

Clash of Civilizations and Spiritual Revival

2004

A rather surprising announcement was made recently by Zhuang Cong Sheng, a senior official of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Zhuang declared in Beijing *"To my knowledge in recent years, we didn't have any formal talks with the Dalai Lama."*

This is all the more astonishing as in May this year Zhuang himself was host in Beijing to the Tibetan representatives led by Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama's Special Envoy,. To play down the visit of the Dalai Lama's representatives (or to add insult to injury), the Chinese official added: *"Tibetan compatriots who visited the region for sight-seeing and tourism, had some 'contacts' with his department"*. He further told the press that it was 'misleading' to call these contacts 'negotiations'. Zhuang's words were corroborated by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on the eve of his departure to the US. In an interview to the *Washington Post*, Wen declared: *"We have taken note of the recent remarks by the Dalai Lama, but we still need to watch very carefully what he really does. So long as he genuinely abandons his position on seeking Tibetan independence and publicly recognizes Tibet and Taiwan as inalienable parts of Chinese territory, then contacts and discussions between him and the central government can resume."*

It is fifteen years ago, in September 1987 that the Dalai Lama officially and publicly declared that he was renouncing his claim to Tibet's independence. A year later, in front of the European MPs in Strasbourg he had reiterated his position of seeking 'genuine autonomy' within the People's Republic of China. This compromise had been suggested in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping sent a message: *"We can discuss everything, except independence."*

Today, Wen's interview shows that over the past fifteen years nothing has changed, despite the Tibetan leader's compromises and his obvious wish to find

an amicable solution. Many feel that it was perhaps his mistake to seek to a Middle Path approach. If he had continued to ask for independence, would negotiations today be under way? Who knows?

At the beginning of the 20th century, his predecessor, the 13th Dalai Lama told his British friend Sir Charles Bell: *"The Chinese way is to do something rather mild at first; then to wait a bit, and if it passes without objection, to say or do something stronger. But if we take objection to the first statement or action, they urge that it has been a misunderstanding, and cease, for a time at any rate, from troubling us further."*

The Chinese give a different meaning to 'middle path'. First they grab; if they encounter a strong resistance or reaction, they may withdraw half way. Unfortunately in the case of Tibet's status as well as for the borders with neighboring India, the reaction was too mild to even be taken note of by Beijing, which remains today in its original position.

Wen's declaration raises very serious issues for the Tibetans in exile as well as for India's border negotiations. In both cases, Beijing is in a position of the occupier (whether in Tibet or in the Aksai Chin region of Ladakh) and to wait 10, 20 or 50 years does seem to be a problem.

However this can be seen from another angle. What we are witnessing today in Tibet is a clash of civilization. The Dalai Lama's crusade for ethics and universal responsibility is a fight to preserve an endangered way of living. It is also a battle against time.

Apa Pant, an Indian diplomat who had been in contact with Tibet for many years wrote in the 50's: *"With all its shortcomings and discomforts, its inefficiencies and unconquered physical dangers, here was a civilization with at least the intention of maintaining a pattern of life in which the individual could achieve liberation. Without the material conveniences that others have come to expect, the Tibetan as I found him was a cultured, highly developed, intelligent person whose vision... was fixed upon the objective of reaching Nirvana. It was a perspective that must make a Tibetan pause and think before accepting communist solutions... for the problems of an ancient society on its way into the modern age."*

Today 'communism' is dead and new gods (or *asuras*) have taken over: they are called 'material success' or 'money'. However if this endangered culture disappears for ever, it will certainly be a great loss for mankind which continues to need spiritual awareness to grow and develop.

Recently I was told by a friend who went to Mount Kailash that as soon as one crosses the Indian border to reach Purang (Taklakot) located near the trijunction between India, Tibet and Nepal, one finds brothels and karaoke bars where fifty years ago, there were only monasteries or *stupas*. During the last couple of years, Purang, the last town before the Kailash *parikrama*, has gone into these new business ventures. How would pilgrims react if brothels were opened in Mecca or Vatican City?

A thousand years ago, the Kingdom of Guge-Purang was the center of one of the greatest cultural renaissances which spread into the entire Himalayan belt. The knowledge which had been accumulated for centuries in the great *viharas* of North India and which was systematically destroyed by barbarian hordes took refuge in these areas of Western Tibet.

Today, a new civilization based on Deng Xiaoping' motto: "to become rich is glorious" is clashing with the old one. Slowly the Tibetan plateau, symbol of inner peace is taken over by modern concrete ugly buildings and prostitutes.

