

# Flight of the Lama

By Isabel Hilton  
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It was 10:30 on the evening of Dec. 28, but darkness had descended over central Tibet just an hour before. (Sunset comes late here, because Tibet runs on the same clock as Beijing, 2,000 miles to the east.) In the remote, beautiful monastery of Tsurphu, the seat of the 17th Karmapa, head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, most of the monks were already busy with their evening studies. Others were settling down to watch the 10:30 news on the television set that only recently had been installed.

Parked outside the monastery was a Mitsubishi S.U.V., ostensibly to take one of the senior monks on a fund-raising trip to northwest Tibet. The driver waited behind the wheel, nervous but resolved. Only a few hours earlier, he had been admitted to a secret that, had it been betrayed, would have brought the immediate arrest of all involved: the 17th Karmapa was about to try a daring escape from Tibet.

Earlier that day, the 14-year-old religious leader had entered what had been announced as an eight-day religious retreat in his private apartment. Up in his personal quarters, though, the Karmapa was making an unusual set of preparations. He laid aside his maroon monk's robes and dressed in a pair of trousers, a down jacket, a warm hat, a pair of spectacles and a scarf. Then he opened his bedroom window and, followed by his elderly attendant, climbed carefully onto the roof of the shrine hall that housed the effigy of the Karma Kagyu's protective deity, Mahakala.

The old man and his young charge worked their way along the roof toward the end of the building, a route that took them directly over the roof of a guardhouse. It was a drop of less than 10 feet to the ground, then only a few yards to the waiting vehicle. But as the two crept along the roof, they heard the voice of their accomplice, the monk who was preparing to depart for his supposed fund-raising tour. He was engaged in a loud conversation with an unseen man below -- perhaps one of the many monks at Tsurphu who were paid to report signs of disloyalty to the Chinese regime. It was a bitterly cold night, and few monks were likely to stray outside, but any casual encounter could spell disaster. The Karmapa and his attendant froze and crouched down on the roof until the conversation ended and the straying monk had stepped back inside. Finally they dropped to the ground and ran to the S.U.V. Amid a tense silence, the four men drove off.

More than two months later, the consequences of the lama's dramatic flight are still being played out. As he stole off into the night, the Karmapa could not have suspected that within days of his arrival in northern India he would be regarded by many as a possible future leader of the 100,000 exiled Tibetans, the potential temporal successor to the exiled ruler of Tibet, the Dalai Lama. Nor could he know -- though he certainly feared -- that embarrassed Chinese authorities would reportedly detain his parents as well as close Tsurphu to visitors and reshuffle the monastery's security personnel and management.

It is also unlikely that he anticipated the worldwide sensation his flight would cause, or the

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diplomatic crisis it would touch off between India and China -- a crisis so severe that the Karmapa himself would be forbidden to speak publicly of why or how he fled. This is the story of that escape, based on the account of a key participant who, fearing for the safety of friends, associates and family in Tibet, would not allow himself to be identified.

It had been just over two months since the 17th Karmapa had decided to flee. For any Tibetan, it would have been a momentous decision. Few are allowed to come and go legally, and each year thousands risk their lives to do it illegally. And while the Karmapa was a Tibetan of exalted status, that fact merely served to restrict his freedom of movement even further.

In 1992, at the age of 7, Ugyen Trinley Dorje -- the Karmapa's given name -- had been recognized as the reincarnation of the deceased 16th Karmapa and plucked from his nomad family in eastern Tibet. Shortly thereafter, in a ceremony attended by about 20,000, he was enthroned in the 12th-century Tsurphu monastery in the Drowolung valley in central Tibet, some 40 miles northwest of Lhasa.

An appealing child with a remarkably direct gaze, Ugyen Trinley had impressed his followers with his intelligence and seriousness of purpose. As a high incarnate lama recognized both by Beijing and the Dalai Lama, Ugyen Trinley enjoyed a privileged existence even in today's Tibet. The Chinese government indulged him, hoping to use him to legitimize its rule over Tibet and to blunt the impact of the Dalai Lama's international campaign for autonomy. At the same time, he was worshiped by the followers of Karma Kagyu, one of the most influential of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism around the world.

But now Ugyen Trinley was 14, and the red-cheeked nomad boy had grown into a young man nearly six feet tall, and he was looking for something more than toys and kind words from Beijing. He had reached an age when the tradition of the Karma Kagyu demanded that he begin to receive the teachings of his lineage -- that he become the latest link in a chain of oral transmission that stretches back, unbroken, for nearly a thousand years. Each previous incarnation of the Karmapa had received the teachings from a master lama (the word lama simply means "teacher") who had himself received them from a previous incarnation of the Karmapa.

