

Part 11 – Confusion and Delusion

The big area around the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa became like a nightmare circus of cruelty.



Tulkus and Tibetans from noble families were forced to stand in public wearing bizarre costumes and wooden signs with a list of “evil deeds” the Red Guards accused them of, and bow their heads way down in humiliation and guilt, or they were forced to beat drums and wear tall dunce

caps on which were written evil deeds they were accused of. Anything that wasn't in agreement with Communist ideals was wrong and evil. Chetsang Rinpoche tried to avoid going to that area.

At his school, he was accused of being an enemy, because he was a lama and from a noble upper-class family. The Red Guards ordered him to admit his crimes and show his remorse, his guilt. But, he answered, honestly:

“I have nothing to confess, I haven't committed any crime. If you know something specific that I did wrong, then say it.”

The Red Guards just repeated over and over their accusations which were only Communist slogans, not any real crimes. They brought up these accusations against him every few days in a classroom meeting. But they never touched him – no one dared to hit or attack him. Still, he had to be very careful about everything he said and did, because anyone could be a spy or an informer, a tattletale.



One of his teachers had performed a Tibetan New Year ceremony, so the Red Guards forcefully accused the teacher of misbehaving by taking part in old culture – superstition - which was against the Communist rules. They conducted a huge “struggle session” with a crowd of people shouting and insulting him, using violence to force him to admit he did wrong.

People were constantly asked about who they visited and what they talked about with others. The Red Guards were always trying to find more people to accuse and abuse, to show off their power and vent their anger and hostility.



They put up posters in the streets to remind people of the Cultural Revolution duties and slogans. There were new ideas and slogans every day, and that made people confused about what the Red Guards really wanted. Red Guards weren't interested in explaining, being clear or logical. They just wanted to shout their slogans and decide for themselves what they mean as they criticized people for any little thing, such as keeping an extra piece of meat, owning a nice bike, or being an intellectual.

The Chinese army commander Wang Qimei thought, "There's too much confusion - just what is the purpose of the Cultural Revolution anyway?" He wanted to clarify what it meant, so he set up a meeting and gave a speech to all the students, journalists, and members of the Communist Youth League. Then the head of the Communist Youth League, Wangdu, stood up and accused him of being a capitalist. Everyone began yelling at once. Wang Qimei's supporters insisted he was a loyal supporter of Chairman Mao, and his opposers accused him of trying to get privileges for himself. The meeting ended in chaos. Chetsang Rinpoche didn't know at the time, but this meeting he was watching was a very significant moment in Tibetan history. Most of the students were against Wang Qimei, and later they organized themselves into a group known as the Rebels, called the "Gyenlog." Rinpoche ended up being involved with this group, although he didn't intend to.

Most Red Guards in Tibet were young Tibetans, fanatical followers of Mao who wanted to totally overthrow and change society. After years of Chinese Communists humiliating them, they felt resentful and wanted to attack the Chinese people in power in Lhasa, following Mao's ideas of getting rid of people, even other Communists, who have wealth and power.



More Chinese Red Guards arrived in Lhasa from Beijing. They heated up the conflict between the group of people supporting the army commander Wang Quimei and those who were in the rebel group, the Gyenlog.

Each group accused the other in posters - similar to graffiti on paper - that they put up in the streets of Lhasa. And each group pasted their own posters over the posters of the other group, sometimes before the glue had dried on the poster underneath.

(photo of Red Guards in Beijing)

The Red Guards sent Chetsang Rinpoche and his schoolmates to do errands, hang posters, deliver messages, and copy propaganda texts. One time, a schoolmate who was a big supporter of the Red Guards told Rinpoche to hang the posters up higher so they couldn't be pasted over by the opposing group's posters. It wasn't safe to go out alone anymore in the streets of Lhasa, so Rinpoche responded,

“Why don't we go together?”

His schoolmate got so angry that the two boys had to be separated by some other students. There was tension everywhere. Eventually, everyone stopped going out, and the town seemed to be shut down. Hardly anyone was seen out in the streets, so there was an eerie silence. Not even the dogs roamed around anymore.

