

The Master Director

EXCERPT No. 5

The Meaning of Random Events

(from Chapter 13)

Gurudev has a genius for finding meaning in the random events of everyday life. Somebody presents him with a large fruit wrapped in newspaper. He unwraps the fruit and puts it aside, hardly noticing whether it is a papaya or a pomegranate. It is the newspaper that interests him. Examining the headlines, he tears out a few words. Rarely is it an entire headline. A word or two—or a phrase—usually suffices. These scraps he ensconces in the folds of his robe or hides under his pillow. Under the pillows of Gurudev’s thrones are troves of treasure—a veritable arsenal of spiritual wisdom. He reaches into the deep, concealing folds of his burgundy robes or pulls up the corner of his pillow or blanket to reveal his little hidden treasures. He picks out a scrap, often without even looking, and hands it to some unsuspecting devotee placing a flower on the low table before him—a special message from Gurudev gleaned from a random scrap of newspaper, something especially for that person to take home and ponder. Gurudev has the uncanny ability of coaxing significance and meaning from the seemingly random. He is often right on the mark, answering with a scrap the question that hasn’t yet been put to him.

One time, Gurudev held up a newspaper photograph of the Mona Lisa and asked me if she were a movie star. Another time, he was sitting enthroned before a crowd of thousands, the monks on either side of his throne blowing their huge alpine horns. When those who had pushed to the front of the crowd started rushing the throne and touching their heads to the ground before him, an almost exaggerated look of boredom crossed his face. I have noticed this look before, especially when the fervour of worship hits a crescendo. So he picks up a newspaper and starts leafing through it, scratching the corner of his mouth and yawning. To say he looked bored would not be accurate: ironic would come closer to the truth, the corners of his lips suggesting an enigmatic smile, as if he, like the Mona Lisa, were continuously verging on a laughter that never came. He steals a glance at me. ‘What to do?’ he says. He is saying that he is a being like any other, under a law, having to fulfil his role in this life. His, it sometimes seems, is to live up to others’ expectations of what a master should do.

As the crowd continues in an endless wave to press their foreheads to his throne, he folds the newspaper back to expose a half-page-sized photo, holds it up, and slowly shows it to the crowd, first to the people on his left and arcing towards the right, where I sit. I am the last one to see it—a photo of Marilyn Monroe, her neck exposed and her breasts bulging. He turns to me. ‘This one goddess?’ he asks. Then he turns the paper over and holds it up again. The huge headline reads, ‘Another Time, Another Place.’



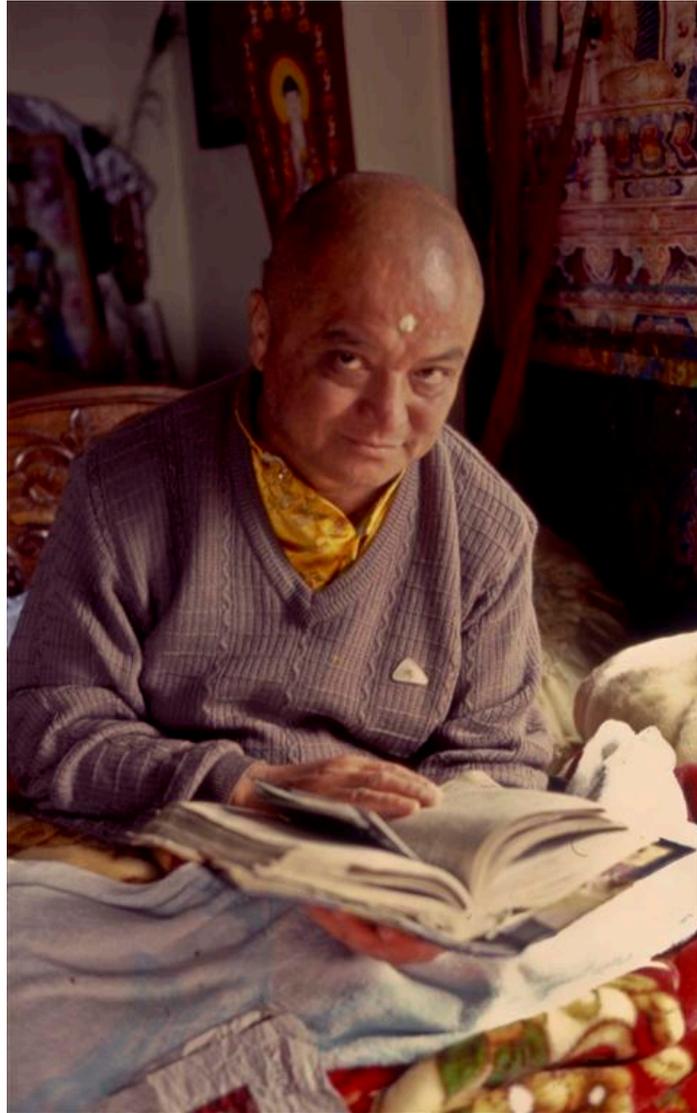
Another time, another place

Since imitation is the greatest form of flattery, I decide early on that I too can play this game. Why should he have all the fun? So one afternoon in Tukvar, Gurudev is sitting on his bed surrounded by devotees and I am sitting on my bed on the other side of the partition. A scrap of newspaper on the floor catches my attention, too good to let lie. The headline reads, ‘You Cannot Escape the Third Eye’. I rip it out and hand it to a little girl on her way through to see Gurudev, and gesture that she is to give it to him,

just as Gurudev would do, in a commanding but friendly way. So she brings him the scrap, explaining that she was instructed to do so by the foreigner. I can hear Gurudev asking someone for a translation of the headline. Gurudev bursts out laughing. ‘Third eye!’ he calls over the partition wall. ‘Good one,’ as if we are now comrades, able to find consequence in the inconsequential, meaning in the meaningless, a point where there is no point, significance where there are no signs, sense in the senseless, and messages in the random scraps of everyday life.

Gurudev has a book that could easily have been the subject of a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentinean writer of metaphysical tales. For this is an endless book, a book bursting its own binding, two times its natural thickness, stuffed with headlines and scraps of paper. He produces it at odd moments from under a corner of his bed and uses it as a book of divination. He always handles this book gingerly not only because it is holy, but because its binding is torn and many pages are loose. He leafs through it as if to gain inspiration, sometimes as if looking for something that he might have lost there as long ago as in a previous lifetime. The book originated as an English–Nepali dictionary. Maybe sometimes he is simply looking up a word. But often he flips through it. Then he glances in a significant way at someone sitting on the floor. He flips some more pages, picks out a scrap of paper, puts on his reading glasses to read it, replaces it, turns a page, and peers over the rims of his glasses at that person again while everyone in the room waits for the pronouncement of the magical dictionary. It might just change the course of that person’s life. Sometimes Gurudev holds the book in his hands and has someone open the book at random. Without looking, Gurudev puts his index finger on a word in the dictionary and from that word tells something about that person’s condition or fate.

One time a friend from Spain came with me to see Gurudev. She spoke neither English nor Nepali, and I was forever having to translate from her Spanish to English for someone to translate to Nepali so that Gurudev could understand her words. She opened Gurudev’s book at random in the middle of the English Ps. Gurudev put his finger on a word. It was the word ‘polyglot’, third definition, which reads, ‘a mixture or confusion of languages’.



The Book of Divination