

# The Callings of a Restless Heart

Rare is the individual who dares to surrender all to destiny and fly off on wings still not fully opened.

WORDS AMAR B. SHRESTHA

According to the theory of karma, what happens to a person, happens because they caused it with their actions—destiny, in other words. It is an oft-mentioned word in both Hindu and Buddhist discourses. So, on hindsight, it is really extraordinary that this all-important word never cropped up even once during my three-hour-long conversation with Susan M. Griffith-Jones, writer of six books on Buddhist philosophy, maker of 'Circle of Immortality' (a 45-min documentary on Muktinath), and someone who has undergone six years of intensive Buddhist study under the "Master of Masters", Guru Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, of Boudhanath in Kathmandu.

The story of her life is full of unplanned-for episodes, almost ordained by destiny, one has to think. "Till I was eighteen, life was normal for me. I was studying in Cambridge, achieving A grades all the time. Then, in my final year, I dropped my grade, and my teacher told me that he would keep my place in class only if I regained my usual grade," she recalls. "It was a life-changing event for me. For the first time, there was a gap in my life, and I looked at it in a different way. I asked myself, did I want to continue in this way? My heart said, no I don't want this life! It also said, if you don't get out now, you never will!"

## In search of something, anything but

Get out she did. "I decided that my life would be about finding the greater truth," she says. "But where I was to start? Where was I to go?" And her heart replied, "Just go!" So, she left for Calais, with 250 pounds in her pocket, and the conviction that "whatever happens will happen." Was Susan a rebel, then? "No," she says emphatically, "I was not against anything; rather, I was going towards another thing." She moved around Europe with no fixed plans, but had to set up camp for some time in Italy since her meager fund was running out and she needed to work. "I did all sorts of jobs," she remembers. "I also learnt Italian, and studied the history of art. I visited all the galleries in the art capitals of the world, such as Rome, Florence, Venice, and Pisa. I was especially fascinated by Renaissance art, which was religious in nature, carrying much symbolism." In this way, she spent three years in Europe.

Then, she thought of giving voice to her expression through a magazine, but didn't have a clue about running one. So, she joined 'The European', a newspaper based in London, as an unpaid intern to learn about print media. "It was exciting to work for 'The European';

once I even got to fly on a private jet to go and interview Schumacher!" she says, "But I also needed to earn to live, so I worked nights in a pizzeria." By and by, she had an urge to visit Russia, and by November 1993, she was in Moscow. "The country was in a transitional state, with Perestroika and all that, and there was lawlessness all around. However, I was more curious than worried. The locals would come up to me to enquire if I had Levis jeans, canned delicacies, and all sorts of Western stuff, so I set up a trading firm—as many others were doing at that time!"

Also, by and by, she got married to a Sikh man living in England, and they had two children. "My marriage brought me in touch with Indian culture, and I was impressed by the shared warmth and solidarity of his family," she reminisces. "But, at the same time, I felt myself being pulled and pushed in different directions. My business was also in the doldrums, and I was desperately trying to save it." She gave it away, lock, stock, and barrel, and as she says, "I now came to the other side. I had had enough of materialism. It was 1998, and I was just twenty-five, but that was when I turned spiritual, and very consciously so."

## Annapurna on my mind, in my dreams

"Now, the question was, 'What am I doing?' and I had no answer as yet." She then decided to write, but problem was, she really didn't know what or how to write. "I wrote anyway," she says. "The first twenty pages was routine stuff, then it started becoming philosophical, and eventually, very much esoteric. I wrote four volumes in this way. I was not really thinking as I wrote, but the words came on their own, I don't know from where. It was a euphoric experience. I was thinking, wow, it's all coming from the heart!" (It was published in 2010 under the title, 'Drops of Being'.) As she was first starting her foray into writing, she had made another decision. "I decided that I would never work with money as my goal. I said to myself, money is not my god! I was convinced that if my intention and work was honest, money would come to me anyway."

A life-changing event of another kind occurred in 2000, when she separated from her husband. By now, she was on a completely different plane, and the thought uppermost in her mind was, "I need a teacher. A guide." At the same time, she was aware that "when the disciple is ready, the guru will arrive." At around this time, she had a dream in which the word 'Annapurna' came repeatedly as a mantra. She looked it up in a library, and discovered

that it was in Nepal. "I took it as a sign, and decided to go to Nepal," she remembers. "As usual, I had little money, so I sent emails to two-hundred individuals and organizations in Nepal, with the simple message that I would work for board and lodging, and mentioning my qualifications."

She received two replies. One was from the director of Muktinath International Foundation. "He was a Dutch, who wanted to make a film on Muktinath. I had good rapport with the producer of a big TV channel in Italy, so we came up with a proposal that I carried with me to Italy. The producer was enthusiastic, and asked us to make a pilot project proposal." So I flew to Nepal, scraping up the ticket money by agreeing to write off debts owed to me by a business franchisee in return for the 450 pounds needed." It was an inauspicious time to visit Nepal, what with the recent royal massacre, and the Maoist war in full swing. "I was met by a Lama, who disclosed that he was doing the 46th day puja for the deceased royal family members, and would soon be free to go to Muktinath with me."

## Dangerous trails, surreal surroundings

But, bad luck persisted. The flight from Pokhara to Jomsom was cancelled for three straight days (due to heavy rains in July, the monsoon season), and her companions suggested that they return to Kathmandu. "I was aghast, I didn't want to go back to Kathmandu, so I insisted that we trek to Muktinath," she recalls. "We took a taxi to Beni, and then started walking. We walked for five days, and it rained all the time, the Kali Gandaki was swollen, there were about nineteen landslides on the way, and we were stopped in many places by Maoist guerillas to check our identities. I was not really afraid; they were more of a curiosity for me."

