

## Chapter 2 – Religious Statues and Objects

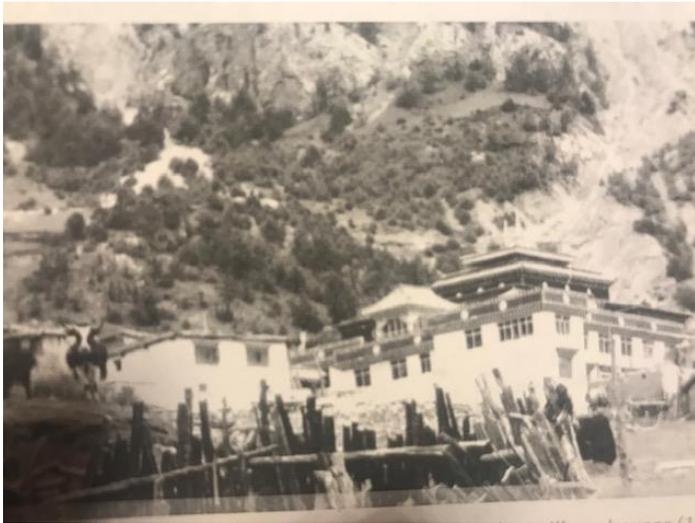
With the Chinese armies were invading all over Tibet, Garchen Rinpoche's family left their village to escape to Pemako, India. At that time, Rinpoche had to stay at the Gar Gon monastery along with the other tulkus and lamas. But sometime later, in October 1958, he and the others at the monastery were able to leave. Only his teacher Lama Chime Dorje, and one other monk decided not to leave with them.



The three tulkus, Garchen Rinpoche, Namdrul Rinpoche and Mingyur Rinpoche escaped into the mountains around the monastery along with others, including five or six families from the nearby Gar village. They brought some

strong horses and mules with them but left behind their yaks, sheep, goats, dogs and other animals so it would be easier to hide from soldiers. They also brought guns and knives for protection. Staying high up in the mountains, they could look down and see any armies or anyone else traveling in the area. But they were very careful not to let anyone see them. The villagers took turns being watchmen during the daytime, hiding themselves on rocky cliffs and peering down over the valleys, to warn others if they saw anyone coming.

One late afternoon in October, they saw Chinese army troops coming into the area. The poor villagers felt sick with dread as to what might happen. Careful to stay hidden, they looked down and watched with disgust what was happening below as the soldiers approached the Gar Gon monastery and surrounded it. The soldiers raised their guns and began to shoot at the outside of the monastery. The piercingly loud sounds of gunfire scared the wild forest birds, who flew suddenly in a flurry from the trees. The animals that were left behind in the village let out long, horrified shrieking noises. The villagers, hearts pounding, cringed in horror as their precious monastery that had been their place of refuge for many years, many generations, built and lovingly adorned with many precious religious images, was being recklessly ruined in just a moment of time.



The soldiers entered inside the lower (in photo) and upper Gar Gon monasteries, and started looting.

They grabbed what they could easily carry and packed them tightly onto their horses, and whatever they couldn't carry away, they damaged. They hit the buildings with axes and randomly shot at the walls. They ruined beautiful wall paintings of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and gurus of the Drikung Kagyu lineage by scraping them, making chips of paint fall off in patches. The

ground was soon covered in paint dust, crumpled pages from Dharma books, and smashed statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The beautiful jeweled ornaments and precious stones from inside the statues were snatched away by the soldiers. They cut down the ancient thangkas, ripping apart the painted images of Buddhas and deities. Later, they used the colorful silk fabric around the images to make hats for themselves and decorations for their horses.

