

Part 12 – Losing Everything

While Chetsang Rinpoche and the group of students were traveling to the city of Chengdu, which had become totally chaotic, the situation in Tibet also had become out of control. Many groups of Red Guards, mostly from China, joined together and called themselves the Rebels, or Gyenlog. They wanted to throw out the existing leadership and become the new leaders. An opposing group of Red Guards, supported by high-ranking Communist leaders and the Chinese army, called themselves the Nyamdre. The violence in Lhasa increased into a huge battle between the Gyenlog and Nyamdre.

In China, the chaos and violence were so bad that Chairman Mao ordered the army to stop and disband all opposing groups. The Chinese army took that as an excuse to brutally destroy the Gyenlog. Already they had arrested several Gyenlog leaders at the time Chetsang Rinpoche and his group returned to Lhasa. All the students from his school automatically were part of the Gyenlog. Most of the students who still had homes to go to returned home, and the remaining students including Rinpoche and a few of his friends stayed at the school, with Rinpoche cooking for them. Rinpoche didn't dare go out in the streets because of the danger. So, stuck at the school without any teachers or classes, there wasn't much to do.

Each group, the Nyamdre and Gyenlog, competed to get more people to support them. Rather than hanging posters, now they competed by professional announcers shouting propaganda and slogans all day, every day, broadcast over the city with loudspeakers set up on a roof of a big building. The Gyenlog took over the Jokhang Temple and put their loudspeakers on its roof.



Chetsang Rinpoche and other students, plus about 50 guards, were told to protect this broadcast station. The Jokhang Temple then became their new home, so they spent all day and night there. They slept in a large hall, and with everyone together in one room without clean clothes and no way to do laundry or take showers, the stench became overpowering.

At night, Rinpoche snuck away into a large wardrobe cabinet to get away from the disgusting smell so he could sleep. He had to curl up to fit inside.

The Nyamdre put their broadcast system on another roof, and it also constantly filled the air with loud propaganda, along with screeching and crackling sounds from the old loudspeakers. With the constant loud noise from the loudspeakers, no one could feel any stillness or peace, no matter where they were in the city.

The Gyenlog had only one monstrous old amplifier and they urgently needed additional equipment to compete against the Nyamdre broadcast. Rinpoche found out that the Nyamdre were getting ready to move their broadcast station, and their equipment was at a certain school guarded only by 18 people.

Rinpoche and his friends began discussing plans to take their opponent's amplifier, and they finally agreed on Rinpoche's suggestion. They would sneak into the enemy camp at three in the morning, when everyone was fast asleep, and have one of their big powerful guys from Kham (eastern Tibet), armed with a club, spear or dagger, next to each person sleeping, to keep them under control in case they awoke. Others would protect the escape route, with a lookout at each corner to warn of any danger. Rinpoche himself would carry the machine out.

So, at 2:00 in the morning, they arrived at the building where the amplifier was. They posted their lookouts and waited in the shadows. A light was still on in the main building – that meant that someone was awake and might notice them. Then an old Chinese man opened a door and tossed out water from a bowl; he was following the Chinese custom of washing his feet before bed. The light then was turned off, and it seemed that everyone was asleep. They ran swiftly and silently, one after another, across the courtyard and tried to get in through a door or window, and then found a window that was open. They got into the building and everyone took their positions. Rinpoche began disconnecting the amplifier. It was connected to many cables and made noise at every movement. Suddenly, one of the sleeping people turned over, but luckily he stayed asleep. Once Rinpoche detached all the cables, he and a friend lifted the amplifier and carried it through the row of unsuspecting sleeping people, and then across the city to the Gyenlog station at the Jokhang Temple.



But now they needed additional loudspeakers. Rinpoche and 23 of his friends went the next night to a large building that was used as a movie theater and meeting hall. This time some Nyamdre guards saw them walking to the building and shot rocks at them with slingshots. Rinpoche and his group went back a different way to avoid being attacked.

When they discovered their amplifier was missing, the Nyamdre were not amused. They soon retaliated with a vengeance. One evening, a convoy of trucks rolled up to the Jokhang in a big cloud of dust, and closed in on the temple from all sides. Some Gyenlog went up on the roof so they would be able to knock down the attackers' ladders and prevent them from getting in. Others quickly barricaded the doors and hallways. They threw furniture, wood, tables, benches and anything they could find down the stairs to block the stairway entrance.

