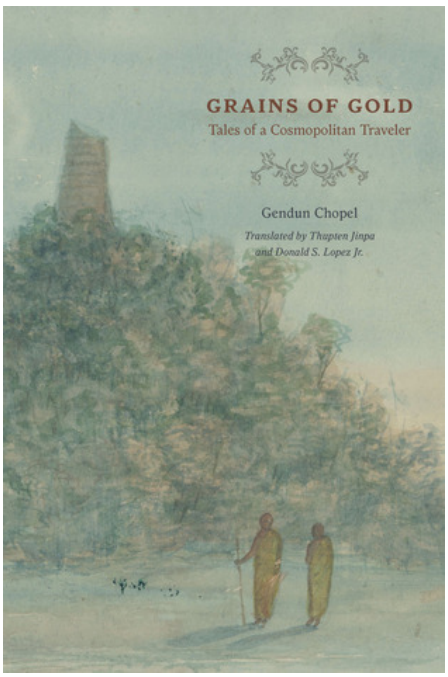

Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler

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In 1941, philosopher and poet Gendun Chopel (1903–51) sent a large manuscript by ship, train, and yak across mountains and deserts to his homeland in the northeastern corner of Tibet. He would follow it five years later, returning to his native land after twelve years in India and Sri Lanka. But he did not receive the welcome he imagined: he was arrested by the government of the regent of the young Dalai Lama on trumped-up charges of treason. He emerged from prison three years later a broken man and died soon after. Gendun Chopel was a prolific writer during his short life. Yet he considered that manuscript, which he titled *Grains of Gold*, to be his life's work, one to delight his compatriots with tales of an ancient Indian and Tibetan past, while alerting them to the wonders and dangers of the strikingly modern land abutting Tibet's southern border, the British colony of India. Now available for the first time in English, *Grains of Gold* is a unique compendium of South Asian and Tibetan culture that combines travelogue, drawings, history, and ethnography. Gendun Chopel describes the world he discovered in South Asia, from the ruins of the sacred sites of Buddhism to the Sanskrit classics he learned to read in the original. He is also sharply, often humorously critical of the Tibetan love of the fantastic, bursting one myth after another and finding fault with the accounts of earlier Tibetan pilgrims. Exploring a wide range of cultures and religions central to the history of the region, Gendun Chopel is eager to describe all the new knowledge he gathered in his travels to his Buddhist audience in Tibet. At once the account of the experiences of a tragic figure in Tibetan history and the work of an extraordinary scholar, *Grains of Gold* is an accessible, compelling work animated by a sense of discovery of both a distant past and a strange present.

Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler Details

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From Reader Review Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler for online ebook

David Dinaburg says

> If you explain something difficult with ease to Tibetans, you lose the luster of a scholar. If, in contrast, you utter whatever incredible lies you are capable of and, at the same time, make a path through a deep cave so that the lies of other people can also come out, you are granted the title of scholar. I would love to be a learned scholar, but this time, I would rather be honest.

I, too, choose to be honest; you probably will not finish this book. You—who have not spent the prior three years extracting pull-quotes and jotting notes in the margins of everything you read—may struggle to avoid the gentle glazing that chews up pages for non-assigned reading. Life is short; don't feel shame. This is not an easy book. It is often not very fun.

I almost shelved it. Reading every word is a lot of work. Lists of kings and queens, gods and cities, just weren't working for me. Then, in the midst of such dry, dense tedium, a sentence caught my attention: "Although there is not much to be admired in other Indian food and drink, the thought occurred to me that it is definitely our bad karma that the mango does not exist in Tibet." Mangoes are a wonder to me, and each time I indulge, I give thanks that I live in a world where they are readily accessible. It was that point that I knew I would finish the text—even if only one page in twenty contained such a wonder, it would be worth it. But you won't find those bits if you aren't reading every word.

That is the reason Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler is not a book to recommend; it cannot be skimmed. Ever. Almost to the point of being purposefully cheeky, the fascinating is muddled together with the mundane and tedious. Perhaps the author realizes that a reader will appreciate knowledge more when they must work for it:

> Alas! Such is the nature of reality that if you explain something difficult to fools in a way that makes it clear, they are unhappy and despise you for it. If something that is easy is explained in a way that makes it difficult, people become terrified and take it as a mark of great learning. Although this seems to be the doorway to decline, there is nothing I can do about it.

Perhaps it is an extended metaphor: the grains of gold are there, within the text, waiting to be extracted; more than worth their weight, they are worth the wait to find them. Whatever the rationale, the pages are long, the words are dense, and the tales will tend to wrap you up. The author is a constant presence, part professor, part put-upon uncle:

> In general, it appears that in India there is no talk, even in the distant past, of there being a creature called a dragon in the clouds and that the thunder is its roar. Moreover, even in authentic Chinese lore there is no dragon that travels in the clouds. Thus, this is a uniquely Tibetan way of speaking; this is similar to our talking about such things as the four types of wind gods that come from the Yungdrung Bon tradition. However, I do not divide things in such a way that I elevate something by saying that it is a Tibetan or Bon custom. Thus, please do not impose your misconceptions on me at any point [in this book].

