

Incarnation and Lineages

When an exceptional abbot of a Tibetan monastery died, his followers often turned to eminent spiritual leaders for help in finding their teacher's reincarnation, known as the *tulku*. These have become known as 'reincarnate lamas' in the West. Although literally correct (the lama's mind does return to inhabit another human body), their incarnation process is quite different from that of ordinary mortals. Most human and other beings' rebirth occurs uncontrolledly, determined without choice by the driving force of past karma. A *tulku's* life is seen as a chosen and controlled manifestation. In fact, *tulku* means 'emanation' rather than reincarnation, indicating a mind which remains firmly centred in ultimate reality while materially manifesting within the world, for the world's well-being. *Tulku* could also be translated as *living buddha*, if one takes the latter term in its broadest sense, to include emanations of bodhisattvas.

From the earliest days of Buddhism we have stories of eminent teachers being emanations of earlier masters. A later innovation — in the case of Tibetan *tulkus* — was for them to return very systematically, life after life, to lead their followers and continue their work. This custom was first started by the Gyalwa Karmapas, leaders of the Tibetan Kamtsang tradition. The second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1206-1283), was recognised as — and indeed identified himself as — having formerly been the first Karmapa, Dusum Chenpa (1110-1193). The latter had lived a long and extremely industrious life establishing his tradition in eastern and central Tibet, healing the sick and bringing peace to troubled areas. Most importantly, he had entrusted a letter to his chief disciple, before his death, indicating where and when he would return to continue his activities. The Karmapas have done this ever since, with the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ugyen Drodul Tinley Dorje, being found in 1994 through the prediction letter he left with the Twelfth Tai Situpa.

In the fascinating story of the second Karmapa, we discover him becoming teacher of the famous Mongolian and Chinese Emperors Mongha Khan and Kublai Khan. The tale, found in the Imperial records, is one of miracles and magic, as he outclassed the influential Taoists and Islamic sages at the royal court. The Chinese nobles came to greatly appreciate their new imperial guru, who determined his own reincarnation and did not belong to a family dynasty, as was the case with former imperial Sakya gurus. Their lineage passed from uncle to nephew (a father-to-son transmission being

impossible for celibate monks) and the imperial court had been obliged for some time to send costly caravans of tea, brocade and other offerings to this family, to the disgruntlement of many court dignitaries.

Gradually, more and more of the Tibetan saints followed the Karmapa's example and reincarnated systematically as *tulkus* to lead their followers. However, the Karmapa remained unique in leaving a clear indication of his next birth *before* his own death. In order for the bereaved followers of other masters to find their *tulkus*, it has been necessary for them to solicit the help of the most saintly and clear-minded lamas in the land. The latter give guiding instructions, indicating villages in which to search and which type of child to look for. They acquire their clues through direct insight or by entering in prolonged meditation, by divination (*mo*) or by following special signs associated with the deceased lama. To find the Dalai Lama *tulku*, for instance, a senior lama of his tradition looks into a certain lake for signs which appear to him as visions on the surface of the water. The State Oracle can also be consulted, in which case he enters into a trance and dictates answers from the unseen worlds of devas and spirits.

Finding the right child is an onerous responsibility as the elders of the monastery are, effectively, choosing the future teenager then adult who will control all their spiritual and material resources. In the case of larger monasteries housing hundreds, sometimes thousands, of monks, these were quite considerable. Once found, the child is frequently subjected to tests, such as being able to pick out, from among a group of similar objects, personal items which belonged to the former incarnation. Following official recognition of the child, there comes a ceremony of enthronement, the pomp and importance of which vary with the status of the lama.

These are only the first steps. Although the child is still the ongoing presence of its previous existence's good mind, it has nevertheless passed through the physical experiences of death and rebirth. These strip off the superficial aspects of acquired knowledge. As one scripture puts it, "Who, even the mightiest hero, could endure nine months, curled up in the dark confines of a womb, even if offered thirty measures of gold?".

In the case of most *tulku*, it becomes therefore a fairly urgent task for tutors to restore former knowledge as quickly as possible. The raw material is ideal. Many of these children show a remarkable learning ability and some can recite their prayers and lessons by heart after only one or

two readings, such is the innate clarity of their mind and the strength of their link with these scriptures from former lives. But most important for a properly-educated *tulku* will be to receive the spiritual transmissions which lies at the very heart of their lineage. These must come from a lineage-holder: often the very master who, in their previous incarnation, they had appointed as their own spiritual heir. Possessing the transmission, they become truly the new presence of the master they were in former lives.

