

Chapter 13 – Making Excuses

After Garchen Rinpoche, now 25 years old, recovered from his illness in the prison's medical clinic, he went back to the regular prison section with the other Rinpoches.



One day, his friend Adeu Rinpoche told him,

“You should go meet Khenpo Munsel. He is from Kathok monastery and a highly accomplished master. He is very special. His teacher was a famous student of the great Patrul Rinpoche. You should go see him when there is a chance.”

(photo: Adeu Rinpoche (left) and Garchen Rinpoche)

Adeu Rinpoche said that Khenpo Munsel Rinpoche had been arrested and beaten almost to death while he was being questioned by the Chinese Communists, but he had remained peaceful the whole time. Because he was a great lama, they accused him of the worst crimes possible against Communism, so he was put in prison as if he was the most dangerous criminal. But for no apparent reason, ever since he arrived at the prison, he was given all the freedom a prisoner could possibly have. No one said he is to be treated better than others, but his immense amount of good karma naturally resulted in good conditions while in the prison.

If a prisoner was crippled, the Chinese prison officials carefully tested him to be sure he was really badly crippled before they would excuse him from having to work like everyone else. The officials would stick the prisoner's legs with needles to be sure he wasn't lying about being crippled. But the chief doctor in the prison simply said that Khenpo Munsel had an injured leg and could not do hard labor. So, a report was made that Khenpo Munsel's legs were badly injured and he had to use crutches. And then he never had to work at all at the prison. The Chinese officials gave him some simple tasks that could be done with his hands, and made him read the daily newspapers and write very detailed reports on the articles he read. Every day, Khenpo Munsel just stayed in a room with six other prisoners who were too ill to work, and all he had to do was read the newspapers.

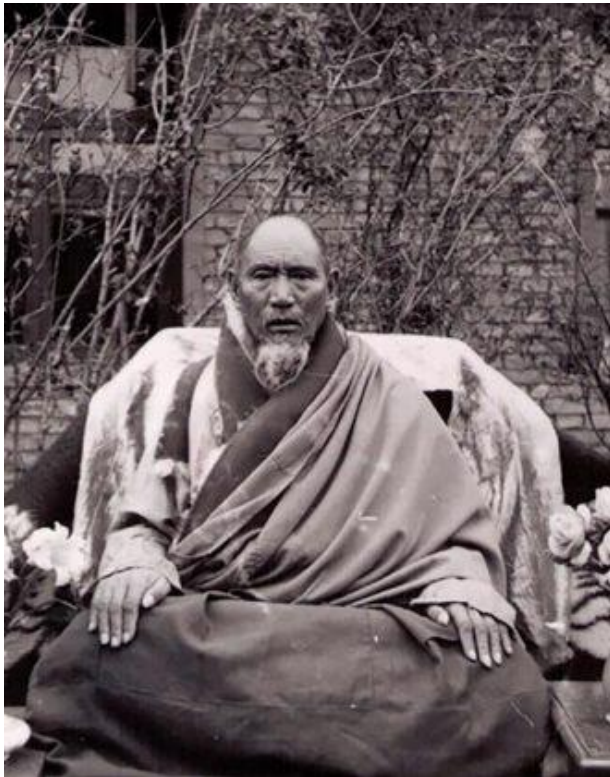
The Chinese officials didn't even know he had been a lama. When he had been arrested long ago and they asked his name, he said “Khenpo Munsel” and they didn't know that Khenpo means a learned scholar who is a leader of a monastery. They thought it was just his name. So when he arrived at the prison, the Chinese officials continued calling him Khenpo Munsel without punishing him for being a religious leader.

Adeu Rinpoche told Garchen Rinpoche that Khenpo Munsel was about 46 or 47 years old, “old enough to be your father.”

One day, Garchen Rinpoche pretended to be sick so he could get a day off work to go and meet Khenpo Munsel Rinpoche. The prison doctor knew Garchen Rinpoche very well by then and was sympathetic to the prisoners. He let Garchen Rinpoche be excused from work that day. Khenpo Munsel’s room wasn’t too far away. It was located in the same section as Garchen Rinpoche’s room. So Garchen Rinpoche stopped by his room on the way to the restroom.

