



The Tulku System in Tibetan Buddhism

By Geshe Tenzin Legtsok

Recently, a need for more information about the tulku system in Tibetan Buddhism has become apparent. To address this, we have put together the following comments and resources in line with our stated mission to provide integrated education through which people's minds and hearts can be transformed into their highest potential for the benefit of others.

In Buddhism, the idea that a spiritual teacher might appear in life after life to continue benefiting others and guiding disciples arose with the Buddha himself. In the Agama Sections of the Vinaya Pitaka, *The Sūtra of the Wise and Foolish*, the *Sūtra of Golden Light*, the *Jataka Tales* and other sūtras, the Buddha recounted his own past life deeds and interconnections with others over many lifetimes. In the Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras he described the conduct of bodhisattvas who, with a pure altruistic motivation, willfully take rebirth in samsara, appearing in different forms to free sentient beings from suffering. Ārya Nagarjuna expresses this sentiment in the *Precious Garland*:

For as long as even one sentient being,
Has not been liberated from samsara,
Even if I could achieve peerless enlightenment,
May I abide in samsara for that being.¹

And Shantideva prays:

As long as space remains,
 As long as transmigratory beings remain,
 Until then may I too remain
 To dispel the suffering of transmigratory beings.²

Also, in the tantras, appearing as Vajradhara, the Buddha stated that in future times he will appear in various forms to benefit beings. *Hevajra's Royal Tantra* says:

In future times, my physical form
 Will be that of masters...

And:

Also, in the last five centuries,
 I will take the form of masters.
 Think that they are me
 And develop respect for them.³

However, in ancient India, and to this day in other Buddhist nations, a custom of formally recognizing someone as the reincarnation of a deceased Buddhist master and giving them special status never arose. This Tibetan custom only arose during the later dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet. As His Holiness the Dalai states:

In the course of upholding the Buddhist tradition in Tibet, we evolved a unique Tibetan tradition of recognizing the reincarnations of scholar-adepts that has been of immense help to both the Dharma and sentient beings, particularly to the monastic community.

The earliest instance of a lama's reincarnation being formally identified and given special status is probably the second

Karmapa, Karmapa Pakshi (1206–1283), who was recognized as the reincarnation of Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa in accordance predictions made by the later. Since that time, this practice of recognizing reincarnations has spread to all lineages of the Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. In addition to the Karmapas, two of the most renowned reincarnate lama lines are the Dalai Lamas and the Panchen Lamas. By consolidating power and influence from life to life, many of these incarnations have made a profoundly positive impact on countless people and helped the Buddha's teachings be transmitted intact from generation to generation.

The term tulku (Tib. *sprul sku*) literally means emanation body; among the four bodies of a buddha, this is the one that appears to ordinary beings in various forms to guide and support them in virtue. This term is used for reincarnate lamas as an expression of faith and the pure view that reincarnate lamas are enlightened beings appearing in ordinary forms. While such expressions are polite and respectful, in Tibetan society they are usually not taken literally since, of course, not all those honored with the title tulku are emanations of buddhas. There are many factors involved in how a person comes to have this title. In the best cases, a tulku really is an enlightened being, a bodhisattva who has directly perceived emptiness, a lower bodhisattva, or at least the reincarnation of a qualified spiritual teacher of the Great Vehicle. As His Holiness says:

Amongst the tulkus of Tibet there may be those who are reincarnations of superior bodhisattvas, bodhisattvas on the paths of accumulation and preparation, as well as masters who are evidently yet to enter these bodhisattva paths. Therefore, the title of tulku is given to reincarnate lamas either on the grounds of their resembling enlightened beings or through their connection to certain qualities of enlightened beings.⁴

The tulku system needs to be viewed within the larger context of the Buddha's teachings. The purpose of the teachings and path is to liberate sentient beings from suffering and lead them to the fullest development of their positive potential. The fundamental basis of Buddhist practice is pure moral conduct, essentially not harming anyone and benefitting others as much as we can. For this reason, Shakyamuni Buddha taught the morality of abandoning the ten nonvirtuous actions such as killing, stealing, lying etc. and engaging in their opposites, protecting life, property, trust and so forth. On the foundation of pure morality, a person can develop exceptional mental focus, and based on that, wisdom, compassion, and all other qualities up to enlightenment. Without the foundation of pure morality, no other attainments are possible.

