Dilowa Gegen Hutukhtu (1883-1965)

EIGHTEENTH INCARNATION OF TELOPA, INDIAN BUDDHIST SAINT (988-1069)

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A SINGULAR and widely heralded event in American academic history occurred in March 1949 when the Dilowa Gegen Hutukhtu arrived at the John Hopkins University, Baltimore. Its newest faculty member, aged sixty-six, distinguished by Central Asian features, a radiant smile, closely cropped hair, and a brocaded robe, came to serve as research adviser in Mongolian language, history, and culture. Greeting this erudite Mongolian in Washington D.C., on his arrival from Nanking, was Professor Owen Lattimore, Director of the Walter Hines Page School of International Relations. They had been friends since 1931 when they first met in Peking.

From the Mongol titles which followed his name Dilowa, we learned that he was an incarnate lama of the highest rank in the Buddhist hierarchy of Mongolia. The title *Hutukhtu*, which means "Incarnate Saint of the first rank," was confirmed by the Manchu Imperial Court on his successive incarnations beginning with the K'ang Hsi period (1662-1722). His last incarnation was the fifth to appear in Mongolia. His other Mongol title *Gegen* means "enlightened, holy."

The lama's name Dilowa is the Mongol pronunciation of Telopa, the Indian name of a tenth century Buddhist saint born in Bengal (A.D. 988-1069). But the venerable lama was not named at birth after Telopa. The Dilowa Hutukhtu during his lifetime was recognized and revered as the eighteenth incarnation of Telopa by the Buddhists of Mongolia, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Northern India.

The national publicity announcing the lama's arrival also referred to him as a "Living Buddha." It mentioned his knowledge of the Tibetan language and Buddhist scriptures, also that he spoke Chinese, but understood no English. To the average American, unfamiliar with Buddhism or its Founder, the title "Living Buddha" could mean a modern reincarnation of Gautama, the historical Buddha. According to the canonical texts, when the Buddha attained Nirvana, the state of complete Enlightenment, he was no longer subject to rebirth. Because a Buddha cannot be reincarnated, the epithet "Living Buddha" is therefore incorrect and misleading. Having arrived here at the age of sixty-six years, the process of learning the English (or American) language was indeed slow. Yet in spite of this handicap, the Incarnate Dilowa was always willing to see visitors interested in Mongolia or Tibet, and others sincerely interested in Buddhism. Those who could communicate with him in Chinese, or through an interpreter, found him perceptive, wise, and sympathetic.

An opportunity to correspond with the first Mongol incarnate lama to live in America was at least a possibility. I therefore composed a letter in Tibetan[1] to the Dilowa Hutukhtu, which I wrapped in a white silk *khata* (fringed greeting scarf) before mailing it on 16th March 1949. The lama's reply in Tibetan was the beginning of an extra-ordinary

friendship with the greatest Tibetan scholar ever to come to America. Although this may seem to be an extravagant claim, there was an abundance of evidence to support it. In fact, I gradually ceased to be amazed at his vast erudition and prodigious memory. He had either mastered or committed to memory innumerable Tibetan Buddhist texts, and could either recite them or write them out in his flawless calligraphy. Titles of canonical, liturgical, and even medical texts, and the names of Buddhist divinities and renowned lamas were always forthcoming. Only on the very rarest occasions would he have to say, "I don't know." Whenever my studies approached the fringe of the Esoteric Tradition, I had to be extremely careful not to ask any questions that his initiatic vows would not permit him to answer. Once or twice, when I unintentionally asked a forbidden question, his answer was, "Never mind."

During the following years he was often a guest at my home, and a great favourite with my family. He always brought his portable shrine in its specially-made leather carrying case. Among its sacred objects were photographs of his former lama tutors, and his favourite Tibetan Buddhist text,[2] in which he would read a chapter or section before retiring. I arranged a larger and more permanent shrine for him on one wall of my library, using only Tibetan images, paintings, books, and other sacred objects I had received as gifts. To my delight, he made the necessary readjustments, and used the shrine during subsequent visits.

Almost from the beginning of our long association, I had exceptional opportunities to acquire knowledge of the Hutukhtu's early life in Mongolia, his religious studies and monastic training. Later, published material in English, translated from his autobiographical notes dictated in Mongol, supplemented oral information, and corrected errors in earlier newspaper and magazine articles about him.

The child (or entity) later known as the Dilowa Hutukhtu was born in 1883 to a shepherd family at Oigong Bag in Outer Mongolia. His father and mother, a sister aged fourteen and a brother of ten lived in a round, felt-covered tent, and owned several sheep, a few cows and horses. The administrative territory in which they lived was called the Aimak of Jassakhtu Khan.

