

Tulku reform

Dalai Lama want to abolish the Tulku tradition or at least to reform it

by Lama Tendar Olaf Hoeyer

In a report from the magazine Tibetan Review, Dalai Lama is quoted for saying, that time has run out for the Tulku tradition. These spiritual Princes and their role in society is closely related to the Middle-age and feudal system, he is quoted for saying. Even the Tibetans hold Dalai Lama in high regard, they are not very likely to follow this recommendation. It is most likely too radical a suggestion in this time.



We in the West will tend to agree with him. It is indeed time to deconstruct the Tulku tradition with its politically motivated appointments of new Tulkus. On the other hand, we want to keep and uphold the 'genuine' Tulkus. But maybe they are limited in number to just *Karmapa*, *Shamarpa* and a few others?

Here is a quote from the report: " The [Tulku] system should end, or at least change with the changing times. There have been cases of lamas who use reincarnation [i. e. their Tulku status for personal gain] but never pay attention to study and wisdom."

Dalai Lama added, that he feels there should be no institutions of [such] lamas and no [Tulku] reincarnations now.

Dalai Lama continued: "Institutions need to be owned by the people, not by an individual. Like my own institution [labrang], the Dalai Lama's office [in Tibetan: Gaden Podrang, the throne of Drepung Monastery], I feel it is linked to a feudal system."

It will be interesting to observe, how this is going to unfold. Most people agree, that something has to be done.

Indeed, the problem is deception of the followers, when the Tulku actually is not the claimed incarnation, but just an able candidate. It then becomes very bad, when the chosen person is not able at all or do not feel

like being such a reincarnated Tulku. The most renowned example in our time, is one of the *Jamgon Kongtrul* Tulkus, that just left it all and got a job at a video shop instead. The widely known example of misuse of his followers' trust, is *Sogyal Rinpoche*, who died earlier in 2019. His scandal was quite enormous. He both did commit sexual misconduct and exploitation of his students and helpers, as well as physical violence and misuse of power. Also, Sogyal Rinpoche match Dalai Lama's description of someone, who 'never pay attention to study and wisdom.' Many of his followers were injured both physically and emotionally by his acts. On top of that, Sogyal Rinpoche misrepresented the concept of '*samaya*' for social control. This is very bad and existentially irresponsible.

Obviously, the Dalai Lama express an opinion on the subject matter. He is not suggesting a new policy or a meeting between the Tibetan Buddhist Schools or traditions to clear up these problems. It appears, that this matter is not just about the scandal ridden Tulkus. Dalai Lama seems attracted by the idea of ending all appointments of Tulkus all together.

The logic is, that in the future there will only be such Tulkus left, that have been appointed by the Chinese communists, and who celebrate the right of the Chinese Empire to rule all Centralasia.

It will be quite difficult to bring everybody onboard for such a policy. To finish it all, seems like something the Tibetans are not prepared to do or feel ready to accept. And a reformation will encounter serious logical problems. Who is a 'genuine' Tulku? And who is appointed for political reasons of convenience? How are we to distinguish? How do we know the difference? That is, if the tradition is to be reformed. And besides, who are 'we' in this connection? Is it just a small circle of people, like the leaders of the Tibetan Buddhist Schools, who are to make such evaluations? What about the rest of us?

Dalai Lama mentions in the report, that the 'people' should govern the institutions. How is that to happen? In my paper about the *Two Karmapas*, I wrote, that the Buddhist organisations should be governed in democratic fashion. While there ought to be a meritocratic governance, run by peer control by the Pandits and meditation masters of the Tibetan Buddhist schools, in order to establish what is correct and good *Buddhadharma*. Through academic merit by examinations, debate and PhD degrees may someone qualify as a Pandit. But so far it has been more complicated with meditation masters. How do anyone evaluate, if someone else has obtained mastery (*Sanskrit: dhyana*) in meditation? It is quite difficult, when all you can see, is someone sitting on a meditation

cushion for a long time. You cannot examine a yogi. So this is somewhat problematic. Particularly so, when we want a precise definition. But Dalai Lama does not mention this issue yet.

Reform is a necessity. I have been of this opinion for many years, because it appears obvious for someone with a background in the Danish form of political governance. What is true, cannot be decided by a majority vote. But in the old days of the Kingdom of Denmark, we always elected our Kings in local peoples assemblies, where everybody had a vote.

But Dalai Lama does not inform us, if his thoughts move in this direction. Apparently, he is in favour of abolishing all Tulkus as the actual leaders of their schools and institutions. Maybe he thinks, that everybody should organise themselves in line with the organisation of his own Gelug tradition. It is governed by a sort of meritocracy in sorting out their leaders. It is in the hands of the Gelug Geshes, their Pandits (in the other traditions, these examined doctors of philosophy and correct view are called *Khenpos*).

So far, none of the other Buddhist schools from Tibet have published any opinion on this matter. Most likely, everybody expect that Dalai Lama will convene a conference about the issue, including the status of his own reincarnation. Such a meeting was called in November 2018, but was cancelled, because the Nyingma Head Lama died shortly before the event was to take place. So probably, such a meeting will be arranged later to clarify the matter and seek a mutual understanding.