In nearly all cases, a tulku has been recognized as the reincarnation of a Buddhist master who was an exemplary model of Buddhist practice such that their followers were inspired to search for and recognize a reincarnation. It is hoped that by doing so the tulku will train well, come to embody the same exceptional mastery of Buddha's teachings as their predecessor, and continue to work for the welfare of beings and the flourishing of the Dharma. As Lama Zopa Rinpoche stated in a letter:

So, this is to explain that the principal, main objective for looking for the incarnation of the teacher is to be of benefit to the teachings, Buddha, and sentient beings, and to make the child pure in morality (having subdued, peaceful conduct) and good-hearted. On that basis, then he should study the extensive scriptures of the Buddha.⁵

In many cases, this goes well. From the side of the tulku there is a genuine desire to follow in their predecessor's footsteps and serve the community of followers they've inherited. With special status and support they have more opportunities to train with the

best teachers, connect with students, and enact virtuous deeds on a larger scale. Tulkus are looked to as pillars upholding their respective lineages by receiving and then passing on to students extensive textual explanations, practice instructions, scriptural transmissions, initiations, and of course, experiential realizations. When the actions of the tulku and the expectations of their followers align, great benefit can arise.

However, this is of course not guaranteed. When there are high hopes, there is the potential for great disappointment. The institution of a tulku can concentrate much wealth and power in the hands of a few. As with many well-meaning human endeavors, there is infinite potential for corruption by the three poisons of attachment, anger, and ignorance, and the eight worldly concerns, especially craving for praise, fame, wealth, and worldly pleasures. As His Holiness says:

Among the Tulkus recognized in Tibet there are monastics and lay tantric practitioners, male and female...there are recognized tulkus in all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions...who serve the Dharma. It is also evident that amongst these tulkus some are a disgrace.

In the recent past, there have been cases of irresponsible managers of wealthy lama-estates who indulged in improper methods to recognize reincarnations, which have undermined the Dharma, the monastic community and our society.

When a tulku does not act in accordance with the Dharma and the hopes of their predecessors' followers, it can be confusing, painful, and cause much disharmony in the spiritual community. Seeing this, many lamas instruct their disciples not to search for

a reincarnation after they pass away; and some tulkus renounce their titles to live as ordinary people without the burden of others' expectations. It is important to remember that, in most cases, they did not seek the title of tulku or consciously choose to have their life entirely shaped by the restrictions and responsibilities that come with this title. In the worst cases, some tulkus, (and others regarded as teachers) misuse the power their position carries to take advantage of the unsuspecting faithful and cause great harm. The Buddha himself predicted that arising of corrupt monks and teachers in detail:

In later times there will be
 Many monks without vows.
 Wanting to say, "I am learned,"
 They will praise ethical discipline,
 But will not strive diligently at their own ethical discipline.⁶

And:

"Those who are lazy and lacking in diligence,
 Who do not maintain the aspect of conduct,
 They will stand up and state,
 'That is not the teaching of the Buddha!'

"Some of them will declare,
 'We are enlightened!'
 But they will be uncontrolled, untrained,
 And disrespectful to each other.

"They will delight in words
 And have no stability in the Dharma.
 They will have that kind of aspiration,
 Desiring what is gained through reputation.

“They will be motivated to have a following.
 They will delight in acquisition.
 They will be overpowered by arrogance and carelessness.
 Their goal will be gain and honors.

“Based upon gains and honors
 They will desire the intellect’s accomplishments.
 They will build temples and stūpas.
 Their interest will be in the women of families.”⁷

Regarding this unfortunate situation, His Holiness has clearly said:

I feel some of these lama institutions have some sort of influence from the feudal system. That is outdated and must end. With some feudal influence, eventually lama institutions create lama politics. That’s very bad. If an individual lama is a disgrace, it doesn’t matter much. But since it gives a very bad impression...that is very bad so we must pay more attention.

