

Chapter 8: The Stupid Stupas

Out of sheer frustration I ended up labeling them in my mind the 'stupid stupas,' which is about as blasphemous as a Buddhist can get. Stupas are receptacles, usually made of brilliant white marble, that look like chess piece pawns, only much larger, about eight feet tall for these particular ones, and they are hollow, holding holy relics and precious offerings. The monastery where I worked was assembling eight of them, quite the auspicious Buddhist number, on top of a concrete pad. The plans were made long before my arrival, but this was the final phase. The immensely heavy marble components were delivered in creaky wooden crates. Each stupa consisted of four parts; its base rested on the concrete pad, a two-part hollow body and a lid or spire. It was an ambitious undertaking.

The number of staff at the monastery had been decimated by the usual religious politics and in-fighting that can be found at any number organizations of this size and type, so there was no facilities manager who would normally lead such a project. Someone hired a crane operator to hoist the components into place and the work was to be completed on a very tight deadline, since the stupas were to be blessed by the highest of holy men, plus a few indispensable but less visible women, that were scheduled to travel onsite from all over the world. Then, the day before the crane was to arrive, the contractor cancelled. Needless to say, this was more than a small inconvenience.

A small excavating company long associated with the monastery stepped up to help. With nothing more than an excavator with straps attached to its bucket, a construction ballet went into action. Their precision and mastery of the assembling of the stupas was breath-taking. While the monks and lamas prepared the holy relics, the construction guys did the heavy lifting, literally.

But there was one small catch. Several of the workers were volunteers, but the excavators, understandably, charged for their services. Even excavators doing holy work need to put food on the table for their families. This was unacceptable to the monastery's finance officer, even with their discounted prices. Her belief was that they should have donated their time and extremely specialized skills, which still boggles my mind. To punish them for their transgression she ran interference whenever she

could. Thankfully she was on campus only a few days per week and I was there pretty much every day.

There was a workshop in the basement of the residential building dating back to the monastery's construction. It housed all sorts of tools and supplies necessary for building projects. As the operations manager I was one of the few holders of a key. Keeping in mind that the men assembling the stupas were excavators, they did not come with tool boxes filled with caulk guns, hammers and other useful items, like push brooms. But, as long-time associates of the monastery, they figured they could rely on the stash in the basement, which they were already familiar with from work they had done in the past. That was unacceptable to the finance officer. She did not allow them to have a key, and she did not give them permission to use the tools, nor did she allow the workshop to be left unlocked for them to use.

I resorted to allowing my feet to take me to the construction site when they were called to go there, even on my days off.

I would wander nonchalantly down the grassy hillside and the guys would call to me, "Hey, we were just looking for you! Can you let us into the shop?"

"Of course," I'd tell them, "And make absolutely sure that you lock up at the end of the day or we'll be in a whole heap of trouble."

They had my infinite admiration for their long and grueling days of hard work, despite the completely unnecessary adversity coming from the front office. The finance officer was so petty that she even begrudged them a single sheet of plywood they needed and purchased on account, her permission be damned, because of the time constraints. I fortuitously encountered her humiliating tirade chastising the entire group of men. I walked through the middle of the group to run interference on the way to my office and tossed a terse good morning greeting in her direction, which I'm sure only added to her already low opinion of me.

The final clincher was that when the uber-blessing ceremony for the stupas happened, none of the excavator guys were invited, because, apparently, getting paid was to be their punishment and their reward. I was also not allowed to attend. The other volunteers attended, and received gifts and blessings from the young Karmapa himself. Eventually an apology was issued to the excavators, and being the good Buddhists they are, I'm sure all was forgiven.

