

LOST IN THE PROCESS

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The scene is the garden of a Short Path monastery at the southern border of Tibet. The scene is a bare stage.

The characters are:

IMO, a novice of the Short Path monastery  
The NOVICE MASTER of the Short Path monastery  
EXAMINER I  
EXAMINER II

The OBJECTS which figure so prominently in the play are as follows:

A bridle  
A pair of brass finger cymbals  
A faded fan  
A battered iron cooking pot  
A dented water-dipper  
A copper tube  
A rusty spatula  
A pair of scales  
A small hoe  
A transistor radio  
A croquet mallet handle  
A scroll  
A pair of dark wooden keys on a brass ring  
A small footstool  
A mitre-like head-piece

With the exception of another small scroll which EXAMINER I carries, and of the two burlap sacks in which they themselves are carried, the above are the only real objects on the stage,

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The "Short Path" is a Tibetan mode of Buddhism which promises its followers Enlightenment in a single lifetime.

"Samsara" is the (illusory) world perceived by the senses.

"Tulku" is a title of respect.

The Tibetans hold that a Lama far advanced along the path is able to choose the circumstances of his next incarnation and, before his death, foretell where his rebirth will take place--not with great accuracy but with enough detail to enable his colleagues to discover his new incarnation.... Many tests have to be applied before the new incarnation is accepted and invested with the deceased Lama's titles and functions. For example, some thirty objects are placed before a child who seems likely to be the one for whom a search is being made; of these, half once belonged to the late Lama and half to strangers. If the child unerringly picks out the right objects and rejects the others, a high degree of probability is established and other tests follow until no doubt remains.

John Blofield, The Tantric  
Mysticism of Tibet

LOST IN THE PROCESS

(On a bare stage IMO, squatting and intent, mimes laying tile around the rim of a pool. The NOVICE MASTER hovers over him, now pointing to a tile that has been placed unevenly, which IMO promptly straightens, or to a bulge of extra putty, which IMO promptly smooths.)

Enter the two EXAMINERS. EXAMINER II carries two enormous burlap sacks, bulging with the sharp-angled OBJECTS. EXAMINER I carries a small scroll which he consults in asking his first questions, then puts away.)

EXAMINER I

Is this the Short Path monastery?

NOVICE MASTER

Yes.

EXAMINER I

The last Short Path monastery before the border?

NOVICE MASTER

Yes.

(EXAMINER II sets down the two sacks, which he unpacks during the following, laying out the OBJECTS in a line across the apron, like footlights.)

EXAMINER I

There is among you a novice named Imo?

(IMO for the first time stops work, looks up at the NOVICE MASTER.)

NOVICE MASTER

(to IMO)

Go in.

(IMO mimes hastily gathering up his tools; exits.)

One of our adepts is called by that name.

EXAMINER I

You know what is rumored of this adept?

(Pause.)

You know--

NOVICE MASTER

It is given out that he can see the future. A fortune-teller.

EXAMINER II

(as he unpacks)

Much more than a fortune-teller. He has been seen rolling around the gorges in a ball of fire. The story is told of a wedding where he forgot himself and levitated through sheer inadvertency, afterwards apologizing. Snow is said to melt against his wrist.

NOVICE MASTER

These things are given out of him.

EXAMINER I

And in your opinion?

NOVICE MASTER

He doesn't need that.

EXAMINER I

Need! What are you thinking of?

NOVICE MASTER

He's a plain boy, as you'll find when you question him.

EXAMINER II

(still working)

We question him? We don't have any questions.

EXAMINER I

It's time we introduced ourselves. We are Examiners from the Great Monastery at Lhasa.

(The NOVICE MASTER bows; EXAMINERS I and II return the bow.)

The spirit of the late Dalai Lama is thought to have made the return. Our mission is to discover in whom: for he in whom that spirit dwells must mount the Dalai-throne. Now since His Holiness' death occurred some fourteen years ago, our search focuses on thirteen-year-olds--especially thirteen-year-olds of whom, like your novice, one hears extraordinary things.

NOVICE MASTER

One hears "extraordinary things" of many journeyers on the Short Path.

