

Unveiling the Silence: A Virtual Talk with Thukten Yeshi on *The Monk Without Dharma*: A Novel

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Thukten Yeshi hails from Bhutan. His debut novel, *The Monk Without Dharma* (2024), stands out as an avant-garde, gut-wrenching and thought-provoking narrative that upends the fundamental foundation often understood as spiritual holiness and individual identity. In such a literary world that is erstwhile overflowing with clichés and rehashed tales, his novel takes an inimitable path. He creates a protagonist whose inward journey away from orthodoxy is just as captivating as his outward one. His novel is more than just a narrative; it reflects the human condition in the face of existential turmoil, a philosophical confrontation, and a lyrical revolt encased in words. Under the saffron robes of monastic life, he unveils the unvarnished, sometimes sticky facts with eerie poetry and uncompromising honesty. Sitting down with him on a virtual talk today

allows us to enter a world where narrative may serve to pursue more profound questions, renunciation may be more about rediscovery than escape, and silence can speak louder than lectures.

However, this talk of mine—Dharmendra Kumar Singh (DKS)—with Thukten Yeshi (TY), examines the personal path that gave rise to his debut intrepid literary venture and its reasons. Why was this spiritual unmasking done? To what extent is Yeshi himself a monk? What happens when a seeker, rather than the world, abandons the same truths he previously revered? And so more and more. Dear readers, for answers to many such questions, we should not wait. Without any formality, let us welcome the novelist with the arrows of questions assimilating noted preconceptions and sparking reflection, leading to a discussion as passionate and enlightening as the book *The Monk Without Dharma*. The questions follow:

DKS: Good evening, Yeshi, sir!

TY: Good evening! It is a great pleasure to speak with you as well.

DKS: What is your writing life looking like these days?

TY: I began adapting another one of my film scripts, *The Kingdom in a Cocoon*, into a novel a few months ago, but I paused the work as I am now considering researching to develop a Himalayan Narrative Form alongside it.

DKS: Do you remember when you first thought you wanted to be a writer?

TY: I had a strong interest in writing since school but never thought of becoming a writer. Later, while working at the national television and radio station, I developed a passion for filmmaking and transitioned into film. Naturally, this involved writing screenplays and learning the craft of storytelling. Still, I did not consider writing a novel until I struggled to secure production funding for the scripts I had written for international markets. That challenge led me to experiment with expanding one of the scripts into a novel to see how it would be received internationally.

DKS: What sparked your latest novel—*The Monk Without Dharma* (2024)? Was it a real moment, a dream, or a wild ‘what if’?

TY: Stories are born in two ways, whether for film or novel. In the first instance, they come to you as sparks: an intriguing character, an exciting scene, or a catchy line of dialogue. In the second, you search for them or devise them. This could stem from a personal desire to tell a specific story or from a commission by a client. *The Monk Without Dharma* began in the second manner. I wanted to make a uniquely powerful Himalayan Vajrayana Buddhist film for international audiences.

DKS: What is your go-to escape or guilty pleasure when not writing?

TY: When not writing or working, I watch movies and read just as many novels. I also go hiking during the day and hang out with my friends in the evening, especially when I have writer's block or need to unwind.

DKS: Was there a book or author that made young-you fall in love with storytelling?

TY: Even though I loved mainstream stories, whether in film or novels, no particular author or book made me fall in love with storytelling. I loved good, powerful stories. But when I took up filmmaking and studied the craft, I fell in love with storytelling's art and technique. I realized there were so many nuts and bolts beneath those narratives. Stories did not just happen. They were crafted with intention and precision. Many American films and novels were created at the highest level, and that inspired me to work hard to learn and understand everything I could,

including aspects specific to novel writing, which I studied by attending online workshops and reading extensively on the internet while expanding *The Monk Without Dharma* from a film script into a novel.

DKS: Tell me about your writing space. Are we talking about a tidy desk or beautiful chaos?

TY: My workspace is not very tidy, but decent enough. However, I do not restrict myself to one defined workspace. I write wherever I feel comfortable. Sometimes, when the weather is pleasant, I drive up to a hilltop or find a nice spot and work inside my car or under the shade of a tree. With today's technology, you can work from anywhere since you can carry your phone and internet connection.

DKS: The title of your debut novel, *The Monk Without Dharma*, feels like a paradox. How do you define Dharma, and what does it mean to be without it in a world that demands labels and identities?

TY: *The Monk Without Dharma* is neither a traditional phrase one would typically hear nor a conventional title for a book or film on Dharma. However, this is not a simple, straightforward, traditional story with an ordinary exploration of Dharma. Instead, it is a unique, unconventional story that delves into Dharma's ordinary and extraordinary aspects. However, the title is not worded that way as a marketing gimmick to entice readers. Instead, it is a phrase that appears repeatedly in the story that encapsulates the two most significant circumstances in the protagonist's life. In this respect, the title *The Monk Without Dharma* comes from the story's heart. It serves as the narrative's spine, supporting its plot and theme. Now, when we speak of Dharma here, we are not merely referring to its traditional study and practice. We are going beyond, into the secret world of Tantra. Therefore, the title *The Monk Without Dharma* is both literal and metaphorical at the same time. In the literal sense, it refers to a monk who has no dharma teachings. In the metaphorical sense, it refers to a monk who has transcended Dharma because, at a higher level of Tantra, a practitioner must ultimately discard Dharma, which is, after all, only a path.