In the neighbouring Aimak of Sain Noyan Khan stood the local Buddhist monastery built during the Chien Lung period (1736-1796) for an incarnate lama known as the Narobanchin Hubilgan.[3] Some-time after it was completed, the Imperial Court of Peking conferred upon the Narobanchin Lama the title of Hutukhtu and his monastery itself received the name of Narobanchin.

A step back into the past would help to clarify future events. In a previous incarnation of the Narobanchin Lama during the Kang Hsi period (1662-1722), the Lama was born near the Monastery of Banchin Jo, Inner Mongolia. He was identified as the Narobanchin Incarnation and then became the disciple of the Dilowa Hutukhtu, the presiding lama of Banchin Jo. The Narobanchin Lama eventually returned to his former monastery.

The Dilowa Hutukhtu, in a later incarnation, appeared in one of the families of the Narobanchin territory, Outer Mongolia. The Narobanchin Hutukhtu, upon discovering the identity of his former tutor, decided to have the Dilowa Hutukhtu remain and share the religious and civil administration of Narobanchin Monastery and territory.

During the significant year of 1883 the Dilowa Hutukhtu of Narobanchin Monastery died while in his second incarnation as its joint presiding lama. Five years later the shepherd's son in the next Aimak, and almost forty other boys born in the latter months of 1883 were considered as candidates by a delegation of monks from Narobanchin. The monks recognized the shepherd's son as the incarnation of the Dilowa Hutukhtu for two convincing reasons: (1) Neither he nor his parents, nor any of their acquaintances had ever been near the Narobanchin Monastery;[4] and yet he frequently spoke of places near it. (2) He recognized a bowl brought from the monastery as his own—a bowl that had belonged to him in his previous incarnation.

He was escorted to the Narobanchin Monastery to live, and his family went with him bringing their livestock and other possessions to the vicinity of the monastery. Although his family could visit him occasionally, from the age of five the new incarnation was in the care of the most learned tutors to be educated (or re-educated) in Tibetan language and writing and the Five Basic Subjects: Logic, the Perfection of Wisdom, Monastic Discipline, the Middle Path and Meta-physics. As he progressed, the monastic curriculum included the discipline of memory training, also liturgy and the proper use of ritual objects. Since the monasteries of Mongolia belong to the Gelugpa Order, founded by the famous Tibetan Lama Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the Dilowa Hutukhtu studied the voluminous "Collected Works" of this Lama and his Order, in Tibetan.

The youthful Incarnation was also trained for his future administrative duties; when he reached the age of eighteen the Dilowa Hutukhtu became the co-master of the Narobanchin Monastery with its three hundred monks, and miles of pasture and farmland in its territory. He was now one of the thirteen highest incarnate dignitaries of the Buddhist religion in Outer Mongolia (possibly of "archbishop" rank). He also assumed control of two monasteries in Inner Mongolia.

During the following twenty-eight years, 1901-1929, the Dilowa Hutukhtu lived a quiet monastic life at Narobanchin. He continued with his advanced studies in the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures besides receiving oral esoteric teachings from initiates. He presided over the daily services in the great assembly hall of the temple, attended by the three hundred resident monks and monk officials. In ceremonial seating, the Incarnate Dilowa had religious seniority over the Narobanchin Lama's residential seniority by virtue of being his former tutor.

This tranquil period was interrupted in 1911 when the Manchu dynasty fell and Outer Mongolia (Khalkha) declared its independence from China. The most influential and widely revered Hubilgan, the Jetsundamba Hutukhtu of Urga, was proclaimed sovereign ruler of Outer Mongolia, with the title of Bogda Khaghan. Even before I met the Venerable Dilowa, I had read about the "irregular" conduct of the Urga Hutukhtu: his excessive drinking, his wilful practical jokes and cruelty to retainers, his concubines and eventually a "consort." The saintly Dilowa was well aware of the Urga's depravity and willingly admitted it yet he carried in his portable shrine an early photograph of the Urga Hutukhtu, then a young man, reverenced as a former teacher.

The Jetsundamba Hutukhtu of Urga, born in 1870 at Lhasa, was the eighth incarnation and the last of his line. Even before his death in 1924, his powers as sovereign Bogda Khaghan were being undermined and finally limited by the newly

formed Mongol People's Revolutionary Party. On 10th July 1921, the Party became the People's Revolutionary Government "…in ever firmer and stronger friendship with the Soviet nation."[5] Thus, as the power of the "autonomous" government increased, the organization of the Buddhist hierarchy disintegrated.

