

Part 9 – Perseverance

While Chetsang Rinpoche was living at the house of his friend Nubpa Rinpoche in Lhasa, the Chinese Communists required all the high-ranking lamas and tulkus to attend another political reeducation program to teach them Communist beliefs. They had to read about Communism and then write about it, and if they didn't write the correct Communist view, the instructor shouted and harassed them. Chetsang Rinpoche and the other teenage tulkus, who were the youngest ones in the class, couldn't understand much about Communism and had no interest in it. They stared out the window, watching people passing by, wishing they could join the boys and girls who were walking to school. They would much rather go to school than this boring Communist reeducation program! They asked Tritsab Gyabra Rinpoche, Chetsang Rinpoche's former teacher and now his guardian, to help them get out of this program and into a normal school.

Tritsab Gyabra didn't dare ask the Chinese directly, but he recommended that the boys write a letter requesting that they be admitted to a school. Chetsang Rinpoche's friend Reting Rinpoche had the best writing skills, and the boys all worked together to come up with a letter that was very respectful - a bit over-the-top respectful - concluding with, "We are too young to understand the true meaning of the reeducation program. We therefore beg to submit this petition for admission to a school, so that we may be more of use and service to ourselves, the government, and the people."

Their plan worked, and they were allowed to attend school. Unfortunately, they were assigned to different schools, so they couldn't be together. Chetsang Rinpoche had to take an exam so the school can determine which class to place him, but he couldn't answer any of the questions on math or science, because monks weren't taught those subjects at the monasteries. So, at age 14, he was assigned to a second-grade class, and he was the oldest one in his class. He immediately decided to learn the most of anyone in the class, beyond what the teacher assigned. He remembered the advice from an old Muslim teacher who told the students never to waste time but to constantly use time for their studies, even when they went to the toilet!



Rinpoche studied late into the night by candlelight. There were subjects that were totally new to him, like opening up new worlds – science, history, geography, biology, art, and music. The teachers were strict, but fortunately everything was taught in Tibetan and they weren't allowed to hit their students like in some schools of that time many years ago!

He was one of the best students by the end of third grade, and he skipped fourth grade, and completed all the material in fifth and sixth grade in one year, so he ended up completing second through sixth grade in three years, when he was about 17.

When Rinpoche was about 14 or 15, he was invited to a political assembly. He was expected by the Chinese to attend with all other rinpoches and upper-class people. The Chinese army had recently caught a famous Tibetan bandit and made a deal with him, and they wanted him to present his life story to everyone in attendance. The bandit told the crowd that he started stealing as a small boy. At age 13, he led his first robbery, ambushing people traveling on a road. He joined with a group of Tibetan resistance fighters, and killed hundreds of Chinese soldiers. Once when he was in battle and all the fighters were killed except him and his sons, the Chinese soldiers called out to him, "You're surrounded! If you surrender, you will be given freedom, some land, and animals!" He didn't believe them. He shot at them until he had only two bullets left. But he was badly wounded and terribly thirsty, so he finally turned himself in along with his sons to the Chinese soldiers. He planned to shoot them if they didn't keep their promise, but they did – they gave him land and some animals. So, he said that the Chinese are forgiving, honest, keep promises, and take care of those who respect Communist policies.

When he finished his speech praising how good-hearted the Communists were, a Tibetan man stood up, walked up to the stage and with harsh words he criticized the bandit-turned-Communist, accusing him of making propaganda, spreading lies about the Chinese army and trying to present himself as some kind of national hero. Suddenly, two Chinese guards dragged the man, who had not been invited to speak, off the stage. Chetsang Rinpoche was astounded that the Chinese would make such an effort to try to convince the Tibetans by the bandit's speech. How could they could think their ridiculous propaganda was convincing to anyone except themselves?

