

Interview with His Holiness the Dalai Lama

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Your Holiness, your exile seems to have been beneficial for Humanity as a whole in the sense that through your visits in India and abroad, millions of people have become aware not only of Buddhist values but also of basic human ethics? Can you comment?

I can not say that I contributed much. But for me the tragedy of Tibet has given new opportunities to more than 100 000 Tibetans. Although we lost our country, for all these Tibetans it was a new opportunity to experience freedom and see the outside world.

For me particularly, this tragedy has also given me new opportunities like meeting various types of people such politicians, scientists, religious leaders, scholars, businessmen, ordinary beings or even sick people [Just before us, His Holiness received an Indian patient with a terminal cancer].

I consider all this as opportunities to learn from these people new things and to share with them some of my own views, my own experience. From this angle, I think I contributed something to the promotion of human values.

Then, the promotion of religious harmony: in that respect also I think I made some contribution for a closer understanding between Buddhists or non-Buddhists, whether they are Hindus, Muslims or Jews. That way I made some contribution to humanity as a whole.

Our Review is destined to the French public. Could you tell us about the spread of Buddhism in France? In 1960 when you sent Dagpo Rinpoche in France, Buddhism was practically unknown. I am told that there are today 5 millions of

sympathizers. It seems a wave, a spiritual tsunami. Could you envisage this when you sent lamas such Dargpo Rinpoche in Europe?

No, never! In fact it has never been my interest to propagate Buddhism, my own religion. At that time, the main reason why we were eager to send Tibetan scholars in some of European universities (in France, Germany, Denmark or Italy) was some wrong perceptions about Tibetan Buddhism. It was our duty to show a proper representation of Tibetan Buddhism. This was the main reason. Even today, I have no intention to expand or promote Tibetan Buddhism. Of course, like in France there were Vietnamese who were traditionally Buddhist, [in such a case] we could naturally help to promote a better knowledge of Buddhism. We were happy to do this. Because French people are generally Christians (and to some extent Muslims), I always make it clear that it is better to keep your own religion. Out of millions of people, some may have different predispositions: they find Indian or eastern traditions (it includes Tibetan Buddhism) more attractive, more effective. These people who genuinely show interest in Tibetan Buddhism, it is our duty to help them. It is not a conversion.

You visited Europe for the first time in 1973 (14 years after your arrival in exile) and the United States in 1979, why did you start so late to travel around the world and offer your message, even if it was not for conversion.

We were not very sure. We had the impression that the West was something different, but since the '60s we had the opportunity to meet foreigners here [in Dharamsala], then around 1973, we said "OK: the time has come".

I remember when my Air India plane was about to land in Rome in 1973, I realized: "It looks like India, people look like us, there are not different."

Deep inside, I had the feeling that the West was quite different.

By fear?

I don't know, but it was not by fear.

I had already the habit to respond to questions: "I don't know". I still remember very clearly in 1973: it was after a talk at a reception in London. One old English gentleman came to me. He expressed his surprise to my response: "I don't know". He admired me for having been able to say "I don't know". For me (and for Tibetans in general), it is something normal to say this. Sometimes also it is out of humility, even though we know, we will still say: "I don't know".

Amongst Tibetans it is rare to find someone who says: "I know best." I carried this attitude, it was more of a habit for me, but in their eyes, it was very unusual that someone who is the Dalai Lama and is considered by many people as a religious leader this person could say: "I don't know".

This created first a bit of surprise. The reason for which I had not fear is that I considered these people as other human beings. I did not considered them as stranger. Similarly, I was for them only other human being. I could immediately get along with them.

For us, you are not another human being!

[Joking] Yes, for Hindus, I am a mahadeva [god]. [Dalai Lama keeps on laughing] Of course, but I sometimes get sick! I have never heard God's doctor [laughing]. Therefore, if I was a God, I would not need a doctor. [laughing]

I was speaking of this 'spiritual' wave in the West, particularly in France. Does it translate into political support? President Chirac does not even receive you!

How do you explain this dichotomy, on one side, the public is open to your message, on the other, the government does nothing!

My message is for individuals, not for politicians. My message is not to influence policies. I do not say "The government should do this or that". I never try to influence policies or suggest change in policies.

At the same time, China is economically, politically, militarily an important nation. The French government considers that they have a special relation with the People's Republic of China. They believe that they have a closer relation with China than with America.