The adoration of Mao was now like a cult. On the Buddhist shrine that Tibetans had in their homes, instead of Buddha statues, images of deities and Dalai Lama, now they had a photo of Mao on the shrine. This was not only normal, it was required during the Cultural Revolution.



Chairman Mao wanted to spread the excitement of the Cultural Revolution throughout the land, so he directed Red Guards to travel and make contact with students everywhere. That was the only way to get the word out, as of course there was no social media in those days. Mao also invited students to visit him in Beijing.

Four students were chosen from Chetsang Rinpoche's school to make a journey to see Mao in Beijing. Rinpoche and about twenty of his schoolmates decided that they also wanted to go to Beijing. They decided to walk there. Rinpoche was excited to go because it was an escape from the increasing terror in Lhasa and an opportunity to go on an adventure. And because he was so physically fit, it seemed like a good exercise challenge. They made a proposal to local school officials and were given food coupons for three months for their trip. Samten, who was the only Red Guard member among them and whose uncle was in the Communist Party, would be their leader. He carried an official letter explaining the purpose of their journey and requesting others to support them on the trips, so they might be offered food and places to rest.



They started off one day in December, heavily loaded with backpacks full of supplies and clothes. With such heavy loads, they only walked twelve miles the first day. They took some things out of their packs and left them behind, and then they were able to walk about 24 miles the next day. If they walked that far every day, they would get to Beijing - which by road is about 2,400 miles away - in about 100 days.

After a few days walking and camping, they rested a few days, soaking their aching legs in the local hot springs. Some of the students got huge blisters on their feet and had to get some medicine for their feet, but no one gave up the journey. Truck drivers stopped sometimes and asked where they were going. When they said, "To Beijing!" the drivers laughed with disbelief.

After traveling over snowy mountains, they came to a place where, as a small boy many years ago, Chetsang Rinpoche had met with the Dalai Lama. At that time, the campground had seemed like an immense field to him, but now that he was 20 years old, it looked small and narrow as if the world had shrunk. He thought about how our mind sees the world according to our body size, or according to how expansive or narrow our mind is.

His friends waved down a truck that took them to a city on their way, and then they got a ride in an army truck that took them further on their journey. When they arrived at the next city, Samten told the truck driver that they were all Red Guards, so then they were given respect and allowed to sleep in the army truck station that night. They also enjoyed a good meal.



An army officer asked if the young travelers from Lhasa could put on a musical performance to cheer up the wounded soldiers in the hospital. The students weren't prepared, but some of the young ladies could sing and dance, and some of the young men could play the musical instruments that the soldiers had available. Rinpoche played the Tibetan bamboo or wood flute, called the *lingbu*. The big hall they played in was filled with wounded soldiers, who applauded wildly when the students played the instruments, sang and danced. The audience demanded an encore,

but the students didn't know any more songs. So, they just started from the beginning, to the delight of their audience.

The next day, the commander of that army unit invited the group to his big beautiful house and made a speech. He praised their commitment and comradeship – being good Communists- and commented, “How wonderful that young people are acting on Chairman Mao’s ideas to help the development of China!”

Chetsang Rinpoche noticed how skillful the commander was at charming his young guests, winning their trust and admiration with exciting stories about bandits and wild animals in the forests. Then he gave them some final advice, with a little warning: “In China, everything is red, even the traffic light’s signal for go is red now instead of green. The Red Guards are a very good organization, but still, one shouldn’t overdo things.”

Later, the students were shown Tibet’s most modern factory where wool blankets were made with brand new Chinese machines for export to other countries. Like all important factories, it was under control of the Chinese army.

Chetsang Rinpoche didn't know at the time, but Chungtsang Rinpoche was working somewhere in this region cutting down trees for a wood processing factory. The workers in the forest and in the factory were all labor camp prisoners working under terrible conditions. No one knows how many people died in the labor camps. Many people simply disappeared with no record of what happened. Chungtsang Rinpoche almost became one of those who died. He got a very serious wound on his head from a falling branch and was sent to the very same hospital where Chetsang Rinpoche and the other students had given their musical performance. His fellow prisoners were quite sure that the only reason he had survived the accident was because of his supernatural abilities and protection as a tulku.

