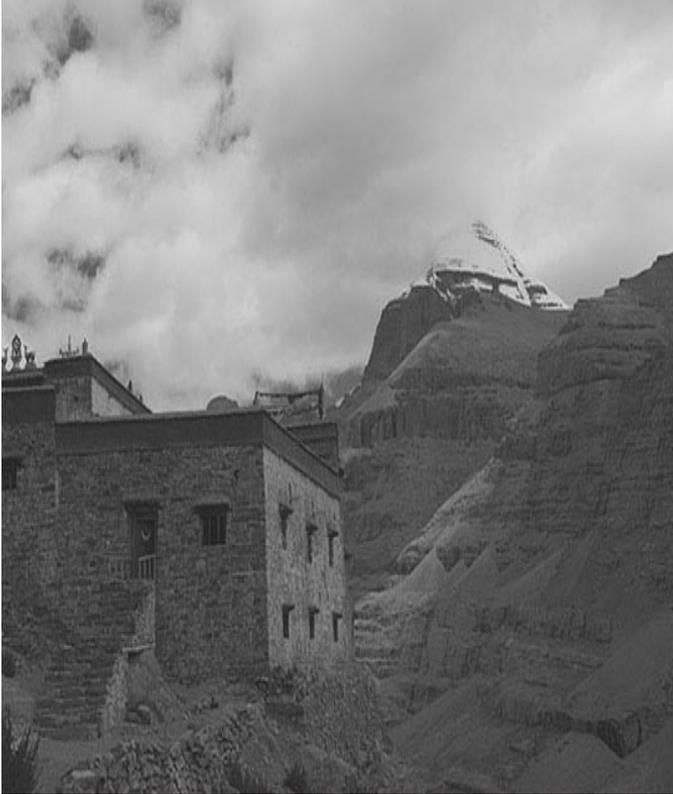


The Mystery of the Kailash Trail



Chapter 2 Circle of stones

Bharat Bhushan

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Pre-publication draft manuscript

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About the book

The oldest mystery known to the Oriental World. It is said that nobody dares to venture out to walk on the Kailash Mountain. And it is also said that those who walked up the mountain, never returned. In all these centuries, they have gone within, never to return.

About the author

Bharat Bhushan

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Chapter 2: Part 1: The twelve pilgrims who sat out in the open and did not walk the *kora*

They sat quietly, amidst the rocks, watching the stream of pilgrims walk by, intent in reaching the Dirapuk Gumpa before sunset and darkness would cover the valley beyond Guru Rinpoche. The other pilgrims did not notice them and nobody remarked about this group of walkers of the *kora*. They were about twelve of them together, sitting peacefully, cross-legged, amidst an earlier year's campsite and its leftover rock-circle. A group of pilgrims with their mules and yaks walking by earlier had seen them cooking their lunch and soup. This group of twelve pilgrims had continued to sit at the same spot since noon.

The group seemed to be waiting. Patiently. They were dressed like the other Tibetan pilgrims who came up the *kora* and had nothing to distinguish them otherwise. There seemed to be a holy man amongst them, twirling a prayer drum in his hand, and reciting a singsong hymn in a low voice. He would sing a line of the hymn in rhythm with the prayer drum, and the group of pilgrims would repeat the line with the same low volume. Nobody could hear the words but could understand the devotion.

Their clothes were dirtying, unwashed from having worn in over many days. Some of them had fur coats, grubby and smelly. They were all dressed for the bitter cold of the region and were very comfortable in sitting it out in the open. They did not speak within the group. The minimal bags that they carried with them had only absolutely basic requirements. Some of the group had windcheaters and jackets picked up from the flea

markets at the other cities and villages that they had walked through.

They did not seem *Khampa* pilgrims from east Tibet though they were certainly dressed like them. They had not stopped at the tea stall in the makeshift tent earlier where most other pilgrims took a break without fail. These twelve had come through the resting pilgrims at the tea tent, filled up some bottles of water from the buckets kept outside the tent, and had silently walked away towards the Dirapuk Gompa. There were other Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims from east Tibet sitting around in smaller groups near the tea tent, and they had watched this group curiously, for they had not exchanged any greetings. The holy man in the group had not even glanced at the other holy men in the various groups of Tibetan Buddhists resting near the tents.

The twelve were now seated at a distance on higher ground from the pilgrim's walking path. The Choku monastery could be seen at a distance. The holy man in the group of twelve had remarked that there did not seem to be anybody at the monastery for the windows were dark and one could not see any light from within. They had reached this circle of stones from a higher trail that they had walked on, from the Grachom Ngagye Dorsa. Not many pilgrims preferred to take this trail for it was rumoured to be inauspicious and inhabited by the demons and evil spirits who did not dare to harass the pilgrims on the *kora*.

