

Chapter 1 – Impermanence

In eastern Tibet, near the border of China, a very special little boy was born in 1936. When he was seven years old, he was recognized as a tulku, which is a reincarnation of a great lama. A great Dharma teacher called the Seventh Garchen Rinpoche had died several years earlier and had been born again as this little boy.



How was he recognized as a tulku? The leader of the Drikung Kagyu lineage, the Sixth Chetsang Rinpoche, knew through his spiritual power that the next Garchen Rinpoche would be born in the area of the Gar Gon monastery, and he knew the names of the man and woman who would be his parents. A little seven-year-old boy was found who met this description, and when he was tested by being shown many sacred items, he correctly identified the seven items that belonged to the Seventh Garchen Rinpoche.

Then he was tested by being shown many statues of great Buddhist masters, and, saying “This is my lama!” he pointed to the statue of the great Dharma master and founder of the Drikung Kagyu lineage, Jigten Sumgön (statue in the photo). So he recognized who his master was from many lives before.

The little boy, now known as the Eighth Garchen Rinpoche, grew up at the monastery where lamas and his father taught him so he would be prepared to carry on his responsibilities as a great teacher of Dharma to lead people on the Buddhist path toward Enlightenment. This was the purpose for which he had reincarnated, or taken birth, again and again, over hundreds of years. About 800 years ago he was known as Gar Chödingpa, a great student of Jigten Sumgön.

In many ways he was a typical young boy, but he also had some amazing abilities. He knew when someone was going to die soon, he could read a person’s mind and he could see into the future or past when people came to him with their worries and concerns. One time when he went to visit his mother, he seemed so talkative and happy that his mother asked him what made him so joyful that day. He replied,

“I am just so very happy, Ama, because I will soon have a brother.”

His mother was puzzled. What made him think he was going to have a brother? She asked, “A brother?”

He answered, “Yes, yes, a younger brother. You are carrying him right now!”

She realized that her son knew and was telling the future, that she was going to have another baby when she herself didn’t know. And sure enough, several months later she had a baby boy.

When Garchen Rinpoche was a teenager, he and the two other tulkus at the monastery, Mingyur Rinpoche and Namdrul Rinpoche, had many responsibilities. In addition to their daily religious practice, chanting, studying and meditating, they traveled to different areas when their devotees requested them to visit, and they took care of the monastery. They also took turns doing retreats in which one of them stayed totally alone in a room to meditate and do religious practices for weeks or months at a time.

When Garchen Rinpoche was about 19 years old, his teacher, Lama Chime Dorje, told him that the time had come for him to receive the 36 vows of a novice monk. So, he had more rules to obey as an ordained monk. And then he must do a retreat totally alone in a room in the monastery for *three years*, so he could fully understand the mind and attain wisdom. This was a Drikung Kagyu tradition for monks and serious practitioners. Namdrul Rinpoche had already done a *four-year* retreat. So Garchen Rinpoche began his three-year retreat.



During that time there were big changes occurring in Tibet. The previous Dalai Lama (seen in this photo) before passing away in 1933, had written in an ominous note that Tibet soon would be invaded and ruined. Specifically, he wrote that Tibet’s monasteries will be destroyed, the monks and nuns taken away, and everyone will be forced to be like slaves and will have to endure endless suffering. He announced that he wanted to die early so that by the time Tibet was invaded, he would be born again and be old enough to become a leader of the Tibetan people.

And indeed, the Chinese soldiers, who were once friendly and helpful, giving out silver coins and food for the Tibetan people, began to act hostile. More and more of them invaded Tibet and they shot at innocent people for no reason, and brutally punished people when they hadn’t committed any crimes.

Almost anything a person said or did was enough for the soldiers to call them a “reactionary” – supposedly reacting in a negative way to the Chinese Communist government – and then they were abused, tortured, put in prison or killed.

The leader of the Communist government, Chairman Mao Zedong, thought that “religion is poisonous” so he especially wanted to get rid of monks, monasteries and religious activities. He

also wanted to get rid of the wealthy rulers and everyone and everything involved with religion and power in Tibet.



Although it was increasingly more dangerous to live in Tibet, the King of Nangchen in eastern Tibet prohibited monastery leaders from leaving the country and ordered them to stay put in the monasteries, so Garchen Rinpoche and

the other tulkus remained at Gar Gon monastery. The king thought that because the people of Nangchen hadn't opposed the Chinese government, there was no reason for them to be treated badly. However, he underestimated the cruelty of the Chinese Communists. He eventually was taken captive and then killed in prison several years later.

Because of the increasing danger from the violence, in 1958 Garchen Rinpoche's family was thinking about leaving their village, Dong-go drong, and fleeing from Tibet to live in India, which would be a long and dangerous journey. Garchen Rinpoche's little sister Kunzang Choedon thought their village was like a magical sanctuary surrounded by bare and dry landscape, so it seemed like a safe place far from any interference from the Chinese Communists. She sometimes took long walks with her father to visit her uncle who was usually practicing meditation in a hut very high up in the mountains, in a thick forest. There were many fruit trees and beautiful wildflowers all around the hut as well as interesting animals, and the surrounding area seemed to be filled with love and kindness toward nature and all beings, which she thought was the result of her uncle's sincere meditation practice. From experiencing this beautiful wonderland, she thought that living in a meditation retreat was like living in a paradise. But she heard her uncle and father talking about the situation in Tibet and about escaping. They mentioned a place called Pemako, which was supposed to be a holy land, a divine place where even if they ended up dying there, they would be greatly blessed.