But how was Ugyen Trinley to receive those teachings? Tai Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltshab Rinpoche, the masters anointed to teach him, were both in India, part of the vast Tibetan diaspora that had formed in the aftermath of the failed 1959 uprising against the Chinese. Ugyen Trinley had made repeated requests to travel to India to study with them; they, in turn, had asked for permission to visit him in Tibet. But since Tai Situ Rinpoche's last trip, in 1993, Beijing had refused.

At same time, the young Karmapa was developing a mind of his own. Kagyu monks tell of the Karmapa's reluctance to pay homage to the Panchen Lama (the second most important reincarnate lama, who was chosen by the Dalai Lama against the wishes of the Chinese and then disappeared with his family after being apprehended by Chinese security forces). Or of the time the Karmapa slapped the face of a Gelugpa lama in a dispute in 1995.

Then there was his general reluctance to toe the Communist Party line. When the local party representative asked him last year to read a speech prepared by local party officials, he refused. "Do you wish me to say," the Karmapa inquired, "that I am giving this speech on your behalf?" The startled party representative explained that the speech was to be delivered as though it were his own.

"In that case," said the Karmapa, "I have no need of this text." No speech was given.

Word of the Karmapa's discontent inevitably filtered out. The Dalai Lama was alarmed to hear last year that the Karmapa wanted to leave; he feared for the boy's safety. A message was hastily sent, counseling patience. The Karmapa waited, but with a growing conviction that the longer he did, the harder it would be to escape. Already he was under surveillance: in addition to the spies and informers, uniformed security personnel controlled access to the monastery and scrutinized the Karmapa's mail. He could not leave the monastery for any reason without the permission of his Chinese-appointed management. He had begun to feel like a prisoner.

To escape was a terribly risky enterprise. but for his followers, the Karmapa is a bodhisattva, a manifestation of the Buddha, whose vision goes beyond the mundane. He saw his flight as his spiritual destiny, a conviction that was reinforced by a prophetic dream more than 100 years old.

In the 19th century, a Kagyu monk named Chogyur Dechen Lingpa dreamed about the lives of 21 Karmapas. He described his dream to the abbot of Karma monastery, who painted the prophecy as he had been told it. In the painting, which survives, the 17th Karmapa is depicted sitting beneath a pine tree, in discussion with a monk who is understood to be Tai Situ Rinpoche. The landscape of the painting, Ugyen Trinley pointed out to a trusted follower, did not look like the barren valley in which Tsurphu monastery sits. It did, however, bear a striking resemblance to the landscape in which Tai Situ Rinpoche has built Rumtek, his monastery in Sikkim. To the Karmapa, the message was clear: he would go to India and, as it was prophesied, he would get there safely.

Perhaps that thought offered some comfort to the little group as they drove through the chilly darkness toward Lhasa, for they knew that the most dangerous part of the journey lay ahead. Some 20 miles away, near the river Tolung on the outskirts of Lhasa, a third lama and his driver waited patiently. They had taken a taxi loaded with provisions to the rendezvous spot.

The third lama looked at his watch and guessed that, if all went well, the escape party would arrive in half an hour. He, too, had told his friends and family that he was planning a business trip. He had warned the driver to prepare for a journey of some 15 days, to a destination that would be revealed to him later. Now, as they waited in the darkness, it was time to let his driver in on the secret. Was he ready to join? He was. A few moments later, the Mitsubishi picked them up and, the party complete, headed to western Tibet.

The Karmapa had entrusted the planning to one man in his entourage; he in turn had chosen two more. The Karmapa had insisted that his escape must be accomplished before the Lunar New Year, which was Feb. 5. They had had just over two months to prepare for this moment.

The three men had been under no illusions about the scale of the challenge on which they were embarked: to smuggle Tibet's most prominent reincarnate lama out of a heavily guarded monastery, run for a border that at its closest point was some 200 miles away, cross that border unnoticed and somehow reach Dharamsala in northern India, the exile home of the Dalai Lama. It was a project so audacious that many continued to believe it was impossible, even after it had been successfully completed.

All three men were devotees of the Karmapa. "The Karmapa is the embodiment of the active principle of the Buddha," said one of those involved. "His wishes must be obeyed. So I felt a very strong sense of conviction and inspiration." At their first meeting, in Lhasa, two months before the escape, the three had sworn an oath. "We swore that, until our goal was achieved, we would not reveal it to a soul."

