SEM SHOOK

essays on the Tibetan Freedom Struggle

Tenzin Tsundue
SEMISHOOK

Semishook is the courage and determination it takes for truth to prevail; the willingness to make any sacrifice that truth demands and finally initiating action to achieve it. Such a Semishook we must all undertake lest the gold remains under the earth forever. How and when would that truth prevail depends upon us. Nobody will champion our cause – whether it be the United States or India; we have to work and make it happen by our own actions.
By the author

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**KORA: stories and poems**   November 2002
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E-mail: tsampa@tibetwrites.org
Web: www.tibetwrites.org

The author may be contacted
c/o SFT Office, Tenwang House, McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, Kangra - 176219, HP India
E-mail: tentsundue@yahoo.com
Web: www.friendsoftibet.org/tenzin

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Publisher’s Note

This third book arose from an article Tenzin Tsundue wrote for the Tibetan Review in 2003 titled “Hopelessly Hopeful”. Coming to Dharamsala from Mumbai after his studies at Bombay University, he investigated the exile world around him to see what his voluntary contribution would best be. He thought in terms of the role of youth. And became increasingly aware of the responsibilities that his and future generations must now assume.

From this article came the realization that he had so much more to say, and so he proposed to Pema Thinley, editor of the Tibetan Review, that Semshook (the commitment to truth) could be the vehicle for expansion. The result was a monthly series of 13 essays with interlinking themes as varied as democracy, youth responsibility, education and political activism, forming a continuum.

The interest in these articles resulted in Tsundue photocopying multiple sets for distribution. So came the need to compile them in book form. Coupled with the incisive political cartoons by Loten Namling, Semshook forms an insight into the contemporary concerns of the Tibetan struggle for freedom.

Since the first 2007 edition – which carried a further three articles from the Indian media – sold out before it reached an eager readership in the furthest corners of India and Nepal, a new edition is in demand. Tibet Writes is happy bring out this second edition.

The author and the publisher would like to thank singer, composer and cartoonist Loten Namling, for kindly giving us permission to use his cartoons in this book. We also thank Jane Perkins, Gabriel Lafitte, Mathew Akester and Buchung D.Sonam for their editorial suggestions. This edition has been made possible by the support of the author’s old friends based in Mumbai: Raunaq Roy, and Nidhi Tuli and Ashraf of Rangrez Films.

By the summer of 2008 a Tibetan edition of Semshook will be published – thanks to translations by the author’s friend, Buddha, from Sarah College near Dharamsala.

Tibetan Writes
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KHENPO’S DEATH A NATIONAL LOSS

This column begins on a sad note — the demise of Khenpo Jikme Phuntsok. Like many of us in exile, life in Tibet is second-hand information to me — or even third or fourth. When the news of Khenpo’s death reached me I was in Dharamsala. I immediately went to meet Tsultrim and Tenkyong. I wanted to understand what this means to the people in eastern Tibet, particularly to the people in remote Serthar Larung valley.

Understanding Tibet in its changing phases is of prime importance. For that, an easy bridge available in exile is the sanjorwas — the new arrivals — we have around us. I envy them, for they lived in the country I so much wanted to be in all my life. Their rosy cheeks and distinct regional dialects bring Tibet alive for me. But when I sit with them, and listen to them telling about their lives in Tibet, all my romantic notions of Tibet fly from my mind.

Tsultrim and Tenkyong were Khenpo’s students in Serthar a few years ago. Tsultrim escaped Tibet in 1998, while Tenkyong was the hero who smuggled out the video-taped evidence of Serthar Institute’s destruction by the Chinese authorities in Karze Prefecture. As I sit with them, they constantly receive updates from Tibet through phone calls.

Khenpo has died in mysterious circumstances after an operation at the Chinese military hospital in Chengdu on the morning of 7 January 2004. Tibetans are deeply disturbed that their lama was held under house arrest since the destruction of the nuns’ quarters at Serthar Institute in 2001, and now he has died in Chinese hands. There are reports that some Serthar nuns have committed suicide after the news spread. The Chinese authorities are afraid there may be unrest in the region. So they are stopping all
vehicles heading towards Serthar by all approach roads. And yet, we hear reports of people trekking through the mountains to pay their last respects to their dead lama.

As we sat in that small room on the hillside in Dharamsala, worried about the situation, silence enveloped us. We didn’t know what to do. Suddenly we found ourselves at the foot of the mountain, looking up at the enormity of the problem that is Tibet. The two young men from Tibet and I — a Tibetan born in India — then talked about our future.

Khenpo Jikme Phuntsok is seen as the ‘yid shin norbu’ (Gem of the Heart) of Eastern Tibet. He was the little boy, Kalsang Namgyal, who grazed sheep in a Larung Valley and later grew up into a bright scholar and started teaching at a young age. The one-room hermitage he built in the 1980s in Larung valley attracted more and more students, until it swelled like a honeycomb. At the time of its destruction Serthar Institute was hosting nearly 10,000 students; monks, lamas, nuns and lay people from all over Tibet. He had many students from China and Southeast Asia too.

Khenpo, the reincarnation of “the treasure finder”, Terton Lerab Lingpa, a teacher to His Holiness the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, visited India at the invitation of Penor Rinpoche in Bylakuppe in 1990. Khenpo then had an audience with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The teacher and the student discussed previous lives, some say. Khenpo’s foreign trips, and his popularity among Chinese Buddhists in the PRC, were chillies in the eyes of the Chinese authorities. Khenpo was growing beyond China’s limited definition of “religious freedom.”

Tsurltrim showed me video footage smuggled out of Tibet. It had images of Khenpo giving sermons from a temple on a hillside overlooking a valley. What looked like flowers in the valley and on the hillsides were actually hundreds and hundreds of monks, lamas, nuns and lay people listening deeply to Khenpo’s teachings.
The demise of Khenpo has created a vacuum of leadership. Without charismatic leaders all is chaos. Nobody knows when to do what. Everyone sits waiting for the moment to jump, but nobody knows WHEN that moment is, whether the moment has finally arrived. There is no centre, no one to consult. Khenpo Jikme Phuntsok was a great key leader in Eastern Tibet. The traditional set up of society looks for wise leadership from the lamas, whether for political or religious reasons. These lamas are unifying forces. They are also the natural magnets for ordinary Tibetans to show allegiance to when foreign law-and-order puts them in various political dilemmas. But, sadly, most of the lamas in exile are found wallowing in the little praise and money they receive from their western patrons.

However modern our community is called, the traditional resistance power and leadership still survives. In Tibet these lamas run their locality. This makes the demise of Khenpo Jikme Phuntsok a national loss. Tibet today is without a leader; the real Panchen Lama is under Chinese control, and the Karmapa has found his way to India. I think His Holiness the Dalai Lama must return to Tibet as soon as possible. He is much more needed by the Tibetans in Tibet. Just his presence will be of so much encouragement and inspiration to our people in the snowy land.

Like last year, this year too Tibet has made a false start. Last year we lost martyr Lobsang Dhondup to Chinese bullets in a judicial execution on 26 January. This year we lost Khenpo, one of the most important leaders in eastern Tibet. Tulku Tenzin Delek still lives in a Chinese jail with a death sentence hanging over his head*. The two-year death sentence reprieve runs out this year and we have only a few months in hand to save him.

* In December 2004 the death sentence on Tenzin Delek was commuted to life sentence. And since then there has been no news about him.
Karmapa Miracle
DECLARE TIBET AN INDEPENDENT COUNTRY

This year on 10 March — the 45th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day — Delhi will see the biggest-ever gathering of Tibetans and Tibet supporters in a Free Tibet protest rally. We hear that they are planning to flock to Delhi in buses, trucks and trains. Many are coming from foreign countries too. His Holiness the Dalai Lama will address the gathering in New Delhi, and will declare Tibet an independent country. For this the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and the Tibetan NGOs have been working together all this time.

NO, this is NOT happening this Sum-Chue Dudren. I wish it would. New Delhi has perhaps never seen a gathering where more than five thousand Tibetans have come together. The biggest-ever rally for Tibet in Delhi was the 1998 hunger strike unto death where Pawo Thupten Ngodup self immolated. Organized by the Tibetan Youth Congress, it brought about an emotional bonding amongst the Tibetans. Volunteers and donations were literally pouring in.