The Grachom Ngagye Dorsa, near Sershong Tharchen is one of the few sky-burial places permitted near the *Kang Renpoche*. It was said to exist for more than thousands of years at the place. The group of twelve pilgrims did

not pay any respects at the burial place but merely walked through silently, at a steady pace, choosing the higher trail towards Choku. They were now seated after an hour's slow walk from the monastery. It would be dark in an hour or earlier if the storm clouds came up faster in this valley. The slow moving water streams would pick up speed and could block the walking trail later. It would become dangerous to walk in the darkness with only the faint light that may be visible from the pilgrim tents on the higher slopes towards Choku. Usually the windows of the Choku monastery were lighted up to help the pilgrims.

It was not so at the Choku monastery. The monks were yet to light up the windows and had come to do so. One of the monks had spotted the group of twelve pilgrims sitting at the circle of stones on the higher trail from Choku towards Dirapuk. A rainstorm was sure to come pouring down the pilgrim's path, and it could be a hailstorm tonight. Most pilgrims were walking by at a rapid pace. Some groups had come up to the monastery and had taken up refuge in the shelters outside. Some pilgrim groups had set up their tents much earlier during the day, fearing the worst. It was therefore a very curious sight to see a group of pilgrims sitting in an open spot, almost seeming to await the rain.

The young monk called for the other two monks to join him at the window and pointed out the group of twelve pilgrims seated out in the open. A younger monk suggested that they should send out one of the Tibetan guides on a mule to go and enquire if the group was in trouble and if they needed help. The senior monk gestured in the negative and kept watching the pilgrims. On an impulse, the senior monk called out to an old

Tibetan guide who usually lived near the Choku monastery during the pilgrim season. This old guide, now in his eighties, but very hyper and spirited eighties, came up in a brisk walk to the window, crossing the monastery hall.

The senior monk pointed out the group of twelve pilgrims sitting out in the open to the old Tibetan guide. The old man looked intently at the group and nodded sadly. The other two monks looked on in puzzlement. The youngest one asked, “O Master, what is it that makes you seem so sad? Do you know of that group of foolish pilgrims? Are they going to sit in the rain through the night? Is it their foolishness that makes you sad?”

The senior monk did not answer. Instead, he spoke to the old Tibetan guide, “Dawa, my friend, when was it that we saw such an event earlier? Was it not at the very spot?” The old man nodded, and looked out at the group, intently once again, kept watching for a long time, and replied, “Yes, Master Rinchen. It was so. This seems to happen once in three to five years. It has happened about three times in your time here at Choku.” The senior monk, Master Rinchen, spoke in agreement, “Yes. I have seen it happen three times earlier. It’s usually after a period of three or five years. I wonder how do they decide that it is to be this year, and that it is this time of the year, and that they should select the very same spot.”

The young monks were more puzzled than before. The Master, knowing their unspoken questions about the group of pilgrims, said, “My brothers, this is a very unusual happening. You are seeing it for the first time. Who do you think they are? Can you guess and tell me

what is mean to happen today?” The young monk looked out at the group again, and replied, “Master, from their dress and appearance, they seem to be Buddhist *Khampa* pilgrims from east Tibet. They must be resting or praying together, wanting to witness the gathering of the rain clouds on the great mountain’s peaks. They will probably run in later or set up a tent at that place.”

It was the old Tibetan guide, Dawa, who answered with a sad smile, “No. No. They are not *Khampa* at all. We have searched the place earlier. They are from someplace else. They are definitely not Tibetan but they go to extreme trouble to dress up like the local Buddhist pilgrims from towards Lhasa. We do not know where they are from. Each time they have appeared, I have spent much time at the circle of stones and in the nearby trails, searching for some sign about them. We do not know where they come from. They sit out through the night at the place and it is usually through a stormy night such as the one that is to come. They know and select the night and come to this spot. In the morning, they are gone. They are never known to go back to Darchen or go forward to Dirapuk. They are not seen on the other trails. They just disappear in the morning. Nobody has seen them in the daytime in any of the local trails, towns or villages.”

“We enquired in the nearby villages. We spoke to the other pilgrim guides, policemen and other pilgrim groups. We asked at the monasteries and other guesthouses along the roads going away from Darchen towards Lhasa. There was no news,” said the elder monk, “It seemed like they had disappeared. We regularly have news of people who try to climb the *Kang Renpoche*, and they are from all sorts of communities.

But, usually, we know about it in advance, and the police outposts get to know from all pilgrim guides and eatery owners from the gossip that they pick up. These adventurers are warned away from climbing the mountain. They are allowed to do the *kora* and complete their pilgrimage. This is not a tourist destination. Most visitors, who come here, come out of devotion. It is the utmost and ultimate pilgrimage destination. But it is this group that seems to come once in three to five years that is a puzzle. They just disappear from the trail.”

Chapter 2: Part 2: The twelve pilgrims wait for the rainstorm near Choku.