One day some people in the village of Dong-go drong came running up to the house, screaming that her uncle "is not in his retreat hut! He's gone!" Kunzang Choedon looked at her father and realized that he wasn't surprised, so he must have known that her uncle had secretly fled Tibet. Days later, the family received a letter from her brother Garchen Rinpoche, who wrote that they should follow their plan and not wait for him, and that it would be impossible for him to leave as the King of Nangchen didn't allow the lamas to abandon their monasteries. Rinpoche concluded, "I will be fine, please don't worry for me"

Then, his sister Kunzang Choedon heard her father say it was time to pack all their foods and leave behind everything, and he meant everything. They left with only the clothes they were wearing and whatever food the horses could carry on their backs. They had a long, difficult journey to make, and packing and bringing their belongings would cause delays, which would be a big risk. The family, with the children including her little brother who was only about one or two years old, and her mother who was soon expecting another baby, walked for many days toward Pemako, at the border of Tibet and India. On the way, her mother had a baby boy, and wrapped him up and carried him along for the rest of the journey.



When they finally reached Pemako, it was not at all as Kunzang Choedon expected. It was so dry and hot!

The Tibetan people, who were used to living in a cold climate, had a hard time adjusting to the hot weather, so some refugees died soon after arriving there.

Meanwhile, back at Gar Gon monastery, Garchen Rinpoche missed his family very much, especially his mother. He hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye to them before they left for Pemako. He just had to accept his fate of staying at Gar Gon. He relied on his spiritual practices to calm his mind. Yet at times he wondered where his father, mother, little sisters and brothers and extended family were. He wouldn't be able to visit his old home anymore and enjoy the food cooked by his mother and the laughter of his younger sisters and brothers.

It never crossed his mind that he would never again see his grandmother, father, brother Kangon and sister Bochik. They all passed away, one after another, only a few years after they had hurriedly left their homeland to reach the safe new home at Pemako.

QUESTIONS (answers in parentheses):

1. What did Garchen Rinpoche know about his mother that she didn't know? (that she was going to have another baby)
2. For how long was Garchen Rinpoche supposed to stay in a meditation retreat? (three years)

3. What did the 13th Dalai Lama know was going to happen soon in Tibet? (it was going to be invaded and ruined)
4. Why did he want to die early? (so he would be reborn and old enough to be a leader to the Tibetan people during the invasion)
5. Why did Garchen Rinpoche's family leave their village? (the Chinese Communists invaded Tibet and were violent to the Tibetans)
6. They went to Pemako, which was on the border of Tibet and which other country? (India)
7. Why did some people die after they arrived in Pemako? (it was so hot compared to Tibet)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Impermanence:

In the story we hear about big changes in life –

There were typical changes that people experience, like the birth of a baby, the dying of family members, and moving to another home.

And there were unusual changes - the invasion and brutality of the Chinese Communists, living in another country and in a different climate, and the destruction of Tibet and its monasteries.

The Buddha taught that everything is always changing. Nothing stays the same.

Everything is impermanent, not permanent, it doesn't last forever.

Our bodies change, our mind changes, our thoughts change.

Everything arises or appears, exists for some period of time, and then disappears.

A living being is born, then lives for awhile, then dies.

The cells in our bodies are formed, live while, and then die off, and then more are formed.

Even stars appear and disappear.

Can you think of something that exists forever?

Will the Earth exist forever?

After the Big Bang and after the solar system formed, the earth formed from gas and dust billions of years ago.

But one day, billions of years in the future, the Earth will be destroyed by the sun.

Everything that arises will eventually come to an end.

Does our sun or do stars last forever? Our sun is a star.

A star is formed, shines for many eons, and eventually becomes a white dwarf or neutron star and over billions of years, cools and loses its energy, like dying, or else becomes a black hole.

What is so important about this teaching that everything is impermanent?

It's important for many reasons.

One is that we can avoid being too upset when bad situations arise, by remembering that it will pass, it will end, it won't last.

Another is we can avoid having unreasonable expectations.

We want the things we love to stay the way they are, and we get upset when they change, or when we lose what we love.

We might even become very angry or depressed.

When we expect things will stay the way they are, we get shocked when they change.

But if we remind ourselves that everything is impermanent, then we don't get so upset.

We remember that we can't keep everything the way it is, so we let things go, we don't get too attached to them, and then we can adapt to changes.

Sometimes, it's a matter of life and death to be able to be flexible, to let things go, to accept changes.

For example, in the story, Garchen Rinpoche's uncle had to leave his peaceful meditation hut, and his family had to leave their village and all their things behind so they could escape Tibet. If they wanted to keep their homes and keep things the way they were - if they were too attached to their homes and their belongings - they might not have left in time and could have gotten killed by the Chinese soldiers.

Another example is accepting the changes from the pandemic.

If we don't want to wear a mask or if we don't want to stay at home, we risk getting very sick or making others get sick.

If we get angry about having to stay home, it doesn't help. We just make ourselves and those around us miserable.

Of course we miss being together with all our friends, but we all know that it's better for everyone if we accept the changes, remembering that everything comes and goes – the pandemic and restrictions will end one day, and we will be free to see our friends again.

And then we can appreciate being together even more than before.