

Chapter 12 – Suicidal Thoughts

Garchen Rinpoche was in the prison's medical clinic, very close to death - sick, emaciated and too weak to get up - because for more than a year, he didn't get nearly enough food while having to work extremely hard to make his quota of bricks every day. Like Tulku Riglo Rinpoche, he gave away all of his food to the other patients in his room so he could be generous to others and give up his own life. He had become so sick and weak, and he just didn't want to live anymore.

The kind prison doctor, who also was a prisoner, immediately reported Rinpoche's serious condition to the prison authorities and had a needle inserted into Rinpoche's arm so fluids and nutrients could flow into his veins to bring him back to health.

But Rinpoche was still in great distress. He wasn't hoping to get better. His mind, like the minds of other Tibetans, was full of hatred and anger. He hated every officer and guard in the prison. He didn't trust any of them and didn't want to speak to any of them. Tibetans considered the Chinese Communists and their army as the enemies of the Dharma. The Communists were trying to destroy the Dharma, wipe it out of Tibet and force everyone to be a Communist. Rinpoche thought that it was because of the Chinese that the Tibetans lost so many lives, thousands of households were overwhelmed with grief, monasteries were destroyed and the whole country was taken over by Communists. Even some of the lamas said that if they kill one Chinese soldier, it is good for the Dharma, like building a stupa. Rinpoche blamed the Chinese Communist Party – called the “Gong Chan Dang” in Chinese – for everything. The suffering of all the people inside the prison and outside the prison was the fault of the Chinese Communist Party.



Rinpoche tried to chant the Tara mantras silently to calm himself down, but he didn't think about the law of karma or about Bodhicitta. He totally ignored the mindfulness he used to practice. He wasn't watching his mind anymore.

His resentment was so strong that all he could feel was anger toward the Chinese.

While Rinpoche was a patient in the medical clinic, one of his roommates, Yi Drak, described what was going on in the outside world of Tibet just before he was arrested and put in the prison. He said,

“It's not just us. There are tens of thousands of people out there who are also experiencing suffering. I've seen it with my own eyes. Outside of the prison, everyone is also dying of starvation. For every hundred Tibetan girls, I heard that there are only two men left. All of the

other men have either been arrested or killed. The Chinese also operated on Tibetan women so they can't have children."

Yi Drak concluded, "That's how it is and we can do nothing about it!"

When he first heard those stories, Rinpoche's whole being flooded with anger. For many days and nights, resentment filled his mind. It was as if Yi Drak had struck the match to light a fire of anger. Rinpoche wanted to rebel even at the cost of his own life. He was ready to die in order to cause some harm to the Chinese Communist Party, the Gong Chan Dang. He felt suicidal, and now he had no way to starve himself to death by giving away his food. He had a lifeline in his arm, the intravenous needle feeding him and keeping him alive. So, what could he do?

He told the doctor that he had something very important that he must tell Ma Dhu Thang, the commander-in-chief. Rinpoche had heard that he had fought the Japanese before.

"Please let me see the Chief!" Rinpoche groaned, "What I want to tell him is critical information."

Finally, the commander-in-chief Ma Dhu Thang came to see him, asking "What do you want to tell me?"

Rinpoche said, "Please come closer, I have to whisper in your ear."

So Chief Ma came closer and bent over Rinpoche who was laying in his bed.

Rinpoche said, "Closer, closer, please"

The moment Chief Ma bent down further with his face very close, Rinpoche forced up some phlegm from his throat, as much as he possibly could, and spat it right in his face! Then, gathering every bit of the little energy he had, Rinpoche quickly raised his arm and punched him hard in the face!

He thought the chief surely would be outraged and would have him killed. That was his plan: suicide by provoking the chief to kill him. Because he just wanted to die right then and there.

"Oh my! He has gone mad! He wants to die or what?" everyone cried out after seeing what he did to Chief Ma.

Rinpoche really was going insane. He began to yell out many awful things, and then he ripped out the needle in his arm and threw it on the floor.

"Why don't you just kill me? It would be better if you just killed me!" he screamed at the top of his lungs as Chief Ma turned around and walked out of the room.

Frustrated, Rinpoche turned over and punched the doctor, and then hit his attendants! The doctor and the attendants had to restrain him and tie his arms down. They wrapped him up tightly in bedsheets to keep him under control, then put him on a stretcher and tied him to the stretcher with a rope. He was too weak to move by then. He was dying, but they tied him up because they thought he had gone completely crazy.



Then they took him out of the medical clinic. They brought him to the office of Chief Ma, who was waiting for him along with the doctor and some other officers. They all seemed eager to question the dying madman that Rinpoche had become!

