

# A Step Away from Paradise

A Tibetan Lama's Extraordinary Journey to a Land of Immortality

*by*

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2,200 words, including captions



Tulshuk Lingpa, shortly before he mounted his visionary expedition in the early 1960s

Don't listen to anybody. Decide by yourself and practice madness. Develop courage for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Then you will automatically be free from the knot of attachment.  
Then you will continually have the confidence of fearlessness  
and you can then try to open the Great Door of the Hidden Place.

~Tulshuk Lingpa

*A Step Away from Paradise*, just out from Penguin India, tells a true story of what is usually confined to the realm of fiction: a journey to a Land of Immortality—right here in Nepal.

It was autumn 1962. The Cuban Missile Crisis threatened to end the world as we knew it. As Kennedy and Khrushchev teetered on the brink, it became startlingly clear that not only was an apocalyptic end within our technological means; it was also an immediate likelihood.

During those same tense days in October 1962, a visionary Tibetan lama was leading over 300 followers up a remote Himalayan mountain slope in order to find a hidden land of immortality, a place of refuge and plenty that Tibetan tradition dating back to at least the 12<sup>th</sup> century declared could only be opened at the time of the most dire need, when cataclysm racked the earth and there was nowhere else to run.

The lama's name was Tulshuk Lingpa. He was of that rare class of Tibetan lamas—revered like precious jewels—known as *tertons*, or treasure revealers. As a child of eight in eastern Tibet he had been tested by another high *terton* who coronated him and gave him his name, which translates to Crazy Treasure Revealer.

The hidden land was called Beyul Demoshong, and it was ensconced somewhere on the slopes of Mount Kanchenjunga, the planet's third highest mountain straddling the Sikkim/Nepal border. It was Padmasambhava, the 8<sup>th</sup> century mystic often credited with bringing Buddhism to Tibet, who with equal measures of foresight and compassion created and then magically hid Beyul Demoshong as a place of refuge for an unseen future age in which survival in this world was rendered impossible.

Tulshuk Lingpa had been visited in a vision by Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal, the consort of Padmasambhava. She revealed to him that deteriorating conditions meant the time was ripening for the opening of Beyul Demoshong and that he was the one destined to open it.

At the time Padmasambhava hid this land of refuge, he also planted the mystic knowledge of its opening within the consciousness of one of his disciples. So not only did bad times have to ripen, but that particular disciple had to take incarnation and be spiritually developed to the point that he could uncover this hidden knowledge within himself.

Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal told him in great detail the landmarks he would find on his way to the ‘gate.’ She described rituals he should perform to appease the spirits. Opening this hidden land wasn’t as easy as going to the right place and stepping through. It was rather akin to opening a crack in the very fabric of reality and passing into another world, a world from which one could never return.

While the immediate calamity in the Tibetan world that necessitated the opening of this hidden land was the Chinese invasion of Tibet, the timing certainly corresponded to the closest brush the world has ever seen with nuclear holocaust when America and the Soviets held their fingers to the nuclear button over Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Tulshuk Lingpa wrote of his visions in his ‘guidebook’ to the hidden land. In it Khandro Yeshe Tsogyal describes the signs by which one will know the time ripens for the opening. “At that time,” she said, “the elements will become unbalanced and disease will increase. Crops and cattle will degenerate. Internal fights and quarreling will increase. Poisonous and chemical weapons will shake the earth.”

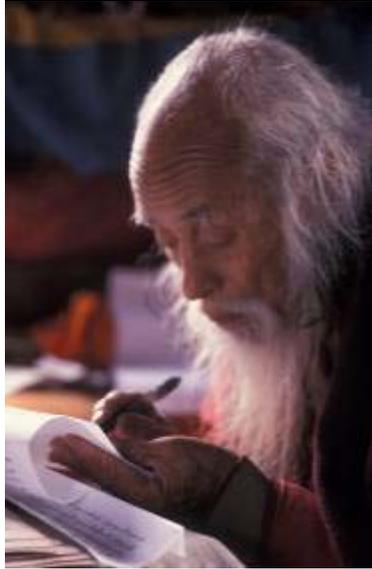


*A Step Away from Paradise* is the result of ten years of research and writing. The author, the American writer and photographer Thomas K. Shor (author of *Windblown Clouds*), had the good fortune to track down and meet most of the surviving members of Tulshuk Lingpa’s expedition and to discuss what for most was *the* seminal experience of their lives. Now mostly in their 70s and 80s, he met them in their monasteries and mountain retreat huts, and in their homes located in villages and towns across the Himalayas of India and Nepal. Now mostly quite elderly, they tell their tales of what for most was *the* most important episode of their lives. The book is richly illustrated with their portraits, taken by the author, as well as photos of the places significant to the story and historical photographs of the people involved.

