With all the strength of his concentration, Sherab/Chenrezig pulled from him arrogance and self-pity and fear. In the light he breathed out, he imagined himself giving away the good effects of all good actions he had ever performed at the monastery. Vividly, he imagined the man changing as his heavy blanket of delusion grew transparent and finally evaporated to nothing. He imagined his features relaxing into tenderness and bright interest. He imagined his body clearing to translucence. At last, with effort that brought sweat to his body, Sherab poured into him, in a wave of spoken mantra and visualized light, all the joyful wisdom that he himself did not yet possess, Chenrezig's wisdom.

When he was done, there were tears wet on his cheeks. His mind felt worn down and wavering with the effort. He knew he had not been skillful. But before he said the prayer of dedication, before he let go of a visualization grown unsteady, he rested in it one last time. Two fully detailed figures of

Chenrezig floated there, bright, facing each other, himself and the westerner. He let the joy and completion of it fill him, and then he let it go.

Rapidly he said the traditional prayers of ending. More rapidly still, and with little concentration left, he recited by rote the daily prayers the lama had given him as an obligation.

The foreigner slept deeply now, his face at last still.

Sherab closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall. He didn't know how long he had slept when Ngawang's low call woke him in the dark. It felt as if a long time had passed.

"Sherab-la, please come. Rinpoche has sent for you," the little boy whispered.

Wakefulness came in a shock. Sherab scrambled to his feet and followed the boy unsteadily through the yard. His left foot had gone to sleep. In the main house, he paused before the curtain covering the Rinpoche's door, his heart pounding. Then, decisively, he pulled it aside and entered. He felt as self-conscious as that day four years ago when his parents had brought him, at his own request, from the farming settlement nearby. He dared only a single quick glance at the lama as he made the three ritual prostrations. The lama was not looking at him. He was looking at a rosary that moved steadily between thumb and forefinger in his lap.

"Sit down," he said.

Sherab obeyed, too shaken to think of speaking first. He waited.

In a little while Ngawang came in backwards, his small bottom pushing out the curtain to keep it behind him as he turned and entered with a tray of food. With an enormous yawn he set it down in front of Sherab. Sherab recoiled.

"Rinpoche!" he whispered to the boy, gesturing vehemently towards the high lama who sat without anything in front of him. Ngawang was too sleepy even to remember protocol.



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The Rinpoche swept his politeness back at him with a wave of the hand and went on saying his silent mantras.

Awkwardly, Sherab forced himself to eat some of the meal and drink a cup of tea. The old lama was too unpredictable and the night had been too grueling for him to feel any hunger.

"You have been with the westerner," the lama announced matter-of-factly, as soon as he stopped eating.

Sherab looked up, a faint eagerness creeping into his mind. "I tried to help him."

"You have not helped him," the lama said bluntly. "He will be the same tomorrow."

The words came like a slap across the face, and Sherab dropped his eyes sharply. With effort, he successfully checked the urge to cry, but he could not stop the inward rush of despair. What was the purpose then, if such a meditation accomplished nothing at all?

It was a long time before he could bring himself to look up at the Rinpoche again. When he did, he started nervously. The lama was examining him with total attention. "He has not been changed," he continued, as if there had been no pause, "but you have received great benefit. This night he was your teacher and in future you must never forget him in your prayers."

Sherab stared at the old man. The Rinpoche's normally fierce gaze had softened. "You cannot help him," he spoke low. "Only he can help himself. What you can do is show the way."

There was another long silence. A young buffalo bawled in the distance and a dog started barking. With surprise, Sherab realized that it was almost dawn.

The lama's voice commanded his attention forward again. "To show him the way, you must know the way." The aged voice was precise. "And you must know your disciple perfectly. You may go."

Sherab stumbled to his feet and turned toward the door.

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“Come here,” the lama ordered.

Bewildered, the young monk turned back to him. He bent over and his eyes widened as the lama placed a white kata scarf of respectful greeting around his neck. His warm hands, almost hot, touched Sherab lightly on both sides of his head.

Feeling braver, Sherab glanced up into his face. The intensity of the love there stunned him. Warmed to the bottom of his heart, he backed away, hands held to his forehead in greatest respect. And fled.

It was late morning when the westerner at last came out of Sherab’s room. He had stuffed his backpack and tied it shut with a rope. He whistled as he began rolling his sleeping bag on the porch and finally wedged this bundle under the rope as well. As he passed the kitchen, he peeked through the open door, and his whistle wavered. When he saw that the young monk wasn’t there, the whistle died. He went on.

In the garden he saw the old Rinpoche walking with an attendant at his elbow. A deep furrow formed between his brows, and he slid down behind a wall, muttering under his breath until they had gone. Out in the monastery’s dusty central lane, he glared at the maroon-robed monks who passed him going the other way.

Only at the tall bright-painted entrance gate did he hesitate, looking back. But the familiar bitterness was rising in his chest. “Fools,” he whispered. He felt for a moment as if sorrow would overwhelm him, and then grew angry that he felt sorrow. Feeling in the plowed earth beside the entryway, he searched for a dirt clod big enough to throw at the monastery’s name on the arch above the gate.

He was distracted by a cry of distress. A young buffalo calf, wandering outside the monastery grounds, had slipped into a drainage ditch and, between muddy walls higher than its

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shoulders, was trapped. A genuine smile lit the westerner's face as he slipped down into the ditch and soothed the young animal until it was quiet. Then he heaved and rolled the heavy, ungainly little body up over the edge. He laughed as the calf scrambled to its feet and went bawling for its mother, back through the gates. He watched, surprised, as it turned into the very compound he had just left. Then he hoisted himself out and slapped the dust off his pants. He was whistling again as he began the long walk to the bus station in the Indian village. He did not look back.

Behind him, the Tibetan long horns groaned into life to mark the beginning of a morning ceremony at the refugee settlement. Hundreds of prayer flags, hung on ropes from the monastery's golden peak, fluttered in a breeze that came from the distant sea.

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*This fascinating collection by Buddhist writer Francesca Hampton explores modern situations in both India and America through the prism of Tibetan Buddhist teachings. From a lonely paddle boarder contemplating suicide on the dark Pacific, to a wayward Tibetan lama on a Greyhound bus, to a journalist who reconnects with a journey begun in a previous life in an interview with the Dalai Lama, it is a welcome addition to the emerging genre of Buddhist fiction.*

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