His mood seeps into every word—"permeated…as a sesame seed is permeated by its oil"—and through the

course of the dozens of hours spent with the text, and it will be dozens of hours, he becomes the sole voice of reliable authenticity. Not that he is always correct, mind you. Nor does he demand you believe so:

> A work by the Sinhalese monk Dhammakitti titled *Saddhammasangaha*, explains how different [Buddhist] schools divided off from each other and contains the following account: when Harsa ruled the region south of Mathura, a learned elder of the Sammitiya school wore blue robes and went to the house of a prostitute at night. He fell asleep and when he woke up it was already dawn, so he went to the vihara wearing the same robe. To hide his shame, he upheld a new view and wrote a treatise bearing such statements as, "*Beer, women, and sex [our] three jewels. / The other three jewels are just jewels of stone and wood*," and "*Enjoy beer. If it is difficult to find even a drop of this mixed with salt in the heavens, why should you fear going to hell?*" Initially, his students embraced [this view]. Then it spread among other monks as well and the "view of the blue robes" became widespread. Hearing of this, Harsa invited their master. Acting as if he admired him, he made great offerings, saying he would proclaim this throughout his realm. He gathered all their followers and texts, and placing them in a large building, he burned them all in a fire, thus ending their lineage. However, one or two escaped and it is from them, like a contagious disease, that this system reappeared. So he [the Sinhalese monk Dharmakitti] writes.
>
> Because the sravaka schools do not respect the Vajrayana, here [in the Sinhalese monk's work] the Blue Robe sect and the Vajrayana are described as if they were the same. It appears that what the all-knowing Jonang Taranatha has said [elsewhere] and this story of burning them all in a fire both derive from the same source. As for the Blue Robed [master] himself, he seemed to have been a great tantric master. For example, in the Kalacakrottaratantra, with respect to the disciples, it lists the names of some masters, saying "'The Blue Robed,'" *that is a samudacara clad in blue robes*." This, I think, is a reference to him.

His tone has a natural flow, a counterpoint to the dense subject matter:

> In general, because all the stories in the Hinayana [scriptures] are narrated in an ordinary way; when the deeds of the Buddha are recounted, they are always quite moving. The majority of what appears in the Mahayana sutras is excessively elaborate. Thus, apart from the extremely wise and the extremely stupid, it is difficult for them to appeal to the minds of all common people. I will not write about the disparities in the life of the Teacher [between the Pali and the Mahayana sutras]. Similarly, their sutras use so many amazing analogies that it can be very confusing. For example, there was once a man who, having heard that Gautama did not react to either praise or blame, went before the Teacher and spoke abusively until he was exhausted. Then, the teacher asked, "*If a recipient does not take possession of a gift, then whose property does that gift become?*" The person thought about this and replied, "*It becomes the property of the person who gave it.*" "*In that case*," the Buddha responded, "*I have not taken possession of the harsh words you just uttered, thus they are yours now*."

What Grains of Gold does, it does extremely well; it slides facts and lessons into conversations and tales. It presupposes more Tibetan, Buddhist, Indian, and Hindu history than I have:

> The name of the Muslim city of Delhi, built in later times, also appears [in the *Kalacakra Tantra*]. The visualization of *aham*, Sanskrit for "*I*," as existing naturally within one's body is a profound form of Hindu meditation on the self. Similarly, when one observes well how Hindus practice many subtle and detailed instructions on the stopping of thought as well as conduct with elaboration, without elaboration, and so on, then discarding something as Hindu based on

> a small difference [in practice requires] subtle and detailed analysis and knowledge of the essential points. Therefore, the statement that if you denigrate the t?rthikas, Vairocana will become far from you is not difficult to understand.

A working knowledge of Sanskrit is also often assumed. Moreover, even when it is ostensibly about Sanskrit, art history is folded in:

> In the Sarasvatikanthabharana it read, "*The pearls turned red by women's dark red soles…*" In the old Nepalese paintings, this is absent on the bodies of the male deities. It is also possible that, "*Entirely red, like a lotus*" in the Kavyadarsa refers to something like this. However, there the term is atamra, which is copper color. Some day that because the letter *a* here is a negative particle and not a superlative particle, it should be translated as slightly reddish for if it is very red, how can it be a feature of beauty? Yet we cannot know whether or not this is a negative particle unless the letter *a* itself opens its mouth to speak.

Linguist theory can be understood even if the context is impenetrable—credit to the translators for preserving a sense of erudition without creating an unassailable barrier of cultural fluency.

