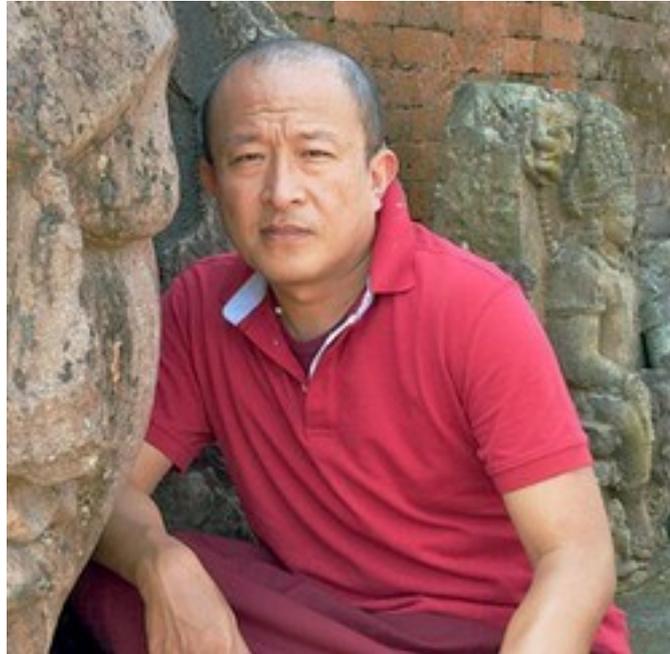


Time for radical change in how we raise our tulkus



-Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse

The recent statement by Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche 4th that he has given up his role brings up a lot of mixed feelings from many different angles.

On the one hand, as a Jamyang Khyentse tulku closely connected to Jamgon Kongtrul for several lifetimes, my concern is for the Buddhadharma and especially for the Rime (non-sectarian) spirit that our supposed earlier incarnations shared.

On the other hand, as human beings, we just can't help making comparisons. And so I find myself comparing my generation of tulkus with this present generation.

In my time we went through a lot of hardship, eating nothing but rice and potatoes for up to a year, travelling on India's cheapest public transportation, sleeping on railway platforms, having no more than 10 rupees in our pockets for six or seven months, getting by with one pencil for a year, and even having to share our study

books with 18 other students. As a child I had just two handmade toys that I made myself.

Worse, my tutor confined me to one room not just for a few weeks or months but for a whole year, so that even going to the toilet became a long awaited excursion. We also suffered regular verbal and physical abuse, which went as far as making us bleed from the head and whipping us with nettles.

I am not justifying or romanticizing any of this. But by comparison, our present generation of tulkus is utterly spoiled and has the easiest ride. Yet on further contemplation, these young tulkus today have their own share of challenges that are in some ways far more difficult than those we faced.

The world is now much smaller and more open, and so, expectations are very much higher. Particularly tulkus with some lineage history behind them are always under the spotlight from all directions. This is especially true for tulkus who are put on thrones at a young age, given titles like “His Holiness”, and for whom trumpets are blown every time they arrive.

All this hype and more inevitably backfires by raising expectations and putting these kids under tremendous pressure. A key reason they are always under the spotlight is simply that today’s institutions have continuously put them under the spotlight. There is no indication that this is going to get any easier in the years ahead.

In the midst of these huge changes, Jamgon Kongtrul 4th’s decision pushes us to acknowledge and examine some fundamental flaws in the way tulkus are presently taught and raised. This is a very complicated subject, but it must be addressed, which is the intent of this article.

Why our young tulkus need training:

One key complication comes from students and disciples not knowing how to balance their pure perception of these young boys, which may come from their genuine dharma practice, with their cultural preconceptions that often put adulation and veneration above clear seeing.

As individual Vajrayana practitioners, we are supposed to have pure perception towards our gurus. For those with the capacity or ability, that pure perception and devotion should not change even if the guru’s form changes. In fact, I have seen great practitioners look at their guru’s young incarnation and, without any doubt,

clearly see their actual guru beyond the particular age, size, appearance or nationality of the incarnation. Ideally, this is what individual practitioners are supposed to do.

Of course this does not mean that a child who is supposedly the incarnation of a great master has no responsibility to learn and be trained. If, at best, the child is an exceptional and genuine reincarnation manifesting as a complete continuum from the previous life, then of course any training or upbringing is arbitrary. But if not, then the child needs to be trained to take responsibility for his or her own actions.

