

About the 17th Karmapa

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On the morning of 4 June, 1989, a contingent of over two hundred thousand soldiers surrounded the Chinese capital of Beijing, where they opened fire on unarmed protesters in a massacre at Tiananmen Square that shook the entire world. On 5 March of that same year, there had been another large massacre in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa, news of this earlier event had been effectively suppressed. Because of the absence of the Western news media, the PLA's cold-blooded killing of Tibetan protesters was never recorded on camera. The holy city of Lhasa was about ten times smaller than Beijing at that time, and Bajiao Square where the massacre took place was about ten times smaller than Tiananmen Square, and yet over ten thousand peaceful protesters assembled in that narrow square, where they clashed with some fifteen thousand heavily-armed soldiers. As a result of this encounter, more than three hundred civilians lost their lives, another three thousand were imprisoned, and the "worst offenders" were subsequently sentenced to death. The Jokhang Temple located next to the Potala Palace was attacked and occupied by army troops because it was flying the Snow Lion Flag of Tibetan independence, and it was burned to the ground along with its precious copy of the Pagoda Scriptures, a text which symbolizes the dignity of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. Tens of thousands of Tibetan Buddhists stood in the street bewailing the loss of their sacred text, and the lamas continually tried to rush into the burning temple to rescue the scriptures, but were shot down amidst the flames. The sad image of these martyrs dying among the flames as they tried to rescue the Pagoda Scriptures provided the precedent that inspired the many Tibetan martyrs who have died by self-immolation in more recent years.

That year, which was also the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 17th Karmapa was an innocent child of four years. But in 1992, this young boy was discovered by a commission of high temple lamas in his small native village on the snowy Tibetan plain who, after many years of continual searching, recognized him as the reincarnation of the deceased 16th Karmapa and installed him in office in accordance with Tibetan Buddhist tradition. As the third highest patriarch of Tibet after the Dalai and Panchen lamas, he was moved into the Tsurphu Monastery 60 km from Lhasa, where he was housed at an 800-year-old sanctuary. One wonders what

impact the massacre of 1989, the disastrous 1959 invasion of Tibet, and the flight of the Dalai Lama, must have had on this tender young soul who had been marked by Heaven.

Seven years passed in the blink of an eye, and the young Karmapa was fourteen years old. Although he had learned to affect the solemn demeanor befitting his station and was venerated by the peasants of Tibet, he was still just a pure and unsophisticated youth, full of curiosity about the outside world. It is recorded that at this same age, the current Dalai Lama enjoyed playing the piano and listening to radio, and that he spent his time pondering how the radio waves were able to penetrate all the way through the earth to reach him. He had no interest in politics and hated his role as ruler in charge of the Tibet's secular government. In his leisure hours, after he had finished his studies, he devoted himself to music and poetry. The 6th Dalai Lama in Tibetan history, Tsangyang Gyatso, was famous as a composer of romantic songs and poems, and it is recorded that he ultimately renounced his throne in the Potala Palace in order to pursue his love. His lyrics remain famous throughout the Land of Snows even to this day, so much so that even a Han Chinese like myself is familiar with many of them- "Oh, you departing goose! Fly to Batang then return, for your beloved is waiting for you at home." The 17th Karmapa is known for being widely read, so he is surely familiar with these lyrics of his predecessor from three centuries ago. He once surprised his fellow monks by organizing a band at his monastery for which he was the lead singer, and he is said to have been a fan of both rock-and-roll and techno music, as well as an outstanding songwriter in his own right. If I ever have the opportunity to meet His Holiness, I would like to ask him about his impressions of the post-war Beat Generation, especially the poet Alan Ginsburg and the songwriter Bob Dylan. Both of these artists were idols of mine during my youth, and I was especially influenced by Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind"- "How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man? How many times must the cannonballs fly, before they're forever banned?" Perhaps His Holiness would smile in silent agreement.

But who could imagine that the Supreme Karmapa- a man responsible for the fate of his entire people- would ever have such a meeting with an insignificant writer like myself, despite the fact that we share the dubious distinction of having been repeatedly denied permission to travel abroad? For my part, I submitted several petitions to the Chinese government to request an exit visa. I promised the authorities that I would avoid discussing political issues while abroad, that I

would stick to talking about literature, and that I would go and come right back. He also submitted several requests, and he promised that he would not discuss politics, but would restrict himself to talking about Buddhism, and that he would go and come right back. In the end, when I was faced with the threat of losing my personal freedom, I decided to rush headlong into danger. I crossed over the Sino-Vietnamese border and, after many twists and turns, ended up here in Germany. As for the 17th Karmapa, he was under close surveillance, so he pretended to shut himself in his chambers and then snuck out under the cover of night and escaped, with his loyal followers staying behind to cover for him as he made his way across the Tibetan border.