In the fateful year of 1930 Buddhism, the state religion, was banned, monastic property was confiscated, and high-ranking lamas were arrested and put on trial by the People's Court on the charge of anti-revolutionary activity. When the Dilowa Hutukhtu was on trial, no witness could be found to testify against this "living saint," the embodiment of wisdom and compassion. While others were executed and "some just disappeared," the Dilowa Lama was put on probation. He took a few personal belongings and left his homeland in 1931 for an unknown future at the age of forty-eight. Now a refugee, he escaped to Inner Mongolia, then to Peking where he lived in a Buddhist monastery for many years, He also served Chiang Kai-shek as his Adviser in Mongolian Affairs in Peking, and later during the Japanese war in Chungking.

All Buddhists, with rare exceptions, hope eventually to visit India to see the places where the Buddha and his disciples lived twenty-five centuries ago. In 1946, Outer Mongolia's refugee Buddhist prelate travelled to India on a pilgrimage to the places sacred to Buddhism, including Rajgir, site of the ancient capital of Magadha, where the Buddha lived and taught the Dharma for many years, and had his first monastery.

The Dilowa Lama then travelled north to Tibet and remained in Lhasa for fourteen months, staying at Drepung Monastery which formally housed the largest enrolment of Mongolian monks. After leaving Lhasa, he travelled west to the Tashilhunpo Monastery, the official residence of his friend the Panchen Lama who died in 1937.

After a month's visit, the Venerable Dilowa left Tibet to visit his friend the Maharaja of Sikkim at the capital Gangtok for a few days. Then a few hours ride south on the old Indo-Tibetan caravan road brought him to Kalimpong, a town in northern India where he stayed for seven weeks visiting Mongolian and Tibetan friends as well as the local monasteries. From there he went to Nepal, visited temples, and then returned to China. Two years later, at the invitation of Owen Lattimore, the Asian travels of the Dilowa Gegen Hutukhtu ended when he became America's first resident Mongolian Incarnation.

In 1951, after he had been a guest at my home several times and we had been corresponding regularly, he expressed in a letter his pleasure in learning that a large group of Kalmuk Mongol refugees from Russia were coming to America to live. Although they were Mongolians, representatives of the few remaining Oirats (the western branch of the Mongol race), they could enter as European nationals. They were fortunate indeed because the immigration quota for Asians was extremely limited; a special ruling by a sympathetic Attorney General at Washington, D.C., paved the way for the Kalmuks to leave the Displaced Persons Camps near Munich, Germany. They had lived there for six years after fleeing from Russia.

Before the Dilowa Lama's next visit, I had read that the Kalmuks, like other Mongols, were Buddhists of the Tibetan tradition. Moreover, several organizations[6] interested in solving the problems of displaced persons were joining forces to assist the Kalmuks to enter and become self-supporting in America.

While the Dilowa Gegen was visiting me late in 1951 he received a telephone call from a delegation of Kalmuk Buddhist monks who had just arrived with the first group of refugees. It was a rare occasion to see him in such a state of suppressed excitement. Since no 'plane service was available that memorable Sunday afternoon, he took the next express train.

I didn't see him during the next few months, for he was busy with a multitude of duties as the First Primate Lama in America. His incarnate rank was more than sufficient to make this position inevitable; his liturgical knowledge and extraordinary erudition confirmed it. His Kalmuk lay followers, eventually to total more than seven hundred, could now feel secure with the additional reassurance of the continuity of their ancient Mongol culture and Buddhist religion. The Kalmuk monks could look forward to renewed learning in Tibetan Buddhist Scriptures and re-training for intoning the daily services in Tibetan according to the high standards of the past at Narobanchin.

The first Kalmuk Buddhist temple in America, formerly a truck garage, was the metamorphic result of hopeful planning, strenuous effort and fervent Kalmuk devotion. The small masonry structure in Freewood Acres, New Jersey,[7] was consecrated on 23rd November 1952. The Primate Lama Dilowa, in a red robe and yellow silk mitre-like hat, signifying high rank, officiated assisted by the Kalmuk abbot and eight monks. About two hundred and fifty members of the Kalmuk community witnessed the historic ceremony and several Americans, interested in Tibet or Buddhism, attended the impressive ninety minute service. Among the visitors were the Countess Alexandra Tolstoy, Pearl Buck and Professor and Mrs. Owen Lattimore.