Rinpoche was trying to secure another entrance when he heard attackers on the other side, battering the door. Rinpoche and his friends jammed planks against it and pressed their weight

against it. The Nyamdre chopped openings into the barricade and shoved spears through the slits they cut. To Rinpoche's horror, one of his friends was badly injured in the eye in that attack. The Gyenlog defended their building valiantly through the night, but then the Nyamdre sprayed chemical insecticide through the holes they had slashed in the door. Some of Rinpoche's friends became dizzy and others doubled over with pain and sickness. They had to get out of there immediately.

The Nyamdre had prepared well for this attack. They put a huge floodlight on the house across the street, so they could see the Gyenlog on the roof defending their building. The Nyamdre threw hundreds of stones at them, forcing them to take cover, and then put their firefighter's ladders up against the side of the temple and overpowered the Gyenlog on the roof. Now there was no escape. In the darkness and dust, it was confusing and the Gyenlog couldn't see. One of Rinpoche's friends was desperate to escape so he jumped out the window and fell three stories down. The Gyenlog had to accept defeat, and the Nyamdre chased them, stumbling over broken objects and wounded people lying on the ground in pain, until they got outside. Once they got outside, there were thousands of people waiting in the streets to beat them.

A young Muslim man with whom Rinpoche had played soccer recognized him and said, "You're a lama, what are you doing here? Why are you mixed up in something like this?"

Rinpoche answered, "I came to protect our equipment."

The Muslim man slapped his face and shoved him into a group of people who were watching. He might have slapped him so he wouldn't be attacked by the Nyamdre for being kind to a Gyenlog. Fortunately, Rinpoche was never injured, not even in the fiercest battles, and he had the amazing gift of feeling very little pain from wounds.

Rinpoche and his schoolmates were herded onto a bus and driven to Nyamdre headquarters. The young men felt furious, strong and fearless, and thought about overpowering the driver and the three Nyamdre guards to take over control of the bus. But then there would be no escape from the crowds of people on the streets. Stones were thrown at them as they got off the bus and were led into the Nyamdre building, and a tall Chinese man standing at the entrance hit each one of them as they passed by.

The Nyamdre building was filled with people. The Chinese Red Guards among the Gyenlog group were singled out and shoved into a small room, where they were treated especially brutally. Rinpoche could hear them getting hit and their screams as they received a terrible beating. By morning, Rinpoche and his friends had swollen faces and bruised, filthy bodies, but they were still alive. Rinpoche had lost a shoe but otherwise was fine.

There was an especially combative Gyenlog unit, a crew of street fighters - young women as well as men - including those who used to be monks at universities. As a group of trucks from this unit drove up, Rinpoche's friend Lödro said he wanted to join them, so they both jumped onto one of the trucks. The fighters, who had been monks before, had homemade spears, and

others had slingshots. The young women picked up stones to provide ammunition to the men. A bunch of Nyamdre started throwing stones at them, and then when the Gyenlog got very close to them they shot a barrage of stones at the Nyamdre. The two groups attacked each other ferociously with stones and slingshots, and sometimes with their homemade spears.

The street battles between the two groups went on for about five months. The chaos became so uncontrollable all over China and Tibet that in 1967, when Rinpoche was about 21 years old, Mao said that he wanted to end the Cultural Revolution. But the madness couldn't just be stopped. He couldn't control it. The fights between the two groups became even more violent.

One day Rinpoche was asked to help the elderly men who kept the garden at the school. This was incredibly lucky for Rinpoche, because the fighting had now gone beyond spears and slingshots and now involved automatic weapons. He persuaded two friends to join him working in the garden, and the three young men left the increasingly deadly battlegrounds of the city and went to the vegetable fields. There were no buildings for them to live in while they worked there, so they had to sleep in a deep hole they had dug and lined with grass, blankets and jackets, like a nest. Over it they placed a basic wooden frame covered with a cloth and tarp as a roof to keep out the rain.

The work wasn't very hard. They had six mules, and no one to supervise them, so they just stopped when they got tired. They were near a river, and far away from any buildings and other people, so it was very peaceful. It was easy to forget the horror happening in the city. They cooked over a campfire and slept well.

