

## From “The Jewel in the Lotus: Tales from Tibet”

by Patrick Cooper

***Actor wraps the cloth around her and becomes the hermit. The night is over, and the forest is full of birdsong and little animal noises. The hermit comes out of her cave.***

***Hermit:*** Good morning! Good morning squirrels! Good morning birdies! Good morning little anties! Good... ***(sees boy)***

Well, well, a boy!

Good morning, little boy!

**Boy wakes up and sits up**

***Boy:*** Who are you?

***Hermit (thinks hard)*** Who am I? I can't remember. But I'll tell you what. I've been here for twenty years and you are my first ever visitor. Not that I'm lonely. I have plenty of friends . The birds are my friends, and the rabbits and the squirrels and the deer and the crows.....

Where are you heading for? Happy Valley? I thought so. You're on the right way. Or nearly . Just a bit lost. I'll set you straight. In a bit. No hurry.....

***Stops, abstracted, as if in the middle of a thought***

I expect you're wondering what I'm doing here. Out here in the middle of the forest, with my birds and my rabbits and my squirrels, and my little anties...***(sits down)*** It's a good question. I often ask myself that. Where am I? ***(goes into meditation for a moment)***

Oh, here I am! Yes, What am i doing? A good question. I can't answer it of course. But i could tell you about Asanga. Yes, you'd like to know about Asanga, wouldn't you?

Asanga was a hermit. Like me. But much better. He was my teacher's teacher's teacher's teacher's teacher's teacher's teacher's teacher. Something like that. I might have missed out a teacher somewhere. He was a clever man. A very clever man. A very, very clever man. ***(is going to go on but stops himself)*** He studied

everything. He knew all that was to be known. And then he became a hermit. But he was still ambitious, you see. Which doesn't get you very far if you're a hermit. Anyway, he went into a cave, just like mine, - nice and dark, room to sit, but not lie down - and he sat there for six years (**goes into meditation for a moment. Opens his eyes again**) Six years. But he wasn't just sitting there. Oh no. Asanga wanted something, very badly. He wanted to see Maitreya, the future Buddha. There's not just the one Buddha, you see, there's the last Buddha, and then the one before, and the one before that and the.... (**stops himself**) Yes. A whole line, going back to the beginning of time, and future Buddhas, going forwards to the end of the Earth. And after. Maitreya is the next one, and he's here already, only he hasn't been born yet. Well, Asanga thought if he concentrated his mind hard enough he'd be able to see him. And that's what he tried to do. He sat down and made his mind nice and quiet. But he didn't see the future Buddha. No. He never even had a dream of him, because somewhere right at the bottom of his mind there was still (**breathes**) that little bit of prickling ambition. He wanted to be special. And then after a while he started to think about other things – like cakes, and sweeties, and a nice hot shower.

And after six years he thought - that's enough! I can't do it. It's a waste of time. I'm going down to the village to get a nice plate of chips.

So he got up and started down the path. He was a bit stiff after six years of sitting down, but he went out of his cave and breathed in the lovely soft, fresh air and looked around. He saw some little birdies. Very sweet. And they had nests in the rocks above his cave. And he noticed that where the little birdies flew past the rock, their wings brushed against it. And where they brushed, over hundreds of years, they had worn a channel in the rock.

So he thought, if those little birdies can wear away the rock, then surely my meditation can wear away the rock of my mind. I'm giving up *much* too easily!. And he went straight back inside and sat there for another three years.

**Shakes his head** Still no future Buddha!

So he came out again, and set off for his chips!

And this time he saw how the drip drip of water had carved a deep bowl in the rock.

Thousands of years it must have taken, but in the end the drip drip of water was stronger than the rock.

Right - back we go - another three years!

But still no future Buddha. And more and more thoughts of sweeties and cakes and hot showers.

So he thought "Right, this time I'm really going to have my chips.."

( **suddenly notices the boy**)

Oh now look, that reminds me, I haven't offered you any refreshment. How about some soup? My favourite. Nettle soup. Not *filling*, I admit. And does tend to make you go green if you eat too much. But full of vitamins. Here you are. It's in my pot. (**fetches pot**) It's my last remaining possession, this pot. Some robbers came last week, or perhaps it was the week before, or the week before that....(**goes off into himself for a moment**)... Well, anyway, they took everything else but they left me this this which I thought was very kind of them, and....oh!

**With a clumsy movement he drops it. It cracks in two.**

Oh, it's broken. Look! it's cracked in two. Oh wonderful! Wonderful! What a wonderful teaching. It shows how everything is impermanent. Even this pot I was so attached to, and now it's gone! ha ha! Broken in two – just like that. Everything that comes into being has to pass away – how wonderful! Can't offer you any soup though, I'm afraid. But the teaching of impermanence is so much more valuable than a bit of soup.

**Sits down again**

Anyway, Asanga....

He went right down to the village this time, and just as he was getting there he saw an old dog. A horrible looking thing all covered in mange. And worse than that, it had been in a fight. It had a big sore on its side and it was dragging its back legs through the dust. Oh, the poor thing! It was so unhappy, it was growling and snapping at everybody.

Asanga went over to it.

"Hello!" he said. "Nice doggy!"

It growled back, but he wasn't afraid. He stretched out his hand and it went quiet and let him stroke its head. So then he looked down at its back, and the horrible sore. It was full of yellow pus and as he looked closer he saw it was wriggling. Yes, it was full of squiggling white things squirming in the pus. Live maggots.

"ooh, that must be horrible for the poor little dog," he thought. "I should get them out for him."

He reached out his fingers, but then: "What about the maggots? They're alive too. They want to go on living."

Well he had a sore on his leg from sitting still for such a long time. So he decided to put them on that. Then they could eat him instead. And then he had another thought.

"If i pick them out with my fingers, I might squash the poor little things."

He looked at them, and he looked at the dog, and he was filled with great compassion.

Compassion means when you really, really care about other beings more than you care about yourself.

He shut his eyes and he bent down to suck the maggots out of that poor dog with his tongue.

But he never even touched it. He opened his eyes. The dog had disappeared, and all around were shimmering rainbow lights.

Maitreya, the future Buddha, stood in front of him, in all his knowledge and splendour and compassion.

Asanga threw himself on the ground.

And then he spoke.

“All these years I've been looking for you, Great One,” he said. “And I never even had a dream. Why do you appear now, after I've given up?”

“I have always been there,” said Maitreya. “You couldn't see me, that was all, because you wanted it too much. But when you thought about the poor dog and the poor little maggots you stopped wanting things for yourself and were filled with compassion for others. That is why you can see me now.”

And then Maitreya asked Asanga to stand up, and lift him onto his back.

So he did it. He lifted the future Buddha onto his back. He wasn't very heavy.

“Now, “ said Maitreya. “Walk through the village so that everyone can see me.”

So he did.

Most people just glanced up quickly from their business. “Oh look! That hermit fellow 's finally come down for his chips. He looks surprisingly cheerful for someone who's been sitting in a cave for twelve years.”

But some people looked a bit harder, and saw him carrying an old dog on his shoulders. And seeing how kind he was, made them want to be kind too. So they lived very good lives.

But one poor old grandmother looked up and saw for a moment a great light shining around Asanga. And from that moment she was always happy....