

Part 13 – Dharma Mission

One time while staying at the farm, Rinpoche was directed to do something that he definitely did not want to do – to poison a small animal called a Pika, which looks similar to a rabbit with smaller ears (and like a Pikachu for those who are familiar with Pokemon).



The Chinese thought the pika carried disease and ruined the soil on farms. The pika dig holes to make their homes, which is dangerous when horses catch their foot in a hole. All the workers at the farm were ordered to stand side to side in a line and walk from the river to the mountain slope, pouring poisoned barley into all the pika holes, to kill all pikas in the area. Rinpoche held a can of barley and had to join the others pouring it into the holes. But he made sure that the barley in his can had no poison added to it, so he avoided poisoning the poor little creatures.

One summer, his aunt and cousin Jigme wanted to visit him. They asked people in the nearby village if they had seen the Drikung tulku. The young people had no idea what they were talking about. The only world they knew was that of Communism, without religion. But the older villagers' eyes shone brightly when they learned that the Drikung Rinpoche lineage holder was living among them. They wanted to know where he was, and whether they could see him.

But Rinpoche was not living the life of a tulku or a lama at all. Because he was a lama and from a noble upper-class family, the Communists gave him the most disgusting job possible, hoping that he would be so humiliated that he would never, ever think of himself as anything but an unimportant low-ranking worker. He had to take large loads of hay from the farm to Lhasa on a wagon pulled by a horse. That was not unusual.



But then he had to return to the farm with fertilizer, which actually was human waste – yes, real poop - collected from the latrines in Lhasa.

He had to collect it himself from the latrines, the outdoor toilets that were shared by twelve or more families. Usually people threw ashes over their poop when they were finished using the toilet, to reduce the bad smell, but this winter there wasn't much ash available and the waste in the latrine pits was very wet. Rinpoche had to climb down into the waste pits, shovel the muck into large bags and heave them onto the wagon.

He took the full wagon back to the farm and dumped the waste into a huge pile, and the villagers added their own waste to it. To make sure the pile composted properly, after a while Rinpoche had to climb up onto the gigantic steaming heap and turn it over with a shovel or pitchfork. Then in the spring, he loaded up the donkeys with the composted waste and spread it over the fields as fertilizer.

After a few years of this hard labor, Rinpoche's face and body began to look different. He didn't feel like he was young any more. In his glory days as a soccer player, he had been very fast, nimble and agile, but not now. He wasn't as flexible and his muscles had stiffened, mostly from carrying heavy loads, especially carrying the wood that was burned to make tsampa, roasted barley.

To roast barley, people would put a particular kind of thorny wood that burns with a very hot flame into the stove. But it was very difficult to get this wood. It grew on a mountain where dangerously strong winds blew in the afternoons. Rinpoche went there with the strongest man at the farm, starting up the steep path before sunrise at 3:00 in the morning. Wearing thick gloves to protect from the thorns, the two men cut the long branches into smaller pieces and tied up the bundles of sticks. They could roll the bundles down some hills, but had to carry the wood bundles on their shoulders past high cliffs and areas of stone and gravel so they wouldn't start an avalanche and endanger people working below. Carrying these heavy loads was especially hard on Rinpoche's knees.

Once he was coming back late and it was starting to get windy, so he was in a hurry. He tied everything into a single large bundle that weighed more than a grown man, heaved it onto his back and began climbing down the mountain. Many times, he stumbled or lost his balance, slipping under the heavy load, and falling into thorn bushes. It was extremely difficult and painful to lift the bundle again onto his back. His whole body ached when he arrived at the bottom of the mountain, and he could barely go on. He made his way back home the next day only with great difficulty, and his joints gave him trouble for the next ten years.

Rinpoche got paid for his hard work, but it was just enough to survive. He couldn't save any money. Some Tibetans who were clever at business built up a trade with some Chinese who received higher pay, and who secretly requested these Tibetans to sell some goods they couldn't get in China. When there was less work at the farm, Rinpoche spent a few weeks in Lhasa with a cousin and her husband who knew many traders and was involved with many business deals. Rinpoche had a wristwatch that he received from his father when he was young. It was the only valuable thing Rinpoche owned after he left the monastery. A friend referred him to a Chinese man who was looking for a watch. Rinpoche bargained skillfully and got a good price for his watch. With that money, he bought another watch and then slowly he developed a little business selling watches.