One day, Chetsang Rinpoche returned to Drikung with Tritsab Gyabra to celebrate Losar (New Year) with Tritsab's family. This was the first time he went back since he had left Chungtsang Rinpoche there alone, who of course was no longer there, as the monasteries were empty now. It wasn't a good idea to go near the monasteries, because the Chinese Communists wanted to prevent people from practicing their religion. When the rinpoches arrived for the Losar celebration, everyone seemed tense and anxious because members of the local Chinese government were there, and no one knew who could be trusted and who might tattletale to the Communist government officials. People who used to be relaxed, open and cheerful were now whispering among themselves and looking around with shameful looks on their faces. No one dared to approach the rinpoches for a blessing, for fear that the Chinese would think they are being disobedient to the Communists.

During his second year of school, Chetsang Rinpoche took time off to go with Tritsab Gyabra, his nephew Geleg and an assistant on a journey to regions in the north where Tritsab Gyabra owned a lot of land, and where nomads lived – Tibetan people who traveled around with their large flocks of sheep and yaks. The four traveled like nomads on sturdy and strong small Tibetan horses, with yaks carrying their food and camping equipment. They started traveling

just before the sun rose each day, and at noon, they stopped, set up camp, and prepared lunch. They brought water from a stream, unpacked and took care of the yaks and horses, and made a fire by burning dried yak dung (poop). They ate tsampa (roasted barley flour) and dried meat.

When they arrived at a camp of nomads, they were welcomed into the tents. The nomads gave them a piece of yak butter and special cheese as a welcoming treat. Then they were given yogurt, which according to tradition had to be served overflowing from the bowl, and more cheese, as they didn't have much tsampa. They gave Tritsab Gyabra a horse as a gift, and gave him many huge chunks of butter as payment of rent for his land they were living on.



Next, they visited a very wealthy nomad family. Their camp of 18 huge black tents, made from black yak-fur, were like islands in a huge sea of several thousand white sheep, as far as the eye could see. The sheep were raised for their meat. The family also had huge herds of yaks and more than a thousand

white horses, which were pastured elsewhere.

Each tent was guarded by a huge, ferocious Tibetan mastiff dog. The dogs roamed around at



night, chewing on things, and they even pulled Geleg's blanket off his bed. Chetsang Rinpoche hardly slept that night, and as much as he loved animals, he was glad when it was time to leave. On this trip, Chetsang Rinpoche saw a very different way of life than that which he experienced growing up. Everything was so different – the homes, the food, the clothes, and the customs, their particular ways of doing things according to their culture. He noticed

that unlike people who lived in the city, nomads never used bad language, never joked, and never made fun of others. They seemed more noble than the threatening and dishonest world of city people in Lhasa.

On their way back to Lhasa, the journey became more difficult, with constant rain. The animals, heavily loaded, struggled in the mud. Tritsab Gyabra couldn't take all the things that he had collected on the trip, as that would have required 30 yaks, so he left some things behind to have them sent later. The travelers were soaking wet, riding through swampy areas for days in the rain. They couldn't even light a fire to warm food or prepare tea and dry everything out.



Geleg kept a yak dung patty, that earlier had been dried out in the sun, like a treasure in the large fold of his chuba, his traditional robe. It seemed funny that their most precious treasure was a hunk of dried poop. Eventually it stopped raining, so they could light a fire because Geleg had kept the yak dung dry.

Now they could enjoy a cup of hot tea!



Further on, they had to cross a river that had flooded from all the rain. It was dangerously high, having overflowed its banks, and flowing fast. The young horse Chetsang Rinpoche was riding became very nervous when they got close. It seemed to know the danger.

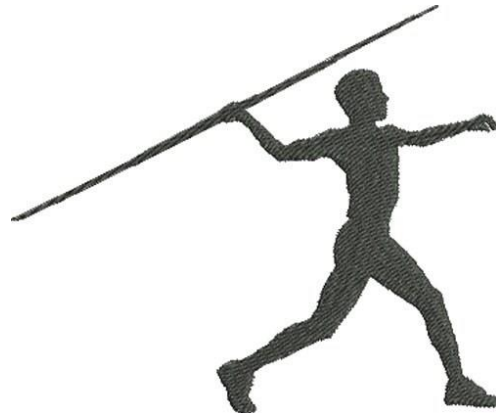
As they their horses stepped into the river, the four became separated, and they couldn't hear each other over the roaring of the river. Rinpoche lost control of his anxious horse, and it plunged ahead into the deep water, struggling in the deep current. When they almost reached the other side of the river, the horse's whole body was underwater. If it took one step in the wrong direction it would have completely lost his footing and maybe would have drowned.