So, while disciples of a previous master may have pure perception towards the new incarnation and practice their devotional duties wholeheartedly, the tulku himself also needs to fulfil the role and responsibility of whatever reincarnation he has chosen to be.

The reality today is that, even though these kids may be genuine tulkus, many of them have not even learned to wipe their own noses, let alone manifest intact all the qualities of their previous incarnations such as omniscience.

Moving from one life to the next is not like moving from one room to another. There have been tremendous changes over time, which require new forms of training if tulkus are to manifest their true nature and qualities. Blind student adoration, often arising from cultural preconceptions, conceals from us the need to re-examine the training these young tulkus actually need.

In fact, it's worth noting that these tulkus are often not genuine reincarnations at all, but are given the "tulku" label as a child, with the aspiration that it will benefit them and others. In such cases, the term "tulku" may simply be a symbolic label that will certainly not manifest without proper training.

Either way, these young tulkus are still just kids who need to be trained, properly raised, and given initiations and teachings – and not just intellectually and academically. We need to make them confident and at the same time humble. We need to make them sublime and at the same time human.

And above all, of the most paramount importance, we need them to become genuine spiritual practitioners. After all, they are supposed to be spiritual leaders and lineage holders, not simply political leaders or village heads. And if they are not true dharma practitioners, what hope is there?

Fundamental flaws in current pedagogy:

Our pedagogy and way of raising tulkus have not changed with the times, and I have to say that Tibetans, especially in monasteries, are extraordinarily stubborn and resistant to change.

There have been superficial changes, if merely because teachers could today go to prison for the way they used to raise us. There may be no beatings today, and there may even be weekend holidays, plenty of family visits, and lots of toys. But that doesn't mean the pedagogy has fundamentally changed or adapted to the times.

Tulkus today are put on thrones and surrounded by an entourage that is often more interested in perpetuating the institution than in bringing up the next spiritual and lineage leaders. All the accompanying paraphernalia of processions, carpets, brocades, and jade cups may make the tulku look exotic and special, but they don't mean he's been trained.

All this hoopla may seem to work at a young age, because if you wash and shampoo even a street kid and sit him on brocades, he will look impressive at least for a few hours. If a very young tulku even smiles in that kind of lofty atmosphere, devotees will interpret it as some kind of amazing sign.

But this substitution of show for real training becomes a serious problem over time, as it exerts an insidious but strong pressure on the young tulku over time. After all, there is no pressure greater and more severe than the expectations of others.

So when hundreds if not thousands of eyes are looking and judging everything these tulkus do, they can end up isolated and imprisoned in one of the loneliest and most alienating zones imaginable.

Misguided focus on image and wealth - a formula for pressure:

The world's growing materialism and affluence have found their way into our monasteries and religious institutions, where many high lamas and especially lineage holders now lead a lifestyle so lavish and estranged from ordinary realities that they could almost be emperors!

This may have worked – and I am not saying it did work – in Tibet, where few questions were asked and where there was little scrutiny and huge devotion. But in the long run, seeing the highest

lamas, whom novices are supposed to emulate, living extravagant nouveau-riche lifestyles, complete with gold watches and bracelets, sends seriously wrong signals.

First and foremost, this “model” simply does nothing to encourage people to practice the dharma, especially young monks newly enrolled in a monastery, and whose thinking may not be very sophisticated. After all, there is a reason why Sakyamuni Buddha chose to appear barefoot with a begging bowl – because the austerity, renunciation and simplicity this symbolized has real meaning.

I am not saying that the head lamas today should all suddenly go around with begging bowls. But it is so necessary for them to exude some sort of unpretentious humility and to project an image of simple living.

A good example of the change that’s needed is the behaviour of many of us lamas at the annual winter prayer gatherings and festivals under the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya. I often wonder what other Buddhists, like the Theravada practitioners, think of our lamas sitting on thrones that may even be higher than some of the Buddha statues.

Of course, the path of tantra trains us to perceive our guru as the embodiment of all the buddhas. But in places like Bodhgaya, where its statues and symbols are profoundly meaningful for the general public and for all Buddhists, there is no one above the Buddha. So Bodhgaya would be a good place for our lamas to start practicing simplicity and humility!