Our struggle needs such an impetus that could create what we do not have — a freedom movement. It doesn't happen with the ‘project and programme’ mentality we have been working with. It has to be strategized and should dovetail into a grand strategy to see a Free Tibet in the end.

Last year on 10 March Tibetans and Tibet supporters were in divided minds; the Kashag had urged them to “refrain from expressing any anti-China sentiments in body and speech”. Dharamsala was evidently under some influence. We saw a snake of the 10 March ritual protest rally silently moving down through the hill station. No anger, no protest, just a limpid body of humanity in single file.
The Kashag ‘appeal’ was supposed to be till the deadline of June 2003, within which time “we make positive gestures in order to create a conducive atmosphere for dialogue with the Chinese leadership”. But no! They were not impressed. Our deadline died eventless, and so did our little blind faith that they may listen to our god-leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

China recently slammed us again with the same three unacceptable pre-conditions for the possibility of any dialogue. Our third delegation has been readied since last August, waiting for China to accept our proposal to visit the “Motherland”.

Dialogue, like a clap, must happen with the willingness and participation of both sides. The Middle Way approach, though philosophically a wonder, isn’t practical with China. His Holiness accepted this way back in his 1994 Sum-Chue Dudren, Uprising anniversary speech. We have been pushing on like this until now in 2004 because, in our opinion poll of the 1997 referendum, we returned our responsibility for choosing the goal of our struggle back to His Holiness when he asked us to look for an alternative. The 12th Assembly passed a resolution and the Kashag adopted the policy, though the policy of dialoguing to resolve the Tibet issue has a longer history from 1979.

These 24 years of attempts, and hopelessly hoping for leniency from China, has made us sit and wait. And the wait has been long and eventless; our people have lost any sense of urgency and immediacy in the struggle. The masses wait for the exile government; the government waits for the delegation and the delegation in turn waits for the Chinese. The key is in Beijing not in Dharamsala.

And meanwhile our hosts are showing signs of changes of mind. The recent lathi charge by the Dharamsala police on 80 Tibetans marching to Delhi shocked people the world over. The support we have banked on in India was found wanting. The order to block the march came from
‘The Centre’ and was an obligation even for Dharamsala policemen who are friends with the resident Tibetans.

Nepal has been hosting the Tibetans most unwillingly. The Himalayan Kingdom doesn’t allow any Free Tibet activities. Even the display of HH the Dalai Lama’s photos at public gatherings is an offence. So does Bhutan. Is this an antic by the Indian government of the day’s infamous China appeasement policy? Will India too melt down, following suit behind Nepal and Bhutan?

On the other hand, if we could lead a public movement after declaring Tibet an independent country, we would begin with a policy of non-cooperation with China. The re-establishment of Independence as the goal of our struggle will once again rejuvenate our people. The complicity in which all Tibetans both inside and outside, supported by the Tibet lovers, will create the freedom movement. This will train us in the much-needed community sense and participation in nation building. The culture of democracy will have grown in the process. In the long run such a community will remain strong from inside and independent.

Our struggle has been weakened by our own sense of competition and division within the community. That maturity of understanding, where each individual or group works in synchronicity in a larger public movement, working in co-ordination, is still to be achieved in our community. Because of this, our strength of being spread in all parts of the world has become our weakness.

Today we find the exile community divided between the conformists, who agree with the exile government’s stand, and the non-conformists who, even today, say Independence should be the final goal of the struggle. The non-conformists are looked at as a rival to the government’s stand. What is missing in the discourse is the understanding that no matter what political stand one chooses one does it sincerely for the good of Tibet, and that one has all the freedom and right to do so.
Though Losar is over, if we make a personal resolution like the westerners on the 45th Sum-Chue Dudren, what would yours be? As we remember the sacrifice of more than a million Tibetans for a dream called Free Tibet, we re-commit ourselves to the cause.

An old man who fought the Chinese for many years, both in Tibet and from the Mustang guerrilla base, still alive at 85, said to me, “The freedom struggle we started must end with you the youngster taking His Holiness back to Tibet in dignity.” Pointing to his fellow freedom fighters living in the Jampaling Tibetan Refugee camp in Nepal he said: “If this doesn’t happen, tomorrow when we are dying we won’t be able to take our last breath.”
... but I have given up independence...!
LATHI CHARGE AND DAL-ROTI: 
ESTIMATING OUR ACTIVISM

We were ready to jump, all 48 of us — mostly young Tibetans, some elders too — ready to pounce on the Chinese Embassy in Delhi. We waited with bated breath, lying low, communicating in signals and whispers on mobile phones. On the count of three, we charged towards the gate screaming “Free Tibet!” The two lonesome Indian policemen at the gate were caught unaware; in shock they threatened to fire at us. There was much commotion and within minutes police reinforcements rushed in from all sides, lathi-charged us and in 20 minutes we were packed off to the police station nearby.

This happened in January last year when China executed Pawo Lobsang Dhondrup. We refused to remain silent. We were few in number, but determined, ready to face any consequences. But the planning was bad. As a result neither were we able to significantly register our protest at the embassy, nor was there good media coverage. This column attempts to understand and estimate the nature and effectiveness of Tibetan political activism in India. Since we are in exile, most of our direct actions have been symbolic and non-violent. Most of them are meant to draw the world’s attention to the injustices China is subjecting Tibetans to, while others target resident or visiting Chinese officials.

After the embassy protest we were solemnly collecting ourselves at the Chanakyapuri police station. The initial excitement, nervousness and uncertainty had been defused. The blows from the police batons we received on our heads, shoulders and butts had started paining. The younger boys were showing each other their bruises and black eyes, excitedly narrating their part of the story, not betraying any signs of pain. In my 10 years of activism, I have not seen anyone express pain or remorse, only a sense of achievement.
There have been cases of Tibetans returning home from protest rallies with broken hands and cracked skulls after clashing with the police. Still we believed sometimes rules need to be broken, and we continued to speak up for Tibet, risking limbs and lives. A typical case is Tashi Phuntsok and Pasang Tsering, who were wounded by police firing during a protest in Delhi when the then Chinese Premier Li Peng visited India in 2001. What follows in police custody isn’t very exciting. The police make a personal record of each protestor and our youngsters give them names that cannot be mentioned here. The police then file a case and summonses are served to individuals or organizations.

Tibetan Youth Congress still faces some cases that are yet to be resolved, years after the protests. The case of 11 protestors who walked to Delhi from Hunsur Tibetan refugee camp in southern India in 1997, and hurled petrol bombs at the Chinese Embassy, is yet to be resolved. Samphel and Jamyang of TYC confirmed that the case of seven members from Chandigarh storming the Chinese Embassy in 1999 has been resolved already. The most irritating part of attending a court case is that nothing really happens, one simply gets another ‘tariq’ (date) after making the personal appearance.

I have been called thrice in two months to attend hearings regarding my Oberoi Hotel climbing protest when Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited Mumbai in January 2002. Besides small expenditures and frequent long-distance travel, such appearances are one of the most drab and ridiculous human exercises. Many friends were excited about the “court case in a freedom struggle”. They fantasized a Bollywood-style court drama where the lawyer screams his guts out under a palatial dome with hundreds of people seated there in suspended animation!

My case was one among 36 the judge heard that morning before lunch. The 47th chamber at the Mumbai Magistrate’s Court at the Esplanade looked like a classroom with a hundred people in attendance. The judge sat in his chair behind a huge brown wooden desk. The black-coated lawyers sat in front and faced the judge like dutiful students. Two
policemen maintained order in the “classroom”. My name was called out in between and I was asked to stand in the dock. The bespectacled 60-something judge said something to my lawyer and then whispered something to his woman assistant and then declared “23rd April!” That’s it. My hearing is over. Another date is given. No decision taken yet again. Everything ended within those two ridiculous minutes. I could have stayed back in Dharamsala and cooked Maggi noodles instead! Fighting a case at the court is like opening your mouth for the dentist, with a leap of faith; you never know what is about to be done to you!

Attending a court summons is boring and yet it is an essential part of the protest work. It is important to perform the rigmarole at the police station and at the court responsibly and with dignity. Dealing with court cases has no charm, that’s why the clean-up process remains the backstage story. For that, one should deal with lawyers and the media sensitively and patiently.