Only business relation?

No, overall they have a good relation. So, in order to preserve this special relation, they are naturally more cautious.

Why is the French government more cautious than the German, British or US government? For example when you go to Washington, you are received in the White House?

As I told you the French government has a special relation with China, therefore, it is understandable!

No, it is not really understandable. Politicians are basically interested by votes and when there is a few millions people behind a cause, politicians should logically do something to please these people.

I don't know. Of course, the politicians know how to draw votes from the people [long silence].

Whenever I go abroad, whenever I visit a country, my number one priority is to interact with the public. This is my top most priority.

Usually, I have nothing to ask the politicians, I have no specific request. Only when I visit Strasbourg or Washington, I have sometimes a specific political agenda. Only then, it is important for me to meet political leaders or politicians. But usually during most of my visits, if I meet political leaders, I say "Ok, it is fine"; if not, "No problem!"

Which is the most important for you, the Tibetan cause or your spiritual message? Today Tibet is still occupied and the situation inside Tibet is not improving. In France and in the West many people feel very strongly about the Tibetan cause.

I have three commitments: promotion of human values, promotion of religious harmony and promotion of awareness of Tibetan cause.

Is there an order in these commitments?

Yes, it is in this order.

First, as a fellow human being, promotion of human values is my first priority, this covers 6 billions of human beings.

Then second, I am a Buddhist, and as a Buddhist I want to promote religious harmony: it addresses perhaps half of these 6 billions who are religious believers.

The third one is about Tibet. There is 6 millions of Tibetans and if you take the Tibetan environment, there are more than 100 millions of human beings dependent on Tibet. North India, Pakistan and Bangladesh depend on river flowing from Tibet: (Ganga, Brahmaputra) then Mekong in Indochina, and in China, Yellow River, Yangtze and many others rivers. But my three commitments are not separate, there are interlinked.

But you have an order of priority?

Yes, there is an order.

But the Tibet issue is also connected with human values and inter-religious harmony. Out of three commitments, number one and two are mostly on volunteer basis. Till my death I committed myself to these causes. Regarding the third one, in a way it not a voluntary commitment, it is due to past history and to the he Dalai Lama institution. I am bound to this commitment and this

responsibility, because I am the Dalai Lama who played a role in past history of Tibet.

More importantly, Tibetans inside and outside Tibet put their total trust in me. They put their hopes into me; that is why I have the moral responsibility to serve them as much as I can. In the meantime, the Tibetan cause is the cause of a nation, this struggle should continue from generation to generation. My life represent only one generation. It is therefore very important, for the people themselves take more responsibilities.

Secondly, we are deliberately promoting democracy. We truly believe in this concept: for the past 46 years, we are fully committed to the democratization of the Tibetan society. Our biggest achievement is to have now an elected leader, the Kalon Tripa [Prime Minister]. Since the last elections (4 years ago), I consider my position as of a semi-retirement. If we return to Tibet with a certain degree of freedom, then I will fully resign. Therefore, my third commitment has some limitation. But even in my complete retirement, I will continue with the promotion of human values and promotion of religious harmony.

We are four here, we can take a poll, nobody wants Your Holiness to retire.

[Joking] My retirement will not be through voting, it is my individual human right [laughing].

Already all the important decisions are taken by Samdhong Rinpoche [Tibetan Prime Minister]. I deliberately did so. Of course, sometimes, he comes and asks my opinion and whatever I say, he may listen.

[The Dalai Lama jokes] People believe that internally, I am authoritarian, while externally I am a democrat. [Laughing]. Of course, it is not true, I intentionally fully rely on him. In fact, if I had the full responsibility and that one day I die, then there would be total chaos. This [democratic] process started 20 years ago and I often tell the Tibetans officials: *"You should carry full responsibility as if there was no Dalai Lama, because for the work you can do, you should take full*

responsibility. That way I will have more energy and time to do some other work that you can not do."

For example about the promotion of human values, no Tibetan can do this. Perhaps Samdhong Rinpoche may be able to do, but much less than me.

For an outsider, your third commitment [Tibetan cause] seems to have made no progress. When one sees the attitude of the French or the Indian government, one feels that no progress has been made since 1959. Is it true?

There is one ancient Indian concept (we have also the same in Buddhism): we believed that the engagement of the mind on one object is by way of selecting only one aspect of the object and excluding aspects of this object. Your mind excludes some aspects and selects one only.