EXAMINER I

One does, yes. Which is precisely why some further yardstick was felt to be necessary.

(indicates the OBJECTS, which EXAMINER II has now got lined up along the apron)

These are the possessions of the late Dalai Lama.

NOVICE MASTER

(after a quick look)

They don't even add up to a personality, let alone a Dalai Lama.

EXAMINER I

Very few of them were, in fact, his. In fact, just

(quick calculation)

three were. It seems reasonable to suppose that the boy in

whom the Dalai-spirit has made the return will be able to say which three. Will you inform the Novice Imo of our wish to speak with him.

NOVICE MASTER

That was him I had here with me when you came up.

EXAMINER II

What! The boy you had laying tile? That's heavy work for a prodigy. Couldn't you have been doing that?

NOVICE MASTER

As he was being punished--

EXAMINER II

(hastily retreating)

Oh, of course; no, I only meant, because you seemed to be going over all the same ground anyway...

EXAMINER I

For what was he being punished?

NOVICE MASTER

For not having given warning of a evil which--it was later learned--he had long foreseen.

EXAMINER I

For not having given warning--? Well, that tells us we're not dealing with a self-advertiser, anyway. Would you please--

(IMO enter quickly.)

Oh. There he is. Dear son, we are merchants who angle for the trade of the farm boys at the Mountain Fair. But we have

all this

(indicates OBJECTS)

and no way of knowing what to put forward will catch their eye. You know the likings of a young fellow, if only because they are the likings you have put behind to make such progress on the Short Path. Will you now, in that spirit of helpfulness which the Path enjoins, do us the kindness of pointing out three objects which have value in your eyes.

(IMO runs his eyes over the line of OBJECTS and, with an almost impudent haste, selects out the COPPER TUBE, the SPATULA and the HOE. EXAMINERS I and II exchange puzzled glances.)

What lay behind your choice of those objects, dear son?

IMO

This hoe I can use to smooth out the dirt beneath where the tiles go; with the spatula, I can flatten any that are warping; and then I can even the putty between tiles using this tube.

EXAMINER I

I'm afraid you're not taking quite the point of view...

IMO

I am asked to say which of these objects has value for me--

(He looks to the NOVICE MASTER for guidance. The NOVICE MASTER, with a helplessness he seems rather pleased about, turns it back to EXAMINER I.)

EXAMINER II

But not so much, value for the task at hand as... what interests you. Or might interest a boy your age at the Mountain Fair.



## NOVICE MASTER

Put the tools back, Imo, and in kindness to these gentlemen--

(IMO begins to protest.)

You're right, they're all of the nature of Void, all equally, you're right to see that. But now, give some former self, some Imo not yet upon the Path, his way; and choose.

(IMO considers the OBJECTS more carefully, but seems at a loss, without any principle of choice. Then his eye lights on the RADIO. He clearly has no idea what it is. He picks it up. It begins to play--spectacular static. Fascinated, he turns it over in his hand; discovers that the dials move; twists them--but succeeds only in varying the timbre of the static. He sinks to the floor, legs crossed, so as to be able to give his full attention to the radio.

EXAMINER II makes as if to interrupt. EXAMINER I checks him; but then, after a moment--)

## EXAMINER I

My son--

(IMO oblivious)

My son---

## NOVICE MASTER

(sharply)

Imo.

(Reluctantly, IMO looks up at the NOVICE MASTER, who refers him to EXAMINER I.)

## EXAMINER I

My son, I think you are forgetting you were asked to choose three from among our wares.

(Relieved that he is not going to be interrupted, IMO distractedly scoops up the two OBJECTS nearest the RADIO--the BRIDLE and the DIPPER--and holds them out to EXAMINER I without ever taking his eyes off the RADIO.

EXAMINER I receives the BRIDLE and DIPPER from

him, and with a disappointed air, takes them over to EXAMINER II. While he is doing so, the NOVICE MASTER snaps his fingers; IMO reluctantly sets down the RADIO, rises, and moves back.

EXAMINER I holds out the BRIDLE and DIPPER to EXAMINER II, as if that said everything.)