Jail is a novel experience and I strongly recommend it for your personal growth. I have been to five different prisons and each has been a unique experience. It’s an honour receiving a jail term, however small, for having worked for a cause as noble as a freedom struggle. Here even robbers, murderers and cheats respect you. You must taste the dal-roti and sleep in the blankets that have perhaps never seen water. They are thick and heavy, sodden with dirt and smells. Criminals of all kinds and reputation have slept in them. Tihar Jail, the favourite destination for protestors in Delhi, serves dal-roti that has become a hit with Tibetan youth. On an emotional note, it is endearing to see friends coming to meet you at the jail, especially bringing food.

Most of our activism has been reactions to Chinese activities rather than proactive initiatives. Protest rallying has been one of our old tricks, but with very little creativity and updated slogans the rallies hardly inspire our own people. And yet, “the show must go on”, opines Karma Yeshi, former TYC Vice-President, “These actions keep our issue alive and remind our people here in exile of the struggle.”
We need to bring creativity and novelty into our activism, which can inject dynamism to the struggle — especially now, when most of the organizers in RTYC’s, RTWA’s and student associations are youngsters. Many people tell me that they are not interested in traditional protest rallies and demand other kinds of action. The future of activism is difficult to predict. With the coming of young leaders we are undergoing a transition.

All said and done, I ask the essential question — what is the ultimate goal of the struggle? The usual Middle Way vs Independence debate seems to have created confusion in our community. I pray your love of Tibet gives you the wisdom to understand and make your own decision, stand by it and get into action. That will give birth to a genuine democracy which will nourish our community in the long run.
East Timor and Tibet
MY ZEDEN LHAMO: IMAGINATION AND REAL TIBET

Seven years back, around this time of the year, I was locked up in a cold prison cell in Lhasa. It is one of those rare stories of a Tibetan born and brought up in India, who had never seen Tibet, crossing the imaginary border in reality, on foot, illegally, and coming back with burnt fingers.

Years back in school I had always imagined Tibet as created for me by my parents in their stories — a huge expanse of green pastures surrounded by snow-peaked mountains, nomad tents in the middle with lots of sheep and yaks, a monastery far away on the cliff.

I wanted to see Tibet myself and live there, and get involved in the ongoing resistance movements against the Chinese. That was perhaps the romantic idea of a schoolboy. I was maybe 13 or 14. As I grew up, studied history, and saw those shocking photographs of Chinese soldiers killing Tibetans during a demonstration in Lhasa, my imagination of Tibet completely changed. I touched the clothes of the Tibetan demonstrators smuggled out of Tibet by foreigners that were put up on exhibition in our school. The clothes were soaked in blood and had gunshot holes in them. I swore right there that as long as I lived I would not keep silent about the Chinese occupation of my country.

I did try going to Tibet after my schooling, but failed. My second attempt after college was successful. I not only was in Tibet, but also received a three-month prison experience in Lhasa, and then finally the Chinese, calling me “a foreigner” — an Indian — threw me out of Tibet. I was outraged and humiliated.

What I saw in Tibet shocked me beyond belief; in the towns like Gertse,
Lhatse, Shigatse and Lhasa, everything from signposts to shopkeepers were mostly Chinese. They were more Chinatowns than any Tibetan dwelling. I couldn’t even buy a photo of the Potala without talking in sign language. Some amalas came to us (the uncle-looking intelligence people and myself) offering shoe-shining services for a few coins. I felt so sad seeing women of my mother’s image doing this, wearing tight nylon pants.

Much of our Tibet is creation of our imagination; we have built our Tibet from our stereotypes, foreign tourists’ accounts and hearsay. Our love of Tibet asks us to study and know the real Tibet that has changed over the years. An easy indulgence is that whatever comes from Tibet we immediately sanctify, whether it’s news, a piece of chura or those ubiquitous Chinese thermos flasks. We need to walk that tightrope; not slumping into our lazy assumptions or falling prey to Chinese propaganda.

Dharamsala in recent times is rife with debates on the pros and cons of watching the many Chinese TV channels that are being brought straight into our households by the local cable TV network. Between an outright rejection of whatever is Chinese as propaganda, and watching the TV programmes with the careful eye of a China watcher, supported by a natural love for everything that comes from Tibet, there is an apparent case for conflict.

But our love for Tibet — and the pretext of a careful sifting of information — gained the upper hand in the debate. It’s been almost six months now since the entry of the Chinese TV channels into Dharamsala after winning over Kathmandu. Since then, a new vocabulary of greetings like “wer” for hello on the phone and “kun-kham-sang” for a casual salutation have come into Dharamsala language for style, novelty and fun.

My friend, who came from Tibet a few years back, loves listening to Radio Tibet. I join him sometimes, but the Chinese-accented Lhasa dialect
is nauseating and irritating; that nasal drawl at the end of every word is simply suffocating. Even in the songs, some of the new and trendy Tibetan pop stars in Tibet sing in that old Chinese operatic nasal whine. Their English radio broadcast aimed at ‘overseas Tibetans’ is a laughing stock. Their Chinese-American English is not only unintelligible but also funny.

However artificially arranged and presented, these small glimpses into our unreachable native land seen on Xizang TV give some satisfaction. The pop song culture in Tibet has achieved style and individuality, unlike much of that in exile which lacks originality and relies on songs borrowed from foreign singers.

Yadong and Chungshae Dolma from Tibet are two icons much loved by the exile Tibetans. Yadong has had a small stint of being harassed by the Chinese authorities for singing patriotic songs. His song “Nga sacha gangne yongpe” has become a great hit here in Dharamsala. Chungshae Dolma, that vivacious little angel, sings both in Tibetan and Chinese. Her song “Namby thaka pep sho” (Come to spin the wool) is a runaway hit with exile Tibetan youth. I have seen her video CDs being duplicated in some corners of Delhi and being sold at big prices in Delhi, Dharamsala and Kathmandu. While she sings of the love of the land and its culture – calling Yarlung Tsangpo river her mother – she is careful not to fall into the easy traps of the exile Tibetans China-bashing bouts.

Tibet TV’s jesters and social commentators Migmar-la and Thupten-la are dear to the exile TV audience. In exchange, the songs and jokes of our famous and popular stand-up comedian PaTsering are being packed in audiotapes and smuggled into Tibet to be privately shared among his fans. This love affair between exile and our brethren in Tibet continues even though we live on the two sides of the world’s mightiest mountain range. Our love has made holes in the Himalayas and it is transparent now.
A general censure of the ongoing practice of traditional music in exile is that it is “tang tari”; this is the result when art is repetitive without innovations. The challenge is the need of fine understanding of the tradition upon which the artists create new compositions. A natural artistic gift and hard work can satisfy the need, but such synthesis is a rare phenomenon in the exile music field. I have seen this in a few: Nawang Khechog, Yangchen Dolma and Techung.

It is because of our love for Tibet, and the need to belong to an identity, that we crave to see Tibet and live there. Tibetan youngsters, however they dress or drink or dance, are more patriotic for their future is Tibet. That’s why Jamyang Choedhen sings:

“In the hope that I would get
a glimpse of the Norbulingka,
I climbed the Dharamsala Mountain.
It is my misfortune
that I do not see the Norbulingka.”
Soldier of the Hungry Nation
TRUTH: THE STRENGTH OF OUR STRUGGLE

My old man friend refuses to believe that the “inji” soldiers could inflict such violence on Iraqi prisoners, simply because as a refugee he has been sponsored all his life by an inji, and he knows hundreds of other Tibetans – old people, monks, nuns and babies – living on the kindness of foreign sponsors.

Recently Dharamsala saw posters splashed across the streets with images laid out side by side of a Chinese soldier dragging a Tibetan freedom fighter juxtaposed with pictures of US and UK soldiers torturing a naked Iraqi prisoner. The title read in Tibetan, “Torture has no different face”.

Thanks to all the kind-hearted injis, the image of the American and the British soldiers in the eyes of the Tibetans was tarnished, but little. There were Tibetans who said that they would rather live a life in the US prison than continue the ‘drag’ life in India. The recent images of helpless Iraqi prisoners being tortured in the most humiliating manner by the “civilized and modern” forces led by the United States of America and the United Kingdom has got the Tibetans rethinking. The images naturally evoked empathy since Tibetans and Iraqis are common victims of foreign military invasion.

