Today, Yeshi Dorjee radiates the confident serenity that seems to be a hallmark of Buddhist monks, but his life got off to a tumultuous and difficult start. He was conceived in Tibet but born in Bhutan, a small, isolated country in the Himalayan mountains between Tibet and the northeastern border of India, where his parents had fled in 1960 to escape the consequences of the Chinese invasion of Tibet the year before. The Dalai Lama had already made his way to India, and hundreds of thousands of Tibetans followed him into exile. But for Yeshi’s family, the safety of Bhutan soon turned into a nightmare. His father died there when Yeshi was only seven months old; he has no memory of him. Then, before he was two years old, his sister, grandmother, and uncle also died, leaving Yeshi and his mother to face the world alone. “I think things were difficult for my mother,” Yeshi recalls with a shy smile.

After several years of trying to remain single and support Yeshi and herself as a widow, Yeshi’s mother yielded to pressure from her relatives and remarried. She had other children with her new husband, and her new family gave her much more security than she had before. But it was a mixed blessing. Her new mother-in-law was very hostile to her and made her life difficult both physically and emotionally. Sometimes her husband sided with his
mother and treated his new wife harshly. All of this affected Yeshi, too; he was always acutely aware that he was the son of a different father, and he never felt that he truly belonged in his new family. His childhood was secure, but it was not necessarily happy.

Yeshi’s childhood interests show a desire to escape from the harsh realities of his life. From an early age, he loved to draw and paint, and drawing pictures was a means of creating for himself a life of beauty and fantasy based on the traditional imagery of Tibetan Buddhist art. He also loved stories and persuaded older people to tell him the traditional folktales of Tibet whenever he could. And from the age of seven, he began to think that he wanted to become a Buddhist monk.

He kept this ambition to himself for a couple of years. Then one day a man came to his school—a visitor from India who described life in the Tibetan exile community there and the new institutions of Tibetan higher learning that were being established to serve the religious needs of that community. Yeshi immediately felt that it was his great chance to make his way to India to study to become a monk. But how would he manage it? Who would help him? So he was extremely surprised when he went home from school to find the visitor chatting with his mother; he was even more surprised to learn that the man was his uncle, an uncle he had never heard of. Soon Yeshi confided to him his ambition to become a monk.

Yeshi’s uncle questioned him closely about his decision to see if he was truly serious. When he was fully convinced, he told Yeshi that he would sponsor him to study in India if he could get his mother’s permission. Yeshi’s mother tried to discourage him by pointing out all of the difficulties he would face. For starters, how would he get to India? Wouldn’t he be lonely there, so far from his mother? But Yeshi did not give up. “After I asked her many times, I wore down her resistance,” Yeshi says, laughing. “So she
Introduction

finally said okay.” Soon after, he began his studies at Gyudmed Tantric University in Karnataka, India. He would be a student there for the next twenty-five years.

It was in his early years at the university, before he turned fourteen, that Yeshi learned most of the traditional folktales he can recite today. Some he learned from his uncles in early childhood, but most he heard from the older monks at the university. He learned to make himself useful to these older monks, in exchange for them telling him stories. For example, usually the monks lived four to a room, and at mealtimes the youngest monk was expected to go to the kitchen to bring back food for all of them. Sometimes Yeshi would volunteer to fetch meals for older monks who lived in rooms without a young student; by winning their goodwill, he was able to coax them into teaching him stories in their spare time. At planting time in the spring, Yeshi liked to work in the fields with the elderly monks. When planting corn, an old monk would walk ahead, dropping the seed in the furrow, while Yeshi would walk behind him, covering up the seeds with soil and listening as the monk told a story to pass the time.