Chetsang Rinpoche and four others who were in top physical condition went ahead to see if they could find a shortcut over a mountain, which would have taken several days to cross if they followed the road. They started out at three o'clock in the morning, in the dark, in a dense forest on swampy ground, with rotting wood, streams, fallen trees, and huge cliffs that made travel difficult. The forest of gigantic trees crowding around them was so dense they couldn't see where the sun was rising. As they went up the mountain, the ground became more firm but it grew bitterly cold and they saw bear tracks in the snow. That was frightening. By noon, three of the students couldn't keep up with the others, so Rinpoche and another young man went ahead. Several hours later, the others caught up to them, but everyone was exhausted, and they were thinking, “This journey is getting to be way too long.”

Once over the mountain, they got a ride in a truck all the way to the city of Chamdo in Kham (eastern Tibet). They stayed overnight there in a hostel, a simple dormitory for travelers. There were many young people passing through the city, either going to Beijing or returning from Beijing. Rinpoche and his friends wanted to move on too, but they needed transportation. They claimed they were Red Guards on a mission, and finally after three weeks, some officials

gave them a truck to use. Some of the girls decided to stay behind in Chamdo, while the rest traveled on to Chengdu, the capital of the Chinese province of Sichuan.

Samten, the only real Red Guard in the group, who had the official letter of recommendation, decided that Chengdu was the end of their trip. He had fallen in love with a girl in Chamdo and wanted to return there as soon as possible. But they spent some time in Chengdu. It was a filthy place. The sun never shone and the city reeked of stinking smoke from burning cheap fuel for heat and cooking. The streets were crowded with people rushing around. People blared out loud messages, like slogans, with megaphones. Groups of Red Guards were everywhere, throwing out what they thought was “bourgeois junk” – valuables like antique furniture, porcelain vases and dishes, paintings, musical instruments from western countries, and old statues. They just threw these things out of windows onto the ground below. They bullied older people on the streets. They even hung a heavy chandelier around one man’s neck and kicked him into the gutter. This was the full-blown Cultural Revolution. It was horrible, and it was happening all over China.

In the brutal, dangerous atmosphere of this ugly foreign city, Rinpoche and his friends imagined themselves to be heroic and secretive guerilla fighters, that would dare to fight behind enemy lines, like they saw Chinese fighters do in a propaganda film about their revolutionary war. They decided not to speak any Chinese under any circumstances, and solemnly swore to stand behind anyone in the group that might get into trouble. There was a large crowd of people gathered for a rally in the city square, and Rinpoche and his friends were determined to march straight through the crowd. They made a game of insulting the Chinese with rude Tibetan comments like, as “Look out, or we’ll switch your ribs from the right to the left side!”

The Chinese didn’t understand what these tall, strong and confident Tibetan youths said, but they felt intimidated and made way for them. The crowd parted, and the students marched through. Anyone who refused to make way for them was shoved out of the way or frightened off when one of the students pulled out a knife.

However, they ran into a group of young Chinese who made fun of them, saying “Tibet is primitive and backward! Tibetans knew nothing of the world!” A Chinese officer asked them in all seriousness, “Have you heard of Mao Zedong?” They didn’t answer. Another Chinese student asked them, “Do you like Mao Zedong?”

Samten finally shouted, “Of course! We became Red Guards because we totally revere him!”

Then Samten raved about how great Tibet is, that it has great wealth, all the gold and wonderful things, and incredibly beautiful girls. He knew how to impress the Chinese students and promised to the arrogant officer, “Hey, I can introduce you to a very pretty girl from Tibet if you come to our hostel tomorrow!”

The next morning, the officer arrived with a few comrades. Samten began to attack him like a fanatical Red Guard. He screamed quotations from Mao and said,

“You have a capitalist mind! You have nothing but bourgeois ideals of wealth and pretty girls in your head!”