They watched the approaching rainstorm, seated patiently, humming the prayer hymns, led by their holy man. The twelve pilgrims continued to sit inside the circle of stones, watching the dusk taking over the landscape. The last of the pilgrims rushed towards to Dirapuk Gompa and could be seen scampering over the stony landscape, hoping to obtain some safe shelter for the night. The pilgrim trail was totally deserted now. One could hear and smell the rain at a distance, and the low evening winds brought with them the threat of the night. The twelve pilgrims did not move from their seated circle. They sat out in the open and did not make any attempt to prepare a tent or a temporary shelter.

The youngest monk, Brother Tamang, at the Choku monastery could not get away from the window. The senior Master had not allowed them to light up the windows. The young monk kept watching the group of twelve pilgrims seated on the higher trail. They had not lit up any lamps and seemed to sit by patiently, waiting for the darkness that was fast approaching. If he had not known that they were seated at that spot, the young monk could not have spotted them, even if he were to search for them. He could just make out the huddle of heads, with their fur caps, in a small group, in silhouette against the shimmer of the early drizzle of rain that had begun to strike the slopes between Choku and Dirapuk. The group of twelve pilgrims just sat there, without moving.

The old Tibetan guide, Dawa, sat near the window, with the senior Master. They had lighted two candles near a

small statue of Buddha and were praying. The other young monk had lighted two candles near the other small statue of Buddha at the other end of the prayer hall. He was praying quietly. Dawa sat up straight and chatted with the senior Master, “We are the privileged, though we are by ourselves. You have the sacred duty, day after day, night after night, to worship the most enlightened one, in the form of the Buddha statue from Garsha. We are truly blessed.”

The three monks bowed in prayer at this statement by Dawa, in his reference to the Buddha statues from Garsha. Master Rinchen, the senior monk, nodded and said, “O Dawa, my old friend, you are correct. We are truly blessed. But yet, it is an incomplete blessing. If only we know of the other three statues, it would have been a complete blessing. There were five statues of Garsha. We have only one here. It is said that there is another one, in Garsha. Three statues have been lost and nothing is known of their whereabouts. The statue that my brother monk prays to is the only one left in Choku.”

The youngest monk, Brother Tamang, knew of the story of the Buddha statues from Garsha. After all, he was himself from the Tibetan villages near Nyalam, on the border with Nepal. Some temples dedicated to the Buddha in these villages were also dedicated to the stories of the Amitabha Buddha and the stories of the Buddha from Garsha. It was said that the five statues had been found in a lake of milk at Garsha, south of Nyalam and Nepal and also south of Sikkim. The monks at Garsha had brought them out to Bhutan some years ago when the monastery at Choku was under the threat of destruction. The monastery was rebuilt about twenty-

five years ago, and one of the statues of the Buddha from Garsha was brought back to Choku.

Brother Tamang kept watching the spot where he knew the twelve pilgrims were seated out in the open. He wondered what they had planned to do or what were they expecting to happen in a stormy night. Dawa looked at Brother Tamang, and said, “Brother, its no use. We simply do not know what happens out there. They sit it out on a stormy night. They are never seen in the entire region before the stormy night is predicted. The moment we know that such a non-seasonal heavy hailstorm is to come, this group makes its appearance on the pilgrim trail. And, in the morning, they are gone. Without a clue and without any explanation that we can understand.”

“There has to be some explanation. There has to be some reason. It cannot happen each time without any logic. We are missing something. We have to do something. What can it be? It must have been planned to happen in this manner. Its happening right out there in front of us,” said Brother Tamang in exasperation, watching the pilgrims out in the trail.

It had started raining heavily. The dusk had come and gone. The twelve pilgrims continued to sit it out at the circle of stones. Quietly, they had pulled out black-coloured plastic sheets from their bags, and covered themselves. In an instant, their silhouette had changed. The fur hats were no longer visible and the twelve could not be seen as separate individuals. The black plastic sheets covering them made them look like the rest of the circle of stones that they sat within. The humming of the prayer hymn could not be heard unless one stood within

the group, and their holy man was continuing to spin the prayer drum in his hand.

There was no other conversation amongst them. They sat huddled next to each other, not seeming to get affected by the chill and the cold winds that moved about with the rain. The skies lighted up occasionally with lightning hitting the high peaks. *Kang Renpoche* seemed to light up that much brighter in the rain. The circle of stones had been set up around heavily packed and beaten down clayey earth. The pilgrims had laid down heavy plastic sheets on the ground before they sat for the night. It seemed like the twelve pilgrims were used to this sharp winter-like winds and heavy monsoon. Not a single individual amongst them had sneezed or sniffled or coughed.