I initially turned down the job offer made by the finance officer on the grounds that I would not be able to live in the main residence as required because of my four-legged companions. She assured me that suitable living arrangements would be provided in an onsite cabin, so I decided to accept the position. I moved into a picturesque, but ridiculously mold-infested, cabin with help from a friend who drove the U-Haul, along with the previous monastery operations manager to help unload. The finance officer asked me to visually assess the cabin to be sure it was suitable, and, silly me, I affirmed that it was prior to flushing the toilet. Rookie mistake! And her horror that the past operations manager and I were acquaintances was a harbinger of things to come. I was told by her never to discuss my job with him. Huh?

I used the toilet for the first time shortly after moving in and it broke with my first flush. The boys tried in vain to fix it, but it was beyond help. That same day I reported the broken toilet to the officer and her response was less than satisfactory. She defensively retorted that I had deemed the cabin acceptable. Um, what? And so, my bucket-flushing saga began.

During my first weeks at my new job I was instructed to avoid interacting with staff. I was also not given the passwords to my work computer, phone and more; the finance officer told me she wanted to know if I “knew how to think” and that I should “figure out the passwords.” This was disconcerting to say the least. It proved so frustrating that I got almost nothing done in my first couple of weeks. The silence from co-workers was deafening and puzzling because I had never been in such a hostile work environment before, and certainly not at the outset as a new manager. I found out later that they were instructed to avoid me, so that no ‘gossiping’ or idle or malicious conversation would take place.

Things just got weirder from there. Even though I was theoretically in charge of overall security I was never given permission to have a method of after-hours communication with the main residence or shrine building. My cabin had hook-ups for a landline and internet, but I was forbidden to get services. A cell signal was non-existent because it didn’t reach my remote mountain top cabin. I could receive an occasional delayed text, and one morning a message from the past operations manager appeared. Apparently, he had gotten a call in the middle of the night because the elevator alarm had alerted and the company still had only his contact information.

The situation must have resolved itself because no one confessed to being trapped in the elevator. Staff had been instructed by me that if they truly needed help or if there was an emergency that required my presence to send someone to the cabin and knock on my door; otherwise, we had no other means of contact. I was also concerned for my own safety, since I had no method of requesting emergency assistance for myself. The inability to call the gas company after running out of propane again, such as what had happened early in the fall, was a troubling and very real concern.

I had my first meeting with the monastery president a couple of weeks after I started my new job. I was hoping that his status as a high Buddhist teacher would make him easier to reason with.

An esteemed co-worker had the best explanation of him, "He's clever, but not in a good way."

Precisely. This was the beginning of cementing my belief that Buddhist politics weren't different than any of the other major religions (yes, I realize what I just typed), even though I had never drunk the Kool-Aid anyway. I was just looking for a safe and ethical place to live and work. And, surprisingly and ironically, I was really, really good at my job. Sadly, I ended up encountering the extreme opposite of ethics and safety in a big way.

After the first couple of weeks, I began to panic. I had no idea how I would cope with the solitude of being one of very few managers, the reluctance of staff to socialize with a newbie who might not last long and the isolation of my cabin. My cabin would have been great for a silent retreat, but not so much for a normal life.

Seven weeks into starting my job I drafted a just-in-case resignation letter, since I had a feeling it wasn't going to end well. An excerpt of it read; "[The monastery] is the North American home of His Holiness. As such, it is a blessed and holy place. Many people, teachers, lamas, nuns, lay people and staff alike, contribute to the well-being of His Holiness's home. The beauty of the land, the holiness of the shrine, and the near-completion of the stupas are all sights to behold and experience. As the time draws closer to His Holiness's residence here, it is importance to ask whether [the monastery] is operating at its best, so that it is the most perfect home for His Holiness. Right now, I believe, the answer is no." Little did I know that bigger problems regarding the holiness of Karmapa's home were on the horizon.

Much to my astonishment, the bucket-flushing continued. Providing code-compliant housing seemed to be beyond the monastery's purview. I was informed, also to my surprise, that I was on probation, a condition of my employment that I was never apprised of. Regardless, at this point in my monastery career I had learned to work around the rampant ineptitude to get anything done. Activity began to become more streamlined in spite of upper management, and the positive changes in quite a few staff members were palpable. Every day I made it my business to greet anyone I saw rather than the previous sad normal I first encountered of having people walking around with their heads down to avoid interchange. Front office staff and I were still forbidden to interact, but we were learning to work around it.