When you spoke just now of the Tibetan issue, it is exactly what you did. You should understand that the Tibetan issue is very complex; there is not one aspect only. That is why, you can not say "There is no progress". There are other aspects also. I think that this way of thinking in black and white is not correct. The words have the distinctiveness to express only one aspect, if you express something positively, it excludes the negatives aspects, on the other hand if you express something negatively, you give a wrong impression, because it excludes the positive aspects. The words are therefore limited, they are lacking something to express the full picture [of a situation].

In reality since 1959, there are many changes on the negative sides and also on the positives sides. On the positive side, take the example what happens in Lhasa or even deep inside Tibet, we received immediately information. It makes things easier. Today millions of people, in the entire world have a much greater knowledge about Tibet (perhaps less in Africa and in the Arab world). Since the last 40 years, especially during the last decades, there is more awareness of Tibetan issue, particularly amongst the Chinese in China and as a result there is more sympathy, more concern, more support. As a result the Chinese government can not ignore the Tibetan issue. For many Chinese officials, Tibet

issue has today become an issue and though they dislike me, they feel compelled to do some effort to have an agreement with the Dalai Lama. This is a progress. Progress does not mean big changes. Real progress come steps by steps. Therefore your words "No progress" are non-scientific. [laughing].

People and the Tibetan community outside Tibet may feel this way because the Chinese people always accused the Dalai Lama. And Tibet remains under tight control and there is sometimes torture.

Another example: after my public appeal that it is shameful to wear tiger or other animal's skins as an ornament, in many places in Tibet including Lhasa, tiger skins were burn, but the Chinese local officials stopped the burning and even made some arrests. Why?

Because they responded to the Dalai Lama's words, so in Chinese eyes, it is political, there is so much suspicion, so much jealousy. It is silly. As a consequence there is more repression and then more resentment! These are negatives points. From this view point, there is no obvious progress and your statement is correct. But everything is relative. In Buddhism, in order to know the reality, you have to think in terms of relativity and interdependency.

On the positive side, I am told that Prime Minister Wen Jiabao is interested in Buddhism and 200 Chinese pilgrims attended the Kalachakra in Amaravathi.

Yes, it is positive. In the recent years and months, more and more Chinese from mainland China come here [in Dharamsala] and most of them cry.

When they meet you?

Yes! On one occasion, a Chinese girl who spoke English started crying as soon as she entered the room. When she sat down, I found out why she was crying: she got her education in one of the best college in Beijing. Till she reached Delhi, she did not know anything about Tibet and the Dalai Lama. After meeting some Tibetans in Delhi, she got a deeper awareness about the Tibetan issue and the

Dalai Lama. Then she came here. She told me that her entire generation (she comes from a top school), was totally ignorant about Tibet. The information they get is one sided. She expressed her sadness that her entire generation is so ignorant. Now, how to help them? There is no way. She can not speak, she can not write articles; no one will publish them.

That is the reason why Googles is censored.

That is right!

Has this revival of spirituality in China has an influence on the negotiations (or dialogue) which is going on with the People's Republic of China?

Certainly things are moving, we will see [what happens]! The greatest hurdle is the suspicion in the mind of the Chinese.

They are more suspicious than the Indians?

Yes, I think so. India is sometimes suspicious of the Europeans [laughing]

We met Karmapa in the morning, he said that he regrets to have come because there is so much suspicion here.

But India is a democratic country, there is free information, Indian suspicion compared to totalitarian suspicion is much easier to dispel. I think that some Chinese sometimes deliberately promote suspicion. [Compare the events], in Tiananmen in 1989, millions of people involved and the government used tanks, but in the case of Tibet there is not the same danger of separation, however if a nun just sings praising the Dalai Lama, they believe it is dangerous [for China].

In 1985, you said that you were ready to go to Tibet.

Yes, in 1983, I publicly expressed that I was ready to go. In 1984, a delegation went to China especially to make arrangement for me to go in 1985. This failed. The Chinese attitude hardened.

My question was: are you still ready to go now?

Yes, yes. Still I am very keen to visit first China and eventually Tibet. I am very eager. Just to see what are the changes, if possible to listen what are the genuine views of the Chinese. Then as a Buddhist, I want to make a pilgrimage to visit the holy Buddhist spots in China.