After the harvest, they returned to the school. There Rinpoche cooked again for his schoolmates, and also for the wounded people at the nearby hospital. He took the meals to them himself although it was extremely dangerous – the Nyamdre and soldiers with automatic weapons had taken up positions on the walls of the Potala Palace and fired at anyone who moved out into the open. The hospital was filled with wounded people. Some of his schoolmates were there, badly injured, and were happy to see him and finally to eat a good meal. One time, Rinpoche was returning from the hospital and heard a piercing whistle as a bullet passed his ear, missing his head by a fraction of an inch. He reached the school safely. Even with the extreme danger, he continued to take food to the hospital.

In 1969, when Rinpoche was 22 years old, Chairman Mao ordered the army to take the weapons away from the Red Guards and send them to the countryside so they could stop their violence and purify their ways of thinking by doing labor on farms. Now they were causing too much trouble and China's farms had been neglected while Mao had sent the farmers to work in factories. The Chinese were in dire need of food. Many Red Guards thought the farms were dirty places with hard work and awful primitive living conditions that were beneath their standards. They felt they were entitled to a life of doing what they liked to do in the cities, and thought they were being unfairly punished having to work on a farm.

Rinpoche and a few of his schoolmates were lucky to be sent to labor camps that were only about a half hour drive from Lhasa. His friends wanted to protect him in case he would be badly treated for having been from a noble upper-class family. Rinpoche shared a small room in a little building with a friend. Each was given a cup and cooking pot, and nothing more. No one there knew he was the well-known tulku Chetsang Rinpoche. He got up before dawn, cleaned the stables and fed the animals, and then went to work in the fields until late in the evening. He walked 20 minutes to get water from a stream, carrying it in a large container strapped to his back. Rinpoche was helpful wherever he was, and right from the beginning, the villagers, farmers, and farm leaders trusted him and felt comfortable with him, and treated him with respect. He was young and strong and volunteered to do the hardest work himself.



There were no forests nearby, so when he had to get firewood for the farmers, he had to ride for 14 hours on a donkey, leading many other donkeys to carry the load, to a place where they could find some wood. The strongest donkeys were hard to manage and stubborn, so his friends rode on the smaller donkeys that were easier to control. But Rinpoche had compassion for the smaller, weaker animals and didn't want to burden them with the weight of his body, so

he rode one of the wildest ones, even though it often kicked and bucked riders off its back.

One day, they went to a mountain to get wood near the famous Tsurphu monastery, and Rinpoche was curious to see what had happened to it. He climbed up to the top of the mountain where he could see it in the distance. He could see the remains of the walls, some of which had fallen down so he could see the paintings on the inside of the remains of some walls. Because wood was so scarce, most of the pillars and beams of wood had been carried away, which caused many of the walls to collapse.

He saw another famous monastery where all the wood had been taken away by the local Tibetans for use in building houses, not because they wanted to, but due to the Chinese propaganda and fear of being tortured. Monasteries that had been there for hundreds of years, and had been expected to stay there for hundreds of years more, including some that were as large as cities, stood empty and abandoned, and finally fell into decay, crumbling into heaps of stones. Some monasteries completely disappeared, and other buildings and towns were built instead. At the site where one of Chetsang Rinpoche's residences, the Yangrigar, stood, there is now a military camp.

Rinpoche's roommate got married and moved out, so Rinpoche had to move into another room – smaller and shabbier. It was a run-down storage room with two tiny windows in the upper

part of a house where two families were living. Under his room was a sheep pen. He made a hole in the wall to let smoke escape so he could cook in his room, and used bricks to create a makeshift stove to hold a cooking pot and prepare his meals. He had two cooking pots, two thermoses, and two cups. He made a ladle by nailing a tin can to a piece of wood. He got dried yak dung to burn as fuel for the stove. For a bed, he had a mattress stuffed with yak hair that Tritsab Gyabra had given him.

The walls of the house were old, crumbling and damp, and the house was full of strange insects, but none of this bothered Rinpoche.



One frosty winter evening he returned after a hard day's work, lit a fire, and pulled a coat over his shoulders. There was no furniture, so he leaned against the cold wall to relax. Then he noticed something very cold was crawling underneath his clothes, down his neck and onto his arm. He took off his coat very slowly and found that a large black scorpion had perched on his forearm. What surprised Rinpoche most was how cold the scorpion felt, but he remained completely calm, knowing he must not touch or alarm it, so it wouldn't sting him.

