



## Chairman Mao's Lighter - a story about Forgiveness

~ Greg Tamblyn, Transformational Humorist ~ Musical Laf-ologist

Ever had a brilliant gift idea that turned out to be the most embarrassing and humiliating thing you could have brought to the party?

At a conference on consciousness we were told to bring a small, wrapped present to exchange as a means of getting to know each other. The gift was supposed to be related to something significant in our lives. After wracking my brains for awhile, and looking around the house, I found the perfect thing: a lighter I had brought back from China. It was a souvenir from the first time I ever hosted a group tour, which has become a yearly event since then.

Ah, but this was no ordinary lighter. It was a solid lighter with some heft to it, covered in bright red enamel. On one side, the imposing face of Chairman Mao stares out at you, totally out of context on this goofy trinket. Sort of like Abraham Lincoln on a box of Wheaties. But the kicker is that when you open the top, it plays a silly (and quite frankly annoying) Chinese marching song, which squeals on and on -- lit or not -- until you close it. Or until the battery runs out, should you leave it open for a few days as a sort of Chinese torture for the unlucky people you live with. In short, it's pretty funny. And it kind of reduces Mao to the status of a cartoon, which I like.

I've given a few of these away to friends, and everybody gets a kick out of them. My brother likes to walk down the grocery store aisle with his lighter held aloft, music blaring and people staring. I think he does it to embarrass his daughter. But I digress...

So I felt quite proud of myself for bringing this funny, clever gift that I knew everyone at the conference would find amusing. That first night, all 120 of us were sorted into small circles of eight, and instructed to put our presents in the middle. One by one we took turns choosing a gift that someone else had brought, and then we took turns unwrapping them. When someone opened the gift you brought, you explained what it meant to you, and so we'd get to know a bit about each other.

But what happened in our little circle was a kind of cosmic joke.

Imagine: out of all the 120 people at this event, the one person who ended up with my little wrapped package containing this incredibly funny, brilliantly clever, totally unique Chairman Mao lighter, just happened to be the childhood/ lifelong friend, as well as the official biographer of.....the Dalai Lama.

I'm not kidding.

He was seated just to my left. As soon as I saw him pick up the little package, I felt myself shrink about five sizes. What I really wanted was to disappear altogether. If humiliation was a color, I would have been a bright orange 4th of July smoke bomb, just fizzing away into nothing. I didn't know there would be a Tibetan at this conference. I didn't know there would be a man who, as I later found out, actually fought Chinese soldiers and was forced to flee into exile as they took over and brutalized his country.

All the time we were going around the circle opening presents, I was sitting there, completely freaked out at the fact that I'd brought the most insulting gift I possibly could have, and it was going to be unbearably awkward when this gentle, elderly, dignified, much-loved man opened it. Unbelievably embarrassing. Life-shattering buckets of shame. For once in my life, I'd been just a little too clever, and my sick sense of



humor had come back to haunt me. How could I possibly explain this to him? What could I say? Especially when all the other gifts were so thoughtful and beautiful. What would he say? What would he do?

When it got to be my turn, I suggested we switch presents. "Why?" he asked. "Because I don't think you'll like it. I want you to have something you'll like." "No," he said. "I chose this one."

Slowly and calmly, he unwrapped the lighter. He turned it over, and for a minute just looked at the picture of Mao. I can't remember if he opened the top and played the little song. After what seemed like forever, during which time I would have gladly traded my whole life to be somewhere else, he spoke.

"Oh," he said firmly. "This is karma."

He looked at me with steady, sincere eyes and said, "This will help me remember to practice compassion."

POSTSCRIPT #1 The next morning, I was relating this episode to one of the conference organizers, and she insisted I tell the entire gathering about it. So I got up in front of the group and told this story. When I mentioned who got the lighter, everybody gasped. And then when I told them what Kuno (his nickname) had said, Kuno stood up, smiled and bowed low, and everybody laughed. And right then we all got it that he was really okay about it.

During the week of this conference, every time I saw Kuno he would shake my hand and thank me for the lighter. So by the end of the week, we had kind of become buddies. On the last morning, he sat next to me at lunch. We talked about Dharmasala, where the Tibetan refugees live with the Dalai Lama, and about life in India. I told him I'd always wanted to go there, and about hosting my group tours. Kuno picked up on this immediately. He invited me to Dharmasala, and said he had friends who would handle all the travel arrangements for us. We could even do some kind of a concert with myself (a musician) and some Tibetan musicians. He was really into the whole idea, and I got all excited at the prospect too.

It's amazing how things work out sometimes.

POSTSCRIPT #2 (A letter from a friend at the conference, reporting how Kuno described this experience.) "Dear Greg, I love that you tell the story about your lighter, but you must tell more of the story. The way you ended it made it sound like he was being polite--but it was MUCH more than that. It was huge, and wonderful.

You should have heard Kuno's talk at the International House after the Conference. He began to talk about his history and connection with the Dalai Lama, and he briefly mentioned his important role as a general in the war. He spoke about how the Chinese killed his parents, family members, and so many of his friends. He talked about his anger at the Chinese--so much anger. He talked about how the Dalai Lama told him many times, he needed to make peace with the Chinese, to not hate them, to have love in his heart, compassion, forgiveness. He saw no way to do this, it was impossible, he hated them all to such an extent that he wouldn't even eat Chinese food.

The Dalai Lama would laugh at this and tell him that Chinese food is very good and his anger is making him miss out on some very good things.

Well, before the conference Kuno was visiting a site of one of the bloody battles between China and Tibet where he lost many friends. He was at the memorial, trying to make peace, but only feeling anger, pain and sadness. He began to cry. A couple was there, crying also. They and Kuno started talking about their losses, and began bonding. After a while they decided to go to a place for some food and to talk more. During the meal each asked where the other was from, and it turned out that the couple were Chinese! He had thought



they were on his side, not theirs. Karma again. They continued their meal together with new understanding. This experience totally changed his perspective.

He wanted to continue healing so he then started trying to get to know Chinese people. He tried Chinese food and liked it. When the conference organizer invited Kuno to be with us, he offered to let him stay at his house. Kuno told him he wanted to stay with a Chinese family, if possible. The organizer said that would be very easy to organize since his foreign-exchange student host family lived nearby, and they just happen to be Chinese! (Coincidence? I think not.) Kuno stayed with the Chinese family before and after the conference and had a wonderful time in their home.

After a couple of days with them, he came to our conference and received your lighter. At this point in his lecture, he held up your lighter, lit it, and played the little song. He told the story of getting the lighter at the conference, of all the groups he could have been with, of all the wrapped gifts he could have picked, he picked you and yours.

It was a gift, supporting his new path to healing. At the time you picked the gift, you didn't know about his new found attempts at healing this pain in his heart, but you helped the process and supported his new path.

I bet the Dalai Lama had a big belly laugh when Kuno told the full story to him.

It's a full circle thing. If I were you, I'd be honored to be part of that healing circle. And the lesson for you? Trust your instincts. There is a reason for everything. There's probably even a reason you were put in that situation so you could fidget and feel such nervousness--but only you know the answer to that.

Love and Peace to you, Greg, Alison Sheafor-Joy

A FINAL WORD: Forgiveness has always been my biggest personal challenge, so yes, there's a LOT in this for me. Please feel free to send this to anyone you think it