Like the Temple where Jiang Zemin goes?

This I don't know! But like the Five Peaks, the sacred place of Manjusri.

Did you go in 1954?

In 1954-55, I wanted to go there but the Chinese officials said that the roads were bad. I think that was true at that time. I couldn't visit this place. Since my childhood, some Tibetans who have knowledge of this area told me about their own pilgrimage. Since then, I have a keen desire to visit the place. As soon as some green signals come from China, I will go.

Will the Tibetans feel comfortable to let you go to China?

We need more discussions, firstly with the Chinese government, then with the Tibetans and also the Government of India.

In 1954, Mao Zedong used to come and discuss with you the problems of Tibet. Baba Phüntso Wangyal recorded these encounters. Why can't Hu Jiantao who has the caliber of Mao, meets you and discuss with you the Tibet issue?

There is a difference, at that time I was not a refugee, now I am. In 1959, I escaped because I did not accept the Chinese policies. Today we have a different situation. Chairman Mao preferred self-sufficiency; the Chinese thought that they could remain in isolation. Now, this concept does exist anymore. Today China want to be part of the world community, they have therefore to care about world opinion. There are a lot of differences and a lot of similarities.

When will the Chinese pay their black karma? In 1989 you made a prophesy: "Within 5 (or 10) years, something will happen to China".

I am regretting. I said that within 10 years there will be big change in China. There is a Tibetan saying that when you press very hard the bones, Some of the oracles had said it would happen. It did not happen fully, though today's China is much different.

As an ordinary human being, I would like them to pay their black Karma.

This is not a Buddhist way of thinking! In fact we pray to see a change in their own action. [If our prayers are fulfilled] it will be for their own benefit. As a human brother or sister, we never pray for something bad to happen to others. That is wrong way of thinking.

If India rises, will China go down?

Hum! In any case totalitarian system can not stay for ever. This morning, I heard on the radio that in Vietnam, the government asked the public opinion about the direction to take for the future. Many intellectuals and important party members

said that one of the hurdles against progress is corruption. In order to check corruption, the one party system should go. I was just wandering what will happen in Vietnam: Vietnam is a Communist country, it has liberated South Vietnam, it removed all Western influence, but if this country change his stand and promote a democratic system, it is great!

What will happen further? If from a totalitarian regime Vietnam becomes a democratic society, it would be wonderful. I think that it is realistic. It is the only way for Vietnam's future. This could a great signal, a great example for the Chinese people. Let us see! The French 'imperialist' must have seeded these things [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] in the Vietnamese minds. [laughing]

Last year there were 73000 riots in China, mainly due to local problems. It means that China is very instable?

That is right, true!

Tell us a word of your vision of future Tibet?

Chinese could provide us a meaningful autonomy. We could ourselves look after matters such as environment, economy, education, language and culture. The economic development of Tibet as a whole could be taken care with the help of China. [If this is realized] we could make some important contribution regarding the promotion Sino-Indian relations.

To be a sort of buffer?

Not only a buffer, but also for the genuine friendship, mutual trust [between India and China]. We have a very good relation with India; we could also develop a very good relation with China. Tibet can be a guarantee for both. We could guarantee that there will be no threat from India's side towards China and vice-versa.

Lodi Gyari [Dalai Lama's Special Envoy] mentioned in his interview that Tibet which was a buffer of the 19th century could become a bridge.

Yes, The buffer could become a bridge, that is right!

What message could you give to the French readers of our Review?

I don't know! [laughing]

[Thinking for a long time]

France is one of the older and larger member of the European Union. Historically, many good things including the French revolution originated from France, people there are often more intellectually inclined. I always admire that fact that French and Germany could unite their forces [after World War II]. [This union] is a step towards the future [of the world]. The military forces of all nations should eventually unify so that the danger of military intervention becomes much less, making war practically impossible. A unified force could materialize first at a regional level. Military forces could be reduced and therefore military expenditure. I hope that in the European Union spirit, leaders will look at the larger interest [of the community], not with narrow nationalism or regionalism.

This [demilitarization] is the sign of a long-sighted view looking at larger interests [of humanity]. I am sure that European people, especially the French can make a great contribution for a peaceful Europe and a peaceful world; eventually a demilitarized, denuclearized world. It could of immense benefit and it could save money [which can be used] to protect the environment. That is my wish.

Thank you, Your Holiness!