Up at the Choku Monastery, the young monk, Brother Tamang, had guessed that the twelve pilgrims must have covered themselves with plastic sheets to sit it out through the night in the rainstorm. He looked around the dimly lit prayer hall in the monastery. The marble statue of Amitabha Buddha stood serenely near the pair of elephant tusks. The light of the candles kept playing with the shadows of the prayer hall and seemed to cause the statue of Amitabha Buddha to talk to Brother Tamang. He kept looking devoutly at the statue, and looking back at the spot where the twelve pilgrims would be sitting out in the open.

Brother Tamang came to a decision. He said, “Master, you are my teacher, and you speak for the elders in our order. The three of us have been staying at our monastery for the past few years. We have been taught to be truthful in our path. It is in the knowledge of the

unknown that we seek our goals. Master, you have said that this has happened at least three times during the period of your stay at our monastery here. In all these three times, we do not know what is happening in front of our windows. This is our holy ground, and the *Kang Renpoche* is the abode of our gods.”

Master Rinchen feared what was to come, for he could understand the glint and sharpness of Brother Tamang’s eyes. He had seen him looking at the statue of Amitabha Buddha, and had guessed that the young monk had sought resolve. The Master replied, “My young brother, I know you from when you had come to our temple for your initiation. I know your dedication and I can understand you even before you can understand yourself. Pray tell, what is it that you wish to?”

The young monk bowed in gratitude, and said, “Yes, O Master. You do understand me well. We have a situation here, near our monastery that we do not know anything about. And we have left our houses and families to join our temple in search of that knowledge that is difficult to understand and that knowledge which is essential to understand. The Most Enlightened One had taught us over these many hundreds of years that it is he who is the emperor who knows that he has no empire, but is on the path to knowledge, and is always seeking it. We have a riddle here, right outside the windows of our monastery, and we do not try to seek an explanation.”

Master Rinchen and Dawa nodded in agreement at the wisdom of the younger monk. They could understand the clarity that he must have received from the magic of

the guardian of the Choku monastery. Brother Tamang continued, “We should go out there in the rain. We should not be frightened of the rainstorm. We are used to the rain, the cold, the winds and the trails near our monastery. The group sitting out there does not know what we know. They do not know that we have been watching them and that we have observed them on the earlier occasions. They do not know that we know the higher and lower trail and that we are very familiar with the slopes near our monastery. We can walk about in this region in utter darkness. And what do we have to fear? We should go out there and try to find out what happens in this rainstorm and in the darkness of the night. Why do these pilgrims disappear on such a night? Master Naropa will protect us.”



Chapter 2: Part 3: The yaks that walked the stormy night in the Lhachu valley.

Master Rinchen did not much like the idea of interrupting the flow of life, the sequence of events, known and unknown, logical and mysterious, strange and familiar or the godly or ungodly nature of developments that always seemed to happen around the *Kang Renpoche*. These sorts of events were meant to happen, he felt. He spoke in a low voice to the young monk, “Brother, I understand your quest for knowledge. But this is the wonderful and unknown world of the great mountain where the Most Enlightened One arrived with thousands of arahats and yet declared that there was much to know and understand about this place. It is not for us to disturb the way of events in this world. We cannot seek knowledge by participating in it.”

“There are numerous caves in this magical Lhachu valley in the shadow of the *Kang Renpoche* that holds many siddhas, saints, holy spirits, demons or dakinis. We do not know who is who. They seek their own goals and they do not enquire into the lives or questions of any other. They have been here for several years. It is said that some have been here for more than a hundred years,” said the Master, and continued, “Who are we to dispute what is said about these beings and souls and spirits in these mountains of the Lhachu valley? We stay here under the protection of the holy presence of the manifestation of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha. Nobody disturbs us. It is in our responsibility to avoid disturbing the way of life and the manner of events that abound in this valley.”

Brother Tameng bowed in respect. He could understand the need to restrain one's impulses in this land of the holiest among all religions. Who knew what particular ritual were those pilgrims here to undertake? They would perhaps be of another religion. He would be wrong to have gone and disturbed them. But what if there was to be sacrilege of the holy mountain and the sacred valley? Should he keep his patience and restrain himself? What if they were terrorists? Should he keep quiet? This was a strange and violent world nowadays. It could also be the Han Chinese, camping here to spy on the *kora* or to cause an unpleasant event that would bring a bad name to the monasteries in the Lhachu valley.

No. It was not to be. He would have to request the Master's permission to disobey him. He looked once again out to the high trail, out in the valley. The rains were getting to be heavier, and one could hear the thunder, rolling out slowly at a far distance. At times, shards of lightning brightened up the skies far into the mountains. Try as he could, he was not able to spot the circle of stones or the pilgrims. The wind was getting much colder and it would be absolutely death to anyone who would wander out amongst the stones and the streams in this night. The waters would be freezing faster than it could flow on the ground, and it would be extremely slippery.