Lineage - the Lifeline to Truth

Buddhists believe that the deepest truth can only be found through direct experience. Words alone could never convey it. Words, ideas and philosophies lend themselves to interpretation — and misinterpretation — and many a religious school has started with an impressive saint but crumbled into ruins within a few generations, as successive masters disagree about that saint's teachings and propagate their own, often limited, understanding of his message. To avoid this happening within Buddhism, living lineages of insight have been carefully perpetuated through the ages. For these to work, each lineage master has had to ensure that his finest disciples acquired not only the intellectual framework of the Buddha's teachings but also the inner, meditative clarity which illuminates its meaning.

Those without considerable experience of meditation have little idea of the vast potential of mind. Perhaps its widespread discovery will be the great adventure of the next millennium, now that the geophysical universe has been well explored. Within mind, there are very many experiences to be had: some peaceful, some vividly dramatic, some blissful and others painfully insightful. It is famously easy for people to believe themselves to be nearing the end of their spiritual journey when, in fact, they have only just crossed its threshold. Therefore, a master needs to carefully, sometimes severely, nurture his finest disciples through the various stages of meditation until they reach unshakeable certainty concerning absolute truth.

Furthermore, within the vajrayana fold, there needs to be a full transmission of the rituals and practices which act as highways into the land of truth. Only when the master is satisfied that what (s)he received has been passed on successfully will the recipient of the teachings be allowed to guide others along those same highways. Thus, through having exercised such care, Buddhism remains a living flame of truth, still burning brightly today, two thousand, five hundred years after its first ignition. Like candles, lit one from another, the lives of its great teachers have passed on the Buddha's initial wisdom from generation to generation.

Just as white light can give rise to many colours, so, according to Buddhism, does the one absolute truth give rise to thousands of relative truths. It is extremely rare for one human to be able to master and assimilate them all, just as it would be impossible for one person to absorb the whole body of

present-day scientific knowledge. The sangha is, in many ways, a community like the scientific community, having specialists in its various fields, anxious to seek out truth and cross-check their discoveries with those of others. As a community, the Sangha perpetuates all that the Buddha taught, with each specialised area of mental and yogic knowledge being preserved through specific lineages. These lineages fall into three main areas. First is that of precepts. Since the Buddha first gave monks and nuns their vows, there has been a transmission of authority to ordain. There are eight main stages of precepts, ranging from those for the lay person observing eight vows for one day to those of the monk (*bhikkhu*) observing over two hundred and thirty vows for life. One of these eight — full nun ordination — gives an interesting example of the need for continuity in lineage. The teacher-disciple transmission of the ability to give full nun ordination was lost in Tibet. Despite the fact that some nuns with a lesser ordination would have liked to observe more precepts, there was no one left who held the preceptor lineage. It could not be re-invented or faked. Following many centuries without this ordination, it is only in recent years that it has been re-integrated into the Tibetan fold, from South-East Asia where the transmission had been kept intact.

The second area of lineage concerns the bodhisattva teachings and the ability to give the bodhisattva vow. There are two main traditions of this: the ‘vast’ one from Maitreya and the ‘deep’ one from Manjusri. The third area, which is by far and away the vastest, is that of vajrayāna. The hundreds of tantras taught by the Buddha are preserved, in general, through the great schools such as those of Tibet. Within these schools, specific lamas have dedicated their lives to the mastery of one or more of these tantras, or sometimes even to just one area of one tantra. Other lamas will send their students to this ‘expert’ when it is time for them to receive those teachings.

The tantric lineage is first transmitted through *empowerment* or *initiation*, known as *empowerment which ripens* and described in the preceding pages. This is like planting a seed in the ground. Without the seed, the future tree can never even appear. Empowerment is followed by the teacher giving the *instructions which bring accomplishment*, consisting of methods of meditation and much practical advice. Well-equipped with these two, the disciple will need years of self-discipline, diligent practice and devoted enthusiasm to nurture the seed into the fully-developed tree, with all its flowers and fruit. Once the full-blown result of meditation within that particular tantra has been attained, and

when the person has all the personal qualities required of a tantric master, he or she will in turn become a transmitter of the sacred teachings received.