The horse tried to jump up out of the water onto the shore, but it was too steep. They fell back into the water and then they drifted along with the current downstream. The panicking horse tried to jump out again, but he couldn't. Chetsang Rinpoche tried to get his boots out of the stirrups so he could get off the horse's back and he the horse could separately jump to safety, but then the horse made another desperate jump for the riverbank, and scrambled onto land, with Rinpoche still on his back. Both he and the horse were exhausted and shaken. It seemed a crazy way to cross the river, but all the others had to cross the river the same way.

The rest of their journey was rainy and muddy, but they made it safely to Lhasa.

Back in school again, the energetic Chetsang Rinpoche found a way to pursue his interest in sports. He was selected for a team of athletes who would represent Lhasa in competition against Tibet's other two big cities, Shigatse and Chamdo.



He was excellent in many track and field events – sprint (running for short distance), shot-put (throwing a very heavy ball), discus (spinning the body then throwing a heavy disc), javelin (throwing a spear), high jump (jumping high by using a pole to hoist oneself over the jump) and long jump (running and then taking a giant leap into sand). He trained very hard, practicing and practicing day after day, to learn and then perfect his technique, and then to get the best scores. Eventually he won 24 awards, and he even won third place in all of China and broke the Tibetan record for throwing discus! He received a certificate with Chairman Mao's portrait and Chinese stamps on it. Some people might think the certificate proves that Chinese education, including sports, was the best in the world. And it might have given Chetsang Rinpoche some protection if he showed it to any Communists that questioned his respect to the Chinese government.

Mönlam, the Great Prayer Festival - a most important religious celebration in Tibet - was now a delicate situation since the Chinese were occupying Tibet and were gradually trying to get rid of religion. The department of religious affairs, which was run by the Chinese, requested Chetsang Rinpoche to participate in a meeting with other tulkus and lamas to prepare for the Mönlam. He and Tritsab Gyabra were invited to stay in an apartment building with Gochok Rinpoche, who had recently returned from studying in Beijing, China. One day when Tritsab Gyabra was away with the Chinese army, Gochok took Chetsang Rinpoche aside and said,

“I'm leaving Lhasa to visit my family. You must avoid any event organized by the department of religious affairs. Do everything possible to have them kick you out of such events. If you are asked to participate, refuse to do it. Pretend to be younger than you actually are, and keep on going to school. Mark my words!” He continued, “Don't tell anyone about this, especially not Tritsab.”

Chetsang Rinpoche trusted him and took his advice seriously, since Gochok had been in China and so he understood Chinese politics and knew all about the new, harsher policy against

religion. He wanted to prevent Chetsang Rinpoche from getting sucked into their games of intimidation, violence and force.

So, with Gochok's warning in mind and a gloomy feeling, Chetsang Rinpoche went to the Mönlam preparation meeting, which all tulkus and religious leaders were required to attend. The meeting was led by a lama, seated next to a Chinese officer and a translator. All monks were required to wear their monk's robes, but Chetsang Rinpoche didn't. He just wore regular Tibetan men's clothes. He also didn't obey the seating plan, and instead just took a seat next to the door. He appeared totally uninterested, and stared at the ceiling. The Chinese officer thought his behavior was outrageous, glared angrily in his direction, and muttered something to the translator. The translator then asked,

"Why are you wearing such old, ragged clothes? Your guardian Tritsab has been given government money to take proper care of you."

Actually, Chetsang Rinpoche hadn't worn any new clothes recently. If his clothes got torn, he patched it. Remembering Gochok's advice, he answered in an aggressive voice,

"I am obeying a recent government campaign to increase productivity and reduce expenses, so I don't want to waste anything. Tritsab Gyabra gave me what he could, but he had to keep the government campaign in mind too."

His answer was translated for the Chinese officer, and then everyone was totally silent. No one knew what to say. The other tulkus had a horrified look on their faces. They were shocked at how disrespectful the young tulku was.

