

There Are No Atheists in the War Zone

by Olga Kornyushyna¹

With a comment by Lawrence Markworth

This story could begin at several points in time and space. It could start in Kyiv in the middle of February 2022 when I finally came to terms with the idea of packing an emergency backpack in case of war. The concept of the backpack is to take it and go somewhere in case of an emergency. I had about zero understanding of where I should go in case of war, and of what to pack for such an occasion. I read several blogs advising people what to pack and concluded that unless I were a special forces soldier and could carry 20 kg on my back, these lists were pretty much useless for me. I have a dog and a cat, and leaving them behind was never an option. So, I packed all the documents, including the passports for the dog and the cat, several lighters, a flashlight, spare batteries, a charger for the phone, some water, snacks for me and some food for the pets, a bowl for water for the four-legged ones and some utensils for me, cash in a plastic bag, random assortment of medicines, and a change of clothes. It was a small backpack, and I could reasonably carry it and a cat carrier and still have one hand free to take the dog on a leash. The big question was where to go with all this and what would happen when the war started. At that point, I had no answers. I just knew that we should stick together with my dog and cat, come what may. About a month before packing the backpack, I also put a miniature Buddhist statue in my purse and started carrying it everywhere. And this brings me to the alternative beginning of this story.

The story could begin in August of 2005 at the Garchen Buddhist Institute in Arizona during my first meeting with His Eminence Garchen Rinpoche, a renowned Tibetan Buddhist master and a veteran of the Tibetan rebel army that opposed the annexation of Tibet by the Chinese back in 1959. I was about to return to Ukraine with the idea of

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registering a Buddhist center there. Garchen Rinpoche gave me some advice and unexpectedly presented me with a miniature statue of Jikten Sumgon, the founder of Drikung Kagyu Lineage, the school of Tibetan Buddhism that he belonged to. The statue was filled with precious relics. It was said that it contained the relic from the previous historic Buddha and a heart relic of Jikten Sumgon himself. In any case, it was precious and important. I was told to carry it with me during all my travels. I followed this advice; however, at some point, I became complacent and left it at home for the most part. The threat of imminent war reminded me that I should go back to carrying it with me. I should probably mention that my friends and I did register a Garchen Buddhist center in Kyiv in 2006. It was not the only Buddhist center in Ukraine. The freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Ukrainian Constitution and once we jumped through some bureaucratic hoops it was quite comfortable to practice the teachings of the Buddha in Kyiv. Through the following years, we hosted several meditation retreats in Kyiv and Kyiv Olbalst with Garchen Rinpoche. The most memorable one was probably the retreat in Bucha in October 2014. The Crimea had been annexed and the war was raging in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts. That year Garchen Rinpoche was the only Buddhist master who was not afraid to visit Ukraine. We held a retreat in quite a picturesque place among the pine trees on the outskirts of Bucha. Garchen Rinpoche kept urging us to support the Ukrainian Army. He kept saying that only by supporting our Army would we be able to keep our language and country. Some people were surprised to hear it from the Buddhist teacher. However, given the history of Tibet and Rinpoche himself, it was not surprising. Once a veteran always a veteran. This Buddhist master always had a special place in his heart for the soldiers and the army that defends the people and the country. If anyone told me how relevant that advice would be and that seven and a half years later the town would be virtually destroyed by the invading Russian army and many of its residents tortured and killed during the brief occupation, I would have never believed it. Now the whole world knows Bucha. It became a symbol of the Russian war crimes against Ukrainians during the full-scale invasion that started on 24th February 2022.

On that day when the war started, I made a bad decision. I loaded my dog, my cat, the emergency backpack, a small suitcase, and food for me and the pets in the car and drove to my neighbor's country house in the village of Yasnohorodka just 20 miles from Bucha. There was virtually no information from the authorities about where to go and what to do. I thought that we had better chances outside of the big city. That was a mistake made by hundreds of Kyiv residents. Some paid for this mistake with their lives. In any case, there we were in a small country house on a street surrounded by the

beautiful pine trees of the Kyiv region. During the first days, we could hear planes that were flying to drop bombs on Hostomel and Borodyanka, we heard the explosions and the distant sounds of heavy artillery. Every day the sounds became closer. For the first three nights, we were able to sleep in the house. The bridges were blown up by the town authorities and the Ukrainian army in the nearby cities, and the Russians were looking for alternative routes to get to Kyiv. We still had an internet connection in those first three days and judging by the news it was just a matter of time before the Russians would start coming our way. Every day I would make a short video with the special Buddhist breathing exercise that calmed the mind and post it on Instagram and Facebook. I was breathing and meditating with the heavy artillery sounds in the background, my dog barking and whining.

Finally at night on 28th February, a few Russian tanks made it to the village. One of them was just across the field from us, stuck in the apple orchard and apparently lost. We woke up from the terrible sounds. The tank was shooting directly at our street. That was the first time we were shot at by a tank, so we really didn't know what it was. I grabbed the dog, and we all ran to the underground cellar where my hosts kept potatoes and canned vegetables. The night was red with explosions, the sounds terrifyingly close. At some point, people from the next house ran to our cellar as well. I was hugging the dog to make him less afraid of the sounds and silently chanting the protection mantras. In a few hours the shooting stopped.

