

NORBU'S JOURNEY: A Story from Tibet to America



Author's note: "Norbu's Journey: A Story from Tibet to America" is a poem based on the experience of Lama Norbu, who was born in Tibet in the 1960s and now lives in the United States. This piece is intended for middle and highschool-aged students, as well as anyone with a wish to learn about Norbu and Tibet. Students will better understand the cultural elements of the conflict between Tibet and China, and the roles of reading and religion in Norbu's life.

- Emma Lewis

READER'S GUIDE:

Ama: ཡུམ།

Tibetan word meaning mother.

Tsampa: རྩམ་པ།

Tibetan word for a famous Tibetan food staple, roasted barley flour. Tsampa can be mixed with Tibetan yak butter tea, dried cheese, and sugar for a tasty snack.

Pecha: དཔེ་ཆ།

Tibetan word meaning book, especially traditional Tibetan loose-leaf books.

Mala: སྒྲེང་བ།

A string of 108 beads used as for prayer and to count mantra recitations in Tibetan Buddhist prayer traditions.

Momos: མོག་མོག།

Tibetan word for very popular Tibetan steamed dumplings, which can be filled with meat or vegetables.

King Gesar: ལྷིང་གེ་སར།

A legendary warrior king of the imaginary kingdom of Ling. The Epic of King Gesar, which dates back to the 12th century, is made up of over one million verses detailing his heroic deeds and travels. Gesar stories are still popular in Tibet today, among children and adults.

Mount Kailash: གངས་རིལ་པོ་ཆེ།

A holy mountain in the Kailash Range in Tibet. It is a place of pilgrimage for Tibetan Buddhist people, and also one of the main routes of escape for Tibetans traveling to the Nepali border from Tibet.

Lhasa: ལྷ་ས།

The capital city of Tibet; Lhasa has been the capital of Tibet since the 17th century. It is a holy city and place of religious pilgrimage for Tibetan people.

Om Mani Padme Hum: ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཏཱཾ།

A Buddhist mantra, or prayer, associated with Avalokateshvara, the deity of compassion. It is the most ubiquitous and famous prayer in Tibetan Buddhism.

NORBU'S JOURNEY

A Story from Tibet to America

I. Village | ལྗོངས་ལྗོངས་ | 1972

You remember when you were little, little enough for your father to carry you on his shoulders. You ate *tsampa* with sugar from a tiny wooden bowl in the evenings with your *ama*, after coming home from school. *Ama* was tired from taking care of your family yaks on the side of the mountain. In your village in Tibet, everyone knew one another's names. Everyone even knew the names of each other's yaks!

In the other room, your uncle opened his long *pecha* books, telling stories of the King Gesar. Excitedly, you ran to the bedroom you shared with your brothers to get your book, the exact same copy. You sat side by side with your uncle, and as he read out loud, you mouthed words under your breath. Your uncle was the fastest reader in your village; you wanted to keep up, wanted to read like that too. At times, so many new words made you dizzy, sometimes they just made you feel warm, like the way you always felt after drinking yak butter tea in winter.

You walked to school with your three best friends, greeting neighbors on the

way. In the classroom, you learned to write all the Tibetan letters, practicing them over and over, tracing them on a wooden block for hours. You loved your school. Once, your friend Tashi told you his *ama* prayed every night to Buddha, lighting candles, fingering prayer beads. You felt curious about that; your mother did that too, but she never talked about it at home. When you got home from school, you asked, *Ama, do you say prayers to Buddha?* She looked at you with sadness in her eyes, which were like your own eyes. You saw a sharp fearfulness in her that you had only seen a single time before, when you fell and hurt your arm while climbing the big tree outside of school. *Norbu, we can't talk about Buddha now, people might be listening to us, and we could get in trouble with the government. Do you understand me?* You were silent.

Ama went into the other room and came back with a string of glass prayer beads, just like hers. *This mala belonged to your grandfather. I want you to use it, and I'll teach you how to pray. But never speak about the Buddha outside of our house.* You sat with *Ama* and learned the words of her prayers: Om Mani Padme Hum. As you prayed, you moved your hands along each bead, listening to the sounds they made as they clicked against each other. You liked praying with *Ama*, and learning all of the new, powerful words. Even though it made you feel confused, a little sad, you promised you wouldn't speak about the Buddha or pray outside.