The route that the party now took was one of several they had considered, each with its own set of dangers. This one ran through western Tibet to Mustang, in Nepal, about 400 miles from Lhasa. It was extremely long but relatively unguarded, and it had a number of other advantages. The road, while not good, was passable with the right vehicle as far as the border, and the border crossing itself was often unmanned. Finally, to cross into Nepal a traveling businessman did not need a passport but only a permit, which could be obtained from an army camp near the border.

The planners knew that once they got over the border, whatever difficulties they encountered would be secondary. They also knew that until that moment, there would be no second chances. They had prepared meticulously, and they knew exactly what lay ahead. A few weeks earlier, two of them had obtained permits for a business trip and had reconnoitered the route as far as Lo Manthang, just inside Nepal. They had taken photographs and noted all the potential dangers -- primarily, Chinese checkpoints (manned on some occasions but not others) or army barracks. They returned to Tibet -- their mission apparently unremarked upon by the security services -- with a detailed understanding of what they had to do. They submitted their plan, along with the photographs, to the Karmapa for his approval.

They knew that good cover stories were essential so that the preparation of vehicles and supplies would not arouse suspicion. Neither the fund-raising trip nor the business trip were unusual events, and the purchase of the Mitsubishi -- a more suitable vehicle than the truck that had been used for previous fund-raising trips -- was made without attracting attention.

Finally, the Karmapa announced his intention to observe an eight-day religious retreat in his private chambers. The retreat, nothing out of the ordinary for him, provided eight days in which the watching eyes of the monastery spies would not expect to see him. Only his teacher and his cook would attend him behind the closed door of his private apartments. The date had been set for the 21st day of the 11th month in the Tibetan calendar -- Dec. 28.

Thus far, the plan was working well, but they had a long journey ahead and a border to cross. They drove on, stopping only to change drivers, all that night and all the next day. The small checkpoints that the two scouts had so carefully logged were all unmanned. It was not until 11:30 p.m. on Dec. 29, the second night of their escape, that they reached a section of the road that they knew to be dangerous. They were nearing the border, and the road ran within 800 yards of the first of two Chinese army camps. Anywhere in the vicinity they risked being stopped and questioned.

It was already dark, but not, they decided, dark enough for the risky passage ahead. Two of them were to drive past the camp without lights. The rest, including the Karmapa, would take to the mountains on foot and rendezvous back on the road, beyond the danger zone. They waited until 1:30 a.m., then three men and the Karmapa slipped out of the vehicle and began their arduous climb. They dared not use any lights, and the night was dark and cold. They picked their way through thorn scrub, frequently stumbling in the dark.

It was four hours before they reached the road on the other side of the mountain, their hands lacerated by thorns and their legs bruised from frequent falls. To their dismay, there was no sign of the Mitsubishi. Had the others been captured, they wondered. Had they missed them in the dark? Had they fled after wrongly assuming that the party on foot had been captured?

The little group rapidly calculated their options. Even if the S.U.V. had been intercepted, they might still make it to the border on foot, even without provisions and despite the

bitter weather. If the vehicle had simply missed them, perhaps they could still meet up. It was still dark, but dawn was not far off. They decided to stay on the road as long as it was safe and to walk in the direction of the border, in the hope of finding the rest of the party. To walk toward the camp invited disaster, and if the vehicle had already gone by, they reasoned, the driver would eventually realize his mistake and turn back. An hour later, to their inexpressible relief, they made out the Mitsubishi driving slowly toward them. It had overshot and, as they predicted, was coming back to look for them.

The second army camp lay two hours farther down the track. It was there that Tibetans traveling on business could obtain a permit to go into Nepal, but now, in that bitterly cold early morning, nothing seemed to be stirring. The choice was to take to the hills or to risk driving straight through. They drove through unchallenged. Half an hour later, they reached Nyichung, passing the pillar that marks the unmanned border with Mustang, Nepal. They drove across.

On the Nepalese side of the border, the track was hardly fit, even for an S.U.V. Besides, the party had no permit to drive their vehicle in Nepal, and they did not want to attract official curiosity. So they left the vehicle in the care of a family on the Mustang side of the border, telling them they would come back for it in a few days.

To continue their trek, they hired horses and rode to Lo Manthang, two hours away. There, in the house of a Karma Kagyu devotee, they had their first night's rest since they had fled Tsurphu. Early the next morning, Dec. 31, they rode on. They traveled without a break for another complete day and night until 7:30 the following evening, when they reached the Manang district, a popular spot for trekkers in the shadow of the Annapurna Range. They spent the night there in a tourist lodge. The next day, Jan. 2, they rode by helicopter -- in this terrain, it is either yaks or helicopters -- to the outskirts of Katmandu, the Nepalese capital, then took a taxi across the border into India. The Nepalese border guards were happy to accept a bribe to overlook their lack of travel documents.