After a few years, all of his friends had been assigned appropriate jobs, but highly ranked lamas and children of noble families were not given better-paid work. They were forced to continue working hard jobs in the farm fields, on the mountain slopes, and in the latrines of Lhasa. The

only other option they had was to work extremely hard labor in road construction, without the equipment and machines we have now in modern times.

It became clear to Rinpoche that his life would be wasted living this way. The monasteries had been destroyed. The Communists had wiped out religion and didn't tolerate anyone practicing religion. It had been 13 years since the Dalai Lama escaped Tibet, and there was no indication that he - or Buddhism - would ever return. Rinpoche realized he would never be able to teach Dharma. He would have no chance to carry on the Drikung lineage, or do any significant spiritual work to help guide people on the path to Enlightenment. He wouldn't even have the time or money to visit his family again, or find his lama friends and teachers. Year after year he would be stuck working on a farm, or some other hard labor, weakening his body and health, until he was too worn out to work any longer. His life would be wasted and there was no sign that anything would ever change.

So, he carefully and calmly made plans to escape. The biggest hurdle was getting information, since it was hard to know who could be trusted in a land that was crawling with people who might inform the Communist authorities that caught and killed or imprisoned anyone trying to escape. But without accurate information, any attempt to escape was doomed to failure.



In 1973, when Rinpoche was about 26 years old, he was transferred to work in Chushul. His job was to translate Chinese and Tibetan for the local leaders, and to organize a group of workers on a canal, digging a ditch for water to flow into the area. He didn't get paid much – the same as he got on the farm, and he had to work just as hard. He stayed in a camp with the canal workers, and when there wasn't much translating work to do, he helped dig the ditch.

Rinpoche was assigned to go with a Chinese official into remote areas as a translator and cook. More nomads were being forced to live and work on big farms, called communes, because the Communist authorities wanted the farms to be more productive with more workers. The nomads didn't want to work on farms where they couldn't continue their way of life traveling around herding their animals, the only way of life they knew.

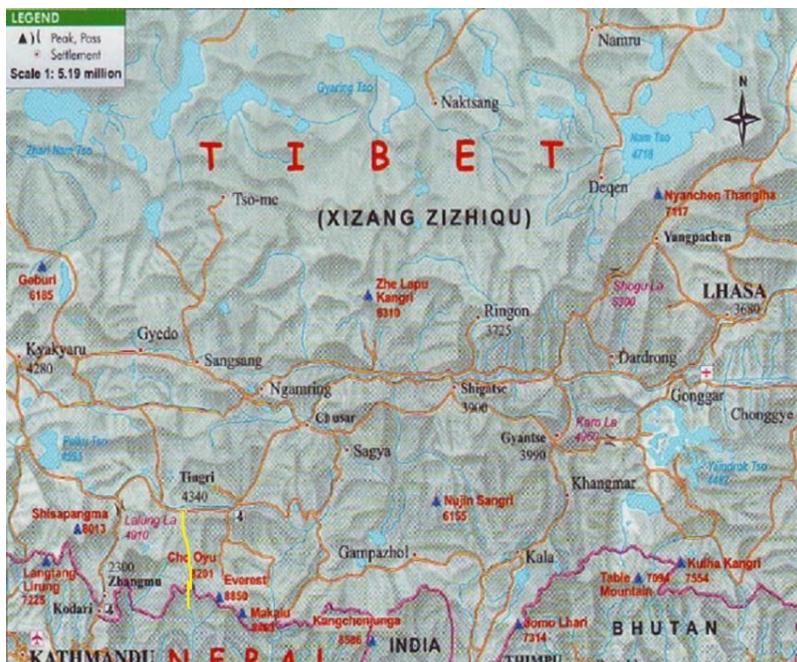
On his first trip with the Chinese official to a farm with nomad workers, Rinpoche met with nomads who had been forced into working on the farm. They looked very different from the nomads he met when he went with Tritsab Gyabra Rinpoche. At the farm commune,

Rinpoche found depressed women and men, former nomads, who just stared into the distance, as if there was nothing worth looking at in the world.