One of them asked Rinpoche, “What is your goal? Why don’t you eat?”

What are you trying to achieve?”

Rinpoche answered, “I want to die. That’s my intention. That’s what I wish for. My parents and family are gone. My friends and relatives got killed. I don’t have anyone with me. I am here in the prison. There’s no food to eat. If I eat just a little, my stomach rages with hunger. I don’t want to live like this. It’s better to die! So I’ve decided to die!”

The officers shouted questions, “Why did you hit Chief Ma? Have you gone completely out of your mind? How dare you do that?” Chief Ma just kept staring at Rinpoche.

Addressing Chief Ma, Rinpoche answered, “Because you are the Chief of the medical clinic and Chief of the prison! I thought hitting you and spitting in your face would be the biggest crime – good enough for me to be killed. I revolted against the Chinese army in the past. Now I’ve just attacked the highest official of the prison. I deserve to die!”

Even after he said all that, Chief Ma still didn’t kill him, but said, “You’re angry, aren’t you? Very angry, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am angry. Very angry!” Rinpoche replied.

Chief Ma said, “You’re angry with Gong Chan Dang [the Chinese Communist Party], but you hit me!”

The other officers yelled at Rinpoche, “Ma Dhu Thang didn’t kill your parents and family. He didn’t even harm you. You have no direct resentment toward him, but your hatred is toward the Communist Party! You dared to attack Ma Dhu Thang! You hit Ma Dhu Thang and spit in his face! But look! He is not even angry at you. Don’t you see? Don’t you believe it?”

Chief Ma said to Rinpoche, “They are right, I am not angry at you.”

Rinpoche was not going to be fooled by their Communist brainwashing. He said, “No, I don’t believe any of it! I don’t believe you aren’t angry with me! That is just the policies of the Chinese Communist Party! It just wants to show to us that, see, you hit me but still I am not angry at you! No! I don’t want any of that! Just shoot me this very instant!”

But still, Chief Ma didn’t shoot him!

Rinpoche explains later, looking back on that day, that it was due to the working of karma that they didn’t kill him no matter how much he wanted to die at that time. He says that many people couldn’t understand why the Chinese didn’t just get rid of him and throw him in a grave along with the many dead prisoners right then and there. Instead, Chief Ma and the Chinese authorities let him live.

It is wonderful that Rinpoche continued to live so that he could help us and teach us the Dharma now!

He also tells us about the pointlessness of trying to end your life – to commit suicide – while you are deeply distressed. He says that we might think we can get rid of our suffering by ending our life, but the distress does not disappear when we die. The torment doesn’t die when we die. It will continue to bother us when we leave our body and go into the bardo, the place we go between lives. We will have to go through the same distress over and over again in the bardo, and those negative emotions will then sprout again at some point in our next life. Our unpleasant feelings can’t be cut off simply by taking our own lives. So, it was so good for Rinpoche and for us that he didn’t die at that time.

On the order of Chief Ma, the prison staff moved Rinpoche to a room away from the other patients. He was alone, and they tied his hands and body to the bed. Then, his great surprise, Chief Ma came to the room to see him.

“You seem to be a very intelligent young man.” This was the very first comment that Chief Ma said to him. Chief Ma continued, “I didn’t kill your parents. I didn’t harm the Tibetan people. So even though you punched my face, you didn’t actually hit me. It was the Communist Party that you were trying to hit. Even though I am a high officer, it doesn’t mean that I agree with all of the policies of the Chinese Communist Party. Do you trust me?”

“No,” Rinpoche replied.

“You don’t believe me?” Chief Ma asked.

Rinpoche answered, “No, I don’t believe you. I spit on you and punched you, but now you’re going to be good to me?”

“You did not punch me. You punched Gong Chan Dang, the Communist Party. You don’t have anger toward me. You have anger toward the Party. It mistreated you and you can have your resentment toward it. But between you and me, there should be no negativity or dispute. You have conflicts with Gong Chan Dang, not with me personally, so why would I need to treat you badly in return? I’m not even angry at you, but I have a request. Eat your food!”

Rinpoche did not want to believe anything this man said. He had seen too much pretending, dishonesty and phoniness in the prison and he didn’t take his words seriously at all.

Chief Ma said, “I believe your parents are still living. And I will find a way for you to meet with them. So, now you must listen to me. The first thing I want you to do is to eat your food.”

Rinpoche thought, “I don’t want to fall into his trap.”

So he said nothing and still refused to eat. After two days, the doctor put a tube through his nose that went into his stomach, and through which they fed him a mixture with barley wine and honey. The tube feeding was the Chinese way of keeping him alive. Then Chief Ma came to see him, and again he said,

“You seem very intelligent. Please listen to me. Take some food now.”

