

Part 10 – Madness of Power

When Chetsang Rinpoche was 18 years old, he attended a school behind the Potala Palace that was a showcase of Chinese education. The teachers were carefully selected, mostly Chinese, with a few of the very best Tibetan teachers. The Chinese students were in separate classes and lived in separate dormitories, and they had a separate kitchen and separate food from the Tibetan students.



Chinese students were served mostly rice and wheat noodles, and Tibetans were served mostly tsampa, food made from toasted barley flour. The flour is often mixed with yak butter and hot water, and eaten with tea.

(photo of tsampa, ready to eat)

They all were given vegetables to eat in return for the garden work they were required to do every Saturday. Only once a month the students were served meat. They never really got enough food to feel full, especially the boys like Chetsang Rinpoche who played sports that burned up a lot of energy, making them more hungry. But they did drink very good tea. When the Chinese army searched the Potala Palace for valuables, they found what they thought was worthless cheap tea, so they let the school have it – but actually it was finest quality tea.

The dormitories were very basic, just a small room for 15 to 20 boys to sleep. Their days were strictly regulated. Every morning, a shrill bell rang before dawn and the students had to quickly dress and rush to the playground outside for morning exercise. Afterward, they washed themselves with a bucket of ice-cold water. There was a tight schedule of meals and classes, and the students were always closely monitored and disciplined.

Each week, a large assembly of all 500 students was held, in which individual students and entire classes were praised or criticized. Those who were accused of misbehavior had to stand up in front of the whole assembly, listen with heads bowed down while a teacher read aloud what they had done wrong, and then confess their wrong deeds and apologize, saying they regret having done them.

Rinpoche knew that with the events occurring in Tibet, it would be a good idea to learn Chinese quickly. So he was happy to sign up in his first year for an intensive course in Chinese, in which students would learn 3,000 Chinese characters in a very short time, and after one year they would be able to speak and write Chinese. The teacher was astounded that Rinpoche always got a score of 98 or 99 percent on all of his exams. Rinpoche had a really great interest in learning Chinese!

The Chinese Communists at that time were manipulating Tibetan society by turning the children of poor families into the privileged students - especially if they joined the Communist Youth League which was only available to those students - and by making life more difficult for the children of wealthy families. For example, the children of higher-class families had to pay for their food and housing, but children from poor families received it for free. And after graduation, the children from poor families were given the best jobs in the Communist Party and in the local governments, so they became the new elite people in society.

Once, Chetsang Rinpoche received a little money from Tritsab Gyabra, and hid it under his pillow on his bed in the dormitory room. When he returned to the room the next morning after exercises, the money was gone. Now he didn't have any money to pay for his room and food, so he had to report it to the teacher. The teacher called a meeting with the whole class, and a boy who was staying in bed pretending to be sick that day was found to be the one who stole the money. He admitted that he was guilty of stealing the money in front of the whole class, and then the students thought that everything was settled.

But it wasn't. The teacher gave a lecture using Communist ideas to change things around, to make the victim, Rinpoche, look like the wrongdoer, because he had money that tempted the other student. The teacher called on the students to discuss what conclusions can be made. Most students said that the thief was partly at fault and Rinpoche was partly at fault, some students still thought that only the thief was at fault, and others were convinced by the teacher that only Rinpoche was at fault. The teacher skillfully manipulated the discussion in such a way that Rinpoche was the only truly guilty one, because he caused the theft by bringing money into the school in the first place. According to the teacher, Rinpoche was influenced by the way capitalist upper-class people think. So, it was not the thief who should confess his fault, but Rinpoche, who had to admit to the class that this was the only correct conclusion.

Rinpoche was now familiar with this game of the Communists trying to make all the noble upper-class people look bad. There was no standing up for what is right here – the Communists were in control of the country, they turned everything upside down, and there was nothing Rinpoche could do about it. So, he stood up dutifully, and with an expression of deepest remorse, he confessed that everything had happened because of his errors.

Then suddenly a girl student spoke up and defended him. She said, "Theft is wrong under any circumstances. It's never okay to steal." Other students admired her courage to challenge the teacher. Rinpoche's friends hoped that the discussion now could be reopened to show he isn't guilty. But no. The teacher ignored the girl and abruptly told Rinpoche to conclude the meeting. The matter was settled; there was no more argument.