The Chinese officer barked at him, "Shave your head and wear lama clothes for the Mönlam!"

Chetsang Rinpoche remained stubborn, and replied, "Since the Communist party has announced religious freedom, and guaranteed it by the constitution, it's my decision whether I participate in the Mönlam or not."

The Chinese officer's face turned red with fury. He mumbled something and then started the meeting.

The Chinese Communist government's main concern apparently was to control everything. It thought of religion as a "poison," as Mao put it. However, rather than completely wiping out religious life, the Communists intended to keep the celebrations and activities just as entertainment and cultural gatherings, so they could use them for their own political purposes.

As soon as the meeting was over, everyone hurried out of the meeting, but Chetsang Rinpoche hung around near the door. The Chinese officer came over to him and tapped him on the head with his finger, a bit annoyed and surprised that he had dared to speak so assertively. He mumbled something like "Naughty boy," and left the room.

After this incident, the Communist authorities no longer requested Chetsang Rinpoche's participation in the events of the department of religious affairs, since he clearly appeared to have been successfully reeducated in Communist ideals. Gochok Rinpoche's clever plan was working well for Chetsang Rinpoche.

QUESTIONS:

1. At age 14, what grade in school was Chetsang Rinpoche assigned to attend? (second grade)
2. What did he do to complete second through sixth grade within three years? (studied very hard, until late at night, not wasting time)
3. What was different about the nomads' way of talking from the way people talk in the city? (the nomads never used bad words, never joked, never made fun of others)
4. What special item did Geleg keep safely dry during the rain, so they could light a fire? (yak dung)
5. Why did Chetsang Rinpoche speak aggressively to the Chinese officer? (he was following Gochok's advice, trying to get kicked out of the meeting)

DHARMA DISCUSSION - Perseverance:

In today's story, Chetsang Rinpoche experienced some big challenges. He had never learned math or science, so he was assigned to a second-grade class even though he was 14 years old, the oldest in the class!

But instead of giving up on school, feeling humiliated and unfairly set back, instead he took the challenge, studying so hard that he finished through sixth grade in three years.

And he enjoyed learning all the different subjects.

Then he had a very difficult journey returning from the visit with the nomads.

He and Tritsab Gyabra had to struggle through difficulties with the rain and crossing the dangerous river.

When he returned to school, he practiced and trained very hard in track and field events.

In all these experiences he had a lot of perseverance.

What is perseverance? It means to keep trying, even if it is very difficult.

It might take a long time, it might feel frustrating, and you may fail, but you keep trying.

It means to keep doing something over and over again until you get it right.

Then once you learn it, it becomes easier to do.

When we were toddlers, we learned to walk. At first we only held our parent's hands. Then on our own we took a few steps and wobbled and fell. Again and again. We had great perseverance to learn to walk! And once we learned, it is so easy! It's natural for a young child to have perseverance to learn to walk, and read, swim, and ride a bike. Or do learn to do something we really love to do.

But when we get older, sometimes we don't have the perseverance to do something that takes a lot of effort, and that doesn't seem like fun. Or we don't want to do it unless we get a reward.

But some of the most important things we learn don't give us an immediate reward. All people who are very successful in their career, or in a sport or in the arts - all of them have the quality of perseverance. They suffered through training, practice, failing, and trying again and again. As they say in fitness training and sports, "No pain, no gain."

Do you need perseverance to meditate?

We may think meditation is boring, we may wonder if it's worth practicing. At first, sitting in meditation position might seem uncomfortable. But the more you sit like that, the easier it gets, and eventually it becomes very comfortable. After practicing meditation for some time, you see the benefits, the rewards: You can stay calm even in upsetting or difficult situations, You can think clearly and concentrate well. You can better control your emotions. You develop more lovingkindness and compassion toward others. Eventually, you can enjoy the extremely peaceful, blissful experience of meditation. But it takes practice and perseverance to enjoy those rewards.

To be able to do any great accomplishment, it is important to be able to persevere – To try and try again through all the difficulties, frustrations and failures, until you succeed.