

Chapter 9 – Loss of Freedom

Garchen Rinpoche, who was now 23 years old, along with Mingyur Rinpoche and many other Tibetans who had surrendered to the Chinese Communists, arrived at the prison in the dry, barren land that the Tibetans call Amdo, and that the Chinese call Qinghai. Everywhere they looked, the landscape was a copper-brown color - the mountains, the desert-like land, and the grasslands. It had a dry, windy climate, very little rainfall and no cities nearby, so it was a perfect place to build a prison. If anyone escaped, they would surely die of thirst and hunger.

This prison was one of the biggest in Qinghai. People called it the “Lamas’ jail” because so many lamas were sent there. It was huge, at least two miles long, and enclosed by tall walls topped with barbed wire which the prisoners themselves had to build. The prison not only housed prisoners, but also operated as a group of factories and farms for the prisoners to work. Within the prison walls were a brick factory, an animal farm, a vegetable farm, a factory to process farm products, an automobile factory, an equipment factory, a clothing factory, and a noodle factory. Prison factories were sometimes called labor camps.

The Chinese Communist government created prison factories, or labor camps, for several reasons: one, to force the prisoners to do a lot of hard labor that benefitted the government without having to pay them; two, to imprison those who weren’t communists and therefore take away all their power; and three, to reform them to communism.

The Chinese government wanted to keep the prison factories a secret from the rest of the world. The inmates manufactured goods that were to be sold outside the prison, including to other countries. But, people in other countries wouldn’t want to buy products made in Chinese prisons, because that would be supporting the imprisonment and mistreatment of innocent people. So, the government didn’t want outsiders to know that prisoners were making the goods, and kept it a big secret. To make the prisons look like ordinary factories, they weren’t called prisons but instead they had a business name. The “Lamas’ jail” was called the Qinghai Hydropower Equipment Factory.

The prison had many walls for security. There was an outer wall surrounding the prison that one could see from the road. Inside of that was an inner wall that kept the inner prison separate from the outer prison. Every day, the prisoners were escorted by a guard to the area where they had to work, between the inner and outer walls. In the evening, they were taken back to their jail cells in the inner prison. Other than going to the restroom and to the work areas, the prisoners could not go into other areas without permission.

Because Garchen Rinpoche had told the Chinese officers that he was the only leader of the monastery, he was put in a different section of the prison from Mingyur Rinpoche. The Rinpoches were very sad at being separated; they couldn’t keep their promise to stay together, the promise that they had made to their dear friend Namdrul Rinpoche who had died of his infected wound from the villagers’ attack.

There were all kinds of prisoners there, including scholars, professors, and other well-educated people, both Tibetans and Chinese. A Chinese scholar said to Garchen Rinpoche,

“Do you know why we Chinese are also in the prisons? Because we are great scholars, that’s why!” He said that at first, the Chinese Communist government gave them good jobs with good pay. Then one day, all of a sudden, the government accused them of some minor mistake or something they didn’t do. And then they were put in jail. The Communists wanted to take away all the status, power and wealth of those who were well educated.

There were about 400 Tibetans in the prison, but there were over 7,000 Chinese prisoners there, mostly criminals and those who disagreed with the Communist government. The Tibetan prisoners included Tibetan government officials and others who previously had high ranking jobs, as well as lamas.

There was a big group of rinpoches, monastery leaders, and spiritual masters who had been in the middle of their meditation retreat when the Communists tricked them into going to a local meeting. As soon as they arrived at the meeting, they were all arrested and taken to the prison. Garchen Rinpoche wondered,

“How could they do that? Prisons are meant for criminals, and for people like me who revolted against the Communists and fought against the Chinese army. These lamas are innocent. They never committed any crime.”

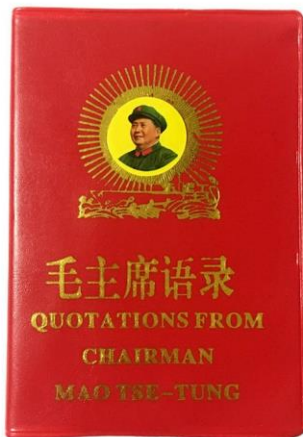
The Tibetans lived in a separate section of the prison, with seven men in one room. The prison guards made them rotate roommates every month, so they never could stay with any one person for a long time. But Garchen Rinpoche didn’t mind, because then he could stay in the same room with many different lamas and get to know them, one after the other. One he knew before - his cousin, who took care of him, giving him food and water in the crowded truck on the way to the prison. Rinpoche shared a room with lamas from each of the four lineages of Tibetan Buddhism, including tulkus, very highly qualified teachers, and scholars.



Every night, the seven prisoners in the cell room had to sleep side by side on a bare brick floor on which they put straw to lay on, like animals in a barn. They each had a thin quilt to put over their bodies. There was a small stove made of mud in the corner of the room that could be used as a heater.

