



Satyagraha ou "l'Insistance sur la Vérité"

Interview with Ven. Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche

By Claude Arpi & François Gautier

[Following an old wish of the Dalai Lama to democratize the Tibetan society and after nearly 30 years of efforts and several intermediary steps, the head of the executive branch of the government is now elected by direct suffrage. When Ven. Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche was elected, it was a first time in Tibetan history.

Rinpoche is also a great scholar and one of the foremost proponents of non-violence in India today. He was for many years the Vice-Chancellor of the Tibetan University in Sarnath (Benares). He speaks to Claude Arpi and François Gautier about the doctrine of non-violence and also of the latest round of talks with China.]

What is more important for you: to be the Prime of Tibet or a monk?

Ven. Samdhong Rinpoche: A monk!

You mentioned once that your vows are more important than your present post.

A: If my duties [as Prime Minister] come in conflict with my vows, I do not think that I will leave the monkhood, I will certainly leave the prime ministership.

You are one of the most well known proponents of non-violence in India? Do you think that non-violence can solve all problems?

A: Yes! I think that non-violence can solve all problems provided that people really believe in it and practice it properly. Many people today see non-violence as a better alternative. I do not agree to that. Non-violence is not an alternative, it is the only way. There is no other

alternative, all the violent ways can seemingly solve the problems in a temporary manner, but it cannot eradicate the root cause of problems. The root cause of problems is hatred. Today, all the problems come out of hatred. This element can never be eliminated by violence. If there is fire, we have to find something opposite to the nature of fire to extinguish it. If in order to extinguish fire, you put more fuel or more oxygen, it will never stop the fire; it will increase the fire. Maybe for some time, the fire will subside but it will rise again. People think that terrorism is terrible, of course, terrorism is terrible, the incident which took place on September 11, in Washington and New York, is a very very bad action and whomever has committed it should be condemned with full force. At the same time, to take revenge is not good. If anybody wants to take revenge, the proper way is to react with compassion and in a non-violent manner.

That way alone the root cause which makes people terrorists, could be eradicated.

The Mauryan Empire collapsed a few years after the death of Ashoka. Do you consider that the concept of non-violence practiced by Ashoka is responsible for the fall of the Empire?

I am not a student of history. It is definitively for the historians to decide this. As far as my knowledge goes, this empire was not handed down by Ashoka but his processors. The Empire was expanded by Ashoka himself: first violently and then by non-violent means. We have to take into consideration two important factors. The change of political power is the nature of politics itself. They can not remain static for a long time. Also the leadership after Ashoka, they may have not been as efficient and powerful as Ashoka. It might be one of the reasons.

The second reason, I assigned it to all decline of powers: the principle of non-violence in the management of State after Ashoka might not have been of the required standard. They perhaps talked about non-violence, but their actions of the successors of Ashoka were not completely non-violent. Their non-violent may have evolved to Ashoka's level. This might be one of the major reasons.

After Gandhi's departure there was no non-violent mind in India and therefore India could not materialize the dream of the Mahatma.

Do you consider that the destruction of the great viharas by the Muslim invaders and the disappearance of Buddhism in India in the 10/12th century AD is due to the fact that Buddhism was not practiced as it should have been?

A: That is right!

If you are non-violent, you are really genuine and your compassionate mind is pure and matured, which means not contaminated by any impure things. Then the non-violent action should be effective in any situation. One cannot consider non-violence in terms of getting more effective with gentle and weak opponents, and less effective with ruthless opponents. If non-violence action methods have really a value and stand, then it should be equal with every opponent. The opponent is not the determining factor. The purity and genuineness of the non-violent action is the determining factor. This is my view.

When the Dharma itself is attacked, should violence be used to defend the highest values of humanity?

I don't think so. This is also depends how you define violence. Buddhist people define violence by the mind set, the motivation and the intention. An act of killing can be non-violent so can be an act of injury or causing pain. The surgeon might amputee your leg, it is not a violent act. The motivation of the surgeon is to save you; it is therefore a compassionate action. There is a story in the Jatakas of the ship captain killing one of the robbers. This act was non-violent because the captain saved not only 500 people, but also the robber who would have committed a sin. If you are absolutely free from anger and hatred, some acts of killing, harming people in defense of higher values might not be violence. But the question is you really free from hatred and hunger? If even you have a bit of anger your value, this can not be non-violence. To defend your value, you have to practice the values, only them you can defend them.