The Communist authorities were concerned that the nomads in the commune weren't taking care of the animals anymore because they didn't own them, as everything belonged to the commune and could be taken away at any time. Rinpoche was sent to investigate, and he found it was true. Neglected yaks, dzos (half cow, half yak) and sheep wandered around the camp, and it seemed that no one was responsible to take care of them. One depressed old nomad secretly admitted that he had even slaughtered a yak, which he wasn't allowed to do. Rinpoche felt compassion for the man, and didn't reveal his secret to anyone.

Rinpoche didn't like his job of trying to explain the government's long instructions to them. The nomads didn't understand all that government talk. They were unable to adjust to this forced disruption of their traditional way of life, and didn't understand why they had to give up a system that had always functioned very well in Tibet, and which gave them a way of life that made them happy despite its hardship. They could not – and would never – understand this, no matter how anyone tried to explain to them the government's decisions.

Rinpoche was even more intent now to leave, as he fully realized his bleak future in Tibet, even if he wasn't always doing hard labor. But there was no one he could trust to talk about it. The only way he could get information was when he made occasional trips to Lhasa, where there were a few traders from Nepal. They might know about travel routes out of Tibet. But he had to be very careful when he talked to them to avoid alerting any spies who might tell Chinese authorities. He talked about subjects that interested them regarding business – prices, products, sales – before deciding whether he could steer the conversation in another direction. He also got them to teach him a few words of English.



He finally confided in one of the traders, who told him that a route to India would be too dangerous – too many army bases on the way – and that it was best to go from the town of Tingri to Nepal (see yellow line on left side of map), on a route used by traders selling their goods illegally, near Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. The way was neither safe nor easy, as it led over a very high mountain pass, over ice fields and glaciers, and it was dangerous to go there without

knowing the area. He told Rinpoche where along the route the Chinese army was stationed.

Rinpoche found a few maps of the region, but it would be unsafe for anyone to notice him looking at maps or taking one, as it might look like he is looking for a way to escape Tibet. So he studied them thoroughly when he could do it in secret, and memorized the paths and type of terrain he would encounter on the way. He also knew he had to take something with him that would be easy to carry and sell. The traders told him that in Nepal the musk of a musk deer, an ingredient in expensive perfumes and in Chinese medicine, was very valuable, more valuable than gold. So, with the money from his wristwatch business, Rinpoche purchased some musk from nomads, who knew how to capture musk deer.

One of Rinpoche's friends was a truck driver, who one day casually mentioned that he had an upcoming trip to the city of Nyalam in the far south of Tibet near the Nepalese border. The road would go past Tingri, the starting point to the path over the mountains to Nepal. Rinpoche told him he wished to visit a distant relative in Tingri. His friend offered him a ride on the upcoming trip, and said that in case they were questioned, Rinpoche could pretend to be his assistant. Chetsang Rinpoche accepted his offer, and his friend promised to pick him up on a certain date.

Rinpoche had no idea how long it would take him to get out of the country, and he wanted to be sure that no one would start searching for him before he had crossed the border. He sent a letter to his bosses claiming that he was sick and that his doctor had urgently recommended he take a long rest; he would return to his job as soon as he had recovered. Amazingly, his bosses granted him leave from his job without asking any questions.

Now in 1975, at 28 years old, Chetsang Rinpoche was about to leave Tibet, 14 years after he had to stop his religious activities when the Chinese army had invaded the monastery in Drikung. For half of his life he had been living under the Communist regime. He packed only a few clothes, a bit of food, a thermos of tea, a knife, and the musk, and left his room at dawn as he did every day when going to work, and went to the place he agreed to meet his friend with the truck. The truck appeared on time, and they drove to Shigatse, a big city in Tibet, where they spent the night. On the evening of the next day, they reached Tingri, a small city. His friend let him out, and they agreed to meet there in a few days for the return journey. Rinpoche couldn't tell him that he planned to escape Tibet. He couldn't fully trust anyone, because even a friend could be tempted to tell the Chinese authorities about someone planning to escape so they could get a reward. And then the authorities would kill or imprison anyone trying to escape. In a few days, when his friend would expect to pick him up, Rinpoche hoped he would be safely across the border in Nepal.