They stayed with nuns in a nunnery in Muktinath for three weeks. "The high altitude, the remoteness of the region (there was no electricity and no phones)—it was all a surreal, yet extremely profound, experience. I had all sorts of weird dreams, but I was totally inspired!" After finishing her work, Susan returned to England, and then went on to Italy to present the final proposal. The producer was so impressed that he generously agreed to fund them with half a million dollars, more than double the amount Susan had requested. Things were working out nicely indeed!

She called up her Dutch partner in Kathmandu with the good news, but destiny had other plans. As usual. Her partner told her that the project would have to be postponed.

"Why?" she asked. The Boudhanath Lama, he informed her, had made an unfavorable prediction, and warned them from going to Muktinath. "That was that!" says Susan. Anyway, she certainly wasn't one to fight destiny. At the same time, the urge to go to Nepal again was becoming stronger by the day, but she was yet vastly undecided. "One day, as I was walking the dog on a lonely and open field, I raised my eyes to the heavens and cried out, 'Whoever you are up there, give me a sign so I know what to do!' Soon after, I saw a double star on the horizon. It is one of the most esoteric symbols in Buddhist Tantra. It was a sign that humbled me, and now there was no question of not going to Nepal."

### The right path, the higher truth

As expected, finding the money for the ticket was a problem, but then, somehow, her brother volunteered to buy her one. "The universe will give you everything if you are honest on your part," she declares. Once in Kathmandu, she started working for a national daily. She was also getting the strong feeling that the teacher she was seeking was somewhere around Boudhanath. One day, she found herself in the presence of Guru Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, and discovered that he was the very same Lama who had prevented them from going to Muktinath to make their documentary. Around this time, a handful of people from different countries arrived in Kathmandu to meet the Rinpoche. He began teaching this handful of seekers of the higher truth, which included Susan.

"It was really intensive teaching," exclaims Susan. "He taught us individually, and we learnt in six years what other monks usually learn in twenty. It was six years of Dharma!" During this time, she disclosed to her Guru her plans to visit Tibet. He gave her the name of a Lama there who would help her. Wanting to know more about him, she went to another Lama, who looked at the name and started laughing. "He laughed for a long time," remembers Susan. "When I asked him why he was laughing, he told me that that Lama was dead for the last twelve years! I realized that my Guru was conveying to me that whatever was to be found was to be found here, and that going somewhere else was like chasing rainbows."

The venerable Rinpoche suggested that she go to Muktinath, instead, and she recalls him telling her to take many pictures. "I spent a month there, meditating. I pierced the veil. I witnessed magical apparitions, didn't know whether they were humans or deities. It was like another layer of existence, and more real than unreal." Once back in Boudhanath, she immediately went into retreat, and began writing long verses that corresponded with her present state of being. She named it "The Rainbow Bridge". She asked the Rinpoche about what to do with the verses, and he said to her, "You will know when the time comes."

### Creative endeavors, mystical, magical

An interesting outcome of her Muktinath pilgrimage was that she returned with almost one thousand photographs. There's a story there, too! "My digital camera had fallen and broken down, so a Lama gave me a 1960 Pentax camera. I was not good with the



technicalities; the aperture and the shutter speed had to be adjusted according to the light, and I was a novice in all this. But, the funny thing is, I got some really outstanding pictures of the Mustang landscape that my friends admired greatly." She, then, started to make collages of the photographs. The first one she made comprised of seventy-five photographs, and was titled, "Two Keys One lock", signifying duality and oneness. Another collage had one-hundred photos, and was called, "Pure Vision Transformed into Organized Vision". In November 2005, she exhibited them at the Lazimpat Art Gallery in Kathmandu.

She met a man from Singapore, also a student of the Rinpoche, at the gallery, who was willing to fund a film on Muktinath. When she disclosed this to the Rinpoche, he exclaimed, "Yes! Do it!" And, so that was how 'Circle of Immortality' came into being. Another student, a Thai, made DVDs that he distributed throughout the world. "I did the narration, and this also became a book, 'The Pyramid Spiral—Dance of the Five Elements'," reveals Susan.

In between all this, the Rinpoche passed away and Susan went to India, where she married a Lama. She was wondering what to do about 'The Rainbow Bridge', and her husband told her that, in Tibet, they would include a commentary along with the verses. So, she spent a year doing just that. Coming

to recent years, last summer, Susan met an Indian lady from the Indian Embassy at an art exhibition in London. While proffering her business card, she happened to present it upside down, where was printed a picture of her first collage. The lady asked her if it was a digital photo, and Susan explained that it was a picture of a twelve-by-three-foot collage of seventy-five of her Mustang photos that she had created painstakingly by hand. So awed was the lady that, in November 2016, she arranged for an exhibition of her collages, all five of them, at the prestigious Nehru Cultural Centre in central London. "'Circle of Immortality' was also shown at the event, and I was asked to give a talk about my experiences to the large audience," says Susan, with a big smile.

At the present moment, she is working on her third documentary on Varanasi, titled, 'Mirrors of Spaces', with two others, 'Rainbow Symphony' and 'Key of Life' already under her belt. Doubtless, Susan M. Griffith-Jones is on quite a high, in fact, has been for quite some time now, and unleashing waves of creativity that appear to be never ending. And, one can expect that her works will be all the more profound in the coming days, for as she says, "I am getting deeper and deeper into symbolism, yet, becoming simpler and simpler with time."