EXAMINER II

Inconclusive. You can see he lost interest once the radio caught his eye. He wasn't even looking after that--just grabbed the two next objects in the line. Repeat the test.

EXAMINER I

We've never repeated the test with any other boy.

EXAMINER II

We've never heard such rumors of any other boy. It's worth being sure.

EXAMINER I

He didn't get one object right!

(EXAMINER II looks up quickly at EXAMINER I.)

All right, we'll try again. Novice Master--

(The NOVICE MASTER snaps his fingers and IMO comes forward, excited, his eye on the RADIO.)

NOVICE MASTER

It seems that you have not yet satisfied these gentlemen.

EXAMINER I

Once again--

(IMO makes a dash for the RADIO.)

EXAMINER II

(getting between IMO and the RADIO)

Other than the radio. Leaving the radio out of it for a moment.

(EXAMINER II stuffs the RADIO in his sack. IMO, glaring at EXAMINER II, makes a point of snatching up the three OBJECTS nearest him-- the FOOTSTOOL, the SCALES and the COOKING-POT-- in ostentatiously mechanical succession. He holds them out straight-arm to EXAMINER II, looking off in the opposite direction.)

EXAMINER II

That's not choosing, that's simple spite!

EXAMINER I

On the contrary, it makes the third time he's chosen!

NOVICE MASTER

(to EXAMINER II)

You seem determined to go on until it comes out the way you want. What kind of test is that?

EXAMINER II

What kind of test is it when every time it turns into something else?

EXAMINER I

I'm afraid I agree with my colleague there, Novice Master; there has been that tendency. If we could run the test once, accurately, without overtones, no one could be readier than I to let it go at that.

NOVICE MASTER

(gently, privately)

Imo, my son.

(IMO comes over to the NOVICE MASTER, a little guiltily, but relaxes when he sees the communing look in the NOVICE MASTER's eyes.)

What is the teaching of the Short Path concerning the ages of man?

IMO

(quietly, as if reading the answer in the NOVICE MASTER's eyes)

"In me is the child I was, and the death I go to;  
In me, the purity I seek, and the snares I fly from;  
In me are the hours just past death, in the Bardo state;  
In me the moment of rebirth from the tumultuous womb."

NOVICE MASTER

(nods)

Imo: go in and bring me the child. Bring me the child in you, Imo.

(IMO nods slightly and closes his eyes. When he opens them again a moment later, he has become a much younger boy--a child.)

NOVICE MASTER

(presenting IMO to the EXAMINERS)

Here is one who will meet your queries with the simplicity of an infant.

EXAMINER I

(tentatively)

Imo...

(IMO runs over to EXAMINER I, throws himself playfully at his feet and buries his head against his leg.)

Imo has been such a good little man, here are all these toys for him. Or, not all of them--we want to save some for the other good children, don't we, Imo?--but Imo may pick three toys, oh yes he may! Pick your three toys, little Imo.

(After some childish poking at this or that object, IMO settles on the FINGER CYMBALS, the

CROQUET Mallet HANDLE and the FAN, all of which he plays with together.

EXAMINER I turns to EXAMINER II with an expression of vindication.)

EXAMINER II

(dogged)

He took the ones any boy would take.

NOVICE MASTER

That's the problem with your whole way of doing this.

EXAMINER I

(at once shaking his head to contradict the NOVICE MASTER, and verbally contradicting EXAMINER II)

Well, then he is "any" boy, he's not the Dalai Lama.

EXAMINER II

Even the Dalai Lama, at a certain age--

EXAMINER

Where is our whole approach if we cannot assume the uniqueness of the Dalai Lama?

NOVICE MASTER

Fundamental difficulty.

EXAMINER II

(to EXAMINER I)

He's right; it is a fundamental difficulty, and I see only one way to resolve it: tell the boy.

EXAMINER I

Tell him?

EXAMINER II

Unless you're willing to go on confronting technicalities indefinitely.

EXAMINER I

Tell him what?

EXAMINER II

Who we are; what really brings us here; what this is all about. What it could mean for him.

EXAMINER I

But that would be flinging wide the door to any ambitions of his.

NOVICE MASTER

Yes, what about that?