The young Chinese officer crumpled under Samten’s tirade, finally bowing his head and confessing meekly that he had done wrong.

For three weeks Rinpoche and his friends amused themselves play-acting as Red Guards in the strange world of a city sliding down into chaos with no control. Some of the students still hoped to travel on to Beijing. But the situation in Chengdu had become so desperate that the Chinese army had to intervene to prevent complete chaos. People were being arrested on every street corner. Rinpoche and his friends were all loaded onto buses and sent home by order of the central Chinese government

The bus trip back to Lhasa lasted two weeks, and Chetsang Rinpoche really felt like he was living in a nightmare. Wherever there were people, there were even more soldiers. The bus was often forced to stop and make long detours over very bad, terribly bumpy roads because the army had blocked the main road through certain cities. Soldiers seemed to be everywhere – scaring crowds, shouting orders, marching, arresting people. So many people were being arrested it was hard to imagine enough prisons and camps to hold them all.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why did Red Guards at school think Chetsang Rinpoche was an enemy? (he was a lama and from a noble upper-class family)
2. Did the Red Guards really know what the slogans meant that they put on posters and accused people of violating? (no)
3. Were all of the Red Guards Chinese, or also Tibetans? (also Tibetans)
4. What did people do with their Buddhist shrines in their homes? (took out the Buddha and deity images and put in Mao’s photo)
5. What happened to Chungtsang Rinpoche in the labor camp? (he was badly wounded when a branch fell on him when he was cutting down trees)
6. What were Chetsang Rinpoche and his friends pretending to be in the dangerous city of Chengdu? (Red Guards and guerilla fighters)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Confusion and Delusion:

In the story, there were many examples of people who were deluded – who were following false beliefs, and they tried to make others agree with their false beliefs.

For example, Red Guards judged tulkus, lamas and Tibetans from noble families as “bad” or “evil” based on Mao’s false belief that religion is harmful.

Instead of following what is good and avoiding what is bad - to be kind and avoid being violent and abusive –in their delusion, the Red Guards did the opposite.

The Red Guards had false beliefs that Mao’s slogans explain what is right and what is wrong. All that delusion and confusion by the Red Guards made the people all over Tibet and China scared just to live their everyday life. And they became deluded too. Many of them got caught up in the delusion that Mao knows what is right and wrong.

Eventually even Chetsang Rinpoche and his friends got caught up in this delusion, when he had to help out with Red Guards’ posters, and when they pretended to be Red Guards and guerilla fighters to stay safe on their journey.

But he was aware of how the mind plays tricks on us.

We think that everyone sees an object in the same way, but he knew that wasn’t true when he noticed that a landscape looked smaller when he saw it again later in life.

We also are caught up in delusions. How do we know what is true and what is false?

Most people would say that science tells us what’s real – what is fact, and what is not a fact.

We can show something is true or not by observing with scientific instruments, and proving it with scientific experiments.

But even science can’t answer all questions that we have, and different scientists can disagree. And scientists can find new information which changes what they thought was true.

Is there anyone who is all-knowing, who knows for sure what is true and what is not true?

Yes! The Buddhas know. They have developed their wisdom and lost all their delusions and ignorance, so they can see and know the truth of everything.

So, from the Buddha’s teachings, we learn what is right and wrong, what is good and bad.

Our friends and schoolmates may not know those teachings, so they may have different ideas.

They may think it’s okay to be unkind, arrogant, or selfish, or make fun of someone, or to take things that don’t belong to them as long as they don’t get caught.

They may think it’s okay because it makes others laugh, or they like to get attention.

They don’t think anything bad will happen to them if they do it.

But that is a delusion.

They don’t think about karma, the law of cause and effect, the karmic results of what they do.

When we’re with them, sometimes it might not be so clear to us what we should do and not do.

Maybe we’re worried about what they would think if we don’t join in or agree with them, and we want them to like us, so, like a sheep, sometimes we just follow what they do.

That’s why it’s important to spend time among people who follow the same beliefs as we do, including karma and being compassionate. It helps protect us against following the harmful delusions of others.