Rinpoche quickly ducked into a public toilet and changed his clothes to look like the local people in Tingri. He had no documents with him, because his ID would show that he was far away from his assigned workplace and then it would be assumed he was trying to escape. If he was questioned, he would simply say that he wished to visit his parents who lived nearby. Meeting up with the wrong people was even more dangerous than getting lost. Not only were

there plenty of police and Chinese army soldiers in the area, but Tingri and areas near the border were also full of informers, like spies for the Chinese Communists.



The road he was to take was unmistakable, leading directly south through an icy area with the peaks of the Mount Everest mountain range shimmering in the distance. He could identify the uniquely shaped mountain called Cho Oyu, the sixth highest mountain in the world, that

the Nepalese trader had said indicated the direction he needed to take. Rinpoche waited until nighttime before setting off on his way, in order not to be seen walking in that flat area around Tingri with no trees.

It was almost a full moon, so it wasn't completely dark. He walked at a swift pace, avoiding the few houses nearby. He didn't feel how icy cold it was after dark, nor the pain in his legs, though they were still strained from the hard labor hauling wood in the mountains. Every step that took him further away from his homeland brought him closer to his true calling, his true purpose in life. Rinpoche recited the mantra of Chenrezig – Om Mani Padme Hung – and of Guru Rinpoche – Om Ah Hung Benza Pema Siddhi Hung – as he walked. His body seemed so light, weightless, and as flexible as when he was young, like the times he would rejoice as he dashed ahead of others in the soccer stadium or as he effortlessly climbed the steepest mountains on the journey with his schoolmates to Chengdu, China.

QUESTIONS:

1. How did Rinpoche avoid poisoning the pika animals? (he made sure no poison was added to his can of barley that he put in the pika holes)
2. What did Rinpoche have to carry down a mountain that was so heavy it made his knees ache? (wood used for roasting tsampa)

3. Why was Rinpoche assigned to do such hard work and a disgusting job? (because he was a lama and from a noble upper-class family)
4. Why did Rinpoche think his life was being wasted? (he couldn't teach Dharma or guide people toward enlightenment, carry on the Drikung lineage, or visit family and friends)
5. How old was Chetsang Rinpoche when he was about to leave Tibet? (28)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Dharma Mission:

You may have noticed that Rinpoche was not completely honest at some points in the story. He told the truck driver that he had a relative in Tingri, and agreed to meet him for a return journey from Tingri, and he told his bosses that he was sick.

These were not lies like ordinary people might say, for example, to avoid getting caught doing something wrong.

He probably would have been caught escaping by the Chinese officials if he told the truth in those instances. Then he would have been killed or put in prison.

Or if he had decided not to leave Tibet, he would have continued wasting his life working under the Communist government regime.

He had risked his life living in Lhasa for years, with the violent Red Guards all around, and fighting against the Nyamdre.

And then he had patiently worked hard on farm communes for six years, from the age of 22 to 28.

Is that the way he should live out the rest of his life?

He was a tulku – he had taken a birth for the seventh time as Chetsang Rinpoche.

He was here to teach the Dharma, to teach them the precious teachings of the Drikung lineage, to guide them on the path to enlightenment.

That was his life's purpose.

But working for the Communists, there was no time or any opportunity to practice Dharma, let alone live as a lama. So, he couldn't live even a little bit according to his life's purpose.

So, being dishonest to the truck driver and his bosses so he could escape Tibet and live according to his Dharmic purpose, was one of the rare instances when it is okay to be dishonest.

He was in a situation where he had to deviate a little bit from the Dharma so that he could live more according to the Dharma for the rest of his life.

What is *your* life's purpose?

Have you ever thought about why you're here on Earth, what you really want to do in your life?

What do you think are some of the most important things for you to do in your life?

We might not be a tulku or a lama, but we can still do something that is good and important.

For example, as a doctor, fireman, police, or scientist, we can save people's lives.
As a teacher, artist, musician, social worker, counselor, or other kinds of work, we can help others feel happier and more peaceful.
No matter what job or work we eventually have, we can benefit others.

If we only live to try to satisfy ourselves, for example, if we just try to make a lot of money or become famous, then we find that we can only be happy for a few moments while we are gaining something, but it doesn't make us really satisfied for long, and then we always want more and more. And we can't always get what we want, which leads to disappointment.

But when we do something to help others to be happy, then we have satisfaction that lasts much longer, and is much deeper.
It makes us feel that we have a purpose in society, that we are contributing something good to the world.