

Diogenes Laertius Passage:

The Life of Tenzin, Called the Gentle Deceiver

Tenzin, who is called the Fourteenth Dalai Lama among the Tibetans, was believed by his people to be the rebirth of their former master. From infancy he was placed upon a throne, declared holy not by virtue but by recognition of toys and dreams. His disciples say he is compassion incarnate, yet he walks with kings, smiles at tyrants, and speaks in riddles.

He teaches that peace is preferable to war, and that kindness ought to be the foundation of human conduct. In this he speaks well, but speaks no more than any washerwoman might tell her child. Of greater matters he is silent.

For when asked whether a man ought to be reborn by ceremony and augury, he neither affirms nor denies. And when men set themselves aflame in the name of his cause, he says: "If I call them wrong, their families will grieve." Thus he chooses to comfort the grieving rather than enlighten the living.

When asked who shall follow him, he speaks in possibilities: perhaps no one, perhaps a girl, perhaps a vote, perhaps none at all. Thus he shirks the yoke of the old myth without daring to break it. And by his delay, the tyrants of the East—who worship no god but power—have seized the myth for themselves. They now ordain their own holy men, wearing the mask which Tenzin dared not tear.

It is said that when Diogenes the Cynic heard of this man, he spat and said:

"He claims to free the people, but will not cut the cord that strangles them.
He fears shame more than falsehood, grief more than ignorance.
He bathes in the river of illusion and calls it mercy.
Had he any courage, he would burn the temple, not weep before it.
Better one rude truth than a thousand sacred lies."

He who clothes half-truth in silk and calls it wisdom is no friend of virtue, but a steward of delusion.

Such was the man called Tenzin.

From the journals of Marcus Aurelius:

From the Private Writings of the Emperor

Concerning a man of peace who feared the truth

There is a man in the mountains they call holy. He speaks gently and counsels kindness. His face is calm, his voice composed. They say he is a god reborn—yet even he does not truly believe this.

I heard he was asked whether his soul will return to lead his people. He answered with riddles: Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps as a woman. Perhaps by vote. These are not the words of a man who knows, but of one who fears to wound.

And when his followers set fire to their bodies in grief and desperation, he did not say, “Do not do this.” Instead, he spoke of families, and sadness, and the burden of grief. As if false comfort were greater than truth plainly spoken.

What is this, if not the fear of disturbing illusion?

Must a man be called wise if he will not speak what he knows to be true?

Must we praise restraint when it is silence that allows evil to advance?

Let no one say that the path of peace is paved by the refusal to confront delusion. A man who knows that the throne he sits upon is born of myth, and that this myth now serves tyrants—this man has a duty: to end the lie, not preserve it in gentler form.

It is better to suffer shame for breaking illusion than to gain praise for letting it grow.

Ask yourself:

Is it just to wear the robe of holiness while denying the sacred?

Is it virtuous to be called a guide while hiding the map?

Is it truly compassionate to offer comfort that sustains error?

No. The philosopher must choose truth over tenderness when the two are at odds.

The soul that desires virtue must not speak in half-measures.

Even the gentlest lie feeds the cruelty of those who will twist it.

Be therefore like the Cynic, who would rather bark in the streets than flatter in the palace.

Better to be scorned for clarity than honored for ambiguity.

Remember:

A man who will not burn the scroll of myth

has no right to lament when tyrants rewrite it.

From the 1970s Series *Connections*

Connections: “The Reincarnation Clause”

Script segment for James Burke, c. 1978

[Open on James Burke walking through a monastery courtyard, robes fluttering in the breeze.]

BURKE (to camera):

Now, suppose you were looking for the next leader of your people. Not just any leader—but a divine one. Someone who’s lived before. In fact, someone who’s lived many times before. And the way you find this reincarnated figure is by presenting a toddler with a selection of objects, watching which ones he picks, and deciding—on that basis—that he’s the living return of a holy man.

Right. That’s the system that’s governed Tibetan Buddhism for centuries. It’s called the tulku tradition, and it’s how they choose the Dalai Lama.

[Cut to: archival footage of monks performing divination rituals with young children.]

BURKE (V.O.):

Now here’s where things get complicated. Fast-forward to the 20th century. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama—Tenzin Gyatso—is living in exile after fleeing Tibet in 1959, and becomes a global icon of peace and compassion.

[Cut to: grainy footage of the Dalai Lama with world leaders, smiling, waving.]

BURKE (to camera, walking through library stacks):

But as the decades passed, something curious happened. The Dalai Lama—this figure supposedly chosen by divine signs—begins quietly, almost imperceptibly, to cast doubt on the very system that gave him his authority.

He says maybe there won't be another Dalai Lama.

