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Tashi Lhunpo Monastery and the Panchen Lama

In this newsletter, you will learn about the history of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery and its leader, the Panchen Lama. Tashi Lhunpo Monastery is an important project blessed with Khen Rinpoche's interest and leadership. We hope this information will motivate you to appreciate it more and to make a generous donation to this project, where your dollar has vastly more purchasing power than it could have in the US. Thank you.

Overview

- One aspect of the relationship between the two highest figures in Tibetan Buddhism—the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama—is that, when either of them dies, the remaining one has the authority to recognize the other's reincarnation or rebirth—thus continuation of his spiritual authority and the respect given him by the Tibetan people. (Recognition of a reincarnation involves a combination of signs, consultations by traditional means, and indications either before the death of the lama or by behaviors of the child/reincarnation, such as recognizing items or people that would have been known to the previous lama while he was alive.)
- The current 11th Panchen Lama was taken into custody by the Chinese in 1995 at the age of six.
- The monastery of Tashi Lhunpo is the seat of the Panchen Lama. The original Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Tibet, now under Chinese control, no longer functions as a great center of learning. It is being rebuilt in exile, in India.
- In the absence of the rightful 11th Panchen Lama, Khen Rinpoche Lobzang Tsetan was appointed abbot of the exiled Tashi Lhunpo Monastery by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Summaries

The following information is summarized or, where indicated, directly quoted from *Hostage of Beijing: The Abduction of the Panchen Lama*, by Gilles van Grasdorff, Element Books, 1999.

Current Situation of the Panchen Lama

According to van Grasdorff's foreword,

In 1989, the second hierarch of Tibetan Buddhism, the Tenth Panchen Lama, died. The search for his successor—the child in whom he would be reincarnated, according to Buddhist beliefs—was immediately launched, with the “blessing” of Beijing. The search raises significant issues concerning the future of Tibet, because it is the Eleventh Panchen Lama who will in turn appoint and train the successor of the present Dalai Lama.

On 14 May 1995, in accordance with his duties and with centuries-old rituals, the Dalai Lama recognized Gendun Choky Nyima, a six-year-old boy from a poor nomadic family, as the Eleventh Panchen Lama. The Chinese, unwilling to accept the intervention of a man to whom they had denied all spiritual authority, abducted the boy and his family and appointed in his place another child, of the same age and from the same village, after a rigged drawing of lots from a golden urn ...

Historical Background

Padmasambhava initiated the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet in the seventh century. Buddhism was declared a state religion in Tibet as early as 779. Several Buddhist lineages, or main schools, developed in Tibet; four still exist: Nyingmapa, Kagyupa, Sakyapa, and Gelugpa (or Gelukpa). The Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama belong to the Gelugpa lineage.

Tibetans consider the Panchen Lama to be an emanation of Amitabha (*Eupame* in Tibetan), the Buddha of Infinite Light. And they consider Eupame as the spiritual father of Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Perfect Compassion, from whom the Dalai Lama is said to emanate.

The institution of Panchen Lamas was begun by the fifth Dalai Lama. The title “Panchen” comes from the Sanskrit *pandita*, “scholar,” and the Tibetan *chenpo*, “great.” The first Panchen Lama (1385–1438) was a disciple and biographer of Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelugpa lineage.

The first Dalai Lama (1391–1475) founded the monastery of Tashi Lhunpo near Shigatse, Tibet, in 1447. He was its first abbot, and he set up a printing house there to publish Tibetan translations of Sanskrit Buddhist texts.

Two centuries later, in 1600, the monastery’s abbot was the tutor of the fifth Dalai Lama. The fifth Dalai Lama was the first to hold temporal as well as spiritual power. In 1652, he set in place the constitution by which Tibet was governed until the 1950s, and he established his government in Lhasa.

Texts that had remained secret since the first dissemination of Buddhism are said to have revealed to the fifth Dalai Lama that his tutor (Lobsang Chokyi Gyaltsen, 1570–1662) was an emanation of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. The fifth Dalai Lama gave him the Panchen Lama title (his previous incarnations were given the title retroactively). Tashi Lhunpo remained the seat of the Panchen Lamas.

Late 19th–20th Century

Tibet’s contact with the Western world came via British India and the Russian Empire in the 19th century. Despite centuries-old treaties between Tibet and China as independent and free states, China claimed that Tibet was a political dependency. British diplomats dealt with China, not Tibet, concerning Tibet’s boundary; Tibetans had not been included in the negotiations. Tibet’s location made it an area of dispute and claims by Russia, China, and British India.

