

Showdown

Padmasambhava stands on the high plain. The wind pulls at the opening of the small tent he slept in, like a dog worrying a rent in a carcass, threatening to rip it to pieces. The dry skin of the tent wouldn't last a week up here. It would be a sky burial: if he dies up here, the wind and the few ravenous birds will turn his body into a mummified tent. Then the bag of skin too would be consumed by this emptiness. The air is cold and dry. The shamen keep back. From above they look like a crescent constructed opposite a single star. I should have brought more people, he thinks. He looks around him. The mountains thrust up into the sky like jagged teeth. That is just one way of looking at the horizon. The blue sky in front of him hammers down between the peaks like a colossal wedge, splitting the earth. He has no fear. A few people are gathering around the rim of this circular plateau. The ground on which he stands is being transformed into an arena. He must defeat the shamen. A theatre. He must put on a good show. A meditation room. This is just a stage of practice. A mandala. This is already myth. At the edge of the battle-field the teeth of native Tibetans flash in the sun as they tear and chew tough rations. They squat and settle down to observe.

The first Bon priest separates himself from the line. He walks in a straight line to a point on the line that would connect the fourth shaman with Padmasambhava, if this were a geometric figure. He takes up a position in the centre of the mandala. The ground they stand on is glowing in the mountain light. It's as if they are standing on the surface of the sun. The priest stands erect. He's a short man, arms held rigid from his body, pointing to the earth. In his black costume he looks like a premonitory vision of a stealth jet. The posture is unambiguous. It invites Padmasambhava to step up; the chest is displayed, inviting him to attack. His black eyes sparkle deep within a feathered head-dress. He's a carrion-bird. He aims to rip his prey apart. Crowing over it as he feasts on dead flesh. Padmasambhava steps forward until he too occupies the centre of this circus ring.

The Bon champion does not strike. He has no weapon. He chants a monotonous phrase. He makes some passes with his hands. His movements begin to mime the cocky strut of a crow. His upper thighs, muscular from mountain living, veiled in feather, seem to shake the ground when he stamps his feet to the earth. Those watching the dance will swear they saw a huge spirit rise from the smaller circle described by the dancer's orbit, as if his magic had thrown darkness down on to the sun-drenched disc he shimmied across. A darkness answered by another, deep within the earth - one that can never be touched by the sun's rays. A force that is not limited, that does not inhere in any one creature but which hides in us all. A parasite which feeds on us all. A fear that energises us. The watchers saw the huge bird which eats corpses rise from the ground and attack the newcomer. One man tells his neighbour that it killed his yak last week. The animal was in good health, young. He'd heard a sound in the night and looked out to see a deeper shadow on the darkness. It leant over the prone animal, taking something from its mouth with fast stabbing motions. A bird demon plucking heart's blood from the screaming beast.

The lotus-born guru faces the freakish opponent. In the sky above his head, a huge figure materialises. It is himself. Padmasambhava. The lotus-born. The beautiful flower rising from the sludge. The rot, the crap: so nourishing. Suffering can give you a quick route to insight. Pain helps you to destroy the old self. It's a kind of snakes and ladders of the six realms. It's horrible in the hell-realms, but a spiral staircase leads up, out of the game, out of the cycle of rebirth driven by greed, hatred and ignorance. In their realm the gods have it so easy that they are not even looking for anything else. He's enraged by the Bon man tapping into primal fears. A memory: meditating beside the corpse of his father on the burning grounds. He allows his father's shell to speak a last farewell: 'It's only pain; get your retaliation in first.' He becomes fearless. The diamond thunderbolt in his hand blasts the bird-phantom into dust. The dust falls through the dawn-light, changing colours. The children ooh and aah at the pyrotechnic display. This is already myth. A small flower grows from every tiny impact crater made by the demon dust. The flowers disappear before anyone can pick them. The huge Padmasambhava smiles, his clothes shimmer in the morning light. The thin mountain air seems to rob the vision of its colouring, then the people watching realise that the spectre is fading, dissolving back into the empty sky, into nothingness, into mind.

The first priest paces back to his position in the line. The lone figure watches him pace the vector of his defeat and waits for the next challenge. As soon as the first regains his position, the figure at the opposite end of the line begins to walk towards the centre. Inscribing a triangle within the circle. Like an arrow-head.

This one is more powerful. Okay. I was born ready. The second striker is dressed as a snake, a naga. He sways as if to mesmerise prey. For a moment he turns Padmasambhava into a petrified hamster, hypnotised by fear. Now he sheds his skin. No separation between the man and the projection. They are at one. He sloughs the skin onto the ground. It goes eeling down into the

dirt. The blue-black of the skin of the leather-headed lizard stains the earth again, threatens to quench the light emanating from the sun-disc. The crowd takes a step back in unison, harrowed by memories of steps taken in the dark onto coils of muscle that sink deadly teeth into exposed flesh. Fever, death. In the incandescent arena for this spiritual cage-fight the pair are swallowed in a haze of steam. Padmasambhava is stamping. The earth beneath his feet burns away the poison of the serpent's skin. In the sky over their heads a massive hand seizes the snake-god. It shakes and chokes the venom out; that too boils away on the burning ground.

A man in the outer ring is already thinking about how he will carry this story back to his village. The battle lasted seven hours – no, it was seven days of conflict. The new magic is stronger than our tired gods. We saw freedom take on fear and grind it into submission. He was so angry; he hates ignorance. The third attack came from a priestess. In the sky she rolled her hips towards him. Her hair was tied into thick ropes. We could hear the crack and rattle as he shook her head. Her breasts were unnaturally round, her sex ringed with rows of razor-teeth. The newcomer sat down, adopted the lotus position. She draped herself on him; he clutched her tight and spoke into her ear. We could hear his voice. He seduced her: join me.

The fourth was a dragon. Padmasambhava withstood the fire of its breath and then snapped it in two. The fifth priest charged in the shape of a yak. Padmasambhava kept perfectly still as the beast ploughed into him. He was unmoveable. He clove its skull with a vajra-axe. The sixth shaman took the form of a lion. Padmasambhava gave his own lion-roar, the mountain-cat shattered into ten thousand fragments.

So finally they stood facing each other. The new guru and the high priest. On either side of him stood three defeated comrades. You could see he knew it was over. He walked up like the final kicker in a penalty shoot-out when the result is decided, his head down. He has to take his shot – for pride, because there's a pattern to this showdown, because he is the captain.

The Bon priest multiplied his body, attacking from three sides. We saw the magician scythe through the high-priests with a flaming sword. The shaman dove into the packed soil, swam through the earth, tried to swallow the man whole. Padmasambhava levitated above the ground, seated on the air, waiting in a meditation posture. The battle continued. Then Padmasambhava turned and moved outside the central zone in which he'd been fighting. He walked back to his small tent. From the ground in front of it he uprooted a peg, shaking it free of the ropes. The tent slumped, robbed of the tension that was keeping it in shape. He held the thing up. A three-sided wooden wedge. A tent-peg. He walked back to his opponent and cast him down upon the ground. His body was huge, blue-black. Lightning bolts flashed from his eye-lids, but the only weapon he held was the phurba, the demon dagger. The watchers saw him strike down hard, pinning their arch-bishop to the soil, fixing him there. But the thunder-nail did not pierce his flesh. Padmasambhava knelt over his fallen opponent, staked to the ground through a fold of cloth under his armpit. He ignored the light-show playing out on the plasma-screen of the heavens.

'Fear is finished. I've got the only game in town. We never teach without mentioning compassion. I can use you, you've got some nice moves.'