Despite problems such as these, Rinpoche felt that his time in school was satisfying. He had a few very good friends, he was respected by most of the teachers for his careful hard work, and he enjoyed success in sports. He represented the school on a soccer team in a major competition which was part of the program for a big celebration of the founding of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Lhasa was being fixed up and improved with elaborate preparations to impress all the foreigners who would be coming to the celebration. So, stores that had been almost empty began to fill up with food and all kinds of things for sale. The celebration started with a parade and reception of important political leaders from Beijing, the capital of China. Tibetans, wearing Communist plain blue worker suits, cheered at the parade.



(Chetsang Rinpoche seated in front row, far left, with his soccer team, 1965)

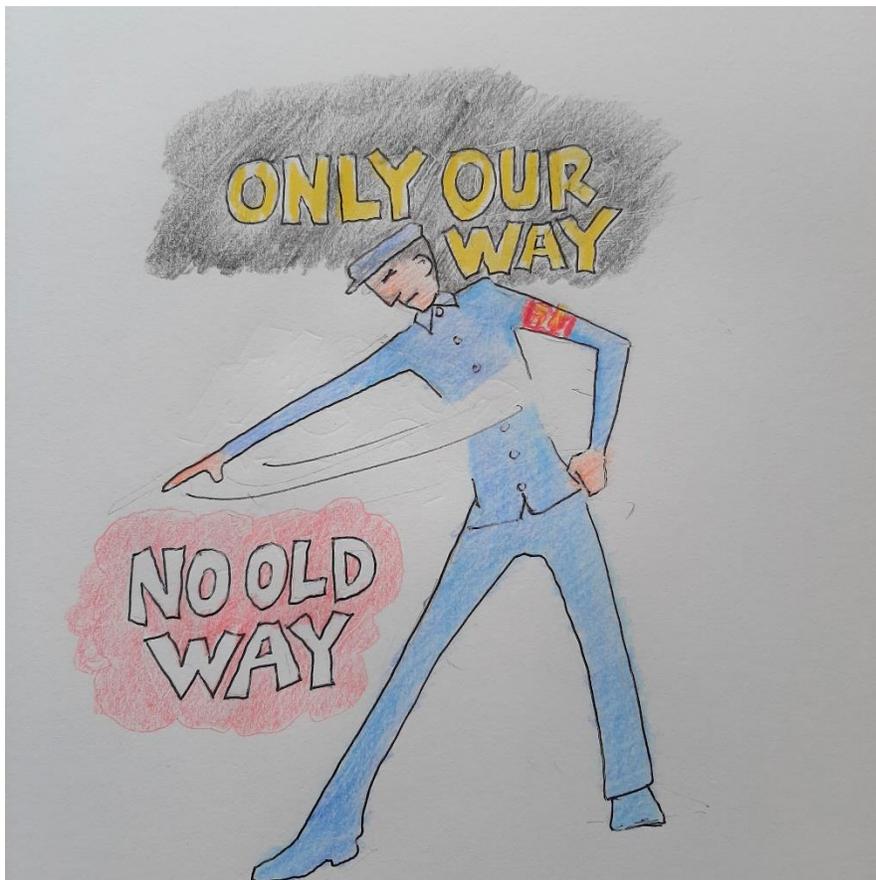
And later there was the big soccer match in the new stadium, which was built by the forced labor of people who had been put in prison by the Communists. Four teams competed: a Chinese army team, a transportation workers' team, a Lhasa government offices' team, and a team representing Tibet, on which Chetsang Rinpoche played. The winning team would play against Tibet's professional team. The Chinese army team had six months to train in a new training facility, and Rinpoche's team only had three months to train, at an old shabby facility. Yet, Rinpoche's team won against the Chinese army team, and got the honor of playing against the professional team! For that final match, the stands were overflowing with fans. Chetsang Rinpoche scored a spectacular goal in overtime, so his team won the final match! It was the best game of his life. From that time on, his nickname was "Golden Foot."

The next year, 1966, a group of students in Beijing founded the first Red Guards. They were fanatical supporters of Chairman Mao and were absolutely obedient to his instructions, without any question. They wore a red band on the sleeve of their left arm to identify themselves as Red Guards. Similar groups rose up in schools and universities throughout China as the new generation, raised in this delusional political environment, were becoming adults. They had been raised to worship and obey power rather than to think carefully. Now they were feeling ready to act and be powerful themselves. They had no real plan, but they had plenty of determination, guts, energy and feistiness to create a Mao revolution. Most of the older adult men in power didn't know how to deal with them. Some tried to rein in and control these rowdy students, but they wouldn't listen. There were too many of them, and they were too hungry for power.