When the Chinese first invaded Tibet they came in as “friends” displaying camaraderie to win over the natives. I know many old palas and amalas who in their teens worked with Chinese cadres, buildings roads and bridges. China looks at Tibet as a treasure house inhabited by “barbaric and dirty people whose minds are poisoned by their religion”. 
It was true that aristocrats and local barons ran Tibet and there was serfdom. There were no schools in the modern sense of four-walled classrooms, 40-odd students and a boring teacher. There were no metalled roads or cement bridges. Like in any community, there were social and political problems in Tibet. But, who are they to come to our country and dictate terms to us? We could have sorted out the problems ourselves.

China came to Tibet with the mission to “liberate” us from our “old and barbaric minds and poverty” and also to liberate people from the “imperialist foreigners”. Our direction of development was focussed inwards. In the same way our culture aims to understand the mind or the inner being or the universe within. Through the diligence of Tibetans’ studies, practices and scholarship a religion like Buddhism, which was born in India, attained greater heights as a philosophy and way of life.

Communist China’s ambition to uproot the “old and traditional minds” sent tremors of destruction all across China. Today, China is bereft of its spirituality. The Chinese have killed it for themselves and have caused irreparable damage to other communities that they have occupied and imposed their communism on, like the Islamic Turks (in what is now called ‘Xinjiang”), Mongolians, Manchus and the Tibetans. But the strength of our spirituality is such that it has survived all the wanton destruction. It is there in a place where no physical force can reach – it is there in everyone’s heart like a butter lamp.

Today’s China blames the “Gang of Four” for all the destruction caused to the cultural heritage across China during the Cultural Revolution. However, the present corrupt Chinese leadership lives on the pumped up nationalism and the indoctrination Maoism enshrined during those years of the 1960s.

I have met some Chinese students learning Buddhism from Tibetan lamas. One explained: “Because our Buddhist cultural roots were snapped, with the new materialistic lifestyle devoid of any cultural roots I feel like an exile in China.”
Today, the Chinese government is morally degenerate. The 400-odd capitalist-minded Politburo members now run the country in the name of communism, without any labour rights or the right to expression by the common people. China is weak underneath its apparent monolithic economic and military power. Today it is a country surviving on the shaky ground of silenced people’s agony. And this makes me unable to understand why the world’s highest moral authority, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, is willing to make Tibet a party to this corrupt communist regime, a regime that has lost the confidence of its own people.

The recent 37-page white paper released by China called “Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet” yet again trumpeted that His Holiness should give up his demand for the independence of Tibet. Even after 25 years of efforts by the exiled Tibetan community to negotiate for a “genuine autonomy” for the Tibetans within the mainframe of the People’s Republic of China – and without asking to separate Tibet – such conditions repeatedly come up.

With this, the Tibetan hope for a Hong Kong form of autonomy has been thrashed. I have always spoken for the Independence of Tibet and nothing less. We do not need to beg; we work for it and earn for ourselves with dignity what we have lost. And with the power of truth it is possible; we can do this.

One of the things that I greatly appreciate about His Holiness is his vision of Tibet, for the future: The idea of Tibet being a self-reliant and self-sufficient country and that it be made a zone of peace. With this I am hopeful that the dignity of the people can be restored, and culture will be preserved and promoted.

It’s a different question altogether that even after proving Tibet as an independent country in the language of the nation state – the International Commission of Jurists, declaring so at the time of Chinese occupation – no state today supports this stand. And this is a frustrating
fact that we have to live with. Still there is faith that truth will triumph. The truth remains that Tibet was an independent country until the Chinese occupation in 1949.

Today, China may have silenced all the heads of government with her lure of money and power over the heads of the billion Chinese who look for a free and democratic China. But the honeymoon will not last beyond the conjugal heat. The truth is with the people. People of the world support us. Our leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, is loved more than any Chinese leader — whether they are called Hu or Wen.

It is this strength that gives me conviction that even after the Dalai Lama the Tibetan struggle will live on, and perhaps would gain more urgency, unlike some pessimists who say that the Tibetan issue will die with the present Dalai Lama.

Often I have been asked the meaning of the word Semshook, the title of my one-page column. At a personal level, I have offered my explanation. Semshook is the courage and determination it takes for the truth to prevail; the willingness to make any sacrifice the truth demands, and finally the act of achieving it. Such a Semshook we must all inculcate lest the gold remains as dust for a very, very long time.

How and when would the truth prevail depends on us. Nobody will champion our cause, whether it be the US or India. We have to work and make it happen on our own.
Violence and Non-violence
GYAMI: OUR CHINESE IMAGINATION

The Chinese army officer sits on an old jerry can with a wide, nasty smile, legs stretched, cigarette in one hand; the Tibetan translator, bespectacled, moves around with a file blabbering something; the Chinese soldiers all grim faces, dressed in olive People’s Liberation Army uniforms, a red star on their caps, point brooms, spades and walking sticks as guns at the Tibetan prisoners.

This was a scene at a Tibetan refugee camp during a dramatic presentation of the Tibetan issue. The elder Tibetans tell their stories of living under the communist Chinese in Tibet to the youngsters; the younger ones born in exile, who have never seen Tibet, grew up with these stories in their minds.

I remember watching Aku Thondup, a great Khampa warrior who kills all the Chinese soldiers on the stage with a dagger. I so much wanted to be that hero. Later, in our children’s games in the refugee camps and schools, we often killed each other in our Sino-Tibetan war. The Chinese were usually the weaklings.

Living in exile, far from the realities of Tibet, it is interesting to examine the imagination of China that we have built up over half a century. I feel such examination is also useful in our continuous growth. In one of my earlier columns I wrote on our imagination of Tibet and this time I will attempt to observe Our Chinese Imagination.

From 10 March 1959, when the irate Tibetan multitude gathered around the Norbulingka palace in Lhasa killed Kenzung Sonam Gyatso – mistaking him for a Chinese by his dress – to the recent Tiananmen Square Massacre solidarity vigil in Dharamsala, it has been a long journey of shifting Chinese images for exile Tibetans.
“Gyami” is basically a Tibetan racial adjective to mean Chinese. In Tibet, there is even an exclusive racial term “gyarik”, meaning Chinese race. Since their imperial claims made over Tibet and subsequent occupation of land and suppression, gyamis are looked at as the “tendra” enemy of Buddhism, a cunning race, untrustworthy, unethical and absolutely cruel.

So, the gyamis eat anything; all creepy-crawlers, insects and animals; their children are named after the sound of throwing utensils on the floor, therefore the Chinese names: Ching Chong Ling Zing. On our exile theatre stages, we never saw any Chinese other than soldiers. They are just gun-brandishing, brutal soldiers, and not individual characters. The Chinese army officer’s role is usually awarded to somebody who is fair, preferably a little chubby, he is invariably a smoker. These are our racial prejudices.

Along with the image of Chinese as soldiers — ready-to-kill types — another image of China was slowly occupying space in our minds, and that was the kungfu master. I loved to watch kungfu films. In our school, after such filmshows, children flooded the playground in groups of twos and threes exercising, enacting the kungfu steps inspired from the film. Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee were favourites. Even though they’re Chinese, we loved their martial arts.

The resurgent Tibetan uprisings in 1987 and 1988 saw the Chinese police – the special task force called PAP (People’s Armed Police) – clamping down brutally on the unarmed protestors. The youngsters who grew up with those terrible stories of torture can now see the reality on video. This reinforced the image of China as a red dragon fuming smoke.

After this our theatre stage saw new images of China. The olive-clad People’s Liberation Army soldiers have been replaced by double yellow striped jacketed police. Images copied from video clippings have helped update reality. The continuous flow of escapees from Tibet also brought us the latest information.
But one thing was constant — the image of the Chinese remained the same; brutal, unsmiling, an unreformed stereotype is still being put up on the exile stage. Decades of brutality to Tibetans and systematic destruction of all they owned has left unforgettable memories of torture and death. Generations will come, but this genocide and destruction will forever be remembered, the deep-scarred public memories, the unhealing wounds are ingrained and unforgiving.