Beautiful things were beginning to happen. Housekeeping got organized beyond what I thought possible. The commercial kitchen storage room was inventoried and organized despite the obstinate reluctance of the kitchen manager. It was a pleasant surprise when he thanked me for making it so much easier to find supplies. With pressure I got the kitchen so far into compliance that it got a flawless annual health inspection. And, one day a staff member from the front desk and I were laughing so hard in the office that the president cautiously peered, scowling, out of his door to make sure that nothing was amiss. Apparently, laughter was a foreign sound...

Months later bucket-flushing was still happening in my cabin. The monastery finally got a new facilities manager. He and I did not have staff meetings with each other and we were not allowed to speak. I was to communicate with him via work order only. This bothered me because I'm a firm believer in relationship building and teamwork. Since he did not talk to me, when his contractors, like the plumber and electrician, showed up on his days off I ended up having to deal with them as best I could, by the seat of my pants. My concerns did not bother him in the least because all he worried about was how to please upper management and anyone in a red robe.

That winter season featured record-breaking brutally cold temperatures. I had run out of propane once already in the fall. As a precaution, because there were no measuring gauges on my ancient tanks, I twice verbally requested that the facilities manager please call the propane company to check on and top off my tanks.

The finance officer was aware of my repeated requests. I would simply have called the supply company myself, but I had been repeatedly instructed that I must go through the facilities manager for my propane request even though I was perfectly capable of doing it myself. On the day of the upcoming coldest night, I asked for the third time if propane inquiries had been made. They had not, and the facilities manager had not a single shred of remorse. I retorted that I would call them.

The company told me that a delivery would happen the following week, but not before that night. I checked my neighbor's tank gauges and saw that they were half full. The company assured me that mine were probably half full also. I sniffed the tanks' couplings to be sure there was no leak, which was the reason why I ran out of fuel in the recent autumn. Then I made peace with myself that I'd done the best I could to make sure that I and my four-legged companions would wake up the next morning rather than be frozen corpses.

The next morning, as I learned of the daily goings-on at the main residence when I got to work, I found out that they had run out of heating oil during the night. The facilities manager had forgotten to check the fuel levels of the under-sized oil tanks in the frigid weather.

It was month number five of bucket-flushing, and I was a reluctant pro. The toilet was a 1980s low-flush, European import installed by a misguided past general contractor. His admirably green intentions were well-meaning but, as any experienced contractor knows, repairs matter. Cost and availability of parts are really important. My toilet could not be fixed.

At my next meeting with the president and the finance officer I mentioned that I was looking for off-campus housing with working plumbing. The red-robed president looked unsympathetically at me and brusquely told me that I was to remain in the cabin until I was off probation. Replacing the toilet, a pricey proposition because the waste pipe was to European specifications, or a timeline for such, was not discussed. Soon after, the town's building inspector called my office to make an appointment for the annual fire inspection. I passed the message to the appropriate people. That afternoon I got an odd verbal request that I find off-campus housing immediately, to which I responded that it was not affordable on my salary.

The next morning, I got summoned to the finance officer's lair as soon as I stepped into the building. The president was unable to join our meeting. I was being fired, effective the previous day. Talk about collateral damage; it seemed that monastery brass preferred that I not be living on campus while town inspectors were nosing around, since my cabin was obviously not up to code. At the conclusion of our meeting the finance officer invited me to have a cup of tea with her in the cafeteria; the firing was just business, she said, the tea invitation was personal. I dryly declined.

I was a bit of an anomaly at the monastery; I wasn't serving in my position with its poverty level wages as a retiree with a pension, nor did I have a home to go back to. I was given ten days to vacate the cabin, but now I had no job and certainly no place to move to in such a short time frame. Adding to my frustration were the extraordinary obstacles interfering with my efforts to search for a new career and home; in the cabin I had no internet and no phone, no connection with the outside world. The monastery couldn't have made it more difficult for me to get out of there even if they had tried.