The most ironic fact is that it is perhaps the people of China who most need the inner qualities that the Lamas discovered in their caves after years of meditation and *sadhana*.

The *viharas* and the caves were certainly not the answer to all ills, but the brothels or the karaoke bars are answer to none.

It is only after the Chinese invaded the Roof of the World in October 1950 that the West began discovering the inner values so special to Tibet.

The great irony is that while Tibet entered the world stage and began spreading its message of peace and compassion in the US and Europe, at the same time Tibet lost its own political freedom. This is a very 'unfortunate' aspect of the 'new propagation of the Dharma': it has not so far helped the Tibetans to regain their independence (or at least autonomy). This dichotomy is so stark: today when the

present Dalai Lama tours in the West, he attracts more and more crowds of followers or sympathisers, while his demand for 'genuine autonomy' for his native land has not progressed an iota.

However, everything is not bleak. Once the Dalai Lama told me: *"Look at my forehead, don't you think that it has started shining!"* I could not understand what he meant until he explained the Tibetan belief that when the 'good luck' comes back to you, your forehead begins shining. He said that Tibet's 'negative karma' is slowly getting exhausted and a more positive one emerging. Where else can we see signs of it?

One should perhaps look towards the East and watch China.

Recently the death of a Tibetan Lama called Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog had been in the news when he passed away on January 6, 2004 in Chengdu (China).

This Lama was the founder of the largest monastery in Eastern Tibet, the Serthar Buddhist Institute in Kantse prefecture (Sichuan province). The Khenpo (abbot or retreat master in Tibetan) had become famous after the relaxation of religious policies at the beginning of the eighties. It was the time Hu Yaobang (not to be mixed with Hu Jintao), the then Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party decided to visit Tibet and see for himself what had gone wrong since Beijing 'liberated' the Roof of the World thirty years earlier.

After a tour in Central Tibet, Elder Hu called a meeting of the Party cadres and publicly admitted that the Party "has let the Tibetan people down". He added: "the life of the Tibetan people has not been notably improved" after the Chinese invasion in 1950.

Later Elder Hu tried to introduce reforms in Tibet ; for a few years Beijing had a more open Tibet policy and the Dalai Lama was even allowed to send four fact-finding delegations and two negotiating teams to Tibet and Beijing.

During the same years, the Serthar Institute was set up; it grew very fast and even received the blessing of the late 10th Panchen Lama. At the beginning of the 90's, it was with around 7000 permanent residents, the largest concentration of monks and nuns in Eastern Tibet.

The Tibet Information Network reported: "The Serthar Institute was established as a centre where teachings from all four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism - Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya - were taught, and it was the emphasis placed on both Buddhist teachings and debate, as well as on studying the arts and literature, which made Khenpo Jigme Phuntsog's institute so remarkable and important." It seems that many of the Serthar Khenpos went out and set up their own centers for Buddhist studies in various regions in Tibet.

Unfortunately, in the mid-90's Beijing ordered a crackdown and most of the monastic buildings were razed to the ground. The interesting part of the story was that the demolition was not due to the Khenpo's popularity amongst Tibetans, but because of the presence of more than 1000 Chinese monks. The regime in Beijing simply did not know how to deal with this new phenomenon: the renewed interest of the Chinese people in higher ideals.

Despite the sad end of the Khenpo and his institution, the events in Serthar show that something deeper beneath is moving in the Middle Kingdom; this will ultimately reflect on the Tibetan issue. We have a tendency to forget that the Buddhist precepts are not foreign to the people of China.

The Dalai Lama mentioned once his dream to confer the Kalachakra Initiation on the Tiananmen Square. It will certainly happen one day.

On the other side of the straits a similar aspiration manifests itself in a more open way. In March 1997, the Dalai Lama visited Taiwan and gave Buddhist teachings to thousands. I had occasion to see a TV program showing images of the Dalai Lama preaching the meaning of suffering and compassion to 50,000 Chinese in a stadium in Kaosiung, 340 km from Taipei. The media had reported: *"People from all corners of Taiwan had braved a miserable, rainy day to fill the stadium in the southern city of Kaohsiung and listen for an hour and 45 minutes to a deeply philosophical sermon from the Buddhist leader... Despite the large crowd, there was almost complete silence as they drank in the Dalai Lama's words."*

Can the regime in Beijing understand that it is in the interest of the people of China to find again this inner dimension which was always present in China's long history? Today it is missing so conspicuously in the Middle Kingdom.

If Beijing could understand this, the new leadership would certainly begin a serious dialogue with the Dalai Lama immediately.