I suppose seeing a wealthy monastic or lineage head might impress some nomadic Tibetans or overly enthusiastic Chinese students. But, subconsciously or consciously, it really establishes the bad habit of the model that a lama must have wealth or rank.

Such a message is fundamentally wrong from a basic Buddhist perspective. After all, the Buddha is by far the most important person on earth for Buddhists. And the most important act of the Buddha was to gain enlightenment after defeating the maras. That great event took place on a simple cushion of grass and bodhi leaves, without thrones, brocades or any other such trappings.

In short, besides inadvertently turning our young tulkus into spoiled brats, the current focus on wealth and privilege as part of tulku training is anathema to Buddhist pedagogy and its core values.

The prison of privilege:

Purposefully or not, monasteries these days often seem to find and enthrone a tulku who happens to come from a wealthy or powerful family. Whatever the intentions, the tulku is today still used as the monastery's main attraction, since far more people go to a monastery to see a tulku or high lama than to see the monastery for its own sake. This is especially true if the tulku's name is preceded by "His Holiness" or "His Eminence", along with an exotic description of how the tulku is a reincarnation of one of the greatest past masters.

Incidentally, terms like His Holiness are not even Buddhist but are borrowed straight from Christianity. So Tibetan lamas' obsession with such Christian titles is really mind-boggling, and it is downright embarrassing when they put His Holiness in front of a toddler's name. At best, Christians must be laughing at us, especially since the average age at which the Papal title of His Holiness is bestowed on the appointed bishop is in the mid-60s.

And yet, because these young reincarnate lamas are such great assets to monasteries, we have predictably seen an unseemly rush to find and enthrone tulkus, of whom there seem to be far more today than we saw three or four decades ago.

In fact, not long after enthronement and all the associated hype, it is not surprising to find many of these tulkus, often from a very early age, being given some kind of project or operation – whether to save the environment or to build a stupa, shedra, or giant statue of some bodhisattva. It's almost as if, in order to be a good lama, he must then have a project.

But on closer scrutiny these activities are almost always tools to generate income, and we know how poor the Tibetan system is in issues of transparency and good governance with respect to public donations.

The encounter of east and southeast Asian cultural traditions of blind devotion and lavish offerings, with a feudal Tibetan tulku system of no checks and balances, has also hindered the development of a modern system of tulku training. Those tender-aged boys end up forgetting that money does not grow on trees, and they have no idea how people have sweated and bled to produce the offerings now heaped up on them.

With so much wealth, privilege, and adoration as the prize, it's no wonder we now find so many parents eager to have their kids enthroned as one high lama or another. Little do they know how much their children will suffer.

Being an incarnate tulku is really like being put into one of the most unimaginable prisons. You put the child in the most comfortable situation, with the brightest brocades, feed him ice-cream, and give him toys, gifts, and respect. And at the same time you systematically alienate him from developing into a proper human being who can deal with the human world.

The real pain will come later when these young tulkus grow up, with their hormones out of control, no idea about worldly realities, and feeling totally useless. They will not even know how to interact with the world in the most basic ways, let alone how to be a leader. How can such a tulku ever be a genuine spiritual guide to students?

Breeding ground for hypocrisy:

Trying to maintain outer images of privilege and respect under the intense public spotlight constantly on our young tulkus inevitably breeds hypocrisy.

For example, young tulkus are told they have to be pure and be monks. But measuring their purity from a very young age according to who is celibate or not creates huge pressure and can be dangerous, because such external standards are really a hit-and-miss game. After all, when we work with people's hormones, we really don't have much control.

Even according to the vinaya, it's just not permissible to impose celibacy vows on someone against their free will or as a result of peer or social pressure, as so often happens with young monks these days. It's worth remembering that Sakyamuni Buddha himself became a renunciant by choice only after he had been married and had a child.

So strong has this social pressure become over time that, when one of the previous Khamtrul Rinpoches decided to give up his celibacy, one of his monks wanted to assassinate him.

Of course it can't be denied that some of the young monks pressured to be celibate at a young age have ended up becoming really good monks. But far too often, imposing celibacy in the face of today's intense social pressure and cyber-entertainment turns many of our young tulkus into hypocrites forced to hide their "faults".

This culture of pretence is reinforced as the tulkus realize that their peers, and sometimes their superiors, are also practising hypocrisy. A pedagogy that encourages such hypocrisy is hugely misguided and can even produce grossly aberrant behaviour.