Rinpoche replied, “If you give me enough food to eat, enough food to fill my stomach, then I will eat. If you give me just a little, it’s not enough and it only makes my hunger worse; then I am not going to eat!” That is how Rinpoche negotiated with him.

In the medical clinic, they set up different meal schedules for patients according to their sickness: if they were only a little sick, they got three small meals a day; those who were a little more seriously ill got four meals a day, and those who were critically ill got six meals a day. Guess how many meals the Chinese officials gave to Rinpoche? All three meal plans, which means that they added up to 13 meals a day!

In the regular prison area, the 200 high lamas would eat together in one large dining room. Many of Rinpoche’s lama friends were assigned to cook, and they received a note from the prison authorities announcing that Garchen Rinpoche was allowed to eat in the medical clinic whatever and however much he wanted. Without that official permission, his friends never would have dared to give him any extra food. But now he ate and ate and became much healthier. He felt like a new person. He says he got really fat in just one month! Well, maybe he became relatively fat compared to how he was.

Later they moved Rinpoche to another section of the medical clinic where patients with less serious illnesses were kept. When he saw those poor patients again, he felt sad because for one month his stomach alone became full, and he alone got better. Although he was well-fed, the rest of the patients were just as hungry as before.



One day, Rinpoche suddenly heard music being played outside his room. He heard the sounds of cymbals being played - teng teng teng, deng deng deng. He looked outside and saw a group of prisoners in white uniforms playing cymbals and carrying paper scrolls (rolled up sheet of paper) tied to wooden poles.

They were marching toward the medical clinic, playing music very loudly. When they finally reached Rinpoche's room, they rolled down the eight scrolls in front of him. There were many Chinese characters written on the scrolls.

The prison officials said, "Look, there is your name, Gong Qujiangcai, on the scrolls." Gong Qujiangchai was how the Chinese wrote and said his name, Konchog Gyaltsen. Rinpoche recognized his name written in Chinese on the paper scrolls.

At first, Rinpoche didn't know what was going on, and wondered whether they came to him by mistake. He thought, "It must be some other Konchog Gyaltsen, another person who has the same name as me."

But then the Chinese officers congratulated him and said, "Gong Qujiangchai, we wrote your success story of reform here on these scrolls to show you our appreciation."

Rinpoche couldn't believe it! He had done nothing to deserve this show of appreciation, and he had no idea what they meant by the "success story of reform."

Then they said, "Look! Everyone needs to know your story. It is written here for all to admire. First, Konchog Gyaltsen rebelled and behaved so badly. He starved himself and refused to eat, so he became so weak and was on the verge of death, but the Chinese Communist Party saved him. Then, later he realized he was wrong, and he listened to the Chinese Communist Party and began to eat his meals again. The Chinese Communist Party took good care of him and let him eat 13 meals a day. He stopped thinking about killing himself, he ate his food, he got well, and he is now ready to go back to work! So those who reform their attitudes and follow the code of conduct of the Chinese Communist Party certainly will gain benefits as well as be appreciated and recognized."

They were trying to manipulate him, to make him feel special so he would like the Communist Party. They thought that by extreme punishments and sudden rewards that boost the ego, they could reform and reshape the minds of the Tibetan people to become Communists.

Rinpoche didn't fall for any ego boosting, as he was not at all interested in building up an ego. But his heart did warm toward Chief Ma. From that time onward, Chief Ma got to know Rinpoche and became very attentive toward him. When there were small chores that needed to be done inside his house, like cleaning his room, he always called Rinpoche to do it for him. After the work was done, he gave Rinpoche some food.

After all the drama Rinpoche had caused, those who didn't like him called him Gar Nyongpa, the Madman from Gar. Some others called him, Gar Chok meaning "broken Gar." They said he was an awful person. The Tibetan prisoners gossiped among themselves and talked about how compassionate Chief Ma was to Rinpoche and that Ma did a good job not getting angry at him.

Finally, when Rinpoche totally recovered from his illness, Chief Ma advised him, "You should learn Chinese now and then you can become a doctor in the future." He even wanted to send Rinpoche to Beijing, the capital of China, to learn to be a doctor because he seemed intelligent and would do well. But Rinpoche rejected that idea, saying,

"No, I don't want that."

The officers said in response, "Then what? What do you want then?"

Rinpoche said, "I want to go back to the prison and be with the other Rinpoches."

Garchen Rinpoche says that Chief Ma turned out to be quite a loving person over the years. Chief Ma was even put in prison for a short time and they became good friends. After Garchen Rinpoche was released from prison many years later, they kept in touch by letters and they are still good friends.