Before the service began I was seated with the congregation of Kalmuk men and women, many of whom were reciting the sacred *mantram* of Tibet and Mongolia "Om mani padme hum," as they fingered their one hundred and eight prayer beads to count the repetitions. The service began as the Venerable Dilowa intoned the rhythmic chant and performed graceful hand gestures—his left hand occasionally rang a Tibetan bell, which symbolizes "Wisdom," while his right hand held the companion sceptre, which signifies "method" identified with "Compassion."

As I watched, fascinated by the ritual movements of the sceptre (*dorje*) and handbell (*drilbu*) in his practiced hands, it was a rare pleasure indeed to see this old set, my own, used for the first time in a Buddhist temple service. Two weeks earlier, the Venerable Dilowa had made a trip to my home to borrow them for the occasion. Now that these sacred symbols were the instruments for consecrating the first Buddhist temple in America, of which the Dalai Lama is the supreme hierarch, an idea dawned on me. I could never take them back. I realized that ever since I obtained them from a missionary family, I had only been their temporary custodian. After the service was ended, I offered the set to the Primate Lama Dilowa. He smiled as he accepted them for the Kalmuk temple. Perhaps he expected this to happen.

During the next few years, the Dilowa Gegen divided his time between the temple and the related interests which took him away from New Jersey. As a scholar and teacher, he was concerned about the inadequate collection of Tibetan Buddhist texts available to the monks for study. Since the Kalmuk temple lacked most of the basic Buddhist scriptures, he decided to copy some of the essential texts in the *Kanjur*[8] at the Yale

University Library, a rare gift presented by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, which arrived in New Haven in February 1950.

Even though now over seventy he came to New Haven recurrently as the spirit moved him. During the summer months he would escape the humidity of New Jersey and work in the Rare Book Room of the Yale Library. Another attraction in New Haven was his godson, David Lattimore, enrolled at the Yale Graduate School in Asian Studies. He would stay with David and his wife, or at my home; but at times he seemed to prefer living independently next to the Library, in the Graduate School dormitory, where a room was provided for him.

The Dilowa Lama was a conspicuous but ever popular visitor on the Yale campus and at the Library. His colourful robes of bright yellow, brocaded rust, or dark red, with a mandarin collar open at the neck, made an "East and West" contrast with his American rubber-soled loafers. He always wore one of his many Buddhist rosaries of one hundred and eight beads wound around his left wrist; on the other, a water-proof, shock-proof watch with expansion band. His ever-cheerful manner made many friends at Yale, among whom were several who spoke Chinese; he keenly appreciated opportunities for direct communication.

He had also made numerous friends in New York who were interested in Buddhism, or Tibet, or both, and he liked to help students and others engaged in academic or professional work, such as curators of museum Tibetan collections; Mrs. Antoinette K. Gordon, American Museum, New York; Miss Eleanor Olson, Newark Museum, New Jersey; Miss Helen Watkins, Marchais Tibetan Art Centre, Staten Island, New York; the late Mrs. Edna Bryner Schwab, Tibetan art collector and author; all of these received the benefit of his extensive knowledge in their field.

Another friend with whom he had first corresponded in Tibet and later in India returned to New York in 1955 after several years in Japan. He was the Dalai Lama's elder brother, Taktser Rimpoche, an incarnate abbot of Kumbum Monastery, near Kokonor Lake, in Western China. He came to America as a guest of the U.S. State Department in 1951, then left a year later for Tokyo where he lived in a Buddhist Monastery. He and the Dilowa Hutukhtu had much more in common than most friends—both were refugees, both were incarnate lamas, and both were former heads of monasteries.

Also in 1955, a Kalmuk monk with the Tibetan doctorate of *Geshe* arrived in New York. Geshe Wangyal, a former professor at Drepung Monastery, Lhasa, had come to live at Freewood Acres, rejoining Kalmuks for the first time in thirty-four years. His arrival, and that of the other Kalmuk monks who joined the community later, created an opportunity for the Venerable Dilowa to leave the crowded quarters of the temple clergy. He usually spent so much time away from Free-wood Acres that this eventual departure for New York created little comment. Living there, he could be near his New York friends and also conveniently midway between Freewood Acres and New Haven.

New York's only Hutukhtu lived very simply in a plainly furnished East Side flat. Several Kalmuk and American friends contributed to his ordinary needs; always unpretentious, because he did not have an "archbishop" complex. The Kalmuks made his Mongol robes, and he was never neglected in any way.