Pedagogy for today's world and for the future:

On the other hand, I also have genuine empathy for the labrangas, monks, and others responsible for training our young incarnate lamas. They generally mean so well and have such good intentions, but they just don't know how to raise a child in today's world, and have simply not adapted to current conditions.

Beyond just academic training, our young tulkus need to learn how to queue up for things that need queueing, how to share what should be shared, and other basic elements of human decency and social contract. When they are served and offered everything, many of these tulkus never learn even the simple human knowledge of sharing, and end up ill-equipped to live in the world. They not only need leadership training, but need a basic course in human relationship.

Tutors and caretakers must know that, out of frustration, some of these young tulkus have even burned themselves or cut themselves with razors – as other troubled teenagers have also done. Such behaviour alerts us to what a dangerous time and precarious age this is.

Just to bring up an ordinary kid, and especially a teenager, in this day and age is extraordinarily challenging, as all parents know. How much more difficult, then, to raise a child and teenager who is supposed to lead much more than just a family estate or family lineage. Yet our tulku handlers have almost no knowledge and experience in the basic human training required to bring up children in today's world.

Sadly, the tulku trainers often worry more about how these small children, often no more than toddlers, will behave and are treated in public, than about them as basic human beings. Their constant worry about who gets the higher seat and better treatment, how many cars will be in the tulku's convoy, and how many people turn up at the airport to receive them, has fundamentally changed the minds of these tulkus; and not for the better.

We see this changed attitude today in the increasing number of "double" tulkus and the multiple claims by different aspirants to be the reincarnation of the same past master. What we have yet to witness is even one tulku saying: "Oh no, I am not the right one; the other lama is the right incarnation." Instead they clutch onto their titles with so much clinging and grasping, it can hardly be deemed a worthy "Buddhist" characteristic.

And we see a similar troubling change in attitudes towards the teachings themselves. In my day we would actively seek out teachers and teachings, travelling far and wide, even with almost

non-existent means of transport. I remember well once when I actually walked from Gorakpur to Lumbini, and then hitched a ride on a tractor to Biratnagar, just to receive a teaching from the Karmapa in Nepal. Somehow my generation's tutors instilled in us that passion and willingness to make sacrifices for a word of the precious teachings.

Today we can almost forget about our young tulkus eagerly seeking out teachers or teachings. Instead we have to be really pleased if they even express some interest in a teaching and summon the teacher to them. In the Buddhist tradition, this change in attitude towards the teachings is deeply mistaken.

How many have noticed, for instance, that photographs of young tulkus these days hardly ever show them sitting below their teacher and offering veneration, let alone bowing down to them? Yet such a sight would be so helpful as an example. It is understandable to put a kid on a throne on the day of his enthronement, but it is really unwise to keep putting him on a throne from then on right through puberty.

Tibetans mostly think that raising a tulku comes only from having a tutor, receiving lots of teachings, memorizing lots of texts, and learning rituals. What they don't realize, although it's very fundamental and simple, is that the larger training comes from the environment where the tulku is raised and, more critically, from how the tulku is raised.

Social and cultural barriers to a genuine tulku training pedagogy:

Again, I don't want to put the entire responsibility for the shortcomings in today's methods of raising tulkus on the labrang and monks directly in charge of this training. In fact, a large reason for the situation can be attributed to traditional societies like the Tibetan and Bhutanese, which are a complex mixture of heartfelt devotion and outdated cultural baggage.

I often imagine how some of these high lamas must dream of walking alone and carrying their own bags, drinking tea in a chai shop, or riding in a rickshaw. It's only their zealous entourage that won't let them do this, because there is such strong pressure from our traditional societies to make these lamas act in certain ways, and for devotees to surround the lamas with attendants, servants, brocades, and all manner of traditional and modern emblems of status.

There's even an eastern Tibetan saying that was used to scold me when I was growing up, that lamas should be like a gold statue –

meaning we should sit very still, not look right or left, and act more like a precious object than a human being. There's another saying that a snow lion must remain as a snow lion in the high mountains, because if he comes down to the ground, he will be mistaken for a dog.

These two idioms really say it all, revealing not only how lamas are actively discouraged from mingling with ordinary people but also how obsolete is our traditional pedagogy for raising lamas for a contemporary society.