QUESTIONS:

1. What were Garchen Rinpoche and other Tibetans angry at, that they considered the enemy of the Dharma? (the Chinese Communist Party)
2. What happened to Rinpoche's practice of mindfulness and Bodhicitta? (he didn't practice them anymore because he was so angry)
3. Why did Rinpoche spit on Chief Ma and hit him? (because he wanted Chief Ma to have him killed)
4. What happens to the distress and unhappiness of a person who commits suicide? (the person feels it again in the bardo and in his next life)
5. Why did prisoners dress up in uniforms, play music and write Rinpoche's story on the scrolls? (to manipulate Rinpoche into accepting Communism)

6. Why do you think Rinpoche wanted to be in prison with the other Rinpoches rather than go to Beijing and be a doctor? (because he wanted to be with the Tibetan people, the Dharma and the Sangha rather than live as a Communist in Beijing)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Suicidal Thoughts:

Garchen Rinpoche wanted to die because of the extreme suffering he was going through – starvation, illness, and anger and hatred toward the Chinese Communists. He thought his life was useless. He didn't know how important his life was. He had no idea that in the future, he would have thousands of Dharma students all over the world.

There are many people right now who are suffering so much that they want to die.

Here are some statistics that show how many there are:

In the United States, each day, an average of 130 people commit suicide.

8% of 9 and 10 year old kids in the U.S. reported they have suicidal thoughts in recent studies.

That means that in a class of 25 kids, on average there are 2 kids in the class who recently have had suicidal thoughts.

For kids in high school, it's doubled - 17% of 14 to 18 year olds reported serious thoughts of suicide. That means that in a class of 25 kids in high school, on average there are 4 who recently have had suicidal thoughts.

Suicide is the 2nd most common cause of death among 10-18 year old kids (The most common cause of death is accidental injuries)

Why do young people have suicidal thoughts? What experiences and feelings might lead to thoughts about wanting to die?

Bullying, cyber-bullying, grief from loss of loved one, family issues, rejection from other kids, insulting words from someone, humiliation (embarrassing event), peer pressure, pressure from parents, failure in school.

Feeling lonely, hopeless (feeling that nothing can help), unworthy (feeling of not being good enough, self-hatred), helpless (feeling that you can't do anything to change the situation), or guilty, and ongoing depression or anxiety may lead to suicidal thoughts.

These kinds of feelings and experiences make people feel there is no way to escape their suffering, and they think that dying is the only way to escape their pain.

They don't realize that dying doesn't help them escape the pain.

As we learned in the story today, the pain follows them to the next life.

When they are suffering so much, they forget that the suffering is impermanent, it will end.

They can't see in those moments how important their lives are, how much others love them, how valuable they are to others, how much happiness they can have, and that they have an important purpose in life.

When they have such negative emotions, their minds are so agitated that they seem blind to all the good things in life.

We all get overwhelmed or feel down sometimes, making us more sensitive to what others say or do. At those times we might lose our confidence when others laugh at us, reject or ignore us, or make a critical or insulting comment.

It has a much worse effect on someone who is having suicidal thoughts. It could cause deep emotional wounds that they never forget.

So we must be very mindful not do or say anything that might make them feel worse, and instead, we can practice lovingkindness by trying to help them feel better.

How do we know if someone is feeling depressed and could be having thoughts of suicide?

We might not know for sure, but be aware of these signs and symptoms:

Less interest in friends, family and activities.

Personality changes, such as being very quiet or trying to get attention (for example, by obnoxious, inappropriate, or overly dramatic behavior)

Changes in sleep habits, not eating, suddenly getting bad grades in school.

Not caring about anything.

Lack of energy.

Reckless behavior (not caring about serious danger).

Kids who are loners, unpopular, don't "fit in," or are bullied.

These don't always mean that the person thinks of suicide, but they could be warning signs.

Even if you don't know the person very well, how can you help them feel better and avoid making them feel worse?

Smile, use kind words, give them a compliment, express your appreciation of something good that they do.

Can you think of some examples of a compliment you can give?

Also, be mindful of the effects your words and your facial expressions might have on others.

Be careful not to say anything that may be hurtful.

Just ignore or get away from their negative or inappropriate behavior, without being critical.

Invite them to join you in your activities.

Defend them from criticisms or bullying from others.

Listen attentively to them. Just being a good listener can make a huge difference to them!

Be respectful of privacy - let them decide when they are ready to talk about personal issues.

By these simple acts of lovingkindness, you could be saving someone's life! They may always remember your kindness.