He was fourteen years old at the time, whereas I was already fifty-three at the time of my escape. Confucius said, “At fifty I knew Heaven’s Mandate”, and so just before my departure I used the *Book of Changes* that Confucius himself edited to divine the outcome of my journey, and got the character *fu* (return), which happens to be the character used in Buddhist scriptures to refer to *samsara* (reincarnation; transubstantiation). Yet how insignificant the reincarnation of a tiny ant like me is compared with that of His Holiness the Karmapa! Following the same track that the Dalai Lama had taken in 1959 on his flight from Tibet, the Karmapa wandered for eight days and eight nights as he crossed over the Himalaya Range, known as the “Rooftop of the World”. What a frightening journey! Tens of thousands of Tibetans had followed the Dalai Lama across this same forbidding terrain to escape from bondage. Some were swallowed up by the shifting snows, while others were shot down by Communist troops. Of those lucky enough to make it across the border alive, many were disabled as a result of injuries that they had sustained during the journey. But the Karmapa- a young boy of fourteen who knew nothing of politics, but only the teachings of Buddhism- miraculously made it all the way to Dharamsala, exhausted and dusty, but otherwise without so much as a scratch on him. And so the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa Rinpoche were united at last- two generations of Living Buddhas, one old and one young, both forced into exile. These two holy figures had each answered with his own two feet the refrain from Bob Dylan’s song- How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man?

The Dalai Lama once said something to the effect that, “The Communist Party is not my enemy, but rather my teacher, and it was my teacher who forced me to leave Tibet. But if I had not left Tibet, and instead had remained a Living Buddha closed off in the Land of Snows like my many

predecessors, I would never have been able to spread the message Buddhism to the outside world.” The 17th Karmapa has never spoken such words. He is an artist who believes that reciting scriptures and singing music are more powerful than ordinary language. This is why he has recorded several music albums in collaboration with numerous Western musicians, using the rhythms of contemporary rock-and-roll music to spread the message of the *om mani padme hum* mantra. His music and poetry circulate freely in both Tibet and China through underground channels. A friend of mine, the author Wang Jianhui, once listened to a copy of the song “Karmapa Jenno” that I had brought back from a black market in Chengdu, and he wrote the following poem:

Who is capable of suppressing one person’s inner smile?
After all of their tribulations and massacres, do the Tibetan people still smile?
Are they full of hatred, demanding an eye for an eye?
No, they simply endure.
They endure the unbearable without any desire to harm others.
Enduring the unbearable, they can only bring harm to themselves, never to others.
And so one after another they fearlessly martyr themselves.”

Since 14 March, 2008, the Communist Party has repeatedly desecrated the spirits of Tibet and killed Buddhist priests, and one after another Tibetans cry “Free Tibet”, then douse themselves in gasoline and set themselves on fire. As of July of this year, forty-nine Tibetans had died by self-immolation.

Oh, World! Look at all of these burned-out corpses! Are their souls still able to smile? In the Karmapa’s music, are the souls of these martyrs still able to smile? Or are the Communists able to carry their long knives all the way to the gates of Heaven? Who can stop these gusts of wind and fallen leaves, this singing and deadly quiet, in order to cross freely over the border between life and death to be reborn?

About eight years ago, when I fled from Chengdu, Sichuan to Lijiang, Vietnam, I at one point found myself in a mixed Han-Tibetan village. It was there that I heard the Karmapa’s song “One Wish” for the first time, and I found it deeply inspiring. Flush from a bottle of wine that I had purchased, I picked up the bamboo flute that I had learned to play while in prison, and I played the Tang-dynasty song “Three Variations on Yangguan”. At that moment, the river of time temporarily reversed its course, and I felt myself transported to the sand dunes outside of Yangguan Pass, where the eminent monk Tang Xuanzang had once passed on his ten thousand-

mile journey to retrieve the Buddhist scriptures from India. This was a watershed moment in the history of the transmission of Buddhism into China, where the religion dividing along regional lines into *Mahayana* and *Hinayana* sects and distinct Tibetan and Chinese faith traditions.

I pray my lord to have another cup of wine,
For out west of Yangguan you will find no hospitality.

These are the words that my predecessor sang. Perhaps the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, after many generations of reincarnation, still have the blood of Xuanzang flowing through their veins. Such were the thoughts that ran through my mind as I played my flute, and for a moment I forgot about the series of calamities that had left me destitute and homeless in a foreign town, and I also forgot about the plain-clothes policemen who were on my tail. I prayed that one day the Karmapa and I would have the opportunity to meet, as two far-flung travelers caring nothing of rank or personal background, and sing a song together. “Out west of Yangguan you will find no hospitality?” Right, the Buddhist dharma is endless, but out west of Yangguan we are all men without a country or homeland. But the difference between the Karmapa and myself is that he is a man who bears a responsibility handed down across the ages, since for Tibetans, wherever the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and the Karmapa are, there they too have a home.