In this novel, it (Dharma) refers to Buddha's teachings and their practice. Simply put, it is a path with instructions and guidance to understand the true nature of reality, gain mastery over it, and ultimately attain liberation. Within this path, there are various approaches and levels. This novel explores an unconventional way to make a giant leap from the base to the highest level, bypassing the traditional study and practice of Dharma. This unconventional approach

involves the practice of Tantra, a complex and often misunderstood aspect of Buddhism that involves the transformation of desire and the realization of the divine nature of reality.

DKS: Your book seems to dismantle traditional spiritual narratives. Do you believe enlightenment is overrated, or have we misunderstood its essence?

TY: The Monk Without Dharma is not a critique of the traditional path of Dharma. The traditional path of Dharma remains the surest route to liberation. It is also the safest as it thoroughly prepares you for Tantra, which is considered extremely risky in terms of failing to progress and the potential for self-destruction in many ways, from straying on the path to losing one's way in life. The Monk Without Dharma explores this unconventional approach to showcase the depths and nuances of Himalayan Vajrayana Buddhism. This rich and complex tradition offers a unique perspective on the human condition.

DKS: Is renunciation an escape or an ultimate confrontation with the self? How has your journey shaped your answer?

TY: For me, it is neither. I think—I say "I think" because I am not a Buddhist scholar—that in Vajrayana Buddhism, renunciation is merely a means to free oneself from the clutches of the material world. Leaving one's family and home to reside in a monastery helps uproot attachment to worldly life, making it easier to practice Dharma. However, Buddhism's Middle Path ultimately offers the correct answer.

DKS: If you could have a conversation with your younger self before you embarked on the path of monkhood, what would you tell him? Moreover, what do you think he would say in return?

TY: I have not yet embarked on the path of Dharma—I only conducted research for this book. Still, having been born and raised in a society where Buddhism is a lived experience, I would tell my younger self to learn and practice Buddhism gradually, in small steps, so that later in life, I would be ready to embark on the path without difficulty. However, my younger self would have brushed it aside, believing there was plenty of time to get to it.

DKS: Many spiritual seekers chase a 'truth'—something absolute and immovable. Nevertheless, your writing suggests that truth itself is fluid. Is there any 'truth' you still hold onto?

TY: In Buddhism, there are two truths: relative truth and absolute truth. The relative truth refers to the everyday world of appearances—how the universe appears to ordinary perception. Even though we can see, feel, and touch objects, everything at this level is illusory because they do not originate independently but depend on other factors. They are empty of inherent nature, which means they lack a fixed, unchanging essence. This emptiness of intrinsic, independent essence in all phenomena is the ultimate nature of reality. This is the absolute truth in Buddhism, the understanding that all things are impermanent and devoid of a permanent self or essence.

In this book, when Tompo is about to enter the world of Tantra, he is told that who he is outside by label is what he is inside, which, in essence, is the most fundamental thing in Dharma. This refers to accepting one's karma wholeheartedly and living truthfully. Then he is told even that would change:

"But, of course, even that will change as you advance. Then you will see nothing as it seems. Far from it, the day will come when you find nothing is even as it is." He paused briefly and spoke with emphasis. "Sometimes, happiness has a tail, and sometimes happiness has no tail. It all depends on the one pursuing it. In Tantra, nothing is definitive, but everything is fluid. Even reality is not real, but that is quite complicated for you to grasp now."

The word "seems" is deliberately chosen to refer to everything he assumes to be real in the conventional world—especially his lousy karma, while also alluding to what he will encounter later—the true nature of reality. Here, he is told that things will not be as they are in the conventional world—the reality of the conventional world will not be objective in the world of Tantra. There, nothing will be definitive, but everything will be fluid. Further down, things will not be even as they are in the world of Tantra when he attains enlightenment because emptiness, or the ultimate nature of reality, is beyond concept.

DKS: You write with both reverence and rebellion toward traditional spirituality. Do you see yourself as a spiritual anarchist?

TY: As I said before, The Monk Without Dharma is not a critique of the traditional path of Dharma. I have immense respect for this path. The traditional path of Dharma in Himalayan Buddhism is so highly developed that even Buddhist scholars would find it difficult to critique, let alone a layperson like me. My exploration of a path outside the traditional dharma framework aims to highlight the expansive, profound, and esoteric aspects of Himalayan Vajrayana Buddhism.

DKS: In a world increasingly dominated by artificial intelligence and digital consciousness, do you think spirituality will evolve or become obsolete?

TY: No, Himalayan Vajrayana Buddhism, with its open and adaptive nature, is becoming even more relevant today. On the one hand, aspects of Buddhism—especially at the tantric level—are often compared to quantum science due to their many similarities. On the other hand, its openness and adaptability make it accessible even to laypersons outside the monastic education system, or as we call it in this novel, the traditional path of Dharma. Now, many laypersons are pursuing the path outside of the monastic system. So, I see Buddhism evolving.