The young monk spoke out, "Master, forgive me, for it is in your knowledge about me that you would be aware of my desire to be absolutely sure in finding out the truth. We need to know. It may be of another's religion

and it may be a ritual that we should not disturb. But, what is it that is different from each other in this valley. We are all seekers of the same truth here, in the shadow of the *Kang Renpoche*, waiting the turn of events as they happen. The hundreds of pilgrims who come here, do so in their faith in our presence and that we would not allow the passing of time to change this place and destroy their opportunity to offer their prayers. What if these pilgrims sitting out there in the rain, are wrong, or bad, or evil or demonic? We need to know.”

Master Rinchen nodded in agreement, and replied, “I have to agree with you, young one. You are of the new generation, and it is your world that you take care. I am only a custodian to allow you to take control of your inheritance. I cannot deny you the knowledge. But let there be another way to do this. You take my old friend, Dawa, with you. I cannot allow you to do this alone. I know that the two of you know these slopes and can make your way to the circle of stones in this dark night. We will light up these windows after a while, to allow you to seek your direction to return safely. Go safely, and go quietly. We do not know what is happening out there. I have not been able to seek the answers in the years that I have been here, and it has already happened thrice. These are the three occasions that we saw. Who knows how many times it has happened otherwise?”

Dawa brightened up at this opportunity to go out in the rain and seek answers to what was to happen out there in the night. He had missed out on the previous three occasions and wondered if he was to carry this ignorance to his grave. This was his world out there. The unknown

was not to happen in the known world of the *kora* and in this valley. He was the owner of the *kora*, he felt. He was one of the oldest guides on the pilgrim trail. His father had done the same, and so had his grand father. Not a single man in his family had ever owned any property. They had lived their lives in makeshift huts, tents, and sheds or eked it out in the monasteries. Their women had worked in the guesthouses, monasteries and eateries. The trail was his world.

They got ready to go out in the rainstorm. The old pilgrim guide picked up black coloured nylon rainproof jackets and track pants. The young monk draped a black coloured nylon coat over his robes. They left the monastery building and stood in the compound, to get a feel for the rain pouring heavily onto the cobbled grounds. From the high walled compound, they climbed down the stairs and began to get comfortable with the night. It was not a strange outing for them. The two of them were used to wandering off in the night together to seek a good spot to sit and watch the *Kang Renpoche*. Those outings had taken place on clear nights or full moon nights. They had walked out in drizzles and had occasionally got caught in sudden cloudbursts. They knew their way around these slopes.

Leaving the monastery's stairs, they walked up the slope along the shadow of the monastery, on the other side of the Dirapuk path. They climbed to a higher trail that they knew of on the slopes facing the Lhachu valley. It felt safer to be on higher ground and to be walking a trail that they were familiar with. Upon reaching the path, they began walking steadily towards the circle of stones.

They knew that the path permitted them to avoid being detected. There were some boulders and stones that had fallen this year and it would allow them to reach a safe spot above the location of the pilgrims seated out there in the rain. Perhaps they could stay back on the higher trail and keep a quiet watch over what was to happen, if it had not already occurred.

It took them about thirty minutes to reach thereabouts. It felt right, thought Dawa that they were almost above the circle of stones. He pulled at the young monk's robe to stop him. They sat down amongst the stones there, to get their eyes to make out the boulders and the slopes downward to the other trail. It took some time but they could only barely make out the nearest stones. Dawa kept examining each stone pile in detail, trying to rule out those that could not be the ones that they were seeking. Brother Tameng, on his part, was working on a different strategy. He thought he knew the location. He had been intently searching out landmarks at these slopes from when he had been standing at the window of the monastery. There was an old stone stupa that had two prayer flags from the previous years. He had measured that the circle of stones was in direct line from the stone stupa to the hill stream that flowed near the lower trail.

They walked down carefully to the stone stupa, with the rain drowning out any noise that would have been otherwise very loud and disturbing in this serene valley on another night. There was a low wall around the stupa, and they made themselves comfortable next to the stone structure, on the other side of the heavy rain pouring

down upon them. There was some respite here, and they sat together, silently, waiting and watching. Dawa pointed out suddenly, and they could now make out, about a hundred footfalls away, the circle of stones could be barely seen. There was a huddle of stone-like shapes inside the circle, too close to each other, unlike the other stones on the slopes. These would be the pilgrims, thought Brother Tameng, huddled under plastic sheets.

Dawa grabbed Brother Tameng's arm and gestured in awe towards the lower slopes. They watched in silence and amazement. The skies parted above, in a flash of lightning, and they could see clearly for a brief instant. They had never seen anything like it before. It was a yak herd, walking slowly, in a small bunch, moving ahead purposefully. There was no sound and they did not seem like any yak from the valley. These were large animals, with very low hanging hair. Their heads were held high, watching ahead, unlike what the other domestic yak would have done in such heavy rain. There must have been more than ten yaks, Dawa thought. These animals were walking in this heavy rain, and walking steadily and silently, as if on purpose, to some destination.