Because of my long-standing respect for this man, when I was chosen three months ago to deliver the opening address at the Berlin International Literary Festival, I asked the director of the festival, Herr Uli Schreiber, to extend an invitation to His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. Once the invitation had gone out, I realized the difficulties inherent in my request. My friend Liao Tianqi took up the task of making contact with the Karmapa, and another friend, Guo Yimei, was responsible for the lengthy process of communication thereafter. Both of them have lived over half of their lives now here in Germany, but they both empathize deeply with the historic hardships of the Tibetan people, and they also have a deep intuition for the cultural differences between China and the West. Through our initial overtures, we learned that the Karmapa did not have plans to engage in travel this year, for reasons having to do with the recent heightening of tensions between China and Tibet, where the Communist’s iron-fisted oppression has given rise to a rash of suicides by self-immolation.

The ever-faithful Dalai Lama turned seventy-seven this year, and he is still travelling widely in his efforts to promote the cause of the Tibetan people. The Karmapa only just turned twenty-

seven this year, but he too is determined to save the world. He recently appeared in the short historical documentary *Milarepa* about another major figure in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism who lived about nine centuries ago. Milarepa came from a prosperous family, but upon his father's death his relatives stole his patrimony. After much hardship, Milarepa became a mastery of sorcery, and he exacted a terrible revenge upon his enemies, but found that this did not bring him any peace of mind. In order to escape from the abyss of his hatred, he sought out an esoteric Buddhist master, and after a series of trials eventually attained his true calling, becoming a master poet and philosopher whose name is a household word in Tibet even to this day.

Milarepa has provided an instructive model for the 17th Karmapa about how self-cultivation, the Buddhist *dharma* and art can overcome worldly despotism and soothe the incurable ills of humanity. Yet in today's chaotic age, Communist China has been able to prosper by squeezing the life out of the common people and has become a monster that threatens the peace of the entire world. It is a monster whose appetite expands the more that it consumes, so that it is now no longer content to turn its own territory into the world's largest trash heap, and threatens to do the same to the entire globe. Many western politicians, entrepreneurs and human rights activists have been misled by the complexities of Tibetan religion and history, the short-term global economic recession and the Communist Party's oppositional stance toward the outside world into ignoring the suffering of the Tibetan people and the rising incidence of martyrdom, and they have misread these acts of self-immolation as a sort of almost terroristic religious extremism. In response, His Holiness the Karmapa wrote the following verses to express his deep concern:

One winter's day
When I was all alone,
I felt that I did not know where to turn.
I was praying aimlessly,
An exhausted man in the bitter cold.
Oh, my homeland! My homeland, where have you gone?
Perhaps you have no concern for a stranger adrift,
And have vanished without a trace!

Oh, great Heaven!
Today I heard that you are heartless,
And that you have sent down untold suffering
To my homeland and among my people

Who could have imagined that the response to the Karmapa's lyrics would come from an exiled Tibetan man, Jamphel Yeshe, who on 26 March, 2012, set himself on fire on a street corner in New Delhi to protest the state visit to India of Hu Jintao, the man responsible for the Lhasa Massacre of 5 March, 1989. Jamphel Yeshe was twenty-seven years old the day that he set himself on fire and, like a flaming torch, cried out and ran fifty meters before collapsing dead. Before his martyrdom, he had left behind a note which read:

Dignity is the soul of a people. It is the courage to seek truth and righteousness, and it is our only guide to a happier future. . . . Freedom is the source of happiness for all living things. When a human being loses his freedom, he becomes like the flame of a lamp flickering precariously in the wind I plan to set myself on fire to show the world the suffering of six million Tibetans who live without rights or justice. So, if you have any compassion, please pay attention to the plight of the weak Tibetan people. We must use our traditional faith, culture and language as the basis for our freedom, just as we require respect for our human rights. And we hope that the entire human race will be able to support us in our need. Only Tibetans should be masters of Tibet, and Tibet must prevail!

The voice of His Holiness and the voices of the Tibetan people all compel me to take notice and listen. After several attempts and much eager waiting, we were finally able to get in contact with the Karmapa's offices and arrange a meeting. We travelled to far-away Dharamsala, where we had the opportunity to meet with His Holiness and ask him to attend the Berlin Literary Festival, where he would receive the welcome of hundreds of eager participants of all races who pray for the prosperity of Tibet. But we had failed to anticipate the difficulties involved in obtaining a passport and visa someone who is living in exile abroad as a stateless person.

I decided to take the advice of my friend, Guo Yimei, that I leverage my position as a well-known author and recipient of a major German peace prize to write to the German Foreign Minister and ask him to intercede with the Indian authorities on our behalf. I wrote him the following letter,

Herr Westerwelle,

Thank you very much for your letter of congratulations.