The next morning, we found a shell crater just two hundred feet outside the house. The tank was destroyed by the Ukrainian army. The village authorities inspected it and found the documents of one tank crew member left behind. They belonged to a twenty-six-year-old guy from Buryatia. Buryatia is one of the Russian republics where Buddhism is an official religion. The head of all Russian Buddhists, Hambo Lama, resides there. The irony was not lost on me: here I was sitting in the cellar with my precious Buddhist statue, chanting the protection mantras, visualizing the Buddhist deities while being shot at by the person whose parents or grandparents were most likely Buddhist, and who probably grew up surrounded if not by Buddhist faith then by the Buddhist culture. The identification was apparently issued through a Russian name. However, it was a common practice to change native names into Russian ones as a part of the assimilation and destruction process of the native cultures during the Soviet Union times. That practice took root and continues to this day. It was clear from the picture that the soldier was of Buryatian descent. Among the soldier's papers also found a small image of the Virgin Mary of the Russian Orthodox tradition and a covid

vaccination certificate were found. The fate of the soldier was unknown. The members of the territorial defense of the village were looking for him.

Of course, I could only speculate about the story of this soldier from Buryatia. The picture of the Virgin Mary seemed to be a part of the official package given to him by the army along with his military ID and covid certificate. It was something he left behind in an attempt to save his life after shooting at our village. Along with their Russian names, the soldiers from Buryatia were apparently given the symbols of protection of the Russian Orthodox faith. Officially, it was not a Buddhist trying to kill us. It was a soldier of the Russian Army with all that came with it. Still, I felt sad and uneasy.

Day by day the fighting came closer, the shooting heavier and scarier. We spent most of the time in the cellar. The cats stayed behind in the house, but the dogs came with us. Sometimes there were up to six adults, two teenagers and two dogs hiding underground in a small cellar. I did my best not to be overcome by fear. I silently recited prayers, chanted mantras, and visualized the protection sphere around us. My neighbors were not religious, and they were not Buddhist, except for my friend who had attended a few events organized by our Buddhist center. She would chant mantras with me, but her husband was skeptical, so we just did it silently not to annoy him. Things rapidly changed from bad to worse. One time when the explosions became especially scary my friend's husband unexpectedly said: "So, what about those Buddhist mantras? It's about time we listened to them." This is how I started to recite the prayers and mantras aloud. There are no atheists in the war zone.

Having written about how to employ the methods of Buddhist practices, body-oriented psychology, and the knowledge of cerebral biochemistry to overcome traumatic events, in that cellar I found a unique opportunity to test my theories and give some advice. I have to say that when it became really bad, I found magical thinking especially helpful. I prayed, visualized, and addressed my ancestors and the power of the Ukrainian Mother Earth. I asked my grandmother, who passed away long ago and who was always a protection figure for me, to save us. When I had a chance, I did some simple physical movements and exercises that I learned during body-oriented psychotherapy workshops and Chi Gong seminars. It helped. The human connection and kindness were other things that kept us sane. We were trying to protect the dogs and the children from panicking. So, when it seemed like the bombs would kill us all at any minute we would sit in the circle with the dogs in the center, hug and cover them,

speaking in calming voices, saying hopeful words. We would tell jokes and share interesting stories.

On 5th March 2022, three Russian tanks marked with the letter “V” drove ten feet away from our house. They quietly drove down the street toward the checkpoint held by the village territorial defense. We fell on the floor and then ran to hide in the cellar. In a few minutes, we heard machine guns and the sounds of fighting. Then the tanks drove back. This time very fast. Later that day we learned that everyone at the checkpoint had been killed. Among the fallen were a local Ukrainian Orthodox priest and the deacon. The priest felt the need to spend a lot of time at the checkpoint. He felt responsible for the fate of the village and hoped that he would be able to negotiate. He was gunned down along with the other defenders of the village. The Russians were scared that Ukrainian armed forces would not be far and retreated along our street to whichever place they were hiding. That night was one of the worst. It was also our last night in the village.

The fighting that broke down during that night was scary and spectacular at the same time. We were hiding in the cellar as usual, but the men climbed to the roof of the house to see what was happening. Finally, it became too scary for them and they joined us in the cellar. There were three generations of people and two dogs in the cellar. We managed to have something to eat and drank tea from the thermos. While the guys were watching the deadly show from the roof I told the ladies about my Buddhist statue. I assured them that it was a very powerful and unique relic and that, in my opinion, it would protect us. At that point, it seemed good enough and we all felt better. Hours went by. Amazingly enough, it was scary and boring at the same time. We were all stuck in the cellar: three business owners, a kindergarten teacher, a Doctor of Science, two retirees, two higher school pupils, and two dogs. One of the men mined bitcoins. To keep our minds off the scary reality we asked him to explain what it was all about. He was very enthusiastic about bitcoins and told us all about them. He was especially concerned with the problems he kept having with the piece of the mining hardware called “ASIC”. We didn’t understand half of it, but it was interesting. At some point, I realized that the fighting was over. The night was silent.