By that time, the prisoners were getting more food to eat than they had before, and they were not constantly watched and disciplined by the prison officials.

As Garchen Rinpoche walked into the small room, Khenpo Munsel was sitting with his crutches behind him. Garchen Rinpoche told Khenpo that he had heard about him from Adeu Rinpoche and other lamas and that he wished to pay his respects to him.



Khenpo Munsel said, “What is your name? What monastery are you from?”

As Garchen Rinpoche answered, Khenpo Munsel looked at him and then quietly asked about his history. Hearing him for the very first time reminded Garchen Rinpoche of his kind root teacher since the time he was a young boy, Lama Chime Dorje. Garchen Rinpoche was impressed by the deep shadows of Khenpo Munsel’s dark, bright eyes. He appeared very handsome and intelligent. There was something very special and very tender that seemed to radiate from his striking-looking perfect oval face and his deep, deep eyes.

Garchen Rinpoche felt like he had been a child drifting around and unexpectedly arrived home after a long and tiring journey. It was like seeing a kind, loving father whom he didn’t know he had. He felt like just falling into his lap and placing there the heavy despair that had weighed down his heart for so long.

He wouldn’t dare to openly ask Khenpo Munsel for any teaching. In the prison it was absolutely forbidden to mention anything about religion or Dharma. Many times, Garchen Rinpoche met Khenpo Munsel on the way to the toilet. Sometimes they had short conversations when there was no one else around. The toilet sometimes was their private meeting place.

On Sundays, the only day off that the prisoners had, they could go and visit friends in their rooms. Usually, they talked and shared personal stories. Garchen Rinpoche joined in the conversations and liked to talk about his past adventures. The stories would just flow naturally from his lips. Sharing stories was their favorite thing to do.

One day, Garchen Rinpoche was telling everyone in the room how he joined the Tibetan resistance army and started fighting against the Chinese. Khenpo Munsel was there and was listening attentively.



“At that time,” Garchen Rinpoche said, “some people told me that if you kill one Chinese soldier, you would gain the same merits as building one stupa.” Building a stupa, a round building containing holy Buddhist objects called relics, helps people worship the Buddha and therefore is considered to be a very valuable and virtuous action for a Buddhist.

Khenpo Munsel was absolutely appalled when he heard that comment. He scolded Garchen Rinpoche, saying,

“Don’t repeat such a thing! Whoever said that . . . those people are not Buddhists! They cannot possibly be Buddhists and speak like that!”

Garchen Rinpoche, feeling the young warrior within, argued, “Yes, but I think it is true. It’s because the Chinese soldiers are enemies of the precious Dharma. They destroyed the Dharma and brought us back to the dark ages! Isn’t it true that according to Vajrayana Buddhism, if a person commits evil deeds that bring harm to others and if you can liberate that person through skillful means to save him from a heavier worse karma, then that is permissible? Isn’t it true that the Buddha himself in one of his past lives had to kill the murderer in order to save the lives of 500 people who would be Bodhisattvas?”

Khenpo Munsel was further disappointed when he heard those comments. He scolded Garchen Rinpoche again and tried to explain to him in simple terms, saying,

“Think about those Chinese soldiers who came to our land to fight. They were drafted into the army. They were forced to come. They had no choice.”

His voice calm and unruffled, he continued, “They have parents. They have children of their own. But they had to come to our land, and to follow the orders from their superiors, and then they were forced to enter the battlefield. They didn’t even know who they were going to kill and whether they would come back alive to see their parents and family again.”

He explained, "If you truly believe in the law of cause and effect like you say you do, then whatever is happening to us is the consequence of our own karma and past negative actions. What the Chinese are doing to our country and our people is horrific, but it is not the Chinese Communist Party alone that has made all this suffering for us. We are actually the makers of our own suffering."