But Chairman Mao saw the potential of using the immense energy of the youth for his own purposes. He gathered the young radicals around him and encouraged them. Then, starting with a shocking article in the newspaper, he went on the attack against those people in the Communist Party who he suspected had capitalist tendencies and weren't onboard with all his ideas.

He wanted to make himself look as if he was extremely popular. In August 1966, one million young people gathered together and cheered him on enthusiastically, mostly so they could relish the feeling of power and show off their own strength. All of a sudden, they had power they never had imagined before. Schools, universities, businesses and factories were closed so students could travel throughout China to share their revolutionary experiences with other Red Guards. In a country that for centuries expected young people to deeply respect and obey their parents and others in power, and to carry on the old traditions, now Mao was encouraging the young people to revolt - especially against tradition, parents and those in authority. He even told them they could use violence! The Cultural Revolution in China had begun.

The Red Guards terrorized the country. They burst into people's homes and forced them to admit they made errors of being materialistic - seeking or keeping wealth. The Red Guards beat, humiliated and arrested people on the streets. They conducted their own style of "struggle sessions," even more extreme than those done before, with more physical and psychological abuse. Brutal torture and killing became part of their routine.



The Cultural Revolution began to affect Tibet for the first time in early 1966 when the Mönlam festival was banned and the Cultural Revolution Committee was set up in Lhasa. The committee launched a new campaign to get rid of the "Four Olds": old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits.

A few months later, around the time Chetsang Rinpoche turned 20 years old, Red Guard students from Chinese universities set up a unit in Rinpoche's school, holding secret meetings

and recruiting students from poor families to join them. They tied on red armbands and armed themselves with homemade spears, and roamed the streets. They attended the same public assemblies that everyone, including Chetsang Rinpoche, were required to attend.



To get rid of the “Four Olds,” all religious symbols had to be removed. Tibetans who became Red Guards gave up their Dharma-sounding names and adopted Chinese names such as “Protector of Mao.” Women and girls were no longer allowed to have long hair. Red Guards forcibly cut off women’s long hair.

They always carried with them the “Little Red Book” of Chairman Mao’s quotations, like their most precious possession.

Earlier, monasteries had been vandalized, emptied, and destroyed by the Chinese Communists, but now the Red Guards wanted to destroy all the remaining ones. Lhasa’s most sacred and special Jokhang Temple, first built about 1400 years ago, was their target.



The Red Guards demanded that all schools join them in destroying the Jokhang Temple, and made all the students march to the temple.

Rinpoche and his friends hung back at the end of the line, trying to avoid being involved.

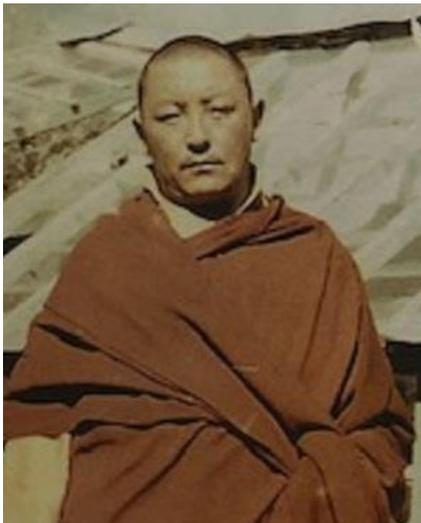
When they arrived at the Jokhang Temple, they could see the Chinese Red Guards arguing with officials of the department of cultural affairs who were standing in front of the temple trying to protect it.



The officials prevented them from destroying the temple building, but couldn't keep the mob from plundering it inside. The Red Guards forced their way into the temple and tore out all the sacred ritual objects, shouting about "superstition." Many students rushed to join them, taking apart the shrines and dragging the precious statues with ropes through the filth of the streets. Rinpoche and his friends snuck off to a classmate's house and went up on the roof to see what was happening. Maybe the rowdy kids in the streets were enjoying the chance to vent their energy by this crazy destructive behavior. Some sneaky adults took advantage of the situation to carry off priceless sacred treasure they could sell to art dealers in Nepal.

(photo of objects destroyed by the Red Guards and students in Jokhang Temple)

The Red Guards invaded the homes of the wealthy people and grabbed everything that looked to them like valuables – "capitalist goods" they called them. Everyone was forced to give them their valuables, and they got paid a tiny bit for giving up their items. But if the people were suspected of being against Communism, their things were just stolen from them. The government set up a big storage hall for the Red Guards to put all the statues and antique items from the monasteries and homes. Valuable items, including beautiful art, were sold. This was done because in Communism, personal collection of wealth and valuables was considered a crime.