EXAMINER II

But he's not ambitious; we've already established that: the business about his keeping back what he knew of the future... Reluctance to admit his gift's the very thing he's being punished for, according to you. Wake him.

NOVICE MASTER

(in a private voice)

Imo.

(IMO stops playing; his eyes close for an instant. When he opens them, he is himself again. He quickly rises and brushes himself off and faces the NOVICE MASTER for further instructions.)

## EXAMINER II

Imo,

(IMO a little startled by the presence of someone other than the NOVICE MASTER)

we have resolved on being frank with you. As you have perhaps guessed, we are no merchants, but tulku, Holy Examiners.

(IMO glances at the NOVICE MASTER, receives a nod of approval, and bows to the EXAMINERS, who each put out a hand to bless him.)

Certain of your feats--while nothing beyond what a Short Path adept often attains to--have led some to suppose that you are the incarnation of the Dalai-principle in this generation. Our mission is to ascertain whether this is in fact so. The objects we have set before you are no merchants' wares, but the personal effects of the late Dalai Lama; or at least, some of them are. Some three. It is felt that he in whom the Dalai-spirit has made the return should be able to identify the three. Will you now, trusting in whatever mandala deity you are accustomed to invoke in your meditations, point out if possible the three possessions of the late Dalai Lama.

(IMO kneels before the NOVICE MASTER, who blesses him.)

IMO now goes slowly down the line, pausing before each OBJECT, opening himself to it. Several times he puts out his hand to take an OBJECT, and at the last moment draws back; once he even takes hold of an OBJECT, but quickly releases it again. Finally, he selects the SCROLL, the HEAD-PIECE and the KEYS, and comes expectantly before the EXAMINERS with his choices.)

## EXAMINER II

Well, that settles it.

(begins to re-pack bags)

EXAMINER I

What do you mean, that settles it?

EXAMINER II

(a little amazed at the question)

I mean we've now had a fair running of the test and he didn't identify the correct objects.

EXAMINER I

He identified two of the correct objects. Two out of three.

NOVICE MASTER

Buddha! doesn't it have to be unanimous?

EXAMINER II

Yes, of course it has to be unanimous.

(to EXAMINER I)

What are you thinking of?

EXAMINER I

(retreating a little, but dogged)

Just that we should give some consideration to a person who only got one wrong.

NOVICE MASTER

Only one wrong! Out of three? Is that so negligible? If it was twenty--I mean, twenty to pick, out of some much larger number--then perhaps one wrong would be "only one." Although even then...

(struck by a thought)

How did you ever hit on three, anyway; I mean, why not twenty? For that matter, why not two? Yes, suppose it was only two:



in that case would you still be so inclined to see one wrong as negligible?

(shakes his head)

No, you can't let mathematics into it or everything changes.

EXAMINER I

I'm not saying we should disregard the fact that he mistakenly included the scroll, only that we also give some weight--

EXAMINER II

The scroll? His one wrong wasn't the scroll.

EXAMINER I

What are you talking about?

EXAMINER II

You know as well as I, the scroll was His Holiness' personal copy of the death-writings, annotated in his own hand.

It was the keys the boy got wrong.

EXAMINER I

Those keys opened His Holiness' private chantry!

EXAMINER II

But that's nonsense, I can recall to you the exact occasion, the very caravanserai, where those keys came into our possession.

(privately) *Really?*

Don't you remember, we were at first so puzzled, and then later--

(EXAMINER I shakes his head impatiently, is just about to reply--)

NOVICE MASTER

But, now: here! Surely there can't be any doubt in your minds which are the actual possessions? That would make nonsense of your whole procedure!

EXAMINER I

It does add a dimension...

NOVICE MASTER

How could such uncertainty ever have arisen? As tulku, you must have spent your entire lives in the presence of the Dalai, attended on his death-bed.

EXAMINER I

The uncertainty arose later. The late Dalai was, as you know, widely held to be a saint. Consequently, after his death any possessions of his came to be regarded as relics. As a result, many were stolen. Nearly all, in fact.

EXAMINER II

(musing)

Strange, the idea of relics: that one agglomeration of Void should be valued over another...