The Tiananmen Democracy Movement of 1989 brought in a completely new image of China to Tibetans. This was a sneak preview of another Chinese community brought straight into our households via television. I was in school, a schoolboy then, and was shocked as I watched in disbelief the Chinese soldiers armed with guns and tanks marching into the Tiananmen Square, killing their own students.

This must have been an eye-opener for the Chinese too. They had never believed our claims and protests over military aggression, torture and violent suppression. The Tiananmen Square Massacre changed our imagination of China forever. We came to accept that China has other faces.

Today, the Tibetan public knows of the various issues within China: The freedom struggles in Islamic East Turkistan (Xinjiang) and Inner Mongolia. The sorry state of Manchuria where the native population has been outnumbered by Han migration by 80 percent, the various underprivileged minority communities in China and also the millions of farmers and workers struggling for basic human rights.

The diaspora of Chinese democracy activists demand a free and democratic China. But some still insist that their “minority nationalities” like Tibetans and Mongolians should remain an inseparable part of China. How can China be free without freeing its occupied colonies? What freedom and democracy are they talking about when they wish to continue their imperialistic control over nations they invade.

Beijing treats its so called “minorities” as babies; incapable, dependent, underdeveloped, and genetically barbaric. Only their development
schemes can help them. With such a patronizing attitude — where today’s leaders, the Han, are the masters, the big-central star in the red flag, and the others the minority stars at the periphery — the basic conflict will never be solved.

Taiwan’s gesture in dissolving its colonialist “Mongolian-Tibetan Affairs Commission” and recognizing the right to nationhood of the Tibetan people was a path-breaking shift achieved between the two communities. Taiwan no longer claims the imperial inheritance of overlordship on Tibet. This shift in Taiwanese policy, and the visit by HH the Dalai Lama to the island nation, brought us together as friends today.

And yet, I suspect, the Tibetans support the Middle Way Approach being led by HH the Dalai Lama in looking for a negotiated solution over Tibet only because of their tremendous belief in their god-king leader, and definitely not because they have any trust in the Chinese. This distrust of Beijing will always be there.

China is changing. And it’s changing beyond anybody’s control and imagination. There is a huge revival of spirituality; Christian and Buddhist cultural parades are a fashion in China now. Many Chinese are going to Tibet seeking spiritual guidance from Tibetan lamas. The democracy momentum in Hong Kong and Taiwan will open up China and one day leave her freed from the corrupt communist regime which is today running the country without the mandate of the people.

The resolution of our issue, I believe, will come out of changes in China. We must tie up with those democracy seekers living in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the USA, Europe, Australia and Canada, and must observe the real China closely. Tibetan youngsters must take special responsibility here.

Tomorrow, when China experiences a solar eclipse, we shouldn't be so fixated by the soldiers that we miss the bus.

FREE CHINA! FREE TIBET
How primitive! What creatures!
SONTSA: TIBETAN YOUTH POWER

The old amala re-phrased her question: “I mean are you Amdo, or Khampa or Toepa?” Lobsang gave the same defiant answer again. In a brash tone he said “Tibet”. One amala mumbled condescendingly – “Obviously the boy doesn’t know his parentage, his native land.”

This incident happened at a restaurant in McLeod Ganj where my friend Lobsang, a school dropout, works as a waiter. He was trying to be polite to this gang of old amalas, while serving them tea, when he was asked: “What is your native land?”

Most Tibetan youngsters would perhaps give the same answer as Lobsang did. Some are oblivious to their parental roots. Many know, but do not like to identify themselves with any of the clans. Tibetan youngsters don’t want to carry the extra baggage of their regional and sectarian identities, which, more than anything else, has become a divisive tool for many of the petty politicians in the community.

Tibetan youngsters are choosing to steer clear of such typecasting. This is the new generation emerging with its own sense of identity. They have seen such categorization result in communal fundamentalism.

The challenge is to know one’s own parental and cultural roots, and yet not fall into the trap of clannish groupism which has stifled Tibetan parliamentary politics. This is the fine balance I believe our youngsters must maintain to take the community forward into positive development. Through this we will achieve that wonderful democratic vision that exiles are struggling for.
Right from the beginning of our exile life, His Holiness the Dalai Lama placed great importance on the healthy growth of the Tibetan children. Tibet’s youth who are receiving both traditional and modern education will greatly influence future Tibet. Today there are over one hundred Tibetan schools in exile.

The children of exile are the hope for free Tibet. His Holiness has a special word for this: “sontsa”. Sontsa is not the unborn seed, it’s not the assumed potential; it is the sapling, it is already fertile and growing, and yet it is young. There is promise of a bright future in sontsa.

As kids growing up in school, the elders gave us the most wonderful dream – a dream called “Free Tibet”, a country of our own, the country our elders lost to the Chinese and we had to quickly grow up and reclaim. There was so much patriotism in our education, whether it was about the national flag, our leader His Holiness, or study of Tibetan history and politics.

Today we are grown up and ready to fight for that dream, but the rules have changed. There is no longer that freedom to fight for. The goalpost has moved, and we are left with no role to play. Now we can’t even do a protest rally; elders charge us with disloyalty towards the exile government’s request to keep calm.

There is no glory in battling for a compromise, nor does the compromise look hopeful. Anyway, even if it was granted, would the youngsters keep silent and be satisfied with autonomy?

Quite often I get to work with Tibetan college students in cities all over India. Tibetan students in these cities have been forming student associations through which they collectively campaign for Tibet. These are being run from the funds they begged from Tibetan camps during their summer and winter vacations. These associations double up as welfare organizations, taking care of students in times of emergency like sickness or accidents.
Last year I was in Mangalore, the seaside city in south India. About 300 Tibetan youngsters study there. During a four-day Tibet festival a curious Indian student asked one Tibetan youth, both about the same age: “What does Tibet look like?”

The Tibetan student stopped in the middle of his speech and began thinking. He was perhaps recollecting images of Tibet he had seen in films and photographs. Most Tibetans born and brought up in exile have never seen Tibet, even the hundreds who escaped at a young age haven’t seen much of their homeland other than the village they fled.

Their Tibet is created by their imagination, their education, stories they heard from elders and tourists and what they inherited in their blood. There is no citizenship to claim; the Dalai Lama is their passport. They are born refugees.

Yes, like the younger generation of any community we too have our own share of problems with language, traditional customs, and yes, we have loads of attitude. And yet deep down there we are Tibetan. Every mention of Tibet and the Dalai Lama in a newspaper, TV, radio pulls the strings in us. It’s something very personal. Tibetans who have strayed to foreign countries with or without papers tell me of this heartstring. It’s just magical. This, I believe, is Tibetanness, and I know this is there in all Tibetans.

At the end of the day, we also want a home to return to, a small place to call our own, somewhere we belong. It’s too difficult imagining there will be a free Tibet and postponing our dream called “home,” and yet the struggle must go on.

Often I am asked how should the Tibetans channel their emotional energy into real work to free Tibet. Today, with the youngsters receiving a world-class education, equipped with global language and technology skills, we can put up a strong fight. Today’s youngsters are not bound by customary
loyalties. They are patriotic, but educated and informed.

If only we can do away with the inhibition where — in the name of faith — we place the whole job of freeing Tibet on the shoulders of one man: His Holiness the Dalai Lama. We are the kind to share responsibility while simultaneously receiving guidance from the Buddha.

We do have a younger group who have excelled in their field of social service, leadership, art and literature, and have set examples. Norsang runs the most popular Tibetan website, phayul.com, single-handedly; Lobsang Tsering runs Kunphen (his drugs de-addiction centre in Dharamsala has helped more than 120 patients), Rapsel has been campaigning for vegetarianism, travelling Tibetan camps across India; Techung and Tsering Gyurme in music, Tenzin Dorjee in photography, Karma Sichoe in thangka painting, Lhadon Tethong in youth leadership, (she’s the Director of Students for a Free Tibet worldwide), and Dolma Gyari and Karma Yeshi in the Tibetan parliament.