Grains of Gold is a tough read. Allowing it to absorb you is a commitment that gives little practical advantage to the reader. It is beautiful. It is different. No one could possibly absorb ever fact, detail, or anecdote as they fly by; most are lost by simple lack of context. It will force any reader to slow down. In that stillness—that impracticality—hides the faintest hint of a true lesson.

Aubrey says

> *...Gendun Chopel takes a certain pride in investigating what lies between God and Mammon, those topics that neither the pious nor the pecuniary pursue. The term translated as "the in-between" is the Tibetan term* ***bardo****, made famous in the West by the so-called* ***Tibetan Book of the Dead*** *in describing the borderland between one lifetime and the next.*

I said to myself when I first saw this that it was a wondrous piece of work, and now that I've finished I'll say it again. The easiest way to confirm this as fact is to ask the simple question of, what *is* this, exactly? Religious philosophy? Buddhist ethnography? Reconciliation of modern science and spiritual principle? Extensive critique of thousands of years of ideological inheritance? A journey to the holy land for purposes of theological cross reference and a great deal of shaking one's head at dogma, obfuscating priests, and massacres committed in the name of faith? There have been many pilgrims in the annals of the travel records, many ideologues in the pages of our books, and perhaps it is lack of reading experience that causes me to not immediately leap from this to the likes of Black Lamb and Grey Falcon and A Time of Gifts. I have a hunch, though, that neither of these reckon themselves in the nuances of five or more religions, languages, and the empires of the past three millenia, so this work would have them beat in that respect.

> *Alas! Such is the nature of reality that if you explain something difficult to fools in a way that makes it clear, they are unhappy and despise you for it. If something that is easy is explained in a way that makes it difficult, people become terrified and take it as a mark of great learning. Although this seems to be the doorway to decline, there is nothing I can do about it.*

In terms of what I *have* read, I'd smash The Discovery of India and Epitaph of a Small Winner and whatever

random articles of theological debate I've imbibed over the years together and set it all down in late 1930's Tibet/India/Sri Lanka/South Asia in general (Chöphel may have gotten even further than that but I'm not the mind to track it down right now). The main gist of it is, instead of the usual two whetstones of European goes to non-Europa and non-European immigrates to Europa, we've got this (ex?) Buddhist monk of a Tibetan who found the scriptures of his homeland a bit lacking and decided to go to the Buddha homeland of India to remedy such in any manner of epistemology he saw fit. As a result, you've got genealogies of languages, script, nations, queens and kings, religious structures of the Hindu and/or Muslim and/or Buddhist and/or mixed and matched and foundered others, all working together to contextualize Chöphel's Buddhism within that great beast of time of Where It Came From and How Did It Get There and Why Is It Here And Not There and How Has It Thrived And Died and Survived. Lots of facts, lots of critique, all culminating in a huge tract of knowledge that is far more concerned with its process than any sort of clean cut finale.

> *Therefore, because Sanskrit is itself "well formed" (sa?sk?ta), it is a language that was deliberately constructed and well formed. Does it not seem like a language deliberately constructed by the brahmins to make it difficult for others to partake in their scriptures? The boast that the ??i B?haspati could not complete the rules for words ending in short **a** for a thousand divine years might be true. When you first hear this, it is incredible; but when you think about it a little, it seems frightening.*
>
> *I don't know if an exception is made for being abusive [when composing] in verse. Many vajraholders endowed with the three vows uttered very abusive words about women.*
>
> *This sultan admired learning and it is said he used the wealth he had stolen from India to support the scholars in his own country. Thus, people speak of him having at least some positive qualities.*

As a result of this monumental endeavor, there are pages and pages and *pages* of what I as a beginner really should not have delved into a first go. Lucky for me, Buddhism apparently has nothing against brutal wit and self-reflexive snark, and Chöphel has shittons to say about religious leaders who abuse the scripture, leaders who kill in the name of the deity of whatever culture they're a part of, temple-raisers, nation-oppressors, and any kind of close-minded bigot who preaches with one hand and plunders with the other. It's a consistency that extends to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, to the point that I believe Chöphel would not have refrained from critiquing his much lauded science had his time of composition extended after WWII. I'd even say that he would treat the current Buddhist violence against Rohingya Muslims with as much contempt as he did the practice of sat? and the gutting of India in the Golden Age of Islam, and that kind of steadfast ethical principle is worth more than any stance of religion or anti-religion or constitution aspiring towards justice. I'm an atheist cause I don't believe, period, but that doesn't stop me from looking at what's come of all those beliefs and the potentials of ethics they espouse, and Chöphel's my kind of ever questioning critical ethics generator who just happens to be Buddhist.