NOVICE MASTER

Strange your raising that question as you go about the countryside with your bag of very distinctive agglomerations. So you're down to three?

EXAMINER II

Well, we think three...

NOVICE MASTER

You mean the stealing continues? They steal from you?

## EXAMINER I

Zealots follow us everywhere, watching their moment...

## NOVICE MASTER

So each morning there's a few less objects than you put away the night before...?

## EXAMINER I

Unfortunately, it's not that simple. A few steal outright. But most realize that if all the identifying objects were to disappear, a new Dalai could never be chosen and Tibet would sink into the snows. So what most of them do is, to first carefully study the object they have their eye on, and make a replica of it, which they then leave behind in exchange, both to prevent detention and to enable us to get on with our search. It is only long afterwards, if ever, that such impostures come to light. This copper tube, for example: a copper tube was certainly among the original possessions of the Dalai, and we assumed this was it until one day last week when the plating began to wear off, letting us see through to the lead beneath.

## EXAMINER II

Of course, every forgery we do uncover, there may be half a dozen we don't. And it's an interesting reflection that the thieves themselves share in this uncertainty: they may be fashioning replicas of replicas--and receiving replicas for their trouble.

NOVICE MASTER

But you don't have to just sit there and be deluded, do you? There are ways of verifying these things. Those objects I'mo picked, for example--that scroll, those keys. What would prevent your comparing the annotations in the scroll with other examples of the Dalai's writing?

EXAMINER II

(embarrassed)

Unfortunately, those annotations are the only sample we possess of His Holiness' hand.

NOVICE MASTER

(waves impatiently)

A special case.

(to EXAMINER I)

Well, then, the key: you say it opens the royal chantry--take it back to the palace and try it in the door.

EXAMINER I

(embarrassed)

Unfortunately, the chantry was destroyed in the late rioting.

(The NOVICE MASTER makes a gesture of frustration and crosses away.)

EXAMINER I

(timidly--as if he'd already imposed enough)

Another problem: we've heard rumors recently that some of the stolen objects are being returned--out of remorse, perhaps, or fear of the Lama's spirit. But of course in the great

majority of cases we're not even sure what's been stolen, so a return could take place without our even being aware of it. For example, two nights ago a mule-driver was seen hurrying away from the tent where we keep the objects. Inspection revealed that nothing had been taken, but these scales

(holds them up)

seem to have suddenly recovered from a dent in the left pan which they acquired--with equal suddenness--some six months earlier.

(shrugs)

So it goes. The objects we believe to be genuine we suspect of being counterfeit, and the objects we know to be counterfeit may be becoming genuine again.

NOVICE MASTER

(determined to put the lid on it)

But you're sure of two of them anyway?

EXAMINER II

(after exchanging a confirmatory glance with EXAMINER I)

I think maybe we'll have to say one after this debacle.

NOVICE MASTER

All right: one. The one Imo chose--the headpiece. As far as I can see, there's your man!

(IMO looks up sharply at the NOVICE MASTER.)

EXAMINERS I and II

(together)

Oh, no, out of the question, etc.

NOVICE MASTER

Why out of the question? He picked the one object you're sure of. I admit, one isn't much, one could be luck; but so long as you're going by objects--

EXAMINER I

But we aren't going by objects.

(The NOVICE MASTER does a take.)

I mean, not exclusively. We can't, with this few. No, our coming on the next Dalai will have to have the character of a certain experience, as well as involving certain objects.

NOVICE MASTER

Now what are we getting into?

EXAMINER I

In fact, I can conceive--

(to EXAMINER II)

can't you?

EXAMINER II

Oh, definitely.

EXAMINER I

...of cases where, if the feeling were right enough, that might even compensate for a wrong object or two.

NOVICE MASTER

But there are only two! Not even two!

EXAMINER I

For example: head-piece plus copper tube plus look of recognition might well be felt as demarcating a Dalai Lama.

NOVICE MASTER

But you said the copper tube's counterfeit!

EXAMINER II

(to EXAMINER I)

Or: bridle plus spatula plus authoritative air.