They were not allowed to leave the room, so they had a tin can to use as a toilet during the night. The room had to be kept neat, and all blankets folded and lined up before they left the room in the morning.

Everyone had to work six days a week, unless they were sick. Every evening, the guards locked their cell room door at 9:30, and opened it before 6:00 in the morning for them to go to the toilet. They were required to do some physical exercises, and then they had breakfast. At 8:00 they were put into trucks to take them to their work areas, where they worked until noon, when they had lunch. They had to go back to work from 2:00 pm until 5:00, and then dinner was at 6:00.



From 7:30 to 9:30 they had to participate in the political study group, to learn about the greatness of Chairman Mao and his Communist Party. The prisoners had to answer “yes, yes” and nod their heads in agreement with everything the officers said. They had to study the Communist newspaper and Mao’s “Little Red Book,” which every Chinese Communist was required to keep and to read. These study groups were intended to make the prisoners become believers in Communism, to destroy their identities as Tibetans and to destroy their Buddhist religion.

The schedule didn’t seem that harsh, but actually, the work was terribly hard and they were forced to work to the point of total exhaustion. They felt especially exhausted because they weren’t given nearly enough food.

And, every moment they had to be extremely careful. When he first arrived at the prison, Garchen Rinpoche was told that any innocent person could easily be accused of any small thing and then get a terribly harsh punishment. When he first heard that, he thought, “How could they do that? How could they make up stories to harm an innocent person?” Then, slowly things began to happen and he realized it was the truth.

Each cell room had one prisoner appointed as the group leader, and another as his secretary. Both were supposed to keep an eye on the attitude and behavior of the rest of the group, and to report any wrongdoing to the authorities, with whom they met once a month. The group leader kept track of each prisoner’s points, which got added or subtracted depending on how hard he worked and how “good” of a prisoner he was.

Every week, each inmate had to write a “confession report,” in which they had to admit all their mistakes, attitudes and behaviors that the Communists would consider inappropriate. The Chinese officers blamed prisoners for many things they hadn’t done, and then made them admit to the wrongdoing. If an inmate failed to confess to something the Chinese officers said he did, he would have to stand with his feet apart and arms straight out in front or held out

behind his back. The officers tied two bricks to a rope and hung the rope on his neck and he was forced to stand there for one or two hours. If he moved or twitched a little, he would be hit. Even if he did not do anything he was accused of and did nothing wrong at all, the officers forced him to admit whatever he was accused of.

There were some important lamas who were completely innocent, yet the Chinese officers said the lamas were guilty of a certain misbehavior, and made everyone else say the same accusations about them. If anyone dared to say, "No, I didn't see him do that," then that person would be harshly punished. They wanted the inmates to spy on each other, criticize behaviors, and accuse each other.

All the prisoners were living in constant fear of being unfairly accused, which could happen to anyone at any moment. This fear of being falsely accused made them extremely stressed, and it even made some go insane. It was the reason that many - both Chinese prisoners and Tibetans - tried to take their own lives.

One day, someone saw the name of Mao Zedong, China's leader, written on a wall inside the prison. Beneath the name was a drawing of a rabbit with a horn, like a unicorn. That made the whole prison upset, because the Chinese considered this - making fun of their leader - a most horrible crime! The prison officers questioned each inmate, and many of them were severely beaten and badly tortured as the officers tried to force them to give information. The officers tried different ways to blame the crime on innocent people, to make them confess to it. Still, after a long time, no one admitted they were guilty.

One day the officers called all the prison cell room leaders for a meeting. There were many people at the meeting, including a very well respected tulku named Lama Rako Chey, his best friend Lama Sonam Rinchen, and a man named Kyangra Yapchung, a pro-Chinese prisoner who acted as a spy for the officers.

Kyangra Yapchung made an angry face at Lama Rako Chey and shouted, "Rako Chey! How long are you going to trouble all of us? It's time you admit your guilt. I saw you write it!"

Then he turned to the lama's best friend and asked, "Sonam Rinchen! Didn't you see it too when Rako Chey wrote all that stuff on the wall? When he was writing it, I was there and you were there, too! I saw both of you!"

Both lamas ended up having to say "Yes, yes," and admit to the alleged crime, because Kyangra Yapchung made it appear that there were two witnesses to the crime, he and Sonam Rinchen. The officers would believe two witnesses rather than the one who is being accused of a crime.

But a month later, the true story was discovered. The officers found the people who actually made the writing and drawing. One was a man who liked Mao Zedong so much that he wrote his name like graffiti wherever he went. Another man just liked to make drawings. He made

the sketch of the rabbit with the horn just for fun, and didn't know that he was drawing it under Mao Zedong's name because he couldn't read Chinese.