II. Mountain | རྩེ | 1980

You remember being a teenager, in spring, when the rules changed. Your *Ama* came to you with tears in her eyes and told you that Buddhist monasteries could open again, that you could pray in public. You decided you wanted to become a monk, so that you could help people, and continue to study Buddhism in a monastery. Although now monasteries in Tibet had reopened, friends told you their stories about monks and other young people being killed for speaking about His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This made you feel scared. You started to notice people you didn't recognize in your village, and friends would whisper *police*. Your family reminded you not to say anything about China to your friends; they might report on what you say to the government. Your talkative neighbor was brought into the government office for questioning, after that, no one knew what happened to him. Everyone always felt like they were being watched. You felt that way too, and you didn't like it. You had started doing labor, paving roads between your village and the capital city of Lhasa. It felt that there was never any time for books or reading anymore. Sometimes, your uncle would still get out his old book of King Gesar stories, and you would sit with him and read. But it felt like everyone was holding their breath, you could hardly concentrate. It made you feel sad. Had it been like this your whole life? How was it that only now, at sixteen years old, you started to notice the fear everyone felt?

You decided to become a monk, to do good, to follow the path of the Buddha. You wanted to spread compassion far and wide, and to learn about Tibetan Buddhist rituals and texts. But to do that, you could not stay in Tibet, not freely or safely. One of the friends you used to walk to school with had tried to escape with a group of other young people, but they had been caught by the Chinese government and brought to prison. They had all been beaten, and two of the people in your friend's traveling group were killed. The Chinese government did not want people to leave. This confused you – the government did not seem to like or trust Tibetan people. So why did they so want to make them stay? You knew it was dangerous, but you decided you needed to try to get to India, where you could be close to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, where you could freely study Tibetan texts and Buddhism, without fear for yourself or your family. You needed to leave, but you knew it would be too dangerous to tell your friends, your father, your uncle, or even your *Ama*. One day, you packed a light bag and put on your simple jacket over your monks' robes. In your bag, you carried 50 yuan, a small bag of Tibetan *tsampa*, a teapot, and a thin blanket.

At the last minute, you added a copy of the Gesar King stories to your bag. You didn't want it to look like you were going anywhere. You didn't want anyone to suspect anything. You just told your parents you were going to Lhasa to visit sacred sites in the holy city, they wished you well. You sat and prayed with your *Ama* one more time that morning. You folded your *mala* beads into your robe.

When you walked out of your house, you remembered walking to school with your three friends, the sheep and yaks in the streets, the mountain air, the valley below, all the games you played, laughing with your brothers in sun of so many afternoons. You had no idea if you would ever be back. You had no idea if you would ever see your *Ama* again, if your uncle would still be there if you ever returned. You held back tears and kept moving. No one could suspect anything. You began your journey, which would lead you across the holy Mount Kailash, to the border with Nepal, to northern India, and eventually, after years, to the United States.

III. America | ཨ་རི | 2020

Now you are a monk in America, and you can still remember sitting with your uncle reading Gesar stories out loud, drinking hot butter tea in winter with your brothers, the *click, click, click* of your *Ama*'s prayer beads as you prayed next to each other in the early mornings, in your village. Now, you can speak English fluently as well as Tibetan and Chinese. You teach Tibetan children in America about Buddhism, and show them how to write the Tibetan alphabet, just as your teacher showed you in your home village, on a wooden board. There is a Whole Foods down the street from your house, where you live. You like to go for walks down the street, to the park with tall pine trees, a pond, and small hills. There are no yaks there, of course, but sometimes, climbing up the hills, you remember the mountainside

of your home village, where you used to play after school as a child. America is different. But you feel free. You can help other Tibetan people who have fled Tibet. They gather together in the shrine room of your house and speak fluidly, openly: about the Buddha, about delicious Tibetan *momo* recipes, about memories of family, about the Chinese government. You wish for freedom in Tibet, and hope that it will someday come. You've heard that it's different now: schools in Tibetan villages cannot teach Tibetan language anymore. Now Tibetan children can only learn Chinese. And they are still not meant to speak about the Buddha. At night, after video calling friends in India and Tibet, you sit down in the shrine room, holding The *mala* beads your mother gave you so many years ago. You sit quietly at first, thinking of all the changes in your life. The Buddha taught impermanence; he taught that all things change. He taught that in the midst of everything, no matter what, the answer is compassion. You sit in front of a painting of the Buddha and a framed photograph of the Dalai Lama. You adjust your red monks' robes, light a candle in prayer, and say the words you know so well: Om Mani Padme Hum. You pray. You pray for your homeland.