EXAMINER I

(nods as if that last were a particularly telling example)

Yes, a choice like that would certainly have the character I'm talking about.

NOVICE MASTER

Whereas: Imo plus head-piece plus keys plus scroll?

EXAMINER I

Oh, no, not at all. After that crossed wire of a choice? And all those misfirings before we ever got a choice?

(shakes his head decisively)

Lama-ates are not uncovered in circumstances like those.

(anticipating NOVICE MASTER's objection)

Strong as regards the objects selected--yes. But the selection of the next Dalai Lama is going to have to involve the correct objects and feel right.

(EXAMINER II begins to re-pack the OBJECTS in the bags.)

NOVICE MASTER

Ah, so it does require a little human attentiveness, it's not all a matter of cross-checking a list.

EXAMINER I

A little human attentiveness. But we're not so much off on our own. All the oracles speak of a blinding flash that will accompany our finding the right boy.

EXAMINER II

Although, of course, whether that means a literal flash or a "flash" of conviction, or...

NOVICE MASTER

Well, between your possessions that may or may not be possessions, and your flash that may or may not be a flash-- isn't it enough to make you doubt the wisdom of the whole arrangement? The late Dalai was a farsighted, farseeing man. Would he ever have entrusted his return to a method that stood him such a good chance of getting lost in the process?

EXAMINER I

We are in the realm of Samsara, Novice Master, the place-world of illusion. What else is there to be in the process but lost?

IMO

A good answer, holy Examiner.

(The EXAMINERS bow to IMO, who bows back.)

NOVICE MASTER



NOVICE MASTER

(to EXAMINER I)

Where do you go with that insight? This is the last monastery before the Mountain Border.

EXAMINER I

Then we will pour down over Asia. Nowhere is it written that the next Dalai Lama must be Tibetan--or even from the Himalayas. You will remember that the fourth and eleventh--

EXAMINER II

And eighteenth.

EXAMINER I

--and eighteenth incarnations came to us from far to the south. Are we packed again?

(EXAMINER II indicates the packed bags.)

Goodbye, then, Novice Master. Gifted novice, I hope you don't mind "losing your chance," as it may appear to you.

IMO

If it lay in my future to be Dalai Lama, I should not have entered on the Short Path. But the Short Path is above many Lama-ates.

EXAMINER II

Do not scorn us, gifted novice.

IMO

I think you are fortunate men to have your lives as a parable on the insufficiency of matter.

EXAMINER II

A good answer, gifted novice.

(EXAMINERS I and II bow to IMO, who bows back, and depart. IMO immediately resumes "tiling the pool," as at opening. The NOVICE MASTER looks after the EXAMINERS. Suddenly a thought strikes him; he turns back and looks at IMO for a moment.)

NOVICE MASTER

Imo: what made you speak of the Examiners' search as if it were their life's work? They could find the boy they're looking for tomorrow morning.

(IMO does not answer.)

Imo: remember that it is for keeping back what you know of the future that I have confined you at this empty task.

IMO

(looking at his hands and work in disgust)

No pool-side, no materials, no tools... An evident illusion.

NOVICE MASTER

"For the aspirer beyond illusion, if he err, the prison of an illusion plain to anyone."

IMO

A deep humiliation for a Short Path adept.

NOVICE MASTER

A deserved humiliation for one who-- Imo: tell me at once the outcome of those monks' search.

IMO

(closes his eyes and keeps them closed while he speaks)

I am present on the morning, thirty years hence, when a

little male prostitute of Delhi makes a selection suitable in all respects. Great will be the rejoicing until, upon consulting the records, it is discovered that the same choice had been made years earlier by a Khmer school-boy, but had gone unnoticed at the time.

(opens his eyes)

NOVICE MASTER

Imo: does such knowledge not produce in you the slightest impulse to rush forward; warn; prevent?

IMO

(closes his eyes for the briefest moment; then opens them)

No. You have heard me express the opinion that they are fortunate men.

(IMO immediately returns to his tiling. The NOVICE MASTER ponders IMO's reply, and nods reluctant approval. But then his face clouds. He turns to IMO with his objection--but the BLACKOUT is too quick for him.)

END