

## CHAPTER 24

### The Systematic Destruction of Ganden Monastery

UP UNTIL 1970, the Yangpa-chen chapel at Ganden monastery, which contained the precious golden reliquary *stupa* of Jé Rinpoché (Tsongka-pa Losang Drakpa), as well as the great assembly hall, the Shar-tsé and Jang-tsé colleges, and other assembly halls, was used as a granary by the food grains department in Lhasa, just as Séra and Drépung monasteries were. But that year, quite suddenly, I heard that the leaders and managers of the neighborhood committee refill stores and the Lhasa East Wind boot and hat factory, as well as the tailoring cooperatives around the city, were going to Ganden to buy up materials. Carts from the Lhasa transport cooperative commonly went up to Ganden to transport the department's grain supplies, but I had never heard that there were warehouses for commodities other than grain, and I had been wondering what was up when one night a close friend came to my place saying he had something to discuss.

He told me that the great golden reliquary in Ganden Yangpa-chen had been emptied, along with other reliquary *stupas*, and the preserved bodies (*dMar gdung*) they contained were to be burned and the ashes used as fertilizer. However, the former monks still working at Ganden had managed to substitute the preserved body of Jé Rinpoché with another one, and had left it in a corner of the chapel. Since there was apparently no security watch on the Yangpa-chen chapel before and after working hours, we had to find a way to go and rescue it. My friend was determined to go but would not be able to manage it by himself, and the other comrades he had approached so far were too scared and did not dare get involved. "What do you say?" he asked me. "We have to do it. But first, I have requested friends of mine who have gone to Ganden to buy materials to check carefully whether it is really the genuine remains of Jé Rinpoché and exactly

where it has been left. They will make contact with the monk-caretakers and report back without delay in the next day or two, and if it is the real thing that has been spared I will call on you at once to come and help me, so please prepare yourself for that eventuality.”

It was a terrifyingly dangerous enterprise at the time of a severe crack-down when the One Smash and Three Antis campaign was in full swing; if the Chinese government found out, they would not have regarded it as a minor offense. All the same, it would have been extremely unheroic of me to back out. We were comrades, and I had often boasted to him that I would be prepared to sacrifice whatever I had if things became critical, so now there was not much else I could do. But before making up my mind, I asked him more about how the plan would be carried out, and he told me, “These days they are selling off a lot of antique stuff to the production cooperatives and to individual buyers, and lots of people are going to Ganden every day for that purpose, so the two of us can go there on that pretext and have a good look at where the precious body has been put and what route we can take and so on. Then in the evening we can hide in a crevice of the mountainside near the monastery, and sneak back into the Yangpa-chen chapel during the night to pick it up. If we get it, we will hide it in some inaccessible spot in the mountains, and then gradually we will find a way to get it out to Dharamsala in India.”

That evening, with my mind racing, I thought how excellent it would be if the plan succeeded, and even if the authorities found out and I were arrested, I could quite legitimately insist that I had acted only out of intense devotion for the holy lama and had no political objective whatsoever, and might thus avoid being executed, so I decided to go. But my friend came back the next morning having received the unequivocal message that Jé Rinpoché’s precious remains had already been burned, and we were both consumed with regret.

A few days later, the people from the neighborhood committee refill store came back, having bought lots of things other than sacred images and scriptures from the monastery, which they sold off to poor people in the neighborhood, while some of my friends gave me blessed objects of reverence that had been retrieved from among the contents of the looted reliquary, such as ashes and fragments of bone from the cremation pyres of great lamas, fragments of robes, and so on. The Lhasa East Wind boot and hat factory used the blessed vestments that had dressed statues at Ganden to make linings and soles for boots, and the tailoring cooperatives used the brocades to make quilt covers and bicycle seat covers and other things for

sale, and for a while Lhasa was awash with things made from the offering vessels, the robes of statues, and the assembly hall cushions and pillar covers from Ganden monastery. Once the people from the agricultural communes around Ganden had dismantled the empty buildings and brought the painted and varnished timbers to Lhasa for sale, these too were to be seen at all the horse cart depots in the city, like the Tromsi-khang market and the Sungchö-ra courtyard.