Chapter 2: Part 4: Do wolves and yaks walk together in the rain?

Dawa and Brother Tameng watched in wonder at the sight of the yaks walking down the lower trail from the direction of the Dirapuk monastery in the heavy rain. They could spot them only when the lightning in the upper mountains cast some light into the Lhachu valley. The herd walked tightly together, in a close bunch. Each individual in the herd seemed to be of the same age and of equal size. They knew their way and kept walking confidently.

Dawa whispered, “Let us not disturb our attention from the circle of stones. Keep your eyes at the pilgrims who are sitting it out in the rain. Those are wild yak and they are probably walking away from all the pilgrims and disturbance at Dirapuk and Dolma La pass. They must have been blocked and they are trying to get out of the valley and on to higher ground. Do not look away from the circle of stones.”

Brother Tameng nodded in the dark night, and tapped Dawa’s hands, knowing that they could not see each other. He kept watching the pilgrims, and on occasions when he could watch their silhouette, he knew that they continued to sit there. Had they seen the herd of wild yaks approaching them? Did they know about them? Were they connected? In this place, under the shadow of the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain, Brother Tameng felt, anything could happen. He kept moving his line of sight from the pilgrims to the herd of wild yak.

They were certainly larger than the domestic yak that he was familiar with, thought Brother Tameng. These were

larger, much larger. The span of their horns was also wider, indeed, much wider, larger and heavier. It was amazing that the herd could walk so tightly together, in such a dark night, in a rainstorm and yet not have the horns get entangled with each other. Realising that he was getting distracted, Brother Tameng turned again to watch the circle of stones. He could see the huddle below the plastic sheets. Did the pilgrims sitting out there know about the wild yak herd that was walking towards them in the lower trail?

Dawa whispered again, “Brother, you watch the pilgrims and the area around the circle of stones. Be careful. Anything can happen at any time. I will keep watching the wild yak herd and the areas away from the circle of stones.” Brother Tameng tapped Dawa’s hand in agreement. The rain was getting heavier and more intense. The thunder had started in the valleys nearby, and the lightning was brighter in the Lhachu valley. The sound of the thunder in each valley seemed to echo against the other valleys, and seemed like the roars would never stop.

The wild yak herd moved across a rain-laden fast flowing stream that crossed the lower trail. The waters were rising, and the yaks walked through the fast stream without stopping. Their speed seemed slow, but Dawa knew that the perspective in this dark stormy night could be extremely deceptive. The wild yak herds were known to move rapidly on steep slopes and charge through the cold plains. The domestic yak stayed away from them and so did the sheep and goat herders. The Changpa nomads had many stories of wild yak herds in the high mountains. After each narration, the stories only got wilder and fascinating.

Dawa wondered about this herd. This was unlike any wild yak herd that he had seen in all his years in the valleys around the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. This herd seemed larger than the largest wild bull that he had seen five years ago on the banks of the hill stream river near the Drolma La pass. That bull had been larger than most other yak bulls that he had seen elsewhere. He had been able to estimate the height of that large bull because it had moved against an old stone stupa, and there had been a prayer cloth hanging over the higher parts. It had been useful as a marker and Dawa had been able to understand that the bull was about 7 ½ feet tall.

This wild yak herd that was moving down the lower trail was uniquely different from other yak herds that he had known. All individuals in this herd seemed equal in size, and he sensed that each individual was a massive bull, and each could be about more than eight feet in height. It was not so much about the height. Dawa felt that the bulls seemed to be much larger than other wild yaks. They seemed to be really huge. More than 1.5 tonnes in weight, he thought. This could not be so much as real, he wondered. Was it really happening?

He knew that the wild yaks did not mind the rain, but could they really withstand this intense rainstorm? He looked at the circle of stones, and could make out the pilgrims sitting under the plastic sheets. What was happening? How would this night move? What would the pilgrims do? Had the wild yak herd come down this trail on earlier occasions also? He wished that he had had the courage and presence of mind and initiative to come out in the rainstorm at night and had tried to find

out what was happening. He felt grateful to Brother Tameng for his courage.

The wild yak herd was almost near the circle of stones. They were walking on the lower trail from Dirapuk towards Choku. The pilgrims were sitting at their spot on the middle trail. Brother Tameng and Dawa were hiding behind the low wall at the dilapidated stone stupa on the higher trail. The rainstorm was beginning to show a slight drizzle of hail. They were small hailstones and not dangerous. The hailstorm could change suddenly and gather in strength and pour larger hailstones. Brother Tameng and Dawa had a clear view, if it could be called that in this stormy night, whenever the lightning hit the higher mountains.