The hard reality is that a golden statue cannot even feed itself. It belongs to an owner who has the power to sell it, or at least sell tickets to those who want to see it. And lamas, like the snow lion, know virtually nothing about what is going on in the ordinary world. So how can these lamas teach the truth of suffering, when they are constantly shielded from it, and when the only suffering they know is what is read about in the texts.

In fact, that is precisely a big part of the problem – that the present pedagogy remains largely intellectual, divorced from the world, and unable to make our tulkus into genuine dharma practitioners. Yes, these young tulkus may chant mantras, get up early, and even do sadhanas, pujas, and receive ordination.

But, as Atisha said, genuine dharma practitioners must fundamentally learn not to be interested in worldly life or in this life altogether. For a start, that means not caring about the height of their thrones, the number of their students, their titles, or the make of their watches.

Stuck in a time warp:

In sum, the present Tibetan tradition is training tulkus towards the exact opposite of true leadership. This is not to deny the merits of the traditional system, which in the past has produced a certain elegance alongside real scholarship and discipline.

But a closer analysis reveals an unacceptable trade-off in failing to prepare our tulkus to function in this world, let alone in the totally different world we will be living in twenty years from now.

Our tulku training system remains stuck somewhere in the 1930s or 40s, never acknowledging that this is 2016, and certainly not preparing our young tulkus for the world of 2026 when they will reach maturity and supposedly assume the mantle of spiritual leadership. What are we doing to prepare our tulkus for a future era

in which Apple produces a chip that tulkus can wear to connect with broadband and explore the world of sex, drugs and money.

It's no wonder that by the time our young tulkus grow up and reach their 20s, they have often become completely strange, knowing nothing about the world, and with their labrang, staff, and close relatives appearing to dictate every movement of their lives. The problem is worse when these labrang members themselves are corrupt and given to nepotism, as is too often the case.

As a result, the scene that newcomers to Tibetan Buddhism encounter can be hugely confusing, with supposedly omniscient lamas unable even to control their closest attendants. Tibetans will excuse such blatantly strange behaviour by saying it's not the lama's fault – the lama is always great – but his attendant or consort is the problem.

But somehow this doesn't wash in the face of the bald reality that our tulkus are rarely genuine dharma practitioners, and are largely out of touch and dysfunctional in their own lives, let alone capable of providing true leadership to students and disciples. I can only pray their odd behaviour has some invisible benefit that can't be conceptualized by ordinary beings like myself.

Aspiration for our upcoming tulkus:

And so, for all these reasons showing the serious failure to adapt traditional pedagogical methods for tulkus to today's world, I have to say that, personally, I have no judgment about what Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche is doing. Though I have no direct knowledge of him, I have heard a lot of great things about him, and for many reasons have the deep aspiration and hope that he will truly shine forth.

At a basic human level, I really don't care whether Jamgon Kongtrul 4th wants to become a doctor or not. It could actually turn out to be great and very inspiring. He could be a watchmaker for all I care; just as some of our greatest past masters included an arrow-maker, a sesame oil extractor, a farmer, a barber, and even a prostitute. By comparison, being a doctor sounds much more respectable!

In fact Jamgon Kongtrul's choice could be an excellent antidote to a fundamental flaw in the Tibetan Buddhist monastic situation, which is to make Buddhism itself into a profession designed to ensure the survival of monks, monasteries, and dharma teachers. While this Buddhist "profession" has its historical roots in the

understandable need for monastic survival, it leads today to a lot of misunderstanding, and may not be helping the wider propagation of the Buddhadharma in this day and age.

For this reason, I've also advised my friends, colleagues, and fellow Rinpoches time and again that, when they teach non-Tibetans, they should not encourage the wearing of Tibetan robes or any sort of Buddhist garb. By contrast, seeing a Buddhist practitioner in army uniform, suit and tie, or other normal dress sends the message that Buddhism can be practised by everyone.

The moment a lama imposes some sort of special robes, which is such a deeply ingrained habit, it immediately excludes others and creates a cultish atmosphere. In my view, one of the key reasons the number of Buddhists worldwide is decreasing while other religions like Islam are growing is our habit of introverted exclusivism.

In sum, Jamgon Kongtrul's choice to become a doctor could end up being perfect, and may genuinely serve the Buddhadharma in the long run. But what I hope, wish, and pray is that, in whatever form he takes, Jamgon Kongtrul 4th will work wholeheartedly for the dharma; not just for one lineage but for all lineages, – as his earlier incarnation did.