A great many people both inside and outside the country did not realize the actual circumstances in which Ganden monastery was destroyed and cannot be blamed for believing the widespread fallacy that Tibetans themselves were responsible, or at least suspecting that that was the case. Because Ganden is situated on a mountainside two hours' drive away from Lhasa, city people had no way of checking what actually went on there, and the Chinese authorities deliberately took advantage of that fact in order to shift responsibility for their crime onto the local farmers. As for the real story of how Ganden monastery was destroyed, I heard it told in full at a meeting of the Tibet branch of the Chinese Buddhist Association (*Chos tshogs*) held in Lhasa in 1982, by a courageous monk who had served as the monastery's chairman (*Kru'u ren*).

As mentioned already, Ganden had been in the same position as Séra and Drépung until the sudden visit of a group of Chinese leaders from the finance department of the Lhasa city government, who made an inspection tour of the great golden reliquary. Not long after, another group of officials arrived, led by an officer of the Chinese government emporium [a division of the finance department, in the former Drupkhang Labrang on the Tromsi-khang street], a red-faced woman with long hair who dealt in the acquisition of precious commodities like gold, silver, turquoise, coral, agate, pearl, and so on. First they removed all the jewels ornamenting the *stupa*. Then they stripped off its gold covering. Finally they emptied the receptacle of its contents, going through them in meticulous detail, and all of these fabulous things went into the Chinese government's pocket. Whatever was left over after the looting of the jewels and gold, such as the frame and the preserved body that could not be readily disposed of, was burned and the ashes spread on the fields, on the pretext of following the Cultural Revolution imperative of destroying the Four Olds. In this way, the priceless sacred wealth of the great Ganden monastery and the reliquary of Jé Rinpoché at its center were systematically removed. After that, the leaders of the farming communes around Ganden, under Taktsé county of Lhasa prefecture, were instructed that if they took down the monastery build-

ings they could use the pillars, beams, and rafters for the construction of a new public hall for their commune, or sell them and distribute the income among commune members as an annual bonus. Thus the commune leaders directed their people in the dirty work of destroying the empty monastery buildings by tying ropes around the pillars to pull them down and so on, and used the timbers as they had been told by the government.

This amounted to the government inciting the commune leaders to achieve their own objectives for them, and the commune leaders ordering their members to carry out the destruction. But because most Lhasa people only saw the farmers bringing the timbers of Ganden into the city, it was assumed that they had destroyed the golden reliquary *stupa* in the same way that Red Guards destroyed the contents of the Tsukla-khang temple in Lhasa at the start of the Cultural Revolution, and they cursed them for it and held it against them. In reality, it was a case of “Mr. Wolf taking the tasty cut of meat and leaving Miss Vixen to take the blame,” because the Chinese government had systematically stripped the golden reliquary to start with, and later had the local people destroy the empty buildings and take the blame for everything. The destruction of sacred images and objects by the Red Guards at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and the destruction of the golden reliquary were quite distinct in nature: the destruction at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution was the expression of a political ideology, while the golden reliquary was destroyed with the sole intention of appropriating its gold and jewels. It seems to me important to make a clear distinction and to convey this to others in order that the fallacious version of events at Ganden not be perpetuated.

Not long afterward, the wind of that destruction threatened to blow away everything in its path, when the municipal government ordered that each neighborhood committee had to run its own communal dining hall, which would first have to be built, and indicated that they should get the necessary timbers by dismantling decrepit buildings at the Séra and Dré-pung monasteries. Thus each of the three sectional offices in the city picked groups of young able-bodied workers from among the “class enemies” in their area for the purpose. I was trying to earn a living harvesting turf in the marshes at the time, but my name was selected as one of those who had to go dismantle monastery buildings. I personally did not have the fortune to have contributed a single stone or clod of earth for the construction of those monasteries in the first place, and the idea that now I was going to accumulate the evil karma of destroying them brought me considerable an-

guish, but there was no way of getting around it, so reluctantly I prepared myself to go.

Meanwhile, however, an auxiliary construction unit under the TMD general command in charge of building a large weapons and ammunition storage facility in an area called Trenma, near Nyingtri in Kongpo, found itself short of construction laborers and was recruiting one group from the pastoral area of Damshung county under Lhasa prefecture and another from the city itself. Each neighborhood committee selected candidates to be sent, and I was among a group of young “class enemies” chosen from our neighborhood, so fortunately I did not have to accumulate the negative karma of demolishing a monastery. However, the work of dismantling those buildings was brought to a stop before it had been completed because of concern for the impact on public opinion.