I salute these and many others who work silently with commitment and years of dedicated work for Tibet. This article pays tribute to that power of youth, to this new generation of Tibetans in exile which is now slowly coming of age, and making “sontsa” – the dream of His Holiness – come true. A promise of new Tibet.
March 10 Decree
MANTOSO: OUR DEMOCRATIC VISION

It’s again the torture period for our four chosen Kalons (cabinet ministers) as our parliament meets in September. MPs, who are largely anonymous to the general public, have made it a culture to barbeque the administration, question their decisions, raise allegations, check accounts and so forth in the bi-annual parliamentary sessions, with nobody questioning them over what they do or do not do.

Last year, during the September session of the parliament, I applied for a pass to witness the parliamentary proceedings. It was my first time. In its modest ground floor hall in Dharamsala, the parliament was in session when I entered. The few seats for observers and press were taken, so I sat on the floor, and craning my neck, tried to listen to the MPs speak in the most literary language.

I regularly read the parliamentary proceedings documents. Almost 90 percent of it is about allegations, funds, laws and bylaws; very seldom are there discussions on the freedom struggle or in the language of the exile government, “to find a solution to our struggle”.

This year, on 2 September, we will mark the 44th anniversary of Tibetan Democracy. I felt it is pertinent to reflect on our perception of the blessed democracy, the culture of democracy in our community or the lack of it, its effects and the future prospects of both in our struggle for a Free Tibet and its role in strengthening our community in the long run.

In the past two months I have met many Tibetan youths in Delhi, Dharamsala, Madras, Pune and Bombay. As always I felt a very strong aversion among them towards our regional and sectarian politics. Tibetan youth do not wish to carry the baggage of regional and sectarian identities.
It is seen as a source of communal discontent. However, I believe it is important we know our parentage and cultural roots.

Our MPs, once elected, comfortably hold their seats for five years and the public remains far, far from their domain to hold them accountable. There are legislative provisions, but our community has yet to develop the culture of democracy to exercise the legislations.

If electing an MP is like flying a kite, you need to have the thread in your hand. Since our MPs are elected on superficial and unfounded bases – regional and sectarian affiliations – what exactly do they do at the parliament as representatives of Kham, Amdo or U-tsang, or for that matter any religious sect?

For many years, opinions have poured in from different quarters of the community to change the basis of the candidature to regions of exiled Tibetan settlements. This can be a real training ground. Once a healthy democratic culture develops within the community, it will prove useful in future Tibet.

From the land reforms, legal reforms and modernizations by the Great Thirteenth Dalai Lama, later resumed by the young Fourteenth while in independent Tibet, to the adoption of Democracy as the Tibetan polity in 1960, Tibetans have metamorphosed from a feudal theocracy run by power hungry aristocrats to a democratic, forward-looking community. This has been our biggest achievement in the last one hundred years.

No people in the world are as fortunate as us to have a living Buddha to guide and parent them. But have we lived up to his guidance? No. We handicapped ourselves, falling into dependency on His Holiness.

In 1991, at the special Kashag and Parliament joint assembly, His Holiness said: “I will do whatever is possible, but it is important that people are able to act on their own through democratic processes without relying on the Dalai Lama.”
From 1960, the formation of the first Assembly, till 1991 can be seen as stage one – the growth of our democracy. In 1991, both the Kashag and the Parliament were dissolved, and re-election happened. But this time the responsibility was taken up completely by the people. Earlier, when people voted, they knew the Buddha would make the final decision. This time, His Holiness withdrew from the 31-year-old practice of making the final selection. From 1991 the electorate made the final decision.

Democracy is not a tseril, the sweet tsampa ball, which is believed to give a new lease of life when eaten. Even for tseril to work, spiritual duties have to be performed. Although we received our democracy as a blessing, we must endeavour to make it work. And we have been most unwilling to do just that to take up democratic responsibilities. A recent example is the resolution passed by the 13th parliament in the March session of the Assembly “to review the Middle Way Approach as government policy”, giving China one year to respond to our gesture to find a negotiated solution to the Tibetan cause.

Now the resolution passed by a majority in the parliament received censure from two regional groups which issued press releases protesting the resolution. One group went to the extent of saying that if the resolution passed by the parliament is not withdrawn during the September session, then all the ten MPs of that regional group would withdraw their membership. If this happens, more that 20 percent of the existing MPs would be resigning, leaving the parliament badly handicapped.

This attempt at holding the whole parliament hostage had one rationale: “Reviewing the Middle Way Approach as a policy would undermine the power of the Dalai Lama.” This is precisely the kind of small-mindedness His Holiness wouldn’t want in our community. Stopping the community from moving forward in the name of Kundun is neither patriotism nor faith. It’s a typically Tibetan reaction to progress, to put it mildly.
By a resolution in the 12th parliament, it adopted as the policy of the exile government in 1997, and the parliament has the responsibility to recheck the effectiveness of its policies from time to time. This is the duty of the parliament, and it does not amount to undermining the power of His Holiness. In fact His Holiness would be the first person to welcome such an initiative from the people.

His Holiness shows us the way. In his 1996, 10 March statement he said, “[It is] my conviction that democracy is the best guarantee for the survival and future of the Tibetan people. Democracy entails responsibilities as well as rights. The success of our struggle for freedom will therefore depend directly on our ability to shoulder these collectively.”

Our history shows that for the past 600 years of the Dalai Lamas there were political crises every time a Dalai Lama passed away, the country moved into chaos, there was anarchy marked by internal feuds and even civil war. Can’t we now learn from history and strengthen our community while there is still daylight? How insecure we feel about even thinking of a time without the present Dalai Lama. We can’t talk about it. It is considered an ill omen.

Democracy is sharing responsibility, and for us it’s all about taking back our responsibility from the shoulders of one man, who has worked enough for us, whom we have taken for granted while we were busy building our houses and heating our hearths.

Imagine the strength of 1,50,000 exile Tibetans taking personal initiative for the cause, doing everything in their capacity, supported by Tibet lovers across the globe. This will reinvigorate individuals, organizations and perhaps governments to the cause. This kind of coordinated worldwide campaign can free Tibet.
Too many directions
In the bustling streets of Mcleod Ganj an old pola went about making announcements through a microphone for a special prayer gathering the next morning. The occasion, he said, was because “Tibet-China Negotiations have started.” It’s strange that in our struggle, the public’s role is reduced to tsampa-throwing rituals and saying prayers.

The third delegation has been able to get itself invited by China after a long wait. We are still in the process of confidence-building and negotiations are a far horizon — if at all they’re coming. China has again refused to give official recognition to our delegation, calling them “overseas Tibetan compatriots”.

And yet, we seem to be focusing all our concentration on this; discouraging — even outlawing — alternative ways of expressing the freedom struggle. At the time of the Chinese invasion there was no political awareness among the general Tibetan populace. State and public had almost no relationship except through tax collection. The aristocrats in Lhasa loved partying — mostly at their desks with mahjong tiles. The majority of the population of Tibet lived in villages with no idea whatsoever what was happening in Lhasa or being done to the country itself by China.

I have written critically about our Members of Parliament and, as if to prove me right, many MPs acted disastrously, even ridiculously during the September parliamentary session. I made another trip to the parliament. Except for the new interior décor, and the parliament now facing east — a symbolic gesture to face Tibet — nothing has changed.

As if Dharamsala had a fit of sorts, for about two weeks the usual Hindi soap operas on the TV suffered miserable neglect. Bhagsu Cable was
entertaining the 6,000-odd Dharamsala Tibetans with more dramatic scenes; many of our MPs were seen thumping away at their chests in gorilla-style, speaking and gesticulating most animatedly in the parliament. Some were seen swearing that they were not afraid of anybody except for one or two or three people.

The protestations were neither supported by facts or figures, nor by any reason. And while voting was being done, one just couldn't help but feel pity that they looked around to check if their clan leader's hand had gone up or not. Live coverage makes it absolutely clear how the parliament has fallen into factions and it was there for all to see. This parliament made decisions, many decisions.

The only consolation was those few MPs who patiently listened to everybody and made their own statements, loaded with researched and updated information. They are our only thinking representatives.

Now let the video recording travel to the refugee camps, release the bomb, and let the public see how their MPs perform and posture in parliament. The video recording has become a bridge between the MPs and the public at large. It has brought transparency and created a new interest in the people about our political affairs. I see our toddler democracy wrapped in a long chupa, totter around, trip and pick itself up again.