Maybe the people should vote.

Maybe the next one will be a woman.

Or maybe—none at all.

Now that's odd. Because if you don't believe the reincarnation system is literally true, what does that say about the current Dalai Lama?

[Pause. Eyebrow lift.]

Or more precisely—what does he believe about himself?

[Cut to: map of Tibet. Flash image of Panchen Lama.]

BURKE (V.O.):

Meanwhile, in 1995, the Dalai Lama names a young boy as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, a key religious figure. Three days later, that boy disappears—vanished by Chinese authorities. Never seen again.

And what does China do?

They install their own Panchen Lama. A state-approved one.

[Cut to: close-up of a government press conference in Beijing.]

BURKE (to camera, now in studio surrounded by books and circuit boards):

So here's the twist: a modern atheist state, run by a communist party, is now in the business of managing Buddhist reincarnation.

It would be funny—if it weren't true.

[Cut to: clip of Dalai Lama on John Oliver.]

When asked why he won't condemn desperate monks who set themselves on fire in protest, the Dalai Lama says: "If I say their action is wrong, their families will feel sad."

Which brings us to the heart of it.

[Burke sits down, steeples fingers.]

The Dalai Lama presents himself as a figure of reason.

But when it comes to the very myth that sustains his public role...

He doesn't tell the truth. He doesn't tell a lie. He tells... nothing.

Now the question is—why?

[Cut to: footage of self-immolations, somber music.]

BURKE (V.O.):

Because if he admits the system is flawed, he loses moral authority.

If he clings to it, he hands China the keys to install their own puppet.

And by staying silent, he allows both to happen.

[Return to Burke in studio.]

So here we are: a man revered for his wisdom, unwilling to say what he knows, leading people who may die for a cause that rests on a tradition he doesn't fully believe.

And that brings us—full circle—to a deeper connection.

BURKE (to camera, quietly):

What happens when the figurehead of a faith is too gentle to tell the truth...

and too afraid to end the lie?

And if that's the price of peace—who's really paying it?

[Fade to black.]

Essay by Samuel Johnson

On the Consequences of Sacred Evasion

—by a Friend to Truth and No Friend to Mysticism

It is a melancholy truth, and one to which all men not intoxicated by the perfumes of false piety must assent, that error—when preserved for comfort's sake—rarely dies a quiet death. Indeed, it often survives its creator, returning in grotesque and multiplied form to mock the restraint that failed to kill it.

So it is with the current matter of the Lama of Tibet, a man hailed across the globe for his serenity, his patience, his affability—all admirable qualities, no doubt, when yoked to virtue, but risible when employed to dress up evasions of reason. For this Lama, though born of myth and ritual, has shown every indication that he perceives the mechanism of his birthright to be quaint at best, and fraudulent at worst.

And yet—he has not shattered the delusion. He has not seized the solemn duty, which every man of reason bears, to tell the truth plainly when the world most needs it.

He has not said: “There shall be no more divine rebirth, no more toddlers tested with trinkets, no more sacred theater in the name of cosmic inheritance.”

Instead, he has trafficked in ambiguity—offering the public the half-light of maybe and perhaps, a fog thick enough to let tyrants pass through undisturbed.

And what shall be the result of this cowardly charity?

The very disaster he hoped to forestall: a schism authored not by philosophers, but by autocrats.

For when this Fourteenth Lama dies—and he will die, as all men do—the world will look again to the old machinery of recognition. And lo, what shall they find?

A kidnapped boy from 1995, long hidden, long silenced, now polished and groomed for service, returned at last by the masters who took him. A Panchen Lama trained not in wisdom, but in obedience. Alongside him, the counterfeit Panchen selected by those same masters—China's preferred puppet—who will add his blessing like incense to a corpse.

And both, as if by providence or stage direction, will point with rehearsed unanimity to a new Dalai Lama, one chosen not by divine omen, but by Communist decree.

What then, of the Fourteenth? Will he rise from his tomb to object? Will his whispered doubts echo loud enough to drown out the clamor of empire?

No. His silence in life will become impotence in death.

He, who might have destroyed the illusion with a sentence, chose instead to maintain it with a smile. And now, the illusion will serve not peace, but propaganda. The lie he left unchallenged will live on, wearing the mask of his legacy, but speaking the words of his captors.

Thus, in attempting to offend no one, he has betrayed everyone.

And in fearing to be seen as heretic to his past, he has become architect of a future ruled by fraud.

Let no man, therefore, esteem kindness over clarity, nor mistake reluctance for wisdom. For the world is not preserved by those who comfort the deluded—but by those who, though scorned in their hour, dare to say: “This is false.”

And had the Lama been such a man, this calamity might yet have been avoided.