From the Indian border, their incredible journey continued. They took a rickshaw to the nearest railway station -- at Gorakhpur -- where they boarded a train to Lucknow. In Lucknow, they hired another taxi, and after a further 24 hours of continuous driving, they reached New Delhi, the Indian capital, on the evening of Jan. 4. There they changed taxis and drove on through the final night of their journey to Dharamsala, the home of the Dalai Lama. Disaster threatened on the final leg of the journey as their car skidded off the road in a fog. Miraculously, as the Karmapa's followers see it, nobody was injured. Finally, at 10:30 on the morning of Jan. 5, they reached Dharamsala.

Since leaving Tsurphu eight days previously, they had slept only twice in a bed. They had made it against extraordinary odds, but their euphoria was tinged with fear for those left behind. There has been only one moment of contact with Tsurphu since the flight: on Jan. 31, they telephoned the Karmapa's residence from Nepal. But a stranger answered the telephone and they heard noises and shouting in the background, so they quickly hung up. The fates of the Karmapa's teacher and his cook remain unknown.

Exhausted, the group checked into the Bhagsu Hotel in McLeod Ganj, a little town uphill from Dharamsala, and less than an hour later, the Karmapa, painfully thin and windburned, with lacerated hands and open sores on his feet, strode into the audience chamber of an astonished but delighted Dalai Lama. "It was a moment of great emotion," says one monk who witnessed the meeting. "Leaving aside everything else, they are two great bodhisattvas, and the understanding and affection between them was very moving."

The Dalai Lama ordered the group moved to Chonor House, the government-in-exile's

official guest house, and sent his doctor to examine them. Whatever the future was to bring, the Karmapa was now in dire need of rest. Late that afternoon, Tai Situ Rinpoche was summoned from Sherab Ling, his monastery in Himachal Pradesh, three hours' drive away. After a brief reunion with Tai Situ, the exhausted Karmapa went to bed and slept until 11 the next morning. As news of his sensational escape raced around the world, the Indian and Chinese governments were caught off balance.

Beijing issued a hasty statement. The Karmapa, it said unconvincingly, had left a note in the monastery explaining that he had gone to get his crown, a ritual object that is presently in Rumtek monastery, the former seat of the 16th Karmapa. The Karmapa had made it clear, according to Beijing, that he did not intend to stay away or to "betray" the "motherland."

In New Delhi, the reaction was a mixture of anxiety and disbelief -- anxiety about the Chinese response and disbelief that such an escape was possible without either the assistance of Tibetans in India or the connivance of the Chinese government. New Delhi dispatched intelligence officers to Dharamsala to interview the escapees. While it waited for the results of its inquiries, the government asked the Dalai Lama's officials to ensure that the Tibetans said nothing that would inflame the already delicate situation. With that, an official silence descended on the subject of the Karmapa's escape.

The Karmapa himself was moved to a monastery on the outskirts of Dharamsala, where Indian Army guards now strictly limit access to him. The few who gain admittance are searched minutely. In the short term, at least, the Karmapa had exchanged one set of restrictions for another.

Forty-one years earlier, when the Dalai Lama's party had struggled across the Himalayas, followed by nearly 100,000 desperate Tibetan refugees, the Indian government had welcomed them unreservedly. Four decades later, though, as relations with neighboring Pakistan deteriorated, the Indians were trying to improve ties with China, which they saw as Pakistan's main support. Besides these strategic considerations, the Karmapa's reception was also clouded by the fallout from a dispute that had split his Karma Kagyu sect.

The row began in 1992, on the sudden death of one of the four regents, Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, more than a decade after the death of the 16th Karmapa. At Jamgon Kongtrul's funeral, the three surviving regents began quarreling over the conduct of the search for the 16th Karmapa's reincarnation. Two of them, Tai Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltshab Rinpoche, believed Ugyen Trinley to be the boy they were searching for. The third, Shamar Rinpoche, a nephew of the 16th Karmapa, disagreed.

Traditionally, the Karmapa's reincarnation is found with the help of a letter of prediction left by the previous incarnation. Nearly 10 years after the 16th Karmapa's death, Tai Situ found such a letter, purportedly in a silk pouch the Karmapa had given him. But Shamar called it a forgery and promoted his own candidate. Despite the Dalai Lama's endorsement of Ugyen Trinley, Shamar never abandoned his own candidate's claim. Today, he and his supporters continue to battle through the courts and in the press for control of Rumtek monastery and its treasures.