Regarding such things, you should not say, “Oh this is my guru, whatever gurus says I must follow.” That is totally wrong! The Buddha himself mentioned that you must examine my teachings. Similarly, if a lama says something, you must examine whether this agrees with the Buddha’s teachings and the norms of society. Only then should you follow. If a lama says something, and when you investigate you find it is not proper, then you should not follow that lama’s teachings; even the Dalai Lama’s teachings. If you find some contradiction, you should not follow my teachings. As far as the Gelukpas are concerned, Lama Tsongkhapa clearly mentioned, “Reject that which is against the Dharma. Act in harmony with virtue and in disharmony with nonvirtue.”

Many years ago in Dharamsala, at a Western teachers' conference, some Western Buddhist teachers mentioned that some Zen and Tibetan Buddhist teachers create a very bad impression for people. I told them, these people do not follow Buddha's advice and teachings. We cannot do much. The only thing to do is make it public through newspapers and radio. Make it public. Although these lamas don't care about Buddha's teachings, they may care about their face.

Recognizing both the benefits and the fallibility of the tulku system, we should maintain a healthy skepticism. Just as when analyzing a teacher or a teaching we should use our best judgement and understanding of Dharma to check the validity and not assume anything based merely on reputation or faith alone, so it is with the tulku system. We need to use discerning wisdom. As the Buddha said:

O bhikshus and wise men,
 Just as a goldsmith would test his gold by burning, cutting,
 and rubbing it,
 So you should examine my words and
 Accept them not merely out of reverence for me.⁸

As Lama Yeshe often said, we need to check up. In Tibetan society, most do not immediately take a newly recognized tulku as their teacher, even though they are a student of the predecessor. While offering respect and support, they wait to see how the tulku develops, what kind of character and behavior he or she exhibits. His Holiness has suggested that tulkus only be officially recognized and enthroned once they have completed their studies of the Perfections and the Middle Way, about the first twelve years of the Geshe Studies Program. The late Zong Rinpoche similarly stated:

In the Gelug we don't revere you and put you on a throne just because you have the label 'tulku.' We watch you carefully. We see how you go about your studies. How well you learn and integrate the teachings. We watch your behavior to see if you act in a manner that represents the ethics of the teachings. We watch how you debate and how you pass your exams. Then we judge the overall performance of your education, your manner, your humility. If you pass well all these criteria then, and only then, we might put you on the throne to teach and guide according to your title.⁹

When a carefully chosen tulku exhibits destructive behavior it raises many difficult questions, especially for those who have taken them as a teacher. Were they mistakenly identified? Are they not actually the continuation of their predecessor? Had their predecessor not actually achieved high spiritual realizations? Are they showing destructive behavior as a way of teaching? None of these questions can be easily answered because, in short, none of us really knows what another person is, whether they are ordinary, under the control of afflictive emotions and karma, enlightened, or something in between. In this regard we should withhold judgment. However, there are some important things to remember.

First of all, just as with any ordinary person, whether we decide to take someone recognized as a tulku as our teacher or not is entirely up to us. A person only becomes our lama, guru, or spiritual teacher in one of two ways: 1) either we develop the discrimination, "I take this person as my spiritual teacher," or 2) we take vows, scriptural transmissions, or tantric initiations from a person since these interactions clearly entail the establishment of a guru disciple relationship. Simply because a child is recognized as the reincarnation of one of our teachers does not mean we should immediately also begin relying on them as a guru. Doing so would

be hasty, unstable, and unnecessarily put much pressure on the young tulku in ways that can be harmful. Rather, we should act as Zong Rinpoche describes above, wait and observe how they develop. Then, if they exhibit immoral behavior, we are not in the difficult position of having to try to interpret it for ourselves as the enlightened actions of a buddha.

In the case where we have taken a tulku as our teacher, we need to follow the advice in the teachings on guru devotion to see them in a pure way. However, just as with any spiritual teacher, even this does not mean approving of every action they may undertake. As His Holiness the Dalai has often stated, our final basis for taking the measure of a teacher's actions needs to be a solid understanding of the Buddha's teachings in general beginning with the four noble truths, karma, and pure morality. In this situation Lama Zopa Rinpoche made the following comments to a close student regarding the tulku system and how to relate to a reincarnated lama who may be acting unconventionally:

- Sometimes buddhas and bodhisattvas manifest as butchers, dogs, and crazy people and various other unconventional forms.
- They manifest in these ways due to 1) our karma, or 2) as the best means to both benefit sentient beings and for those beings needing to purify their karma.
- When manifesting in this way it is *not* appropriate to see them as buddhas. Of course, their nature is dharmakaya but if they wanted us to see them as buddhas they would manifest that way. They manifest in conventional forms because that is what is best for sentient beings and we should relate to them in the conventional manner even though we may hold the view of them as enlightened beings.