There was some movement in the circle of stones, they realized. The twelve pilgrims had moved about in the spot. The plastic sheets seemed to have been opened up and rearranged. Perhaps the pilgrims had spotted the wild yak herd. Dawa wondered if the pilgrims would get away from the circle of stones and move up into the higher trails to get away from the animals.

The animals came to a halt below the circle of stones. They were tightly bunched, and stood magnificently in the rainstorm. A strange change took over in the Lhachu Valley in the area around the circle of stones. The rain seemed to have stopped here. Dawa and Brother Tameng could see the rain at Dirapuk, at Tarboche and on the higher slopes of *Kang Renpoche* and other mountains on the other side of the Lhachu Valley. The clouds cleared over Choku and the moon came out from the high slopes. The valley was bathed in brilliant moonlight and

one could see the herd of wild yaks and the circle of stones.

The wild yaks grouped around, turning about, and were now facing the circle of stones. They continued to be bunched very tightly. The animals began to walk up the lower hill slope towards the circle of stones. What was happening, wondered Dawa. He could sense Brother Tameng's excitement. The yaks walked right to the circle of stones and stood there silently. The twelve pilgrims removed their plastic sheets and continued to sit at the same spot. They seemed to be humming some sort of a prayer hymn. Dawa could see that one among the pilgrims was a holy man, and he had a prayer drum that was being turned about.

Brother Tameng nudged Dawa silently, and pointed with his finger at the lower slope. At the spot where the herd of wild yaks had turned and walked up to the circle of stones, there now stood a pack of wolves, scattered and silent, watching. Dawa counted twelve wolves that were on sight. They had not seen them earlier. It could have been due to the rain and the dark stormy night. Had the wolves come with the wild yak herd? They could have missed seeing them earlier. Or, the wolves could have been waiting in the region for the twelve pilgrims to move. They may have been waiting their time. After all, the wolves were not known to walk with wild yaks. They were known to be their occasional and rare predators. The wild yak had only the wolf to fear on rare occasions.

The pilgrims sat quietly at the circle of stones, watching the wild yak standing on the slopes. They continued with their humming. The pilgrims did not seem disturbed and

did not seem to realize that they were watching a strange happening. Or, did they actually expect it to happen? The wolves stood silently at the hill stream on the lower trail. There was no sound in the area, and strangely, the wild yaks were not even grunting. Dawa and Brother Tameng could see the smoke coming out of the yaks' nostrils. Their tails were upright. They were indeed tall and really large. And then, the night changed yet again. The moon went behind the high mountains. The rain clouds returned. The rainstorm started pouring down the Choku area. It was dark again.



Chapter 2: Part 5: The rainstorm hides the mystery of the pilgrims' trail.

They waited through the night, sitting it out in the hailstorm behind the low wall of the stone stupa below the Choku monastery. The rain did not let go. It continued to rain steadily. There was no thunder and there was no lightning. The rainwaters did not fall down from the skies. It looked like there was a great wall of water standing between the Lhachu valley and the skies above the *Kang Renpoche*. The roar of the storm was tremendous. The wall of water did not break down and the hailstorm began to gather in large hailstones.

Dawa and Brother Tameng could not dare to run for the monastery. Not after what they had just seen out on the trail. Had they really seen wild yaks, wolves, pilgrims who did not fear the rain? What else could happen on this night? Dawa did not want to contribute to any disaster or personal damage by being foolish by running out in the hailstorm. Brother Tameng was too awestruck by the magic of the events that he had just witnessed. What could they understand from what had happened here?

It was totally dark out on the trail. The hailstorm was pelting down on them. They were able to just about hide below an abutment on the stone stupa that barely gave them some protection. There was no wind, thunder or lightning. There was just the sound of hailstones crashing on the hill slopes. They broke upon hitting the low wall around the stupa and the broken pieces and shards were hitting them from all sides. The rain clothes and robe were their only protection. After a while, Dawa and Brother Tameng began to pile up stones and rocks

around them to build up a small wall to block the hailstone pieces flying about.

Dawa wondered about what was happening out on the trail. Were the wild yaks standing out there at the circle of stones? What made the wolves come out near the pilgrims? Had the wolves followed the wild yaks? Where had the yaks come from? He had not heard of any news or gossip about such a strange herd of extremely large yak bulls moving about together. Usually yak bulls moved about alone. They were known to prefer grassy outer slopes on the lower hills. Sometimes they were known to have stayed around the banks of the lakes around the hills. He had not seen bulls of such a magnificent height and body volume. They were large, extremely large. Their horns had made them seem much larger.

What were the pilgrims doing at the circle of stones? There was no protection out there. How would they survive the hailstorm? Had they seen the wolves on the lower trail, behind and beyond the wild yak herd? There were so many questions, thought Brother Tameng. Instead of finding answers, they had only discovered more questions. He wanted to discuss everything that they had seen, and he simply did not have the strength to talk.

