

Tibetan Murder Mystery

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DHARAMSALA, THE HOME OF THE TIBETAN GOVERNMENT IN EXILE, sits on a pine-covered ridge in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas. Ravens and eagles soar in the clear blue air, and vendors line the narrow streets, selling woolen shawls and hats, turquoise earrings and silver necklaces, and a colorful array of fruits and vegetables to Western tourists. Sacred cows, mangy dogs, and the occasional troop of monkeys crowd the streets alongside aging Tibetans reciting their mantras. The warm air is filled with a swirl of odors: incense, urine, dung, curry, and dust.

In the winter, night comes early, and the temperature at 6,000 feet drops quickly. Along the rocky paths Buddhist monks, cowed in heavy maroon robes, appear like ghosts and vanish mysteriously into the trees. On such an evening in February 1997, the light was fading toward dusk as Lobsang Gyatso, a respected 69-year-old lama, sat on his bed, translating scriptures from Tibetan into Chinese with the help of two disciples.

Across the road from Lobsang's quarters lay the walled compound that is the spiritual and political heart of the Tibetan community in exile. It contains a monastery, a central temple with statues of the Buddha and the deity of compassion, Avalokitesvara, and the secluded residence of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, or His Holiness, as ordinary Tibetans call

him. He is considered by his followers to be an incarnation of Avalokitesvara as well as the temporal head of state, a position he assumed at their urging at the unusually young age of 15, when Tibet was invaded by the Chinese in 1950.

Nine years later, upon learning of a Chinese plot to abduct him, the Dalai Lama fled to India, followed by thousands of monks and lay people. One of them was Lobsang, whom the Dalai Lama personally asked to join his campaign to modernize Tibet through the education of its youth and the creation of a parliamentary democracy. Lobsang started as an elementary school teacher and eventually became the head of the Buddhist Institute of Dialectics, a place where monks could pursue their higher education outside the rigid framework of the old monastic order.

The translations Lobsang was preparing in his quarters were to be used in the institute. His two disciples, both in their twenties, sat on stools, kitty-corner across the small room. Hearing a noise, he may have looked toward the stout wooden door, outside of which the ground fell away to a warren of shacks, tiered gardens, and teahouses. He probably dismissed the noise and went back to work with a smile. His great moon-face was famous for its smiles.

The door slammed open and six men

burst in, knives flashing. Striking Lobsang on the head, his attackers slashed open his throat and stabbed him through the heart. The disciples rose from their stools and were cut down without mercy. In moments, the room ran with blood. Then the murderers fled into the night, leaving everyone to wonder why a venerated Buddhist lama, a colleague of the Dalai Lama, had become the target of such a crime.

UNLIKE THE DALAI LAMA, whose spiritual and precocious nature was recognized at an early age, Lobsang had an ordinary boyhood. Born in 1928 to a family of semi-nomadic farmers in southeastern Tibet, he loved swords, guns, and liquor, putting his hand under the distillery spout and lapping up spirits made from fermented barley even as a child. He was always ready for a fight. At the age of 12, when his family began to match him with a neighboring girl, Lobsang asked to become a monk so that he could "escape the married life."

He convinced his family that he could set aside his dissolute ways, and they packed him off to a local monastery. From there, at the age of 17, he went to the Drepung Monastery near Lhasa, the capital, in central Tibet. Drepung housed about 10,000 monks when Lobsang was there in the 1940s. Ten to 15 percent of them were trained in ritualized combat, acting as bodyguards for their monasteries. Like other monasteries, Drepung loaned grain to estates and farmers, charging interest, and had a far-reaching network of affiliated monasteries across Tibet. The monastic order's paramilitary capability, its role in financing the country's agriculture, and its nationwide presence made monasteries political as well as religious institutions.

Into this medieval world the future Fourteenth Dalai Lama was born as Lhamo Dhondrub in 1935. His

parents, like those of Lobsang Gyatso, were ordinary farmers. Not long after the birth of their son, their remote village in northeastern Tibet and their simple house were singled out in the visions of lamas charged with finding the reincarnation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who had died two years earlier. When the search party arrived in their village not far from the present-day Chinese town of Lanzhou, they found the 2-year-old boy foretold by the prophecies standing in his parents' yard. He identified their monastic order and addressed them in their own Tibetan dialect, spoken a thousand miles to the southwest.

Literally true or somewhat mythologized, this event helps to illustrate the sacred process that surrounds the choosing of the Dalai Lama. Buddhists believe that humans go through an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth until they achieve enlightenment, or nirvana. But some enlightened beings, called bodhisattvas, defer their nirvana, returning to human form to help others free themselves from the cycle. The title "Dalai," meaning "ocean" and signifying great wisdom, was given to a lama named Sonam Gyatso by the Mongol chieftan Altan Khan, whom Gyatso converted to Buddhism in 1578. Gyatso was from the Gelugpa sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

In early Tibet, a variety of Buddhist sects competed for lay patrons, and having a leader return in human shape would continue a particular line of succession, enabling the sect to own property and peasants and retain both a religious and legal identity from generation to generation. The largest of the four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism, Gelugpa has produced every Dalai Lama, allowing it to maintain its status as the most influential sect. It has handpicked new Dalai Lama candidates through a variety of tests: Is the boy born in a place where auguries predict he

will be found? Can he pick out his predecessor's clothes and possessions when they're mixed in with forgeries? Does he have the traditional eight bodily markings of a Dalai Lama, including long ears, long eyes, and eyebrows curving up at their ends?