In his many years at Gyudmed University, Yeshi absorbed a comprehensive curriculum of Tantric Buddhist studies, leading to the degree of Geshe Ngarampa (the Buddhist equivalent of a PhD). His special field was Buddhist devotional arts; he became a specialist in the painting of devotional images (thangka) as well as the related arts of butter sculpture and sand mandalas. He also became an expert and prize-winning practitioner of the art of Tibetan calligraphy. But always in addition to his formal studies, Yeshi learned traditional Tibetan Buddhist stories whenever the opportunity arose—not as an academic discipline, but as both an avocation that enriched his own life and a personal contribution to the great project of the Tibetan community in exile to preserve as much as possible of the old culture and knowledge of Tibet.
Yeshi plans to remain in the United States for the indefinite future. His goal in this country is to establish a School of Tibetan Sacred Arts where American and international students of Buddhism can learn the motifs and techniques of thangka painting and related Tibetan arts. Yeshi’s royalties from the sale of this book will be devoted to that project.

During the twentieth century, anthropologists and folklore scholars collected hundreds of folktales in Tibet and other parts of Inner Asia, recording the words of storytellers in towns and villages, caravan camps and oasis inns, monasteries and taverns—wherever people gathered to share a good story. Many of these tales exist in dozens of variations found over a huge geographical area: Tibet, Turkistan, China, Mongolia, and beyond. Some of them originated in Buddhist culture but are now found in other cultures as well (e.g., in Islamic and Daoist cultures); some originated elsewhere and were assimilated into Buddhism. One tale, for example, generically known as “The Tale of the Ugly Girl” (and included in this collection as “King Salgyel’s Daughter, Princess Dorjee”) exists in versions in Tibetan, Chinese, Uighur, Kyrgyz, Kazak, Mongolian, and several other Inner Asian languages. Like many of these tales, it is also very old: one version is found on a scroll that was written about a thousand years ago and preserved in the Buddhist library at Dunhuang. Remarkably, even certain phrases in these many versions of the story crop up over and over again (e.g., the ugly princess is typically described as having hair like coconut fiber and skin like the bark of a tree).

Written versions of several of the other tales in this book can be found in the Vetālapañcavimśati (Twenty-five corpse tales), a collection of stories thought to have been compiled in the eleventh century, drawing upon earlier sources. The original collection is in
Introduction

Sanskrit; the work has been translated into Tibetan and many other languages. Thus, there are published versions of many of the stories that Yeshi learned orally. The stories in different editions of the *Vetâlapañcavimsâtī* are recognizably the same, but they often vary widely in specific details. Similarly, the stories as Yeshi learned them differ in many details from the published versions. Stories evolve as they are written, revised, and edited, or told and retold; in other words, stories belong to lineages that diverge over time.

Of the hundreds of extant Tibetan folktales, Yeshi Dorjee learned several dozen in the course of his childhood, not just in the sense of having heard them once or twice, but in the deeper sense of having absorbed them thoroughly so that he can retell them nearly word-for-word as he learned them from his teachers. Of those dozens, we present a selection of fifteen in this collection. It is our hope and intention that they will convey something of the richness, the wisdom, and the delight of this amazing tradition of oral literature.

This book is not intended to be a scholarly study of Tibetan folklore and folk literature. There is already a large body of scholarship in those fields, tracing, for example, the variant versions of Tibetan folktales and comparing them with versions of the same or similar tales in other cultures. Some of the most salient works in the field of Tibetan folk literature are listed in the “Suggestions for Further Reading” at the end of this book. Our goal in writing this book has been to present to readers particular oral versions of these stories as they were learned by one young monk at the feet of his elders. If scholars will take these versions into consideration in their comparative studies, Yeshi and I will be very pleased. If students of Tibetology, Buddhology, and folklore will find them of interest, we will be pleased by that as well. But we will be happiest of all if these stories are read by a large number of laypeople
who are interested in Tibet, in Buddhism, or in folk literature, or who just know how to enjoy a good story.