Part of Chinese strategy for gaining power over Tibet was to sow discord between the two highest spiritual leaders, the Panchen Lama and the Dalai Lama. The ninth and 10th Panchen Lamas had strong ties with China. But it was the ninth Panchen Lama (Chokyi Nyima, 1883–1937) who, upon receiving the lamas who found the incarnation of the 13th Dalai Lama, gave the child—the present 15th Dalai Lama—the name Tenzin Gyatso.

The 10th Panchen Lama (Chokyi Gyaltsen, 1938–1989) was appointed to several high-ranking posts in the Communist Chinese system. He undertook numerous initiatives to promote the well-being of the Tibetan people, and he became increasingly aware that the Chinese policy was actually aimed at annihilating Tibetan culture. His report to the rulers of the People’s Republic of China on the needs of the people of Tibet, and his support of the Dalai Lama, resulted in his being imprisoned for nine years. Some suspect that his death in 1989 was due to poison.

On May 14, 1995, HH the Dalai Lama officially recognized Gendun Chokyi Nyima as the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama. On that day, the news was barely telephoned to the monks at Tashi Lhunpo by Chadrel Rinpoche; the line was suddenly cut. The next day, a “work group” from the Chinese government arrived at Tashi Lhunpo and told the monks Chadrel Rinpoche had “changed his mind” (which the monks never believed).

Toward the end of 1995, Chinese government officials, along with monks, carried out the “ceremony of the Golden Urn,” in which the 11th Panchen Lama was to be identified by the drawing of lots. Three children had been selected as possible “reincarnations.” One of the ivory tablets in the urn was longer than the

others, and thus easy to pick out. The child whose lot was drawn was the same age as the abducted child, from the same village ... and was already waiting behind a curtain, dressed in ceremonial robes.

The foreword to *Hostage of Beijing* notes:

- An atheist state—Communist China—proclaimed itself the only authority competent to choose and appoint “living Buddhas” / reincarnated spiritual leaders.
- In full view of the world, China—permanent member of the UN Security Council, signatory to the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man and the International Convention for the Rights of Children—abducted a six-year-old child, and no official voice was raised in protest.

Even before the Cultural Revolution, the 10th Panchen Lama (Chokyi Gyaltzen) wrote, “Of the 2,500 monasteries existing in the past (in what is now called the Autonomous Region of Tibet), only 70 remain, and 93% of the monks have been forced to leave their monasteries.” As of 1999, over 8,000 monasteries and cultural centers had been destroyed. Parts of the original Tashi Lhunpo were destroyed. It has been rebuilt and is now a tourist attraction.

Tashi Lhunpo was, from its origin, a place of learning, starting with the publication of Buddhist texts in Tibetan in the 15th century. As the seat of the Panchen Lama, its existence for the education of monks and the continuation of Tibetan culture—in its new “incarnation” in south India—is vital.

Shortly before his death in 1933, the 13th Dalai Lama (Thubten Gyatso, 1876–1933) wrote:

... if you are not able to defend yourself now then the institution of the Dalai Lama, other venerable incarnations and those who protect the teachings will be wiped out completely. Monasteries will be looted, property confiscated and all living being will be destroyed ... official property will be confiscated. The people will be slaves of the conquerors and they will roam the land in bondage. All souls will be immersed in suffering and fear. And the night shall be long and dark.

In 1972, a transplanted Tashi Lhunpo Monastery was established in India, one of many of the great monasteries of Tibet that has been created since the 1960s for the exiled Tibetan communities. Monastic education in Tibet has languished greatly under Communist rule, so these great monasteries, which function in many ways as universities with huge curriculums, have been fortunate enough to continue their legacies of preserving traditional Tibetan intellectual and religious teachings in exile. Tashi Lhunpo Monastery is in the Tibetan settlement town of Bylakuppe, in the Mysore district of southern India. Several years ago, HH the Dalai Lama asked Khen Rinpoche Lobzang Tsetan to become its abbot, and to help it grow into a major training ground for future Tibetan monks and nuns. Toward this end, His Holiness donated nearly \$1 million of his own funds and has charged Khen Rinpoche with raising the same amount. A new and huge prayer hall is currently under construction, and plans are in place to create a vibrant monastic university along traditional lines but with the addition of training in English and modern science. Khen Rinpoche is energetically engaged in raising funds to make this possibility come true.

Bibliography

Gilles van Grasdorff, 1999, *Hostage of Beijing: The Abduction of the Panchen Lama*, Element Books.

This newsletter was provided courtesy of Pat Musick.