> *...the thought occurred to me that it is definitely our bad karma that he mango does not exist in Tibet.*
>
> *There is even a plant called "sister killer" [**nang? mär? ala**, flame lily – or **Gloriosa superba**], which if consumed, one becomes crazy with lust and then dies...I ate a little bit, but other than a slight burning sensation in the throat nothing happened.*
>
> *Some credulous Tibetans say things like this [Victoria] is an emanation of T?r?. I think it would be amazing if she was even familiar with the name of T?r?.*

I mentioned the ethnographer part, but I don't think I ever got around to the fact that Chöphel's bloody *hilarious*. That last bit is him describing how some of his fellow country people think Queen Victoria (yeah, *that* Queen Victoria) is an earthly representation of Kali (yeah, *that* Kali), and beyond the intriguing example of how religious beliefs reconcile with contemporary world powers, the statement is just flabbergasting in its amount of amazing.

> *A great desire arose in me to write a separate book on the advantages of thinking about this new reasoning, but because of the great difficulty involved and because it would disillusion everyone, I decided it would be pointless and set the task aside.*

The introduction to this work that sets out the beginning and end of Gendün Chöphel's life will break your heart. In light of that, the fact that this work has made its way from Tibetan cursive to English to my reading is a very gratifying one.

Barnaby Thieme says

An acquaintance of mine was traveling by plane with a Tibetan lama who lived in the exile community in India, brought up in Tibet in the old ways before the Dalai Lama fled in 1959. He noted that from their vantage point the horizon was visibly curved, and he mentioned it to his travel companion, and asked how he accounted for the fact that in contemporary photographs the Earth appears round, while the canonical texts, such as the Treasury of Abhidharma of Vasubandhu, say that it is flat. The lama said "I have given this careful consideration, and my current view is that the Earth must have changed."

I could easily multiply anecdotes of this type, but anyone who has made real contact with the diaspora community of monastic teachers from Tibet will not be surprised by this story - even now, it is very common for highly-educated monks to retain pre-modern views, and to evidence studious disinterest in ways of knowing that aren't encapsulated by the sprawling curriculum of the great monastic universities.

It is perhaps in part for this reason that the figure of Gendun Choephel exerts such a fascination for western scholars of Tibetan culture, for long before Tibet fell to the Chinese, his incessant interest in other ways of knowing, and his staunchly modernist attitudes, put him in start contrast to his contemporaries. Indeed, his biography includes an episode in which his fellow monk students were so shocked by his performance in an academic debate in which he defended the position that Buddhahood is impossible, that they beat him up until he recanted.

The contradictions of that action were not lost on Choephel, and perhaps under the weight of his encounter with such shabby treatment at the hands of the custodians of a miraculous tradtion of compassion and wisdom, his writings evidence a kind of self-conscious irony, a kind of "divided self," which has been commonplace in Europe since Shakespeare at least, but is very rarely found in Tibet.

Certainly when I first became aware of Choephel a great many years ago, having stumbled on an article by Donald Lopez which summarized some of his statements in his treatise on Madhyamaka philosophy, I became completely hooked. Here was the first great Tibetan intellect I encountered who was not only an incisive and merciless critic of rival positions within his Buddhist culture, but of his own position as well - that of the great Gelukpa school.

In that wonderful book, subsequently translated by Lopez in his "The Madman's Middle Way," Choephel shows himself to be wary of the intellectual edifice built with such confidence and certainty by the Gelkupa,

and asks, in essence, how such conceptual monuments are to be understood in a tradition that places absolute importance on recognizing the illusion-like quality of all concepts, and their key role in keeping all thinking creatures bound in delusion and sorrow.

To any reader of Madhyakama I would strongly commend that wonderful book. But here we have something somewhat more odd, though (to me) no less interesting.

"Grains of Gold" is something of a travelogue recounting Choephel's trip to India. It includes brief and fascinating glimpses of a number of important religious sites in both India and Tibet, and more, it includes a sprawling account of his take on the modern world, and the relationship of both India and Tibet to it. It includes lengthy digressions on science, geography, language, history, and many other subjects which caught and held the attention of this grand autodidact.

Throughout I was amazed at the sophistication with which he attempts to reconcile what is clearly true with his real veneration of the traditions in which he was raised. He could not accept the many factual errors that were handed down in Tibetan culture concerning the largely-mythologized land of India, land of the Buddha, but made great allowance for what I would call "symbolic truths" and what he refers to as objects of "pure vision," that is, symbolic accounts that render images of truths of the psyche by way of concrete imagery, but which are not to be taken as litereal descriptions of the world.

I am a die hard fan of Choephel and will basically read anything that is translated into English. This particular book I would recommend to anyone who has had their own problems with understanding how to view Tibetan Buddhist teachings in the light of modernity, or who is generally interested in Tibetan culture. He was a one-of-a-kind figure, and I owe a tremendous debt to Donald Lopez for representing him to English-speaking audiences so ably.