So, no one dared to keep religious objects anymore. Trisab Gyabra dumped into the river a chest containing vajras, precious small statues and other beautiful items from the monastery, and a few Buddhist texts. He would rather give them to the river than to the crazy Communist thieves.

But still, after all the cooperation he had given to the Chinese army to avoid trouble, he was one of the lamas and tulkus who was publicly humiliated. In front of a heckling crowd, he was paraded across the big Barkhor road around the Jokhang Temple wearing a white cardboard dunce cap that said "I am a demon."

(photo of Trisab Gyabra Rinpoche)

To avoid being attacked for keeping company with Trisab Gyabra and other tulkus, Chetsang Rinpoche stayed in the shabby dormitory of his school, which had been shut down while the students were out in the streets joining the Cultural Revolution and the teachers were in hiding.

Life in Tibet was a complete mess now. At first only the noble upper-class families and monks had been harassed by the Communists, but now even the faithful Communist people were being paraded through the street in disgrace. Pretending to be reforming society under Mao, the actual goal of the Cultural Revolution was to completely destroy Tibetan identity.

QUESTIONS:

1. What language did Chetsang Rinpoche want to learn in school? (Chinese)
2. Who did the Chinese Communists favor, the students from wealthy families or from poor families? (poor families)
3. Who did the teacher think was at fault, the boy who stole Rinpoche's money or Rinpoche? (Rinpoche)
4. Which team won the big soccer match at the new stadium? (The Tibetan team)
5. What did the Red Guards want to destroy? (religion, religious symbols, monasteries, Tibetan identity, people's personal wealth)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Madness of Power:

The Communists used their power to harass, arrest, imprison and force into hard labor the monks and people from the noble Tibetan families.

And they manipulated the minds of Tibetans to make religion and the noble rulers seem bad and abusive, and to make the poor people who accepted Communism into the heroes.

But life in Tibet became even more crazy when the Red Guards, who were just students, took over and controlled people with violence.

Why were they so cruel and abusive?

They became power hungry – they let their intense greed for power take over their minds, like an addiction. Feeling and abusing their power more and more, and showing it off, they became even more arrogant, hostile, brutal and destructive, like demons.

They are an extreme example of what happens when a person suddenly gets power or authority over others, but has not developed enough virtues.

They may have grown up learning some virtues, like self-discipline, respect for family and elders, courage and perseverance, which were important in Chinese culture.

But they didn't have the extremely important virtues that could control their aggression, hate and greed.

Which ones did they not have?

Surely they didn't have much kindness, humility, generosity, patience, and tolerance.

They didn't have much of the Four Immeasurables – lovingkindness, compassion, joy for others' success, and even-mindedness (equanimity).

These are the most important values we should develop to protect ourselves from falling into dangerous behaviors like hunger for power, like the Red Guards.

These are the medicines that cure us from the Five Poisons of greed, hatred, ignorance, jealousy and arrogance.



How do people behave when they are power hungry?

They are focused on themselves and what they want – they are focused on “I,” “me” and “mine” plus they want “more” - they are greedy for more power.

They’re usually bossy, arrogant, pushy, inflexible, and critical of others.

They often insult, blame or humiliate others.

They may make others do the unpleasant work, take credit for others’ work, or make too many rules.

They crave admiration and attention, and like to show off.

Sometimes people call them “control freaks,” “narcissistic” or “bullies.”

Can you think of examples of kids who might be power hungry?

Maybe you think of kids in social media who crave attention, “likes” and followers, such as some influencers on YouTube.

Or a student who is popular or trying to be popular at school, but is arrogant and seems to enjoy controlling, insulting or embarrassing others.

Sometimes, other kids admire their popularity so they start to behave in the same way,

Or they think that’s the way to be a leader, to get others to follow them.

Then the power hunger then spreads to those kids too!

Being a leader doesn’t mean you are power hungry.

Good leaders don’t crave admiration or to control others, but want to lead because they are confident that they can be a good and fair leader.

It is said that those who are good leaders empower others, or share their power, and those who are hungry for power abuse it.

Good leaders have confidence in team members, let them make decisions, give them good opportunities, admire what they do, give them credit for their work, and when they fail, help and encourage them, with compassion, patience and understanding.