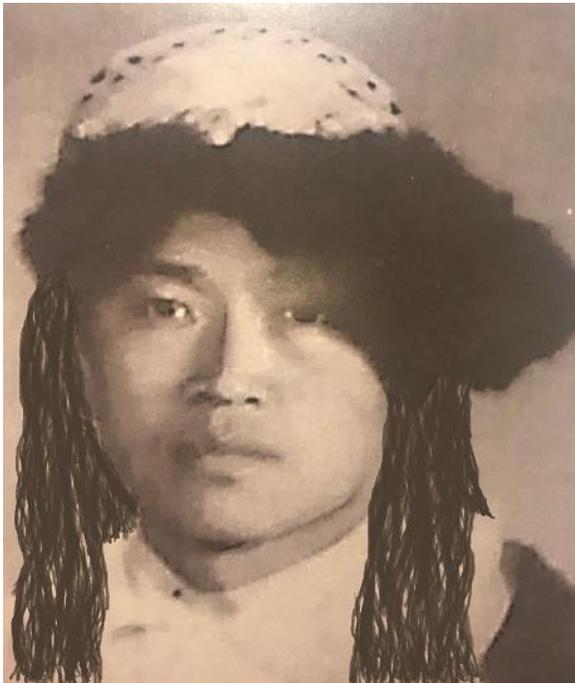
Lama Chime Dorje's room in the monastery was locked while he was away in his retreat hut. The soldiers shot open the door to his room. There wasn't much in there except a few Dharma items, texts carefully wrapped in yellow fabric, old thangka paintings, and some simple old furniture. But there was a large, beautiful gold Buddha statue inside the room that had been offered to Lama Chime Dorje by a devotee. Garchen Rinpoche had blessed it, placing inside it many precious gems, tiny deity statues called *tsa-tsas*, pages of Dharma texts and mantras, and healing herbs. The soldiers immediately focused on the statue and set out to destroy it. First, they hit and cut off the head of the statue with axes, and then they began to tear the statue apart, so all the precious items inside fell out.

The Chinese soldiers didn't think of the images and statues as something holy to respect, but rather as something harmful, because Chairman Mao, the leader of Communist China, taught that religion was harmful, like poison. So they thought it was their duty to destroy it in any way they could. Most important to them was to convert Tibet to communism, to increase the power of the Chinese communist government by taking away the power of religion. They thought that if they destroy the monasteries and all religious images, they could make the Tibetan people become communists, and believe in communism rather than religion.

The soldiers found a way to use some of the broken statues. They rolled three heads from buddha statues together, like large stones, to make a camp stove, placing a large pot on top and lighting a fire underneath. They used pages from Dharma books to build the fire. Then they slaughtered a sheep or dog to eat, and put the meat in the pot to cook. This was

profoundly disrespectful from the perspective of a Buddhist, but the soldiers were completely ignorant of religion.

The lamas, tulkus and others hiding in the mountains couldn't see the horror that the soldiers had created inside the monastery, but later came to find out about it. They were wondering how long the soldiers would stay in the area and how to get away so the soldiers wouldn't find them. They couldn't take the risk of staying, and agreed that they should escape that very evening. But where should they go? Would they be safe in Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet, where the Dalai Lama was? It was so far away, in central Tibet. They heard about a place in eastern Tibet called Lho Zong where a Tibetan resistance army was stationed. It was a ten-day ride by horse from where they were. The powerful resistance army, or freedom fighters, called the Chushi Gangdruk, had taken control of that area, so the villagers from Gar thought that would be the safest place to stay.



If Garchen Rinpoche traveled with them with a shaved head, looking like a lama, then he would be a special target for the Chinese soldiers, who wanted to get rid of the lamas by killing them or putting them in prison. So a wig was made of yak hair, and he put it on his head along with a hat. It didn't look exactly like human hair, but from a distance the soldiers would think he was an ordinary Tibetan man with long hair. He also carried a huge knife. With that disguise, he rode a horse along with the rest of the group. They loaded up their few possessions and food and quietly slipped away from the mountains during the night, hoping no one would see them. To avoid being seen, they didn't travel in a big group but instead they went off in small groups in different directions, not knowing for sure when or if they would ever see each other again.