QUESTIONS:

1. When Khenpo Munsel was arrested and beaten almost to death while being questioned by the Chinese Communists, how did he respond? (he remained peaceful)
2. What had Khenpo Munsel accumulated so much of, so that he was treated well at the prison? (he had immense amounts of good karma)
3. According to a report, what happened to Khenpo that convinced the prison officials not to require him to do hard work? (his legs were badly injured)
4. Did the Chinese officials know that he was a lama? (no)
5. What did Garchen Rinpoche pretend, so he could get a day off work and meet Khenpo Munsel? (he pretended to be sick)
6. Why did Garchen Rinpoche believe it was good to kill Chinese soldiers? (because others said that killing a Chinese soldier makes the same merits as building a stupa)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Making Excuses:

Garchen Rinpoche pretended to be sick so he could visit Khenpo Munsel. He made up an excuse – said something that wasn't really true – so he could see his friend. Have you ever pretended to be sick? Why? Was Garchen Rinpoche trying to get out of work because he wanted to socialize or be lazy? No. He had a very good Dharmic reason to avoid working. He wanted to learn Dharma from a great lama. This was much more important to help the world than making bricks for a day.

There was another example in the story of making an excuse for doing something that seemed like a bad deed.

As Buddhists, who avoid harming any creature, it was very hard to justify joining the Tibetan army and killing people.

But they had to protect the Dharma, the monasteries and their lamas by killing Chinese soldiers. How else could they protect the precious Dharma? They had to fight to protect it. So they made an excuse – they said killing one soldier was like building a stupa.

Garchen Rinpoche, as a young man, thought that was a good excuse.

But Khenpo Munsel thought differently. What did he think about it? He knew that killing was a negative karma that must be avoided. And he knew that the attacks by the Chinese Communists gave each person who suffered in those attacks the results of his own negative karmas.

So this chapter of Garchen Rinpoche's life illustrates something about making excuses. What does "making excuses" mean? It means giving a false reason – a reason that isn't true. It also includes giving a false reason – that it's someone else's fault, blaming others - for your own mistakes, problems or failures.

Everyone makes excuses sometimes. We often make an excuse when we are trying to politely say "no," or when we are trying to end a conversation with someone. Can you think of some examples of excuses you have made? Excuses often include the words "but," "couldn't" and "can't" For example: "I can't because ..." "I would but..." or "I couldn't do it because..." Or when we blame others, we might say, "But she started it," or "But it wasn't my fault, it was his fault." We may even blame the circumstances, like "It wasn't fair" or "It's too hard." We make excuses because we don't want to feel ashamed or be criticized or punished. Like the excuse Garchen Rinpoche made in the story, it's not wrong to make an excuse if it's for a good reason, and if our excuse is realistic.

But if we get in a habit of making excuses without good reasons, we end up with problems. Young children often make excuses because they are afraid of being punished. But as we mature, we learn to be honest. Yet there are some people, even some adults, who have a habit of always blurting out excuses, blaming others, never admitting anything was their own fault, and never apologizing. They can't stand to be blamed, criticized or punished; they can't tolerate feeling ashamed. How do you think other people feel about us if we give excuses or blame others too often? Sooner or later others won't believe us anymore. They may think we are dishonest or lazy.

If you are asked or expected to do something you don't feel like doing, instead of giving an excuse (telling a lie) to avoid it, look at it positively, be open to it, be flexible - try to reduce your "likes" and "dislikes."

If you have a good reason why you can't do it, then just give your honest reason why you can't.

What if we say "It wasn't my fault" when something really is our fault? Maybe someone else would get unfairly blamed instead. And that harms others! It harms you, too. If you say it's not your fault, then are you likely to think about what you did wrong, or what you can do to correct your mistake? Probably not. If you tell others and yourself that it wasn't our fault, then you have no motivation to do better next time, to apologize, or to make amends, to make things right.

What if, instead of making excuses, we “own our mistake” - we admit we did wrong, we take responsibility for it?

We may get criticized or punished. Of course, that feels unpleasant.

But then we think about what we did wrong and how to do better next time, what we could have done differently. And that means we are improving ourselves.

And we are being more responsible. like an adult, not trying to hide from the consequences like a small child.

There may be times when taking responsibility for a mistake can be extremely difficult.

What if something terrible happened and you think it's totally your fault? How would you feel?

You might feel so depressed you can't function.

In those situations, it may be better to be gentle with yourself, so you can function without getting crushed by feelings of failure, depression or anxiety.

We should try to be aware of when we are making excuses, and why we are making them.

And as we know, our awareness is improved by practicing mindfulness and meditation.