With quiet interest he observed its bizarre form, waited until it reached his hand, and shook it off. It came right back to him, but he stayed calm, reminding himself that this was an old house and there was no way to get rid of the creatures that had taken shelter in it. They would come and go.

One day an uncle of Rinpoche came to the area to dig a canal. He found out that Rinpoche was living there, and went to visit him. When he saw the shabby, lonely conditions his nephew was living in, he was stunned, and struggled not to show his tears. He shook his head sadly, but then became aware of Rinpoche's perfect equanimity, his even-mindedness. The uncle said,

"Milarepa lived in uncomfortable caves and it looks to me as though you are living in just the way he did."

Rinpoche hardly knew what his uncle was talking about because he had heard almost nothing about Milarepa, Tibet's most famous Buddhist yogi. The name lit only a tiny glimmer of memory from the long-ago days of his childhood in Drikung.

With all the hard work every day all day at the farm, Rinpoche had no time for religious practices, and he didn't have any books or religious objects to perform them with. But he often performed a tea offering and recited mantras. He began to refresh his memory of the sacred texts that he had learned by heart so many years earlier, although he didn't think that Tibetans ever would be granted religious freedom or that he would ever return to monastery life.

QUESTIONS:

1. How did Rinpoche and his friends get the amplifier from the Nyamdre? (they stole it while the Nyamdre were sleeping)
2. When he joined the crew of street fighters, what weapons did they fight with? (slingshots and homemade spears)
3. What did Chetsang Rinpoche do for wounded people in the hospital? (brought meals)
4. Why did the villagers and farmers trust Chetsang Rinpoche and treat him with respect? (he was always helpful and volunteered to do hard work)
5. What did his uncle think when he saw how Chetsang Rinpoche was living at the farm? (he was sad at the shabby conditions, but compared it to how Milarepa lived in caves)
6. Why didn't Rinpoche do much spiritual practice anymore? (he didn't have time, and didn't have his books and ritual objects)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Losing Everything:

At this point, Chetsang Rinpoche had lost so much that had been part of his life: He lost his family, who had moved to India, his home in Lhasa, his life as a monk, his monasteries in Drikung, his teachers, his Dharma friends at the monastery including Chungtsang Rinpoche, his



devotees and supporters, his Dharma practice and study, and almost all his belongings. He didn't even know if his family and friends were still alive or where they were.

Can you remember losing something really important to you?

Can you remember how you felt?

Did you feel anxious, frustrated, or angry?

Was it hard to stop thinking about what you lost?

Although Rinpoche lost everything he had, and everyone he loved, he didn't get angry or bitter.

He knew that everything is impermanent, everything is always changing.
He didn't lose his good qualities – virtues – of being helpful, generous and compassionate.
He cooked food and brought it to the wounded people at the hospital, even though it was dangerous to go out. He worked hard at the farm, being helpful and kind to the farmers.
He had compassion for the donkeys, not sitting on the small and weak donkeys.
And he was humble, not arrogant – he didn't think that he is too important to do hard work.

In contrast to Rinpoche, many Red Guards got angry about having to work on a farm.
They didn't want to work hard or get dirty, because they were arrogant.
They had a sense of entitlement, a big ego, thinking that they shouldn't have to do hard work because they are special and have power, as supporters of Mao.

Losing your home, belongings, friends and family is extremely difficult for anyone.
But to lose contact with the Dharma is dangerous.
When you lose contact with other people who practice Dharma, you can easily get influenced into negative behaviors.

Even Chetsang Rinpoche was influenced by the people all around him who were involved with violence. He ended up fighting against the Nyamdre, and stealing the amplifier.
Everyone around him was fighting and if he didn't agree with what the Gyenlog wanted to do, he might be attacked by them.
There was no place he could stay to avoid being involved with the Gyenlog.
And even when he was working at the farms, he was so busy that he didn't have free time to do any Dharma practice.
Many Chinese and Tibetan people were good-hearted, kind people, but when so many people around them got involved in the Red Guard and Cultural Revolution, they joined in with the violence, cruelty and other negative behaviors.

This story reminds us that even when we are kind and good-hearted, we can be influenced by the misbehavior of those around us who don't follow Dharma.
It reminds us of how important it is to try not to lose contact with others who practice Dharma, and who have virtuous qualities.