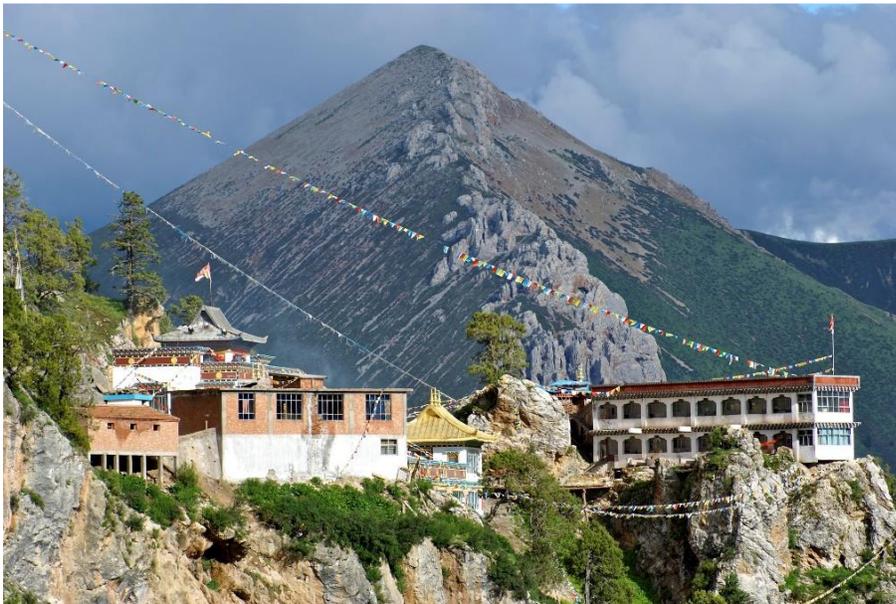
They heard later on that one of the small groups, including a monk, was captured and sent to a prison, where Chinese soldiers threw dirt at them and forced them to participate in meetings called "struggle sessions" in which communists accused them of various wrongdoings and then punished them – insulted and humiliated them and beat them violently.

From the Gar Gon monastery, located in eastern Tibet on the border with China, the group had a long journey to get to Lho Zong. They rested during the day, hiding in mountains, and walked during the night to avoid being caught. They were attacked by a few Chinese soldiers who were on patrol, but the group fought them off. One time the group was making tea, boiling water over a fire, and suddenly someone yelled out, "The Chinese are coming! The Chinese are coming!" and they had to put the tea away and run immediately to escape.

They traveled on and on, and day after day they hoped to reach Lho Zong, but were disappointed as the journey seemed to take forever. The road was long and winding, especially while going over mountain ranges, and there were many huge boulders they and their horses and mules had to climb over. They were getting exhausted, and in addition, they constantly were afraid of being caught by the soldiers. Amazingly, no one was hurt during the journey. And, unlike other Tibetan groups, they were not hunted down by soldiers, arrested, or killed on their route to find a safe place to stay.

After more than ten days of constant tension, the group arrived at Lho Zong. But it was so crowded! There were many other tribes, villagers and nomads who had the same idea to escape to this place where the Tibetan resistance army could protect them. When Garchen Rinpoche and his group saw how many people set up camp there, they became very concerned and thought that maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all to come there. There were just too many people gathered together, which, they suspected, might make the whole camp an easy target for the Chinese army. What if there was a massive attack by the Chinese? Then all those people including the resistance fighters would be in terrible danger of being killed. The group from Gar desperately wanted to escape Lho Zong as soon as they arrived.

Garchen Rinpoche had to make a decision. Should they stay or should they go to some other place? What other place was safe? He longed to hear the deep voice of his lama, Chime Dorje, just then, when any decision they made could mean life or death. Rinpoche felt like he was walking on a tightrope; if he stepped just a little bit wrong, there would be no return. How he wished he was able to ask questions and get clear, thoughtful answers from his kind-hearted master and rely on his wisdom!