The greatest treasure of all is the Black Crown of the Karmapas, which was presented to the Fifth Karmapa by the Chinese emperor Yong-le in the 15th century. (The legend of the Karmapas says that they wear a hat woven of angel hair, visible only to highly spiritual beings. The Ming emperor's present was designed to enable ordinary mortals to see the Karmapa's hat.)

Ugyen Trinley's sudden arrival in India brought the dispute to a new pitch. If Ugyen Trinley was to take up residence in Rumtek monastery, the 16th Karmapa's seat, and to perform the traditional Black Crown ceremony, the chances of Shamar's candidate prevailing in the struggle would suffer a potentially fatal blow. Shamar, therefore, hopes to keep Ugyen Trinley from Rumtek as long as he can.

One strategy Shamar adopted was to play on New Delhi's anxieties over Sikkim, a border state whose annexation has never been recognized by China. He has done this skillfully in a series of interviews and articles that also cast doubt on both the authenticity of the escape and on Ugyen Trinley's spiritual credentials. In a further twist, Shamar also suggested that the Dalai Lama supported Ugyen Trinley only to bring the Karma Kagyu under his control.

How seriously the Indian government takes these charges is unclear, but the row is certainly embarrassing and damaging for the Karma Kagyu. "There is no security problem in Sikkim," said a senior Indian government official. "But Shamar has some influence in some of the Indian intelligence services, so questions are asked. Until they are answered, there will be no final decision about the boy."

The remaining two regents, Tai Situ Rinpoche and Gyaltsab Rinpoche, were, of course, delighted by the Karmapa's arrival in India. Gyaltsab is a rotund but scholarly figure and a man not in the habit of wasting words in secular conversation. "When I heard the news of his Holiness's arrival," he says, "I thought I was dreaming. I couldn't believe it. When I understood it was true, I was overflowing with happiness."

Tai Situ is a small, energetic man in his mid-40's. For him, too, the Karmapa's arrival has been a profoundly emotional experience. And like most of the Karmapa's followers, Tai Situ is delighted by the evidence of his young leader's strong character. "I'm scared to tell him anything," he laughed. "I'm 30 years older than him, but I don't think I know any better than he does."

Within days of the Karmapa's dramatic appearance in India, the senior lamas of the Karma Kagyu were flocking to Dharamsala to pay homage to their spiritual leader and to consult with the Dalai Lama about the boy's future. An elderly Kagyu monk has been named the Karmapa's tutor, and now the young Karmapa divides his time between his studies and his hobby of writing poems and songs. But New Delhi remains silent on the matter of his exact status, and many questions still hang over his future. Among the most intriguing of those questions is the role that the Dalai Lama envisages for a young companion whom he never expected to meet.

The Dalai Lama will be 65 this year and is well aware that Beijing is waiting expectantly for him to die. With the Dalai Lama out of the way, the Chinese could hope that the Tibet issue will begin to fade from prominence. Without its spiritual leader, moreover, the community in exile, prone as it is to disputes and sectarian quarrels, might very well fragment. Divided and leaderless, it would no longer present a problem to Beijing.

But the arrival of the Karmapa offers a different possible narrative. He is young and charismatic and could clearly provide a focus in the future for Tibetan loyalties. A respected spiritual leader and already a forceful character, the Karmapa could be well positioned to speak for his people in the absence of the Dalai Lama or during the infancy of the Dalai Lama's next reincarnation. The Karma Kagyu and the Gelugpa, the Dalai Lama's sect, have been at loggerheads since the 17th century, when the Gelugpa -- with the help of a Mongol prince -- pushed its rival sect from power. But the era of theocracy in Tibet is over. The Dalai Lama has tried to persuade his followers to discard sectarianism,

and he insists that the new generation of spiritual leaders receive teachings from all four schools of Buddhism. If the Dalai Lama keeps the young Karmapa close -- and succeeds in passing on his own vision for the future -- Tibetans could find a new leader, and China could face a new and formidable adversary.

Photos: (Dilip Mehta); 1992: The Incarnation: Ugyen Trinley Dorje, 7, recognized as the 17th Karmapa.; The Karmapa's parents and brother after arriving at Tsurphu monastery.; Tai Situ Rinpoche, left, and Gyaltsab Rinpoche at the Karmapa's enthronement. (Kagyu Thubten Choling Monastery; K.Y. Drolma); 2000: The Exile: The Karmapa in January in India, a week after escaping Tibet.; The Karmapa, moved to a monastery just outside Dharamsala, India.; The 17th Karmapa and the Dalai Lama, now both in exile, in February. (Aman Sharma/Associated Press.; Dieter Ludwig/Sipa Press.; Lynsey Addario/Associated Press.)

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