Though the place and time of this journey were remote, the aspirations and faith of those who journeyed into the snows looking for a land beyond cares has much to teach about the human heart and imagination. By meeting people who had the courage to forsake this world for a world of their dreams and imagination, the reader is awakened to a realm of possibilities.

We read about Kunsang, the lama’s only son who was eighteen at the time of the expedition and with whom the author conducted over fifty hours of taped interviews; Géshipa, a former rainmaker for the king of Bhutan and close disciple of Tulshuk Lingpa, who is presently working on a potion of invisibility; Garpa, a carver of mani stones and was Tulshuk Lingpa’s messenger,

crossing snowy passes to give news of the expedition to the hundreds or even thousands in Sikkim, many of whom had hidden sacks of food in caves along the way to speed their ascent once the way was open; Yeshe, one of Tulshuk Lingpa's consorts, whose love for him shines through after all these years.



Géshipa, close disciple of Tulshuk Lingpa and former rainmaker for the king of Bhutan



Garpa, carver of mani stones, and Tulshuk Lingpa's messenger



Yeshe, whose love for Tulshuk Lingpa is enduring

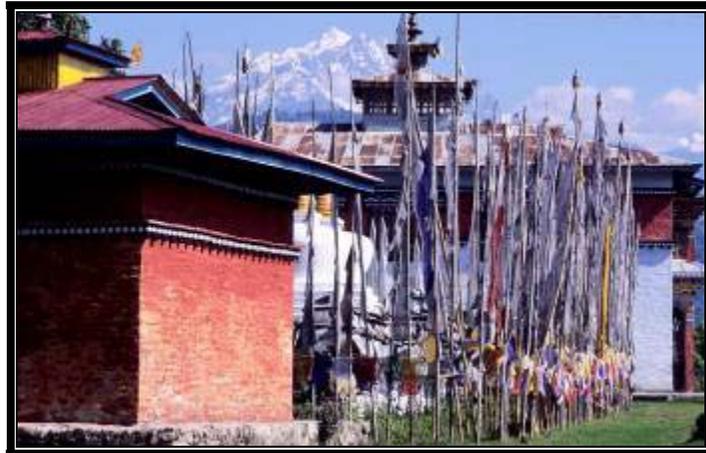
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While still a child, Tulshuk Lingpa quickly mastered the ancient scriptures and mystic arts, as well as the arts of painting, ritual, and healing. At the age of nineteen he eloped with a young woman and went south over the Himalayas to India. There, despite his youth, he was given his own monastery in the high mountains of Lahaul in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh and quickly established himself as a great tantric practitioner.



Tulshuk Lingpa  
His early days in India

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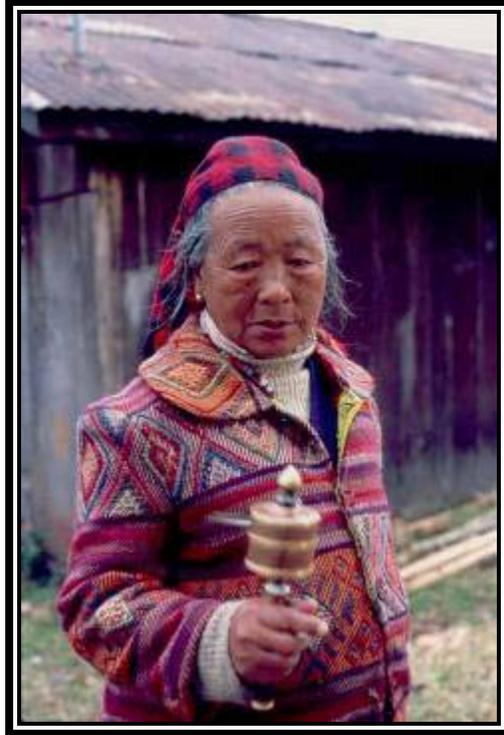
Tashiding Monastery,  
Kanchenjunga range in the background.

It was prophesized that the lama with the mystic ability to open the hidden land would first announce himself at the Tashiding monastery, the central monastery in the Kingdom of Sikkim.

Because of this, there were those who had forsaken their homes across the Himalayas and moved to Tashiding in order to await his arrival. Some had been waiting generations for the opportunity to actually go to a land we would all wish to inhabit if it were only there—a land of peace and concord.

When Tulshuk Lingpa arrived at Tashiding with a retinue of disciples, it didn't take long for word to spread that the prophesized lama had arrived. People flocked to the monastery, and soon there were over three hundred people camped there, waiting to set out on this most remarkable of journeys.