A couple of weeks passed, with me squatting in the cabin. It was a miserable situation. I decided to attend Losar, the Tibetan Buddhist equivalent to our New Year. It is one of the holiest days on the calendar and the celebration would feature huge crowds, many red-robed people and the holiest man himself, Karmapa. I entered the shrine as unobtrusively as possible; I really didn't want to bring attention to myself or start any trouble.

I stood in the back, purposefully across the room from the malevolent finance officer. I saw her deliberately approach me and her falsely chipper voice wished me a happy holiday. I turned toward her and said absolutely nothing; I'm sure the expression on my face said much more. Right there in the shrine, on one of the holiest days of the year with the service about to begin, she lit into me. I quietly stood my ground and answered her accusations with one-word responses. She finally wore herself out. I thought that was the end of it, but no. I sat near staff members behind the sound system hoping to regroup and enjoy the holiday. She deliberately chose to sit two rows in front of me, and then turned around to glare at me periodically. Her repugnant actions were noticed and she was escorted from the shrine. In a more just world she would finally have been relieved of her management position at the monastery, but she was not.

Unbeknownst to her, I had kept a written timeline, along with documents, of events. I shared it with anyone I thought might be able to influence change. I knew I was jeopardizing any standing I had left in the community, but I had nothing more to lose. I was banned by her from campus, which was unfortunate since I needed their Wi-Fi for job searches, and people were avoiding me because of the vicious rumors she was spreading about me, that I was a 'threat' to the monastery. Honestly, if her primary goal was to get rid of me she was making it incredibly difficult to leave. Eventually she did get her wings clipped, and life was a little more peaceful for a while. I was banned from another nearby Buddhist community because I'd become such a political hot potato, which by this point was becoming a source of pride for me. Quite a few people had been banned from the main monastery by the finance officer, most for utterly ridiculous reasons, but I'm the only one I know of that got banned from both local Buddhist centers.

In my attempts to remain somewhat connected to the community for the sake of my sanity, a while later I attended another holy event in the shrine room. (I was banned from the main campus and residences, but it was apparently beyond the finance manager's capabilities to ban me from the shrine.) It was a small, intimate affair, with mostly monastery staff and a few locals. Karmapa presided. We chanted and prayed for a while...and, unusually, Karmapa immediately retired into the back chambers afterward. Normally participants hand over their white katas (no good Buddhist attends 'church' without a kata!) and are blessed at the conclusion of the ceremony. So, we lingered.

A visibly reluctant Karmapa reemerged, probably prodded by his shrine-keeper/handler. He was not enthusiastic. I took my place in line and approached the young Karmapa. Normally supplicants keep their eyes downcast as a sign of respect during their blessing. I looked up at His Holiness who was perched on the dais above me. His face was a sour mask of ill-temperedness. My eyes widened in astonishment and I stopped dead in my tracks. There was no way in Samsara I wanted to be blessed by a petulant holy man. The shrine-keeper, an imposing power-filled man, noticed my displeasure and ran interference. As a Tibetan high holy man, he was not permitted to grab at a woman, but if he was able, I think he would have physically hauled me out of line because he was that angry at my transgression of seeing and visibly objecting.

I had long had suspicions that things were not going well for young Karmapa. He had not adapted gracefully to his highly unusual life and he was, to put it frankly, a bit bad-tempered and spoiled despite his years training and praying. I could sympathize with him somewhat. I cannot imagine the tremendous weight that was on his broad, but youthful, shoulders. However, if I was able to act as the mother figure the Karmapa clearly needed, I would have slapped him Cher-style (from the film 'Moonstruck') and told him to snap out of it. Honestly, I know of few more spoiled men than the Tibetan holy men I knew at the monastery. Collectively they were a miserable, snotty group, with only a few notable exceptions who actually walked their talk.