DKS: Monastic life and modern existence seem like two opposite poles. However, is there a space where they merge? Can a person be a monk while fully immersed in the world's chaos?

TY: Even in the olden days, when society was simpler and less chaotic, it was difficult for those pursuing the path to free themselves from the clutches of the material world. This is why many Buddhist texts state that leaving one's family and home to reside in a monastery makes it easier to detach from worldly life and practice dharma. With technological infiltration—such as social media—deeply embedded in society, monastic life has become even more crucial for those on the path. No serious seeker can truly learn while immersed in modern society. If used in balance, technology and social media can be valuable tools for teaching and learning dharma.

DKS: If the Buddha were alive today, navigating the 21st century, what would he struggle with the most?

TY: Buddha was a great teacher. Even in those days, when society was so backward and people knew so little, he simplified many novel and complex subjects. If he were alive today, I cannot say what he would struggle with the most, but I can only imagine what he would accomplish. He would easily explain Buddhist teachings and offer insights into modern scientists' challenges.

DKS: Your book reveals a tension between discipline and freedom. Do you believe true freedom requires structure, or is it found in its complete absence?

TY: I am not a Buddhist scholar or expert, but from what I understand, in the context of Himalayan Buddhism, discipline is important only insofar as it serves its intended purpose. Discipline, for its own sake, holds no real value. This is why Buddhist masters emphasize skillful means, a concept also highlighted in my novel. The key is to understand the purpose

and objective. So yes, the freedom to adjust the system is of utmost importance. However, mere freedom without a clear understanding of the objective may be just as meaningless.

DKS: Language is both a medium of enlightenment and a barrier to it. When you write about the ineffable, do you feel liberated or frustrated by the limitations of words?

TY: Many Buddhist masters say that language is limited and cannot fully express many profound teachings, let alone enlightenment. I have felt both frustration at the limitations of language in conveying specific sublime subjects and a sense of liberation when writing, as the process can bring clarity even to complex ideas.

DKS: Can suffering ever be a choice? Or is it an inescapable aspect of human existence that we merely learn to dance with?

TY: Suffering is not a choice but an inescapable aspect of human existence, as you put it. Our very existence is suffering, as per Buddhism. Here, suffering takes on different meanings and levels—from obvious physical and emotional pain to more subtle forms, such as ignorance, which leads us to believe that all phenomena are real and permanent. However, we are not helpless in the face of suffering. According to the Four Noble Truths—the foundation of Buddhist teachings—suffering is an intrinsic part of life; it has a cause (craving and attachment); it can end, and there is a path that leads to its end. This path is the Noble Eightfold Path, which provides practical steps for ethical living, mental discipline, and wisdom. So, while suffering may be unavoidable, Buddhism offers a clear and compassionate way to transcend it.

DKS: You have walked away from many established spiritual frameworks. However, is there a ritual, a mantra, or a practice you still hold close, even in secret?

TY: As I mentioned earlier, I revere all aspects of Buddhism. Although I am not a formal practitioner, I engage in the small practices I know of as a lay follower—such as making water offerings, visiting monasteries, and reciting prayers.

DKS: If someone reads *Monk Without Dharma* and feels unsettled rather than enlightened, would you consider that a success?

TY: Yes. The *Monk Without Dharma* may unsettle readers in various ways. Some Buddhists—monastics and laypersons—may have misunderstood or forgotten the true meaning behind some of Buddhism's core principles. Some devout practitioners or staunch believers might find

themselves confronted with deeper insights through the book, which could make them uneasy as they recognize past misconceptions or missteps in their understanding or practice.

DKS: Imagine a world where everyone has read your book. What do you think would change the way people live, love, and seek meaning?

TY: I believe many readers would come to understand that the primary objective of life, from a Buddhist perspective, is to break free from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth—to escape samsara. They may also realize that the karma of past lives shapes their present circumstances, and that this karma cannot be changed by force. Instead, they might learn to accept it with equanimity and live their lives with less bitterness and more awareness. Those with intellectual leanings may also be drawn to the striking parallels between Buddhism and quantum science. Such realizations could profoundly change how they live, love, and search for meaning.

Tons of thanks, sir, for disclosing your life's personal and professional secrets before the literary world. More than this, I thank you for discussing the challenges faced by up-to-date individuals of the 21st century who are ever busy like bees in materialistic indulgences, leaving humanity based on sympathy, passions, and emotions. Your focus on the teachings of Buddhism and the tension between discipline and freedom, as you depicted in your debut novel, has had a profound impact on the readers' lives and will forever cure the minds that have strayed from the path of humankind. Your discourse on the inescapable nature of suffering, as per the 'Four Noble Truths' and the 'Noble Eight-fold Path,' which provide practical steps for ethical living, mental discipline, and wisdom, as you depicted in the novel, will serve as a beacon to the bewildered people living with ignorance in the worldly ocean. Your acknowledgment that the book—The Monk Without Dharma—may unsettle readers, but it could lead to a profound change in how people live, love, and seek meaning is appealing. See you soon, sir, with new questions about your next novel....