The Gandhian idea of Swaraj is what both His Holiness and our Kalon Tripa have in mind for a future Tibet. Democracy by polity, self-sufficient economy, and self-reliant in education, skills and resources: a Tibetan Swaraj.

Is Swaraj then idealistic, as many critics doubt? This is an ideal Tibet we can build, and I believe it is possible. For that we have to engage our people from the grassroots. I have always spoken for public engagement for community-building, as this was and still is our weak point. Such a wonderful vision of Tibet can neither be achieved with western aid nor by Indian support. We have to build it ourselves.
‘Swaraj’ is a process where one learns to free oneself. A community of people of such independence and high moral standards will have achieved Swaraj. This freedom soars far above the more mundane political independence.

Tourism may be an industry, a source of national income, but not in the rampant capitalistic consumerist manner which has left many cultural hubs in the world decimated. Developing our economy, opening our country to modern changes, we must remain alert to the attacks of globalization. For that we have our cousin Bhutan to ask for their experience, how they have been quietly entering into the 21st century at their own pace. I have great admiration for the restrained development this extended Tibetan civilization has been maintaining. Our Kashag is finding organic farming difficult to explain to the urea-hardened Tibetan farmers; unspoilt Bhutan has been most successful in the experiment.

September saw Mrs. Wager coming to Dharamsala again. At 83, the inji amala continues to help the Tibetans. She was calling it her last visit, but she left with another very long list of ‘things to do’. It was in those years of the early ‘60s and ‘70s when we needed foreign aid. Today, there isn’t a single Tibetan in exile who is going hungry or bare-shouldered. In fact, our community has been called the most successful refugee community in the world. We may have become better off, our standards of living in general improved, but we have weakened and we are losing the sense of struggle and work.

And still there are many Tibetans who hide their TV sets and change into humble pajamas when their sponsors come to visit them. It pains me beyond measure to write this, but this truth has to come out. We have fallen into dependency on these jindags. The good hearts of these foreigners have become our weak points.

Jindagism is what we have to fight against. This is basically a mentality of learned dependency, the easy and short-cut path to a comfortable
life. It saves sweat and dirtying your hands. Mrs. Wager on her last visit to Orissa Tibetan Refugee camp two years back said to me there had only been one Tibetan who said to her that the person no longer needed her support, and thanked her.

Tibetans by nature I consider hard-working and enterprising. I have seen extremely skillful Tibetan entrepreneurship in carpet industries, the hospitality industries and travel and tourism. Senge Himalayan Ceramics in Delhi produces Tibetan crockery. I wish somebody would start to manufacture thermos flasks and banish the necessary but evil 'Made In China' flasks from our community.

Now, Swaraj asks each member of the community to take up responsibility. We have a very high level of Religious and Cultural Swaraj, even from Tibet. We were self-subsistent in our nomadic-agricultural economy. Now in the political field, we were found wanting.

Our clannish tribal groupism and aristocrat-run fiefdoms of the 1950s left us no path to political Swaraj. With the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Democracy as the fabric of our civil society, we have the biggest challenge to move forward into strengthening the community in political awareness.

Unless we have achieved this Internal Swaraj we may end up losing whatever we manage to gain – Rangzen or Autonomy. There is much more for the public to do before taking on China. Armed with this Internal Swaraj China would be easy to handle.
Gladiator
DIPLOMACY AND DETERRENCE

I have never been hated by anybody more than this dog; he barks at me with extra enthusiasm and aggression, making me a villain in front of the people lazing around in the neighbourhood. The dog never forgets the kick I landed on his nose when I was nearly bitten by him once. So now I avoid that road.

For 45 years, we in exile have been dogging the Chinese for illegally invading Tibet and continuing to maintain their colonization with so much repression and human rights violations. Our protests have worked. Today, the Tibetan struggle in exile receives favourable media coverage, though the various governments keep their own national interests first and still recognize Tibet as a part of China. We do not have China’s military, political or financial strength, nor do we have the strength of their propaganda industry and still we have won the hearts of the people of the world.

Around this time, two years back, the Tibetan Government-in-Exile issued a “request” to all Tibetans and Tibet supporters to “refrain from anti-China protest”. This has divided our strength. While a good portion of the population retained their democratic rights and continued with the protest rallies, another part is confused and doesn’t know what to do. The community is still in its learning process over democracy and so no wonder it still takes the government’s “request” as an order; it seems too much to expect the general public to take the “request” as a request and not an order.

This has caused confusion within the community for the past two-and-a-half years. The protest rallies, the one thing any Tibetan can do as their personal contribution to the struggle, are discouraged. Those who went
ahead have been looked upon as rebels. Yes, I am making a case against the “request”. TGIE is executing the parliament’s policy to find a negotiated solution, so the effort to find one will take its own course. It must do just this and not act to deter the works of those who struggle for an independent Tibet, especially when these protest rallies are working.

Trulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche may be executed next month if we keep silent and do not protest just because we are still hopeful of a negotiation and that “confidence building” measures are underway. Tibetans inside Tibet have risked so much and done whatever possible to save him, now it lies with us to stop the execution.

Recently the Tibetan delegation returned after visiting China and Tibet. Mr. Lodi Gyari, while addressing a press conference in Dharamsala on the 10 October, again said for the third time that the Chinese and Tibetan officials he met showed good gestures and promised further confidence building. I got a seat among the journalists at the back of the hall. Through heads, shoulders and flashbulbs, I saw Mr. Lodi Gyari talking with his right hand, his thumb and the index finger meeting many times to mean contact-building. He announced very clearly that negotiation is nowhere near and that we have fundamental differences with China.

Mr. Lodi Gyari, former monk and son of a Khampa chieftain, spoke with much confidence and flair as a diplomat. Mr. Kelsang Gyaltsen interjected from time to time in controlled speeches. Mr. Bhuchung K. Tsering was missing; Mr. Dagpo S. Norbu monitored the rules, “one question per person”. The question that was most earnestly asked by at least five journalists on the content of their “free and frank” discussion with Chinese officials, was left unanswered. So one is left to only guess what must have transpired.

However hopeful and unreasonably excited we were about the delegation returning from China, the Beijing government seems as hard as ever on the Tibetan issue. Mr. Gyari, while answering a question, reported that China is basing its policies on the “white paper” they issued on 23 May
this year. This is China’s policy document on Tibet, which was rejected unequivocally by exile Tibetans who called it a “black paper”.

While the delegation was in China, some news reports and speculation from various Tibet supporters, both in the west and India, indicated the return of His Holiness to Tibet could be soon. Looking at China’s desperate call for His Holiness to return to Tibet for their Olympics PR, and the TGIE’s compromise policy on Tibet, it looks as if His Holiness could wrap up the grand exile story in a few years before the Beijing Olympics. If His Holiness returns to Tibet I am sure 80 percent of the exile Tibetans would return too.

Early this year, Kalon Tripa Samdhong Rinpoche gave a public talk on the Middle Way Approach at the Yongling School in Dharamsala during a programme organized by the Tibetan Women’s Association. I saw him on television saying that for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, “Genuine Autonomy” is the end goal and not a step to Rangzen. I grant he is most sincere here, doing exactly what he is saying, given the Gandhian that he is.

Now I think the real problem would start to trouble once such a resolution, if at all, eventuates. For the Tibetan community which supports the Middle Way Approach, “Genuine Autonomy” is only a vehicle to get to Tibet and unfold a freedom struggle once we get there. This is no great secret, and we should not underestimate China’s intelligence in seeing through this loaded policy. And even if by default we are able to reach Tibet through this arrangement with China, without solving the basic China-Tibet conflict – China’s racist claims over Tibetans, Mongolians, Islamic Turks and the Manchus – there will be no peace in China and Tibet. We may instead be entering into an Israel-Palestine type of situation.

The proposal to accept autonomy within one China may be making Tibet practically a part of China – without declaring Tibet as a part of China as demanded in their pre-conditions to negotiate with His Holiness. China’s claims to rule over Tibet refer back to the Yuan Dynasty, when we
paid tribute to the Mongol emperor who also controlled Central Asia including Tibet and China. The Yuan lost power to the Chinese Ming Dynasty; thus the claim. This time around, as we make this compromise, are we not repeating history? Will the children of tomorrow’s China not claim that the Fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet ceded sovereignty to China?