I am not a Buddhist but if my wife is attacked, if my country is attacked. I have to stand and defend her or it. In the West, we have this conception of heroism, is there no divine value in heroism?

Yes, [long silence] it is very difficult to recognize the real love for one's wife or one's country. All this depends of the intention. Gandhi can not be classified as non-patriotic. He had a lot of respect for India, his motherland and one can not say that he Dalai Lama has no patriotism for Tibet. But both Gandhi and Dalai Lama have set their priority: humanity is the first priority, then smaller group, his nation comes only third or fourth. For the Dalai Lama, the Tibet issue is his 4th priority. All sentient beings are his first priority, human beings are his 2nd, the Buddhist world is his 3rd. And finally the Tibetan people are the 4th priority.

If your love for your country is not contaminated by egoism or self-interest, then to defend it, could be acceptable.

A pure love is very difficult to find nowadays. Take the love for one's own wife: often the basis of the love is not her, but for oneself. If self is first and love is second, love is not selfless. You love your wife because she needs you, she gives you pleasure or she serves you. The cause love is not the person, but it is utilitarian. If she becomes useless for you, your love decreases.

Let us take the example of your daughter.

No, even for your wife, you can have a selfless love; a pure relationship can be established; so with your daughter or son! But by and large, most of the people do not have a love free from selfishness.

If I defend my daughter or my country and for this, I have to commit a violent act, will god forgive me?

Yes. The Buddhist literature says that the motivation should be free from anger when you are acting, if there is no anger, that is OK.

Do you think that the Chinese can understand the principle of satyagraha?

I don't think that the present leadership can understand non-violence, but future generation of China may. They are intelligent and their need for spirituality is increasing. I was told the story of a senior Indian diplomat who showed the film on Gandhi to the Chinese leadership. After

the film, they said: "It is very good, but we do not understand non-violence". His is a very honest statement.

Do you see a change in China: not the leadership, but amongst the people?

Yes, amongst the people there are a lot of changes. The number of Party cadres is decreasing while the number of people interested by spirituality is increasing. They may be Catholics, Taoists, Buddhists or Falun Gong. The number of religious followers is tremendously increasing in all the traditions. It is like a ball that you throw and which comes back. Due to spiritual vacuum for the past 50 years, it created a great urge [for spirituality].

Some people say that Wen Jiabao is a Buddhist?

I don not know! People also said that Jiang Zemin had a Buddhist teacher and was going to the temple!

NEGOTIATIONS

What are your main objectives as a Prime Minister?

A: One of main objectives is to have a breakthrough in the deadlock that we are facing at this moment between the Chinese leadership and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Dialogue is the only way through which the Tibetan problem can be addressed and solved. The emphasis of the policy of the present Kashag [Tibetan Cabinet] is to achieve a breakthrough in this deadlock.

Tell us about the negotiations: what is the framework of the negotiations?

A: The framework is very clear. His Holiness made it crystal clear in 1988 in his Strasbourg Proposal. There is not a big difference between the Chinese and His Holiness' position. His Holiness said that the entire Tibet territory which means the traditional three regions which are at present divided into 6 pieces should be reunited (the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region is only half of it). His demand is "let it be joined together". All the Tibetan speaking people, the Tibetan ethnic group should form a single entity.

Tibet should have a separate basic law based on a genuine democratic system. Within that basic law, Tibetans could govern themselves and look after their religious, cultural, economic affairs as well as education and health. The Central government of China could look after the external affairs and until Tibet is declared a 'Zone of Ahimsa', the defense can be taken care of by Central government.

These are our parameter and of course, we will ask them not to change the demographic situation, not to shift Chinese population into Tibet. These are our few demands.

China theoretically accepts territorial autonomy in its constitution and also accepts that a democratic system can be adopted by a portion of China. If it is granted, Tibetans can willingly accept to be part of China.

The negotiating team has just returned from the fifth round of talks. Can you tell us something more than the press release?