The present Dalai Lama easily passed these tests and in 1939 was taken with great ceremony to Lhasa, where he was given the name of Tenzin Gyatso and his title. He grew into an inquisitive, mechanically inclined teenager who became adept in Buddhist philosophy, learned to drive a car and speak English, and took up his lifelong hobby of repairing broken watches. His curiosity and eclectic intellectual tastes proved an invaluable asset when he was forced into exile.

LOBSANG GYATSO WAS NOT SO BROAD-MINDED. Finding himself a refugee in India, he imagined that his monastic life would continue as before: a timeless round of chanting, retreats, and religious festivals. The Dalai Lama quickly disabused him of that notion. Surprising the monks he had gathered for an audience, His Holiness launched into an angry tirade about the monasteries they had left behind, saying they were dominated by a xenophobic and power-hungry theocracy. He even went so far as to claim that by not modernizing their country, they had ignored a mindful Buddhist path and invited the Chinese invasion.

Lobsang was stunned, but he ought not to have been. In his efforts to modernize Tibet, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama wasn't breaking new ground. His predecessor had tried to reform Tibet in the early 1900s, but was thwarted by the monastic order, which viewed religion as the highest aim of the state and opposed modern civil institutions that would divert funds from monasteries. Shortly after the Thirteenth Dalai Lama died in 1933, Dorje Tsegial Lungshar,

his former commander-in-chief and confidant in high state matters, tried to follow in his footsteps by reforming Tibet's political institutions. Having assimilated Western ideas during his travels in England, Lungshar wanted to reduce the power of the Kashag, Tibet's primary administrative body, whose four members (one monk and three lay officials) held lifelong terms. He sought to transfer authority to the more broadly representative National Assembly, where he enjoyed much support and which would, he believed, give him the power to modernize the state.

But Lungshar's attempt to build a coalition of monk officials, made under the cloak of secrecy, was revealed by an informer. He was arrested by the Kashag and punished by an ancient Tibetan method. The smooth knucklebones of a yak were placed on each of his temples and tied with a thong around his head. A stick was then inserted through the thongs and twisted until the knucklebones, pressing on his temples, had popped out one of his eyeballs. (The other had to be cut out afterwards.)

One might say that in blinding Dorje Tsegial Lungshar, Tibet had blinded itself. Wedded to the past and shunning relations with the outside world, monasteries and large landowners continued to dominate the government. When China invaded in 1950, Tibet lacked the military and diplomatic means to defend its independence. (China dwarfs Tibet and surrounds it on all sides but the south.) As the Dalai Lama noted in his first autobiography, "If only we had applied to join the League of Nations or the United Nations, or even appointed ambassadors to a few of the leading powers, before our crisis came, I am sure these signs of sovereignty would have been accepted." Instead, he conceded, "We were quite content to retire into isolation."

In exile, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama was not going to let such public blindness happen again. One of his first moves was to steer monks like Lobsang away from meditative introspection, ascetic retreats, and immersion in scriptural study. If Tibet were to be reclaimed, the young Dalai Lama told them, the Tibetan government in exile had to build schools and provide its children with a modern education. Monks, the only educated Tibetans, would have to relinquish some of their religious practice and become teachers.

He understood the regret they felt at being asked to leave their spiritual studies, he said, but times had changed. Buddhism was like a watch. "Sometimes the watch stops going. But if you take it apart and then put it back together again it will go as well as before. . . . This is the need of the hour."

Though only in his late twenties, the Dalai Lama had become a charismatic speaker, mixing exhortation with easygoing humor. And he was, after all, the Dalai Lama. Lobsang's misgivings quickly subsided. He completed a teacher-training course and graduated to the position of instructor at an elementary school, where he taught Tibetan grammar and writing.

In 1973, the Dalai Lama pressed the older monk into further service, calling him to Dharamsala to head the new Institute of Buddhist Dialectics. It was here that Lobsang spent the last third of his life, teaching, lecturing, and supporting the Dalai Lama in a theological dispute with other Buddhists. To Westerners, the dispute, which focused on a deity called Dorje Shugden, seemed no more than an arcane doctrinal spat. For Tibetans, however, the consequences of the dispute were very serious. It was this dispute that raised a challenge to the Dalai Lama's previously unquestioned authority-and resulted in Lobsang

Gyatso's murder.

THE TIBETAN PLATEAU HAS NEVER BEEN AN EASY PLACE TO LIVE. Stark snow-covered mountains and high steppes meet a sky that seems to have been washed away by the wind. Aware of the fickle and powerful natural forces that governed their lives, the people who inhabited Tibet before A.D. 700 practiced a religion called Bön. They placed their trust in local deities that were the manifestations of mountains, rivers, and weather.

