

## **The Entangled (and Sometimes Violent) Web of Reincarnational Politics**

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*The tune of the flute changed to the song of the arrow.*

--The Fifth Dalai Lama, reluctantly acceding to using Mongolian Troops

After over a year's delay President Obama finally met with the Dalai Lama last week. On this occasion I would like to share some of my research on the relation between Tibetan Buddhism and religious violence.

History demonstrates that there have been very few examples of nonviolent rule by religious leaders. The millions who rightly admire the current Dalai Lama would offer him as a glowing exception, and many would make the assumption the Tibetan Buddhism has always produced such saints.

Sadly, this is not the case. Historian Hugh Richardson comments that the "rivalry and bitter fighting" among the monasteries "is a blot on the Tibetan Middle Ages." Each of the monasteries had a "private army commanded often by a reliable family member of the original religious founder."

In recent conversations with Thomas Laird in *The Story of Tibet*, the current Dalai Lama honestly describes this history as "300 years of pain." The general justification for this use of violence was same that some Christians and Muslims use: it is God's will as found in prophetic oracles and religious texts.

Buddhist rule has always been more successful under civilian rather than religious rule. Many of the Buddhist kings in India, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bhutan were exemplary for their peaceful and enlightened leadership. It is supremely ironic that the most religiously tolerant rulers of Hindu India were the Buddhist Ashoka the Great and the Muslim Akbar the Great, and the best kings that Buddhists of Sri Lanka ever had were their Hindu kings from 1739 to 1815.

During a 3-week tour of Tibet and Bhutan in 1999, I learned that the Bhutanese had bravely defended themselves against nine Tibetan invasions in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The Bhutanese were followers of the Tantric Red Hat school of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Tibetans were committed to extending the rule of the Yellow Hat sect.

My gracious Bhutanese hosts allowed me to assume that they were always the victims of religiously motivated violence, but my research has revealed that their most famous lama, Ngawang Namgyal, known simply as the Shabdrung ("at whose feet one

submits”), was ruthless in rooting out religious and political opposition to his absolute rule.

In a famous 16-point proclamation the Shabdrung declared: “I am the incarnation prophesied by the patriarchs. I am the executioner of false incarnations.” The Shabdrung had sought refuge in Bhutan after a dispute arose about his right to be the incarnation of the Bodhisattva Chenrizi. All the Dalai Lamas claim that they are also the incarnation of Chenrizi, so unfortunately we are confronted with something very familiar: armies appealing to the same God for victory in war.

The Bodhisattva ideal is one of the greatest moral and spiritual achievements of Mahayana Buddhism. These enlightened Buddhas, beneficent laypeople in many instances, have exhausted their karmic debt, but they chose to reenter the cycle of birth and death until all sentient beings are redeemed. Early Bodhisattvas such as the amazing Vimalakirti did perform miracles, but he did not function as the Judeo-Christian deity does. They also did not select their next incarnation with the purpose of extending their lives, particularly not as political rulers.

The current Dalai Lama believes that, before the rise of the first Dalai Lama (AD 1391-1474), the first Tibetan king, Songzen Gampo (AD 605-49), was also an incarnation of Chenrizi. From the beginning of Tibetan history Chenrizi directed everything that has happened, including all the violence and even anti-Buddhist campaigns by some of the rulers.

The Dalai Lama believes that Chenrizi has a master plan and that he has chosen the Tibetan people to have a key role in that plan. The odd feature of this divine plan is that it has not been fulfilled on a number of key occasions, including the entire lives of the 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lamas. The failure of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama’s efforts to modernize Tibet also went against Chenrizi’s plan.

Starting with the Third Dalai Lama (1543-1588), the Yellow Hat sect forged an alliance with Mongolia. Altan Khan declared that all his people had to join the Yellow Hat sect on pain of death, and his troops played a central role in subduing and marginalizing the Red Hat sects. As a result the Yellow Hat sect has dominated Tibetan politics and religion for the last 300 years.

To his credit the Fifth Dalai Lama, sometimes called “The Great Fifth” for his many achievements (including the construction of the 13-storey Potala Palace), confessed that he was not the right reincarnated child, and he reluctantly acceded to the use of military force that his advisors proposed. The Great Fifth actually practiced the sexual yoga of the Red Hat School (producing at least one son as a result) and he was tolerant of all the Buddhist schools, even the indigenous Bon religion.

Tsangyang Gyatso, the Sixth Dalai Lama, was, to say the least, a controversial figure. He drank and made love to men and women to great excess, and, in a great act of defiance, he renounced his monastic vows. In response, the Chinese and the Mongols

found another young man whom they claimed was the true Sixth, and Tsangyang Gyatso died mysteriously on his way to China. The Tibetan people, however, stood by their man and insisted that this new boy be declared the Seventh Dalai Lama.

The ultimate failure of reincarnational politics is clearly seen in the current situation. In 1989 came death of the 10th Panchen Lama, considered second only to the Dalai Lama in spiritual significance. (Considered a collaborator by most Tibetans, the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama started to speak out against the Chinese government just before his untimely death.) The current Dalai Lama commenced the traditional proceedings to find the correct child incarnation.

When the selection was announced on May 14, 1995, the Beijing government arrested the young boy and placed him and his family under house arrest. The abbot who conducted the search was imprisoned for seven years and he is still under house arrest. Using a selection procedure by which previous Chinese rulers had certified not only the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama, but also the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lamas, the Communist government presented, on November 19, 1995, the young Gyeltsen Norbu as the true 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. His parents had of course been vetted by the Chinese Communist Party.

It is therefore inevitable that upon the death of Dalai Lama, the Communists will ask Gyeltsen Norbu, as it is the Panchen Lama's duty, to search for and choose the new Dalai Lama. The Tibetans in exile will no doubt find their own child as the true heir of the Yellow Hats, and unfortunately the controversy will drag on indefinitely.

In 1907 the British convinced the Bhutanese to set up a royal line to solve similar disputes in their reincarnational politics. (With DNA testing now available a true prince can always be correctly identified.) The Bhutanese kings of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century have proved to be some of the most enlightened royalty in Asia. King Jigme Singye Wangchuck became world famous for his motto "Gross National Happiness." His green campaign has stopped forest products exports to India, banned motorcycle taxis, and eliminated plastic bags. The Bhutanese have enjoyed free education and health care for decades.

In 1934 Tibetan authorities blinded a well-meaning lama, who took four students to Europe and worked hard to modernize the country. In stark contrast, King Wangchuck sent his son to Harvard (he is now king), and he made English the language of instruction in all schools. Because they loved their kings so much, the Bhutanese very reluctantly voted in the first parliamentary elections in 2008.

In conversations with Thomas Laird the Dalai Lama speculated that it was Chenrizi's plan that the Great Fifth's reincarnated successor be a king rather than a lama. By renouncing his vows, the Sixth Dalai Lama actually made this possible. This would have put an end to the impractical and unwise practice of choosing young children to rule a country. There is, however, a serious problem with this theory: the Fifth Dalai Lama could not possibly have been the father of the Sixth because he was in China at the time. Not only would the Sixth Dalai Lama have made a bad king, he would have also failed a DNA test!

Why didn't Chenrizi choose a more promising candidate for this otherwise good idea, and why didn't this divine plan succeed? The Buddha himself was a strict humanist, holding that the gods did not control human behavior, and I'm sure that he would have been embarrassed by such an ill-begotten theology. Jesus would also have despaired if he had known what some Christians have done in his name.

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