How do we “relate to them in the conventional manner” while holding the view of them as enlightened beings? Relating to

someone or a situation in a conventional manner means according to the norms of society and the ordinary world apart from one's practice of guru devotion. This is very wise because if we relate to Buddhist teachers exhibiting unethical behavior by showing approval and support of such behavior, or utterly denying it despite unequivocal evidence, this is a disservice to other sentient beings who may be harmed and destroys others' faith in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. To relate in a conventional manner to a lama displaying unethical behavior may well mean publicly condemning or taking action to put a stop to such behavior in accord with what is deemed lawful, appropriate and responsible in normal society. This is not in conflict with the private practice of seeing them in a pure way. Our personal practice of seeing someone with pure view, whether a teacher or other sentient being, should not distort our ability to interact with them in an ordinary and appropriate way. When attacked by a stray dog we should defend ourselves regardless of seeing this as a result of our negative karma, recognizing the dog's buddha nature, or viewing it as a deity. Enlightened beings may well appear in forms exhibiting immoral behavior precisely in order to give us opportunities to choose right from wrong, address such behavior in accordance with Buddhist teachings on ethics, protect the innocent, and practice patience, forgiveness, and compassion. As His Holiness stated above, seeing someone as our guru or a reincarnate lama is no reason to condone or excuse conduct antithetical to Buddha's fundamental teachings.

In short, it is essential to remember that the tulku system and the practice of correct guru devotion, like all aspects of Buddhism, exist for the purpose of reducing suffering and bringing about the welfare of sentient beings. When they seem counterproductive to these aims, we need to check carefully and, as His Holiness said above, "Reject that which is against the Dharma. Act in harmony with virtue and in disharmony with nonvirtue."

If you'd like to know more about this topic:

- This is an excellent and comprehensive explanation of the tulku system by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his intentions for the future.
<https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation>
- Here on official YouTube channel of the Dalai Lama, His Holiness makes some valuable statements about the tulku system and the issue of abuse and misguidance; time 1:15:10–1:19:50.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6yzH-1si8o>
- This has more historical details and addresses the political issues related to the Communist Chinese government.
<https://tibet.net/the-tibetan-tradition-of-reincarnation-and-ccps-assertion-to-reign-sovereignty-over-living-buddhas/>

Geshe Tenzin Legtsok is an American Buddhist monk who completed his studies at Sera Je Monastery. He is the first American and first Western monk from Kopan Monastery to receive the geshe degree from Sera Je Monastery; joining several other Westerners and non-Tibetan/Himalayan monks to receive geshe degrees before him.

Notes

- 1 English translation based on Lama Zopa Rinpoche's translation as explained to Ven Holly and during a teaching at Kopan Monastery on Dec 10, 2019.
- 2 From chapter 10, verse 55 of *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, as translated in the *FPMT Retreat Prayer Book*, 2020, 18.
- 3 Cited in *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand* by Pabongka Rinpoche, translated by Michael Richards.
- 4 Cited from, <https://www.dalailama.com/the-dalai-lama/biography-and-daily-life/reincarnation>
- 5 <https://www.lamayeshe.com/advice/incarnate-lama>
- 6 From the *King of Concentrations Sūtra*, chapter 3, verses 27–8. Translation as cited in the *Great Treatise on the Stages to Enlightenment*, vol 1.
- 7 *King of Concentrations Sūtra*, chapter 25, verses 20–24. As translated by Peter Alan Roberts for the 84000 Project. This description of immoral behavior, the causes, and how to handle it is very extensive.
- 8 Cited in *Tattvasaṅgraha* by Śāntarakṣita; perhaps from the *Sutra of Dense Array (Ghanavyuha Sutra)*.
- 9 Statement made by Kyabje Zong Rinpoche in 1981 during extensive teachings to the FPMT students in Dharmasala, India, with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche both present.