Tulshuk Lingpa made it clear that only those with true and unflinching faith should even think of coming with him. Opening the way to a hidden land is a tremendous act—calling as it does upon tremendous physical, spiritual, and imaginative powers. He knew that the fate of the entire enterprise would hinge upon the fate of each individual who came with him. One's faith had to be total, and the test of this was given even before leaving. Only those who would gladly give up everything—every attachment to both people and material goods and even the notion of return—were fit for such a journey. If you wanted to plant your crops as an insurance policy against a failed attempt, if you wanted only to loan your house out and not sell it or give it away in order to have something to return to, your faith was thereby shown not to be great enough, and your lack of faith would present an obstacle sufficient to block everyone's way.



When this woman from Tashiding was in her early twenties, she wanted to go with Tulshuk Lingpa to the hidden land. Selling her pig to raise money for the journey, her funds were still insufficient to buy the blankets and sacks of grain she needed. In the end, she neither had her pig nor could she go on the journey.



Treasure revealers, or *tertons*, are famous for being idiosyncratic and irrational, and by their very nature inscrutable. Illogical behavior is their forte. They are expected to act in ways that defy the rationality to which the rest of us are bound. After all, they reveal hidden treasures and find hidden realms; and because of this they are especially revered among Tibetans and—like precious jewels—they are exceedingly rare.

While Tulshuk Lingpa always had followers, there were also people who thought him mad. *Tulshuk* means crazy—but it also means fickle, mutable, or changeable. So a man with a *tulshuk* nature would always be changing his mind—saying one thing in the morning, something else in the afternoon, and contradicting both by evening.



We have been taught from the earliest age to separate fact from fiction. We can read *Alice in Wonderland* and get transported to a land of marvels. Yet while we are there, we know Wonderland doesn't really exist. By imagining it, we partake in the hidden realm of wonders the

author imagined, but we retain our sense of propriety. We don't redraw the line between fact and fiction; we suspend it, and we are entertained. That is certainly the prudent thing to do. We can assume it is what the author of Alice's adventures, Lewis Carroll, himself did. He could write his books about Wonderland and still maintain his position as a respected Oxford Don.

Imagine what would have happened if Lewis Carroll had proclaimed the reality of Wonderland. What if he had gathered a following and launched an expedition?



Tulshuk Lingpa  
Approximately 1950

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Though hundreds gave away their worldly goods and flocked to him, and hundreds more were hiding provisions in caves along the various routes to Mount Kanchenjunga so they could travel quickly when they heard he'd opened the way, he also had his detractors. Chief among them was the King of Sikkim, who didn't appreciate a Tibetan lama entering his kingdom and inciting his subjects to leave his kingdom for one far greater.

October of 1962 was not only the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis; it was also when the Chinese made incursions into regions of the Himalayas controlled by India, launching the Sino-Indian War. When rumors began to fly that Tulshuk Lingpa was a Chinese spy looking for a route by which the Chinese could invade Sikkim, things got out of hand. When the king threatened to

jail Tulshuk Lingpa, he and his followers fled the kingdom. Since the mountain straddled the Sikkim-Nepal border, and the ‘gate’ was actually on the Nepal side, they went to Nepal.

When the Nepali king heard that many of his own subjects were beginning to leave their fields and homes in order to follow Tulshuk Lingpa to this hidden land of plenty, which they expected to access from *his* kingdom, he sent in the army. Seventy-five combat-ready troops with rifles drawn encircled Tulshuk Lingpa’s encampment in a most aggressive manner for two days. Tulshuk Lingpa and his followers were able to extricate themselves only with the most skillful of means.

They climbed to an abandoned nomad encampment not far from the glaciers that cap Mount Kanchenjunga, and there Tulshuk Lingpa and his three hundred followers made camp. They spent over a month in that place, preparing themselves through ritual and awaiting the right moment.

One bright sunny day, Tulshuk Lingpa announced the time had come. Choosing twenty of his closest disciples—eight of whom the author had the good fortune of spending time with—he set off for the high snow slopes in order to open the gate of Paradise....

To find out what happened, you’ll have to read *A Step Away from Paradise*, which weaves the stories of the surviving members of this extraordinary expedition together with extensive research into the *terma* (hidden treasure) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and the tradition of the *beyul*, or Hidden Lands, dating back to Padmasambhava in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The author’s extensive research conducted at Oxford’s Bodleian Library and with some of the world’s leading scholars of Tibetan Buddhism and history as well as with learned lamas and Buddhist practitioners make the book of interest not only to those who enjoy a true story of adventure and imagination, but also to scholars and Buddhist adherents.