The long, cold winter dragged on. I had to sneak into the monastery's basement to use the internet to find a new home and job so I could make my escape. One of the interesting side effects of being isolated in my cabin was that I ended up on an inadvertent silent retreat. The much-coveted silent retreat usually requires permission from the campus president and can cost fairly big bucks. Normally training or guidance happens prior to or in conjunction with the retreat, but I was on my own.

Between the stress of not only isolation, but also with the uncertainty of my circumstances, I began to go deep into my psyche to places I'd never consciously visited before. I wouldn't recommend this for the faint of heart. I remember abruptly becoming fully alert in the middle of one night and I should have been terrified. I had come to an edge of an abyss in my mind. I had a choice; to either leap off a cliff into the unknown, or to remain intact. It was clear as day, it wasn't a dream, and the choice had to be made. I chose to remain intact. I still have no idea what was behind door number one, but I suspect I would have been taken out of my cabin in a strait jacket.

Eventually I found another job and home.

In late spring of 2021 information of an unthinkable event bubbled to the surface and rocked the Tibetan Buddhist world. Allegedly Karmapa impregnated a novice nun while he was visiting his monastery and the nearby women's retreat center in 2017. It appears that in his downtime when he was not busy blessing the stupas he had engaged in extracurricular activities.

Interestingly, the search is on for other victims of Karmapa's unwanted attentions. The internet is filled with such claims, only with a twist. Many of these women actually *want* to become Karmapa's baby-

mama. There is a strange obsession, especially among Chinese women, to marry Karmapa, have his baby or both. When I was working at the monastery in 2017, I encountered one of them who was determined to find Karmapa on campus. She had decided that since Karmapa was in America at that time that he *must* be hiding at the monastery. He was not.

Oddly, many of these ladies, I called them Karmapa-hags in my mind, all wore the same type of deity-chasing uniform; a maroon polyester skirt and blouse and chunky, unattractive black heels. The one standing in front of me was furious and convinced I was lying about his absence. Her face contorted into a mask of ugliness as she demanded to know of his whereabouts. Finally, I pointed out that the monastery was deserted, and that if Karmapa was in residence that it would be abuzz with activity. She eventually took me at my word and left in a huff no doubt to try again another time. One of my co-workers related a bizarre story about another chaser that showed up in the monastery's courtyard to twirl and prance and profess her eternal availability by dressing in white for her imaginary upcoming nuptials.

In late summer two lawsuits became live; Karmapa himself was going to be sued, understandably for child support, and additionally for spousal support. It seems that the now former student nun (she was ejected from the retreat center when the administration was informed of her pregnancy) and he had communicated for quite some time during the Covid-19 pandemic by some sort of electronic means across the miles that separated the two of them. Apparently, he had promised to provide for her and the child. A third party had allegedly sent her many hundreds of thousands of dollars to that end. And then he ceased communication.

The young lady and her attorneys claim that during the time of the pandemic the rules of marriage had changed, and that Karmapa's actions and attention constituted marriage. A judge agreed that this might be a possibility. The trial was scheduled for the spring of 2022, but never happened.

Horribly, many Buddhist cultists believe that Karmapa is infallible and therefore had a valid reason for his repugnant behavior. I belatedly admit my naiveté; I thought that finally there would be a day of reckoning for Tibetan Buddhism and all its cultish ways. I scrolled online for comments about Karmapa's behavior, although perhaps 'alleged crime' would be a better term, and the resulting child. I saw many, many

supporters who reinforced the collective Buddhist opinion that since Karmapa was supposedly faultless that his actions were pure. I did not see many dissenting comments.

Apparently, there was a paternity test, the results of which are deafeningly unknown. An out of court settlement was reached, which was probably her best outcome, but what about the bigger picture of the future of Tibetan Buddhism under a soiled deity? It is beyond time that Tibetan Buddhism, especially in the west, answers for its rampant religious toxicity and corruption.