As the years passed and the Venerable One approached the age of eighty, he seemed to be in good health and as cheerful as ever. But in both cases, we were deceived by appearances, for he was experiencing considerable pain. When he consented to a medical examination, early cancer was discovered. Fortunately, his illness could be treated with radiation therapy, and in August 1963 he entered the Yale-New Haven Hospital for treatment. There he became a favourite patient with the nurses and the staff doctors. He was the first Mongolian patient in local medical history. While at the hospital, and later while convalescing at our home, he had many Kalmuk visitors from Freewood Acres and Philadelphia. Their profound reverence for their Primate Lama, bowing low or kneeling on the floor to receive his hand-blessing, never ceased to be a moving experience for most Americans. In October, he spent another week in the hospital for treatment; fortunately, his ailment was found to be completely under control and he returned to New York.

During the next year, the Dilowa Hutukhtu entered hospital in New York on two occasions, once for a surgical operation. Since he now required constant care, his friends brought from India his disciple, Jampal Dorje. From September 1964 this younger monk was the Lama's constant companion being, like him, from Outer Mongolia. No one could be more devoted, more dedicated than he to the Dilowa Gegen's every need, and always with unfailing sensitivity and good cheer. He often managed with about four hours of sleep in order to serve his Venerable Mentor during the final months when he never left his bed. Doctors and nurses came to see the lama several times each week during his long illness.

In the last few days, Jampal Dorje was joined by the Ta Lama, an older disciple of the Dilowa Hutukhtu and leader of the Mongolian refugee monks at Mussoorie, India, all of whom were subjects of the Dalai Lama. The day before he died, though already failing, the Dilowa Gegen recognized and extended his hand to his old friend Professor Owen Lattimore, who had just arrived from England.

My teacher and friend, the Dilowa Gegen Hutukhtu, died at 7.15 a.m. the 7th of April 1965, at his home in New York City. Several services in Tibetan and Mongol were held at the funeral home before the cremation. Seven Kalmuk monks chanted prayers led by the Ta Lama, the only Hubilgan (Incarnation) present. I attended a service and was invited by the Ta Lama to participate. In this way I paid my last respects to the "Incarnate saint of the first rank" who had honoured me with his friendship for sixteen years.

Much more could be said about his life in America.[9] Of one thing I am certain—the Venerable Dilowa had countless friends and everyone he touched was a better person for knowing him.

It is my pleasure to acknowledge with much gratitude my indebtedness to the following friends for oral and written information or published material concerning the Dilowa Hutukhtu before he arrived in America and during his residence here in places other than Connecticut:

Owen Lattimore, Leeds University, U.K.
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Urgungge Onon, Leeds University, U.K.
Gombajab Hangin, Indiana University, U.S.A.

Nicholas Poppe, University of Washington, U.S.A.
Herbert Vreeland, 3rd, Human Sciences Research, Inc., U.S.A.
Herbert Guenther, University of Saskatchewan, Canada.

[1] My study of the Tibetan literary language and writing began in 1941 under the tutelage of Reverend Roderick A. MacLeod, a former missionary, who had lived in Eastern Tibet from 1917 to 1927. Since I was interested in the literary language, copying Tibetan texts helped to keep my vocabulary active, and corresponding with Tibetans became a source of much pleasure.

[2] "The perfection of wisdom in 8,000 lines."

[3] The Mongol word *Hubilgan* or *Khubilgan* means a recognized incarnation of a saint previously recorded in the Buddhist history of Mongolia, Tibet or India. Its two highest ranks *of Hutukhtu,* and *Nominhan* "Lord of the Sacred Law," were recognized by the Manchu Court. *Shaberon is* the Mongol title of a minor Hubilgan not officially confirmed, or whose previous incarnations were not known or recorded.

[4] A distance of about 200 miles.

[5] Owen Lattimore, *Nationalism and Revolution in Mongolia,* New York, 1955, p. 165

[6] The organizations included the Society of Friends, the Tolstoy Foundation and the Church World Service.

[7] The Kalmuk Mongol refugees arrived in America in the winter of 1951 and the early months of 1952. Most of the Kalmuks settled in Philadelphia and the Freewood Acres district of Farmingdale, New Jersey; only a few lived elsewhere.

[8] The Kanjur, "The Word translated," in a hundred volumes, consists of Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantrayana texts translated from Indian Buddhist manuscripts into Tibetan during the latter part of the seventh century A.D. and between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Indian pandits and Tibetan translators worked together interpreting the source material. The Lhasa edition contains 96,368 pages printed from wood blocks carved by order of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876-1933), between 1920 to 1927.

[9] His scholarly contributions also included assistance to the late Professor Ferdinand D. Lessing, University of California, in compiling entries for his monumental Mongolian-English Dictionary; and years of assistance to me while cataloguing the Kanjur and other Tibetan texts in the Yale University Library.