They never knew that the dawn had come and gone by, and that the day had begun. The rain had not ceased, and the dark storm clouds had continued to cover the pilgrim trail on the Lhachu valley. The first sign of the day came when the clouds began to lighten up, and as suddenly as it had begun, the hailstorm stopped. The day came out of the clouds and the sun shone down on the trail. Dawa

and Brother Tameng peered down from the stone stupa at the circle of stones. As he had feared, Dawa could not see anyone. The wild yak herd had gone, and the wolves were not to be seen. The circle of stones was empty. The pilgrims who had sat at the spot had disappeared.

They waited a while at the stupa and looked up at the Choku monastery. They could see Master Rinchen and the younger monk looking at them from the windows. They were waving at them. Dawa and Brother Tameng waved back and stepped out of the low wall around the stupa. They walked down to the circle of stones. There was nothing out at the spot. There was no sign that a group of men had sat down at the place. The plastic sheets had gone. The pilgrims had gone with their bags and other belongings. Dawa ran out to the lower slopes, searching for signs and tracks of the wild yak herd. Brother Tameng continued to search for any sign of disturbance or presence of the pilgrims inside the circle of stones. There was no sign. There were no tracks. The stones were not disturbed. Nothing seemed out of place.

They went down to the river stream that was flowing by with more and more water rushing down from all around. Master Rinchen could be seen watching them from the high windows of the monastery. Dawa searched for tracks of the wolves. It was not possible that there could be tracks of any kind. Not after the strength of the hailstorm that they had waited through the night. Any sign or track would have been wiped away. They climbed back to the circle of stones and searched up and down the trail. There was no sign of any movement right from the faint view of Dirapuk and all the way down to the turn of the trail to Tarboche.

Dawa went up to the exact spots where they had seen the herd come and stop outside the circle of stones. He was searching for signs of yak hair. Domestic yak would always leave obvious signs that they had moved through a place or if they had rested at any location. Yak had different types of hair, and it was the matted shaggy coat that always left signs of its presence. He could not find any trace. Where would they have gone? How did the pilgrims move away so fast, right out in the open, within the fierce hailstorm?

Brother Tameng looked up in wonderment at the higher slopes of the *Kang Renpoche* Mountain. Would the answers to this puzzle be hidden in the sacred mountain? What had really happened out here in this stormy night? He had received resolve yesterday, at night, when he had sought courage from the statue of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha in the prayer hall of the Choku monastery. He had known that this region had more unknowns than any other region in the highlands of Tibet. The numerous stories were not even understood properly. Most were passed on, person to person, community to community, temple to temple, religion to religion and had yet to even begin to know exactly the number of stories of merely the Lachu valley.

Dawa shook his head in wonderment and called out to Brother Tameng, “Let us go back to the monastery and look out at the slopes from the terraces of our buildings. We cannot get anything from this location. The rain and hailstorm has washed away all signs and tracks. The pilgrims have disappeared. What had happened three years ago, and before, and before, has happened again.” Except, he thought to himself, this time, the mystery began to get more complex. How could one explain the

wild yaks and wolves? And why did the pilgrims not get frightened?

They returned to the monastery. Brother Tameng went straight to the statue of the Dharmakaya Amitabha Buddha and stood before it, lost in his prayer and thoughts. Dawa stood with the Master Rinchen at the window, watching the circle of stones. The Master said, “Peace be with the two of you, my old friend. We had not moved away from the windows through the night. At one moment, when the rains had stopped, I could see the herd of wild yaks, standing near the circle of stones. I was also able to see the wolves standing out there on the lower trail and near the river streams. I saw that the pilgrims stood their ground, unafraid, and courageous. I never saw what happened after that. The rains and the hailstorm did not allow us to peer inside the water curtain that stood out there in the valley.”

Dawa replied, “O Master, I am happy. I was wondering if I had not imagined the entire night. I know that Brother Tameng was also with me, but I was frightened for him also. I am happy that you saw what we saw. What we did see is what we know. I am puzzled by what we saw and what we are unable to accept. Is that why we do not understand? We saw twelve pilgrims who sat out there in the rain, and waited for the storm to come. They knew that it was to rain on the trail. They waited for it. They sat together and did not move, even when it was very cold and the downpour became heavier. It did not affect them. Master, did they know that the cold and the rainstorm would not affect them? They were not like us at all.”

Master Rinchen nodded, and said, “Yes, my friend. We are in a puzzle about it because we think that the pilgrims were also people like us. They stood with courage, when the wild yak walked up to the circle of stones. We would have run away from the spot right when we would have spotted the yaks walking down the trail. These pilgrims did not walk away. They stood there and looked at the wild yaks without fear. They knew that they would not be harmed. They are not like us. How did they know that they could sit out there? Who were they? Where did they come from?”