Yet, where exactly was Lama Chime Dorje when the Chinese entered the Gar village and monastery? Was he meditating in his hut, or did he already move to a cave somewhere else?

Rinpoche had no idea. No one else knew either. People later found out that the Chinese troops who entered Gar Gon didn't stay long. They left a

few days after their mission was completed. Years later they returned to further destroy whatever had not yet been ruined. (photo of upper Gar Gon monastery after it was rebuilt).

Also years later, people gathered bits and pieces of information and told stories of how some prisoners saw Lama Chime Dorje being handcuffed and taken to prison. They thought that he must have turned himself in or allowed people to see him getting caught.

#### QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Garchen Rinpoche and the other tulkus and lamas leave the monastery? (so they wouldn't be put in prison or killed by the Chinese army)
2. Why did the Chinese army destroy the monastery and the statues and things inside? (they thought religion is harmful, so they should destroy it)
3. What did the soldiers want the Tibetans to believe in rather than religion? (communism)
4. Why didn't Garchen Rinpoche and the group stay Lho Zong with the Tibetan resistance army? (it was too crowded)
5. Why did Garchen Rinpoche think it was dangerous to stay with so many other Tibetans in Lho Zong? (they might be attacked by the Chinese army)
6. Who did Garchen Rinpoche wish he could talk to for advice? (his teacher, Lama Chime Dorje)

#### DHARMA DISCUSSION – Statues and Religious Objects:

How do you feel when you look at your favorite toy, like a doll or stuffed animal, or when you look at a picture of someone dear to you, like a grandparent? You feel love.



And how do you feel if the toy is broken or the photo is torn up? Very sad.

We project our love on a toy or a photo, and it makes us feel happy because it seems to reflect or bounce back love to us.

The toy or photo itself can't love us.

We project our love out onto the toy and that love bounces or reflects back to us, like a flashlight projects light on an object, or a movie projector projects the film on a screen at a movie theater, or like light projects from the sun and is reflected on the moon. The object, screen and moon don't have their own light, but it seems like they do.

Similarly, we project our love for the Buddha on a beautiful Buddha statue, thinking of his lovingkindness, wisdom and compassion.

And it seems to bounce back to us, making us feel peaceful and happy.

We aren't loving the stone statue itself, like we would love a person.

When we love a person, the other person gives his or her own love to us in return.

Statues and other religious items are sometimes blessed, or "consecrated," which means charging them with spiritual energy, a bit like charging a battery with electricity. Lamas or monks touch the object or chant mantras with very focused minds to generate spiritual energy that is transferred into the statue or object. Sometimes they chant mantras for many hours or days to generate a lot of energy, and perhaps they fill the statue with many blessed objects. Afterward, when a devotee gets near the statue or religious object, his devoted thoughts get magnified and reflect back powerfully, bringing him joy, peace, and a clearer mind. Other people might not feel anything when they are near the statue because they aren't projecting any devotion or love to it.

Chinese soldiers destroyed Buddha statues, monasteries and religious items, thinking that would break the Tibetan people's hearts, they would have nothing to worship anymore, and so they might see that religion is useless and can't help them, when communist power can so easily destroy it.

What the soldiers didn't know is that Buddhists don't worship statues and religious objects, but instead, only revere them as reminders.

They are reminders of the pure mind, enlightenment, the Buddhas' and deities' divine qualities that we hope to develop in our minds.

We project love, devotion and thoughts of the good qualities of the Buddha or deity to the statue or image, and it seems to reflect or bounce back to us.

And we take good care of statues and religious items - cleaning them, putting them in a special place, protecting them from damage, putting flowers around and making offerings to them.

That helps us to develop love for the Buddhas, to focus on them, and to practice mindfulness.

But we don't love the statue or image itself – the stone, paint, or materials that it is made of.

So when statues or images are destroyed, our love and devotion for Buddhas are not destroyed; it's still in our hearts, just the same.