You may recall that in March of 2010, when I was prevented for the fifteenth time from leaving China, I was arrested by ten armed policemen. Subsequently, I was kept under house arrest for one month. At that time you, as the Foreign Minister of a democratic country, delivered a public address in Berlin in which you

expressed support for my cause and predicted that one day you would have the opportunity to welcome me to Germany.

Last year, I finally escaped from China and published a memoir of the time that I spent under confinement by the Chinese authorities. Using my own two legs, I have fulfilled your prediction that I would one day come to Germany. Herr Westerwelle, please accept a humble expression of thanks from this lowly author! In my darkest hour, your encouragement meant the world to me. And immediately following the publication of my memoir, I was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, where I again encountered your name as the person who had nominated me to receive that award.

I was immensely touched by your reference to me as “a courageous cultural pioneer”, though I also felt that it placed a great burden on my shoulders. For as someone who had managed to escape from a dictatorial regime and live to tell about my experiences, now that I am standing on free soil, I feel that it is my duty to fight on behalf of those who are still suffering similar fates.

This is why I would like to make the following urgent request.

You are no doubt already aware of the unprecedented number of politically-motivated suicides that have taken place in Tibet during the past year. For me, as a Chinese author who has long paid attention to Tibet and has had occasion to meet the Dalai Lama, I feel a mixed sense of outrage and guilt which compels me to find a way to act quickly. As luck would have it, the Berlin International Literary Festival recently invited me to serve as a guest speaker this year.

We are currently working to find some way that His Holiness the 17th Karmapa of Tibet can attend the festival this year, so that we can invite him to sing his song “Karmapa Jenno” at the opening ceremony on behalf of Tibetan and world peace. He is, after the Dalai Lama, the highest Tibetan religious leader to have escaped that country for India, and his is widely recognized as the successor to the Dalai Lama’s good works, as well as an important musical and literary talent. His CDs are extremely well-known throughout Tibet, China and Taiwan.

Acting as envoys for the Berlin Literary Festival, some of my friends and I recently make a secret trip to visit the Karmapa in India and invite him to join us at this year’s event. But at present, we are up against some diplomatic problems involving the Karmapa’s status as a Chinese political refugee. Therefore we would like to ask you, Herr Westerwelle, to assist us by communicating with the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and convincing them to allow the Karmapa to visit German. If you could make this happen, it would be a great encouragement to the Tibetan people, who have suffered much since losing their homeland years ago!

I am sure that the people of Tibet, who have been in a weak position for a long time, would be eternally grateful to you and the German Foreign Ministry for any assistance that you could provide on their behalf. So, of course, would my friends

and I. It would be an historic event if the Karmapa, as a major religious figure for an oppressed people, could attend the Berlin Literary Festival and meet with the poets and other artists assembled there and- through poetry and song- console the anguished souls of the Tibetan people. Perhaps it could brighten the prospects of the Tibetan people sufficiently to put an end to the recent spate of suicides.

As you wrote in your previous letter to me, my work as a “chronicler of [my] age” and new role as “guest speaker at the Berlin Literary Festival” have been part of a painful but necessary process of seeking to reach an accommodation between China and the world. This is why I have been so forward as to write to you for assistance. I believe that your support would help us in our efforts to bring the Karmapa to the Berlin Literary Festival and ultimately to win further support for the Tibetan cause from other nations around the world.

I will look forward to hearing your reply.

Six days after sending my letter, we were invited to the Germany Ministry of Foreign Affairs to engage in with more than ten diplomats. Then we settled in to wait anxiously for the Indian government’s response. We had already purchased airline tickets for another trip to India, but ultimately had to cancel those arrangements. At one point, I thought of staging a hunger strike outside of the Indian Embassy, but the German Foreign Minister’s office strongly discouraged me from following through with that plan. Photocopies of my passport were forwarded to the Indian authorities.

As I sat down to begin working on the draft of my speech for the festival, Guo Yimei and Liao Tianqi were beginning to despair of our chances of succeeding in our mission to India. But I said that if we were to fail, our failure could only be temporary, since we were in a Western country that recognizes the values of freedom, equality and fraternity. It would be far less severe than any failure that one might suffer under the iron fist of the Chinese despots. Compared with the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, who bear the weight of the fate of an entire people on their backs, and who crossed over the Himalayas on foot, our troubles are very light. They are even lighter than what I faced a year ago when I was unable to leave China.

Just around the time when I finished working on my speech, the telephone rang unexpectedly. It was the Foreign Minister’s office, calling to say that the Indian government had already expressed its willingness to allow the Karmapa to travel abroad for the festival.

I told them that I was already packed and ready to go.

They told me just to wait a little while longer.

3 August, 2012 (Berlin)