One might wonder why Buddhism is so rich in folk literature in the first place. The answer lies in the special feature of Buddhism, which like Christianity and Islam (and in sharp contrast to many other religions, such as Hinduism and Shinto) is a strongly proselytizing faith. That is, many Buddhist believers—and especially Buddhist lamas and monks—feel a strong obligation to acquaint other people, who perhaps have not heard or absorbed the good news of Buddhism, with the truth of the Buddhist salvationist message. (Buddhists are, however, careful not to impose their beliefs on others; they only proselytize to people who express an interest in hearing their message.) A strong tradition grew in Buddhism whereby wandering lamas and monks would teach in town squares and marketplaces to whomever wanted to listen. And what better way to illustrate some of the points of their teaching than with a good story?

That circumstance accounts in turn for the character of the stories themselves, which are often earthy, funny, full of complicated twists and turns, and seemingly lacking in any overt religious message. They have none of the Sunday-school quality of treacly piety that makes many didactically religious stories seem insipid and uninteresting. (The story of “The Shape-Shifter’s Son,” though full of monsters and even cannibalism, is unusual among the stories in this collection because of its explicitly didactic focus on a religious dharma teaching: all acts have consequences.) These stories were intended to illustrate specific points of Buddhist doctrine. A Buddhist monk presenting a teaching to a willing crowd in a marketplace might tell (or perhaps chant, accompanying himself on a stringed instrument) one of these stories both to hold the crowd’s interest and illustrate his doctrinal message. For example, a teaching about the long reach of karma across many lifetimes
might prompt the monk to tell the story of Princess Dorjee; after he reached the rousing conclusion of the story he might ask, “And why do you think Princess Dorjee changed from an ugly woman to a beautiful one when she prayed to the Buddha?” And so the teaching would continue.

In this collection, we discuss the deeper meaning of the stories in a separate section (“Notes on the Stories”) at the end of the book. Like the wandering monks of old, we want the messages conveyed by these stories to be available to our readers but not intrude on their enjoyment of the stories themselves. But a few general comments about the stories are in order here. First, the reader will notice that they vary considerably in length. A few of them are not even a thousand words long and seem at first glance almost more like extended “shaggy dog story” jokes than folktales with a religious subtext (e.g., “The Woodcutter and His Son”). Others extend to nearly ten thousand words and take a considerable time to tell aloud. Obviously these stories served different purposes for different audiences. All are part of the Buddhist preacher’s repertory, but some are equally suitable for entertaining a crowd of friends over drinks in a tavern, for helping to pass the time when working at a tiresome task, or for making the miles seem shorter while trudging along on an extended journey.

That leads to a second noteworthy point, which is that seven of the fifteen stories in this collection adopt exactly the trope of tales told to pass the time on a long journey. The journey is a specific one and used as a recurring framing device for these tales. It is the story of the Buddhist ascetic saint Lord Nagarjuna, his young disciple Dersang, and the corpse-monster (a sort of re-animated corpse, or zombie) Ngudup Dorjee, whom Dersang is supposed to capture and bring back to Nagarjuna’s cave. Dersang can only succeed in his task if he is able to make the journey without saying anything at all, a restriction that gives him great difficulty.
Plucky but easily distracted, Dersang tries and fails again and again. Each time, after he has been captured and is being carried in a sack back to the cave, the wily Ngudup Dorjee tells Dersang a wonderful story to tempt him to speak, with unfortunate consequences. The Ngudup Dorjee stories are an important and well-known component of the Tibetan folklore tradition. Yeshi Dorjee can recite sixteen of them (the Sanskrit compilation Vetālapañcaviṃśati, as its title indicates, contains a total of twenty-five such corpse tales); we include seven of them here not only because they are wonderful stories but because of how they give continuity and structure to the collection overall. In an attempt to emulate how monks or other wandering storytellers might choose to tell one story or another depending on circumstances, we have not grouped all of the Ngudup Dorjee stories together; rather, we have interspersed them among other stories.