Dorje Shugden, the "powerful thunderbolt," is one such phenomenon: a three-eyed, sword-bearing, soldierlike being riding a fiery horse. He first appeared in the Tibetan panoply of deities in the 17th century and was believed to be the ghost of a man rejected as the reincarnation of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Ever since then he has been an anomalous power, the protector of the Dalai Lama's Gelugpa sect but also an instigator of conflicts within the sect and between it and the other major sects of Tibetan Buddhism. A primary reason for disagreement is that Shugden's most devoted followers elevate him, a mere protector deity, to a status almost equal to the Buddha. Mainstream Buddhists find this heretical.

In the early 1970s, the Dalai Lama began to express doubts about the worship of a deity that divided Buddhists rather than uniting them. His concerns increased when a splinter movement called the New Kadampa Tradition of Buddhism emerged in Britain, under a leader who used evangelism to gain new recruits-something traditional Buddhism doesn't permit-and declared Shugden to be a Buddha. Another highly regarded lama and Shugden follower also claimed that Shugden would destroy any Gelugpa practitioner who supplemented his practice with other spiritual traditions.

This kind of menacing language pushed the Dalai Lama into an incongruous position. In an effort to bring a democratic Tibet into existence, he had created an elected parliamentary system, even inserting a clause into the new Tibetan constitution that gave the National Assembly the power to impeach him in his role as secular head of state. His efforts to seek a nonviolent resolution of the Tibetan question and his support for human rights in China had earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. But the reemergence of a fundamentalist sect worried him. He saw it as a threat to the right of all Buddhist sects to participate equally in a modern Tibetan government. In 1996, he decreed that no government departments or monasteries under the central Tibetan administration could pray to Dorje Shugden. Individual Tibetans were told that they were free to worship Shugden, but that doing so diverged from the Dalai Lama's teachings.

Many Tibetans didn't know where to turn. The Dalai Lama had challenged their loyalty to an ancient protector deity, one they feared might wreak a terrible retribution on those who abandoned him. Some rebelled and even attacked monks to dramatize their point. In May 1996, Thupten Wangyal, a former abbot at the Jangtse College of the Gaden Monastery in southern India, narrowly escaped death when his house was set ablaze. In January of the following year, another lama from that college was badly injured in an assault while he was visiting Delhi. Both men were critics of Shugden worship and supporters of the Dalai Lama.

Shugden devotees also attacked the legitimacy of the Dalai Lama, accusing him of religious persecution and human rights violations. Lobsang-respected, held in great fondness, called by his honorific title, "Gen-la," or teacher-stepped into the fray.

In a series of strident articles, he came to the Dalai Lama's defense, saying in one of them, "The worship and propitiation of Dolgyal Dorje Shugden, by promoting a rabid form of sectarianism, has caused great trouble to the fabric of Tibetan society and hindered greatly the ability of the government to govern effectively." For these words he paid with his life.

Within a few months the Dharamsala police tracked the murderers-young Tibetans between the ages of 25 and 35-to several Tibetan settlements in India, where they had been members of Shugden cults. In his death throes, Lobsang had wrestled a canvas bag from one of his attackers, who left the bag behind. Papers in it helped identify the assailants. Before they could be apprehended, though, they fled to Tibet and eventually to China, where they were given asylum. Some Tibetan government officials charged the Chinese with using the Shugden clash to sow dissension among Tibetans and undermine the authority of the Dalai Lama.

If so, the Chinese had exploited the Shugden issue to strike at the Dalai Lama where he is most vulnerable. It inevitably raises questions for a religious figure, even a venerated one like the Dalai Lama, to use his religious authority to quash opposition-in this case a fundamentalist sect that believes monks should be the final arbiters of Tibet's destiny instead of the democratically elected representatives of Tibet's people.

The murdered lama Lobsang was enlisted in the Dalai Lama's cause, his support reinforcing the notion that Tibet would be a nation of openness and religious freedom. But Lobsang's opposition to Shugden in the name of the Dalai Lama's political vision could not be separated from his identity as a monk. This is the paradox of modern Tibet and the irony of being the Dalai

Lama. He has called for democracy and openness, but through his stature as a divine reincarnated being.

Though the Dalai Lama is as important to the people of Tibet as ever-a picture of him hangs on the wall behind the desk of every figure of prominence in the exile community, as well as in virtually every household-democratically inclined Tibetans find themselves in an uneasy relationship with His Holiness, and not merely over the issue of Shugden worship.

A large group of intellectuals and young people hope for a return to a Tibet that is independent of China. The Dalai Lama, on the other hand, has conceded that this is unrealistic and has avidly pursued negotiations with China that could lead to a Tibetan protectorate under Chinese rule. As one member of the political opposition explained, "Every thinking Tibetan is split in two between their loyalty to their country, their desire for freedom on one side, and their reverence and faith in His Holiness on the other."

Such contradictions are not lost on the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. He often states his wish to retire from politics, leaving the handling of state affairs to his prime minister. He has also remarked that he may be the last of his line. A Fifteenth Dalai Lama, he says, may not be needed.