Because everybody deeply respect Dalai Lama, there is likely no one, who will refuse him completely in this matter. On the other hand, there will be many, particularly Tulkus and their supporters, who are in no way interested in reform of any kind. Also the worldly Chinese communists wish to continue this feudal or hierarchical form of governance of the Tibetan Buddhist schools, because they will get the decisive power in the end in the whole area of Tibetan culture and religion. Besides this exception, the Chinese communists are against any class divided society, worldly or spiritual Princes because of their Marxism. This ambiguous attitude will of course have no future in the long run, net even in China and the Chinese occupied regions of Centralasia. It is a self contradiction.

Read about it in the Tibetan Review:

www.tibetanreview.net/dalai-lama-feels-reincarnation-system-should-end-lama-system-changed/ & www.contactmagazine.net/articles/the-reincarnation-tradition-should-end-now/

Times of India has also reported:

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/reincarnation-feudal-should-end-now-dalai-lama-amid-successor-row-with-china/articleshow/71769825.cms>

Here is the report from The Tribune India:

www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/institution-of-lama-has-feudal-origins/852439.html

December 2019.

A conference of Tulkus is held in Dharamsala, India - but no news about abolishing the Tulku tradition

Representatives of some Tibetan Buddhist traditions gathered in the last days of November 2019 in Dharamsala in India for a 3 day meeting, ending on the 29th of November. Normally they meet each third year for consultations of mutual interest. This conference should have been held last year. But it was postponed, because the head of the Nyingma tradition died a little time before the event was supposed to start.

The 'alternative' 17th Karmapa Ogyen Dorje sent Gyaltsab Rinpoche to represent him. There is no reliable data to suggest, that Ogyen Dorje had tried to organise a visa for India, so he could participate himself. Maybe he did not want to go to India. Last year, he experienced a lot of visa problems concerning a visit to India, that no one have been able to find head and tails in yet. Apparently that is why, he stayed in the US.

The 'classical' 17th Karmapa Thaye Dorje was not invited, as far as we know. He would properly not have participated, even had they been polite and asked him to come. You may wonder why the organisers did not ask Karmapa to participate, but the conference was conducted by the Tibetan exile 'government' that have ignored Karmapa ever since he escaped to India from Lhasa in Tibet and was enthroned in New Delhi by Shamar Rinpoche.

They have ignored Karmapa Thaye Dorje all this time, because the Dalai Lama already had recognised Ogyen Dorje as a Karmapa in 1992. The Tibetan exile politicians dare not follow another line, before Dalai Lama have supported such. At least in cases of the old religious traditions of Tibet. Of course, the Dalai Lama is no longer the head of the Tibetan state, but he is still here and continues to be the ex-king of Tibet.

So, Karmapa Thaye Dorje is in no way related to this conference. If Dalai Lama and the exile 'government' really want to unite all exile Tibetans in their organisation, they should have invited Karmapa Thaye Dorje to participate in their conference. This fear of touch is prevalent between the Tulku Princes. It is as if, they cannot talk together directly, unless a lot of protocol and diplomacy have cleared the way beforehand. The conference itself indicated this as well. And it has been like this, ever since the 5th Dalai Lama became king of Tibet in 1642.

The really interesting was, what did not happen

Dalai Lama took part in the last day of the meeting, where he surprised by his speech. The thing is, that he did not talk about his own suggestion to abolish the Tulku tradition – or in the least to reform it. He suggested this just a short time ago.

That Dalai Lama did not talk at all about this subject is very significant. We may presume, that his suggestion would not have been welcomed. Or maybe the proposal need some time to mature. In stead he said, that the question of his own reincarnation was not eminent.

Maybe not so surprising, the other religious leaders did not talk about reform of the Tulku tradition. On the other hand, they expressed a petition that the Dalai Lama should continue his own line of incarnations also in the future.

All in all, this conference appears to have been a somewhat boring event. No one dared address the problems. For instance they could have expressed support of the two Karmapas efforts to reconcile the Karma Kagyu traditions. They might also have said something about Tulku reform. But it is in the DNA of Tulkus, or so it seems, that they do not criticize each other. So how may they distance themselves from such

scandalous examples, like for instance Sogyal Rinpoche? Only Dalai Lama has expressed criticism of Sogyal Lakar earlier.

And this is just the apparent deviants, inclusive of Sakyong Mipham. It becomes completely out of hand for a Tulku Prince to evaluate things, when it is about the 'politically' appointed Tulkus. The problem is not just the Tulkus of 'convenience' themselves. It is of course also about the Tulkus, who have appointed them in the first place.

This leaves an impression of stern conservatism and standstill. This is actually not very promising, but on the other hand, nothing has happened. So this may also mean, that renewal will not come from such meetings, but from something else.

The problem is, that the Tibetans are organised religiously around the princely Tulkus. If you remove the Tulkus, not very much organisation is left. No Tibetan exile nor any one from the Chinese occupied territories in the Tibetan cultural area, have so far suggested any other way of organisation.

A place to start could be to contemplate, that a Bodhisatva does not have to be recognised as an incarnation of a former known Bodhisatva. If the Bodhisatva is on the seventh bhumi or Bodhisatva-level or higher, such an individual will have no trouble to demonstrate mastery and talent, without any support organisation from the past.

Read about the conference here: <https://www.tibetsun.com/news/2019/11/29/dalai-lama-says-no-hurry-to-discuss-his-reincarnation>

Read about Dalai Lama's speech here: <https://tibet.net/his-holiness-the-dalai-lama-graces-the-14th-tibetan-religious-conference/>