A third point to reiterate and emphasize is that many of these stories are quite earthy and direct. They depict a world of human frailty rather than one of idealized piety. In a world of perfect Buddhist compassion, naughty boys would not throw stones at a crow’s nest, but they do here, setting in train some remarkable consequences. In one or another of these tales a simple-minded boy unintentionally beats his father on the head with a rock; a good-natured charlatan concocts some strange mumbo-jumbo to impress a crowd; a precious piece of turquoise is lost in a clump of cow dung; a cook serves cat stew to a king. We can imagine a marketplace crowd hundreds of years ago roaring with laughter as the wandering monk or professional bard tells of these and other strange occurrences, rolling his eyes, making broad gestures with his hands, modulating his voice to entertain the crowd. These stories have lived by being heard and retold for centuries; we hope that they live still in these pages.

A final noteworthy point is how conspicuously these stories
belong to an oral tradition. There is a conscious use in many of them of formulaic phrases and stock settings, such as a storyteller or bard would have as part of his standard repertoire of devices. A few of the stories in this collection, notably “The King’s Heart” and “The Dream Eater,” display a very well-known feature of oral literature, which is that a subordinate character will explain in detail to one of the protagonists something that is going to happen; it then takes place as foretold, repeated in the story in almost exactly the same words. (This is reminiscent of the proverbial advice about how to give a good sermon: “Tell them what you’re going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you told them.”) An astute and knowing audience for oral tales expects such devices and revels in them.

Our method for recording these stories in writing was simple, and it is congruent, we hope, with the oral tradition from which the stories descend. On a series of visits to the Land of Compassion Buddha Center, near Los Angeles, where Yeshi has been living as a guest teacher and artist-in-residence for several years, I spent a couple of hours each morning with him as he told me a story or two. I taped each story for reference, but my main effort was put into mindful listening, trying to keep the story and all of its details in my own head. In the afternoon I would return to my hotel and type out the story on my laptop, referring to the tape when necessary. My aim was to convey the story in smooth, idiomatic English while remaining absolutely faithful to the details of the narrative and trying to convey as much as possible the specific phrasing and pacing of Yeshi’s oral delivery. In the evening I would print out the results of the day’s work at a local copy shop and deliver the manuscript to Yeshi at the start of our next day’s session for him to read and correct. When I was back in New York between our storytelling sessions, Yeshi worked on the lovely illustrations that give this book an extra dimension of Tibetan flavor.
One specific point about the telling of the stories should be noted here. Traditionally, storytellers have often told these tales without giving names to many, or even any, of the main characters: they were simply “the king,” “the orphan,” “the prince,” and so on. We, on the other hand, have usually supplied names for the main characters where tradition has not already supplied them, because in a collection of stories, the repetition of nameless kings, princesses, and orphans from story to story tends to become confusing and lacking in individuation. The characters in these stories are not just generic figures, but protagonists in separate tales, and we wanted to make that clear by giving them names: Prince Rinchen, Princess Lhamo, and so on. Yeshi emphasizes that this is very much a part of the oral tradition: “It is the storyteller’s right to give the characters any names he wants.”

YESHI DORJEE has been an ideal collaborator on a project that has been a pure pleasure from start to finish; he has my warmest thanks. A number of family members and close friends were among the early readers of these stories, and many of them pointed out to me the very pleasant fact that they can be enjoyed equally by grownups, young adults, and children. I would like to give special thanks to my wife, Valerie Steele, and our son, Steve; Wendy Fairey, her daughter, Emily, and her grandson, Sam; Elizabeth Choi; Tamsen Schwartzman; and Deborah Kaple and her children, Alex and Maya.

Yeshi thanks his uncle, Jamyang Choedak, and his teacher, Lobsang Kalden, who first told him these stories many years ago and whose memory he honors by passing the stories along in this book to be enjoyed and learned by others. He also thanks his niece, Chimi Paldon, for teaching him English and thus enabling him to communicate these stories to the wider world.
Both Yeshi and I thank the two anonymous expert readers who vetted the manuscript of this book for the University of Hawai‘i Press and whose helpful remarks were especially important in ensuring that the “Notes on the Stories” were as accurate and useful as possible. We are also grateful for the expertise and enthusiasm of our editor at the press, Masako Ikeda.

John S. Major
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