Suddenly I realized that the only sound that was interrupting the silence was the loud voice of the bitcoin guy from the underground cellar. “You would need to have ASIC! It’s very easy but the main problem is that ASIC heats up quickly!” It seems he didn’t realize that there was no need to yell anymore and perhaps was a bit shell-

shocked. It was as absurd as it gets. The bitcoin mining lecture in the middle of hostilities!

The next day we decided to escape. We were able to catch a mobile signal and read in the village messenger group that the Ukrainian Army organized an evacuation corridor from 11 am to 3 pm. Once again, I loaded the pets, the suitcase, and the backpack into the car. We were not sure we could make it out alive. We had no way of knowing what was waiting for us around the corner. We formed a group of four cars. My friend's husband drove in the first one with their dog and cat. He asked me to take his wife and daughter in my car, which was the second in the group. He didn't say why but I guessed that his reasoning was – the second car has a better chance of surviving than the first. We drove by the destroyed houses, the checkpoint, the fallen defenders of the village, and the burned cars. I had to concentrate on the road. My neighbor's daughter was panicking in the back seat and my dog was howling, scared by the constant sound of explosions, while the cat was sitting in his carrier. To maintain at least some order, I asked my friend to recite one mantra that she knew by heart. I told her in my best confident voice that it would for sure protect us. Did I believe it? I didn't know what to believe at that point. What I was sure however was that the repetition of the same syllables over and over again will calm everyone down. It worked just the way I hoped it would.

The story of our journey back to Kyiv is another story. We didn't make it to the evacuation corridor but were able to find an alternate route and finally made it to Kyiv after almost ten hours of driving. All four cars, drivers, passengers, dogs, and cats survived the trip. There were a lot of decisions, driving and praying still ahead. As I write this story the war is far from over. In my mind, I go over the events of those first weeks. At that time, we didn't know about the horrors happening just 10-20 miles away in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, Borodyanka, and even closer in the village of Motyzhyn. The summer sanatorium in Bucha where we had a Buddhist retreat in 2014 is destroyed. There is no way to know if any soldiers from the Russian Buddhist republic were involved in this destruction. All I know is that it is possible. Why fate made these strange and ironic twists is also beyond my understanding. I think it is just the general absurdity of this war that manifests in many ways.

Since we escaped from Yasnohorodka on 6th March 2022, I have travelled to the west of Ukraine, Poland, Austria, the USA, and Slovakia. I always carry the miniature Buddhist statue with me now. The war zone has its way to make you a believer. I hope

the war will be over with a positive outcome for my country. Meanwhile, we all need something to hold on to.

Comment

By Lawrence Markworth

Spirituality has played a significant role in my warrior's journey home to safety and in overcoming my PTSD and moral injury. As our author Olga points out in her article, her Buddhist practices, especially trust in her Buddhist statue, the icon she carried at all times, given to her by Buddhist Garten Rinpoche, supported her belief that it would protect her and those she was with from the horrors of the start of the Russian war with Ukraine. The power of her icon also spread to some of those who did not carry that strong spirituality.

I have an altar shelf full of icons of dream figures and others that protect me. There is Mother Elephant, who came to me in a nightmare, trying to kill me and all those in a house on the plains of Africa. She felt we were threatening her offspring who wandered on to our compound. Through tending this dream with a dream therapist, *i.e.* a DreamTender, Mother Elephant has become a powerful ally, as I am able to call on her protective capabilities at any time I feel threatened. At times, as Olga has done, I use magical thinking to feel her protective footsteps behind me when hiking or running on a remote trail by myself. It works, I feel safe, and I always have returned unharmed, as did our author and her group returned to Kiev.

My other powerful image is a photo of my father, who I feel has saved me from harms-way several times. I cannot put it precisely in words, it is an intuition, a spiritual belief, an embodied feeling he is with me and watches over me. How else could I have survived exposures in the U.S. Navy to the ravages of Agent Orange, and the carcinogens trichlorethylene and asbestos?

I also use a mantra, as does the author, for dissipating stress and anxiety. Mine are not Buddhist mantras, but all the same they work for me, and I hope for others. Again, from another dream came my mantra, *Calm...Content...Courage...Compassion*. I often use this mantra daily, especially at night when I awake into anxiety. As Olga also used her mantras to calm others, I often share mine with others who are struggling with anxiety and/or depression. It would have been a godsend for me, as it has been for the author, to use these spiritual practices during my time in war and its immediate aftermath. However, many of the spiritual calming and protective measures I have learned later in life, decades after my Vietnam war experiences. Better late than never. These practices work, as they have done for Olga. I'm sure she is, and those traveling with her, grateful for the knowledge of the protective power of her Buddhist beliefs she put to use earlier this year under the most challenging conditions.