We don't have any definite idea where the negotiations are going. We are roaming in the dark. To have contacts and to talk is much better than having no contact and not talking. In the nutshell I can only say that we have direct contact and we have a dialogue. We are able to understand them and tell them our views. A communication channel is opened. It may be just consuming time. From the Chinese side, they may keep us engage to reduce the international pressure, this could be one reason. Or there might some eagerness to resolve the issue.

Lodi Gyari told us that after the third round of talks, each side could really present its point of view. Do you consider this as a progress?

Yes. We are now able to talk to each and put forward our own position frankly. This is the only achievement.

Are the Chinese sincere and if yes, why are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs does this type of declaration (that they are not aware of any negotiations)?

This is not important, the statement has only been issued by the spokesman of the Foreign Ministry and this ministry has nothing to do with our dialogue. This ministry is not a part of the

decision making; they are only implementing the policy of the Central government. Unless the government policy changes about the Dalai Lama and Tibet, their language will remain the same. They do not recognize the Dalai Lama and his Envoys. But we are taking with the United Front Works Department and they do not speak the same way. They agree that they are engaged in discussion with His Holiness' envoys. Even President Hu Jintao acknowledges to foreign dignitaries that his government has a direct dialogue with His Holiness. He does not say that some people have come to meet friends. He says: "Yes, I have contact with the Dalai Lama through his representatives".

The Foreign ministry has no power?

The Foreign minister is an implementing agency. They implement the decision made by the politburo or the State Council.

Does President Hu Jintao know about the dialogue?

Yes, this is very clear. Just recently in October, the Working Group on Tibet met for the 5th time and President Hu presided over the meeting. All things issues (i.e. the negotiations) were discussed. The lower level would not dare to discuss these issues [without reference to the leadership].

Do you think that there is difference of opinion within the Politburo?

I think so.

Recently, a hardliner has come as the new Party Secretary for Tibet, it does not appear a good sign?

I can not say if it is a good sign or not. Party secretaries keep changing.

But when there is a good Party Secretary, things were easier?

A Party Secretary is a Party Secretary. He just implements the policies dictated by the Party.

When there was a more enlightened leadership (during the time of Hua Yaobang in the 80's for example), the situation was better in Tibet? Do you see a new generation of leaders coming up?

The new generation is already more open and more liberal. That is clear. The Fourth Generation has not yet consolidated its power.

But is not power struggle inherent to the Communist Party?

That is true. Mao Zedong believed that 'struggle' was the only way to progress.

Vis-à-vis India, China has done some concession but their actions often do not match their words. They remain aggressive. Is it the same for Tibet? It looks like they are doing an effort but are they not only biding for time?

Our direct contact with the PRC has now completed four years (since September 2002). During this period not a single positive change has taken inside Tibet, this is very clear. But the fifth round of dialogue show a slow but steady progress. The first round was more tourism, during the second there was some talk; the third one there was an elaborate exchange of views; during the fourth in Bern, we were able to respond to all their suspicions and doubt and during the fifth we had the feedback on our explanation. It is not something static, it is moving. At the time their attitude on the international scenario, their attitude inside Tibet, the language used by the Foreign Ministry, remains the same. Even today, wherever His Holiness goes, even in a small town, they protest and try to pressurize [the organizers] for canceling the event. This has not changed.

Are you keeping the Indians in the picture of the negotiations?

Yes, we keep Indian authorities well inform of our dialogue. This is natural, there is nothing special about it.

Many governments seem prove to give up to the Chinese. In France President Chirac does not even receive the Dalai Lama. Can you comment?

It varies from government to government. For example President Bush decided to receive His Holiness just before his visit to China. Ways and approaches are entirely different. Norway asked His Holiness to postpone his visit because the King was going to China. The French are very much shy to receive His Holiness [laughing].

There is competition amongst the European leadership to appease China. In this competition, French are not far of being first!

Some political leaders, like the new Chancellor of Germany [Angela Merckens] are very eager to receive His Holiness officially. Their approach is they have to choose between the appeasement of China and the appeasement of their public. If [Angela Merckens] receives His Holiness, a lot of people would appreciate this [gesture] in Germany. The political leadership always goes by political consideration.

What is motivating the government to appease China?

I think it is business. I read a news article a few years back. It says "Never mind human rights, money matters". This is very true.

Why can't the French do the same than the Germans?

The French government is very confident in its public. If they appease China, they will get more money and the public can in turn be appeased. It is a strategic approach difference.