So the prison managers blamed and punished Kyangra Yapchung for lying and accusing the wrong people. But he had been obeying the Chinese officers who had made up the scheme of blaming the lamas! These kinds of events happened all the time in the prison, where innocent people were beaten, tortured, and even killed.

Sometimes the prison guards were told to watch prisoners' throats. If someone twitched and moved his throat a little, the guards would accuse him of reciting "Om Mani Padme Hung." The Communists were trying to get rid of all religion, so they punished anyone for even the slightest religious activity of any kind. They knew how much the Tibetans loved the Mani mantra, the mantra of Chenrezig, the Lord of Compassion.

There was a man by the name of Chime Gonpo. Before he was sent to prison, he was a rich store owner, and he was a good person. One time, the guards saw his throat moving in a certain way, so they came over and started to yell at him:

"Look! We can see that you're reciting Om Mani Padme Hung in your throat!"

Chime Gonpo suddenly went berserk and bellowed back,

"How can I recite Om Mani Padme Hung in my throat? Don't you understand? Om Mani Padme Hung can only be recited with a loud voice, like . . . OM MANI PADME HUNG . . . OM MANI PADME HUNG . . . OM MANI PADME HUNG – like that!"

He practically spit the words and his saliva out at the guards.

Chime Gonpo was very clever, wasn't he? He got a chance to chant Om Mani Padme Hung very loudly three times in front of the Chinese guards! But as a consequence, he ended up being beaten, handcuffed and locked up in a dark solitary confinement, all alone for one long month.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why was the big prison called the "Lama's Jail"? (because so many lamas were imprisoned there)
2. Why did the Chinese Communist government want to keep the prison factories a secret? (because people from other countries would not want to buy products from prisons where innocent people were imprisoned and mistreated)
3. What did the prisoners sleep on at night? (straw on the bare brick floor)

4. What were the prisoners required to learn about every evening? (they had to learn about the greatness of Chairman Mao and the Communist Party)
5. Why were the prisoners so afraid and why did they have to be extremely careful? (they may be accused of doing something wrong and punished for it even if they did nothing wrong)
6. Why would the Communists punish someone for chanting a mantra? (they wanted to get rid of all religion)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Loss of Freedom and Precious Human Life:

Garchen Rinpoche had endured a lot of difficulty in his life.

And now he was stuck in this prison. He had no freedom at all.

And he had no idea if or when he would ever be able to leave.

Can you imagine how he must have felt?

Have you ever lost some of your freedom?

Maybe your parents didn't allow you to watch TV, visit a friend, or use a smartphone for a while. Or maybe you were given a time-out, or sent to your room.

Remember how that felt?

How do you feel during the Coronavirus pandemic, when you can't go to school, visit your friends, or have parties?

Only now we realize how lucky we were just to be able to go to school and get together with friends.

Only when we lose our freedom do we realize how lucky we are to have it.

In other words, we might "take our freedom for granted," which means that we assume we always will have it.

Similarly, we are lucky to have a precious human life, and we might take it for granted.

What does "precious human life" mean?

It means we are born as a human and we are healthy, intelligent and living in a situation where we can learn and practice the Dharma.

We earned this precious human life by the many good deeds we did in past lives.

Do you ever think about how lucky you are to be healthy and living comfortably with a nice family?

Maybe you think about it especially when you see someone who is very ill, or who lost their family, or whose home was destroyed.

Do you ever think about how lucky you are to be able to learn the Dharma?

Can you think of any place where it's not easy to find someone who can teach you the Dharma?

In some areas and in some families, people don't talk about Buddha or Dharma, or don't talk about it nicely, so even if they have access to internet, they don't have any interest in finding out about it.

Those of us growing up in non-Buddhist families feel extremely lucky to find the Dharma!

When we are young, we may not think about these things so much.

But it's important to remember that we are very lucky to have a precious human life, so that we will make the best use of it; so we will "live our best life."

Some adults get so busy and distracted by their work and family needs that they don't have time to go to a temple or attend Buddhist activities.

And, remember, everything is impermanent, everything changes. As an example, the pandemic changed everyone's life around the world!

We don't know what could happen in the future.

But if you start learning and practicing Dharma when you are young, you develop good character and good habits that stay with you and help you cope with difficulties no matter what happens when you grow older.

What are some practices, and some good habits, that we develop as Buddhists?

Being mindful, doing meditation, saying prayers, chanting mantras; being calm, kind and compassionate, having self-control, helping and not harming others.

These habits and practices help you to be successful in all your activities – for example, in school, sports, work, and interactions with other people.

So, don't take your precious human life and your freedom for granted!

While you are young, healthy and comfortable, it's very important to keep learning and practicing the Dharma!

Then you are well equipped to be successful in whatever you want to do.