As opposed to this, I have been advocating an international campaign for a Free Tibet. China responds with desperate moves when they are losing face or money because of their occupation of Tibet. After the systematic campaign and much hard work by the Tibetans and Tibet supporters in Canada, we have been able to beat China even when they threatened serious repercussions for Canada if the Prime Minister met His Holiness. In the end, the Canadian government was forced into this meeting because of the overwhelming pressure of popular public opinion, despite their longstanding policy of bowing to Beijing’s economic influence.

China today is responsible for much of the suffering in Asia. If we can forge an international coalition of forces for freedom and democracy in China, I am sure we can topple this corrupt, colonial and communist regime that sits on the heads of more than a billion people. The Chinese democracy-seekers in Hongkong, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, the US, Canada and Europe, independence-seekers in Taiwan, East Turkestan, Mongolia, Tibet and Manchuria and Falung Gong practitioners everywhere, would be our allies. Is freedom and democracy in China possible? I believe it is.
Human Rights and International Politics
Semshook-xi
Tibetan Review, December 2004

OUR INDIA EXPERIENCE

Last year, around this time, a television news channel quoted His Holiness the Dalai Lama as saying that he is willing for Tibet to be a part of China. This shocked many Indians. One of them happened to be the landlord of my Indian college friend living in Pune. I was visiting Pune for a photo-exhibition on Tibet that we were organizing in the city. And I was supposed to stay at my friend’s rented accommodation. After listening to the news clip, the landlord refused to let me step in his house, calling me “Chinese”. I was deeply hurt, but what could I say?

The man knew everything about Tibet and its struggle. My friend protested, but his landlord was adamant. He said, “If Dalai Lama wants to make Tibet a part of China, then why is he here in India? All the Tibetans should be immediately sent back to China.”

Decades back, when the Indian parliamentarians were first getting to be conscious of Tibet’s occupation by China and the consequential danger to India, Nehru was questioned about his mild policies towards the PRC. In defence he said, “not a blade of grass grows there” referring dismissively to the Aksai Chin area of Ladakh.

This has been the Indian mentality behind issues over its 4,200 km Himalayan border; part idealistic peace-making and part gross neglect. Because of this both India and Tibet have suffered tremendously and both are at a lost to find any solution to the quagmire created by Beijing’s occupation of Tibet.

I have been watching with a sense of sadistic pleasure the rituals as India and China try to molest each other during their border debates. While they solemnly pretend to be solving border issues with utmost seriousness, they both know that without first solving the status of Tibet, no lasting
solution is possible. But as a diplomacy and PR exercise, the dragon and the tiger have been – uncomfortably – trying to smile at each other.

As a schoolkid I first participated in a Tibet protest rally in Kullu when I was in the fifth standard. We shouted “Tibbat ki azaadi, bharat ki suraksha”, but in the busy Indian streets, bystanders watched us merely for the spectacle of Tibetans on parade, not giving any attention to what we were saying. It hasn’t changed much even today with the Indian masses.

When news of the PLA’s invasion of Tibet reached India in 1950, Indian leaders expressed outrage and people marched down the streets in Bombay in protest. That was then the prevalent spirit against foreign invasion and injustice, having recently won her independence.

Those marchers were early Tibet supporters in India. Around the same time another brand of Tibet supporters were born – the patriotic Indians who saw the danger to India from the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet. This lot were mainly the educated ones. They supported Tibet keeping India’s interests in mind. This trend grew steadily ever since. Today the sub-continent has more than 150 Tibet Support Groups. They mainly work to create awareness about Tibet through grassroots education and also by lobbying public representatives to take up the issue of Tibet at the national and international levels.

Last year, when the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee went to China and declared the “Tibet Autonomous Region is a part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China”, many Tibetans and Tibet supporters expressed anger and disappointment. Some even called it India’s betrayal of Tibet.

If we look more deeply inside, I think this happened mainly because we have failed to convince India of the viability of our freedom struggle. Most of our efforts to explain our situation have been going to the west. After 45 years of protests and asylum in India, the Indian government was still not convinced of the possibility of a free Tibet. India once again decided not to invest political expediency on us.
But this does not mean India has given up on Tibet. Never. India can’t afford to do that due to her own interests. Besides the border, there are many other geo-political and cultural considerations that guide India’s interest in a free Tibet.

It was our own decision to seek “Genuine Autonomy” for our homeland without striving to separate Tibet from China that has left little political choice for India. When we ourselves go about announcing that we do not seek independence for Tibet, how can India help us? India won’t do anything that would make China her permanent neighbour.

The fact that India is sheltering more than 130,000 Tibetans living here as foreigners, with all basic necessities provided, tolerating the illegal Tibetan Government-in-Exile, and recruiting 10,000 Tibetan soldiers into the Indian Army, is a clear sign that India has not washed its hands of the idea of Tibetan independence.

This doesn’t mean India will take up the issue of Tibet anywhere. India has not, and I think she will not, raise it with China or in international forums. In the mass Indian psyche Tibet doesn’t mean anything other than “Kailash-Manasarovar”. Tibet is definitely not an issue within India. There is no political will to support the Tibetan cause.

For the past few months we have been vigorously campaigning across India to stop the execution of Tulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche. Tibetan Youth Congress took the campaign to four metropolitan cities, and yet besides a few news reports no major media took any serious note of the issue. The colourful Tibetan culture makes a pretty background for Bollywood films, but it never makes it to the news headlines, not even the Dalai Lama.

From the first day of exile in India till today we have resettled ourselves from being empty-handed escapees to become the most successful refugees with more than 100 schools, over 500 monasteries and cultural centres and a standard of living that is a little better than the average Indian. From this basic infrastructure of exile government, our hope of resurrecting a new Tibet flourished. Today we confidently think of
returning to our homeland to resurrect a new Tibet – and this dream is only made possible by India.

The reality in which India lives – with a humongous population with growing “working chaos” as somebody described it – means she has little energy to attend to any issue unless it is literally burning. To top that is the power struggle among the political parties, for whom “the seat” is more important than any national issue. After Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi there’s never been a strong government at the centre to make any political headway.

I have met some Indian communists at strange chance encounters. Though as Indians we shared many national concerns, they seemed to have a silent bonding with China when it came to idealism. An in-depth talk with them made me aware how terribly outdated they are on the issues of Tibet and China. They still imagine that the Tibetan struggle is supported by the CIA, citing the involvement of westerners and the fact that the CIA did support the Tibetan armed resistance movement, but only to check the spread of Chinese communism to the west. They do not even know that the CIA abandoned the Tibetans 30 years ago to die in the cold mountains waiting for food and arms, once the US switched policy and Nixon flew to Beijing to shake hands with Mao.

And yet, I believe if there is one country that can understand our struggle to regain the lost freedom and dignity of being a nation, our craving to re-establish that Tibet which can be a safe haven for our culture and traditions, it is India. India can help us achieve that, and will remain a partner in its maintenance.

I have had the opportunity to work with some of the most sincere and dedicated Indian friends of Tibet. And I have felt the power of that spiritual bonding. This is the source of my conviction that finally the declaration of Tibetan independence will arise from this land.
Celebrating Exile - 1

EDUCATION AND OUTLOOK

a classroom is where the doors
are shut and the windows open

Behind one such closed door, in front of the stunned and staring eyes of
my classmates, our teacher demanded from me a recitation of the poem
we were told to learn by heart the previous day. My poor memory
could retain only the first few lines, and then I went blank.

This happened to me many years ago when I was in school. In most
Tibetan schools learning meant mugging-up without understanding the
real meaning of the matter. The system of testing a child for three hours
to judge what the student has learnt in one year, however ridiculous, is
sadly still continuing even today in most Tibetan schools.

Whenever we came to a poetry lesson in the textbook, whether Tibetan,
Hindi or English, there were some of us who would say, “another round
of flogging”. I hated poetry in school – until I discovered graveyards.
The old inji graveyard on the hillside of Dharamsala was a quiet getaway.
I would often slip among the pines and go to the old church, remnants
of the Raj. The beautiful lines the living wrote to their dead engraved in
ornate calligraphy on headstones revealed to me what magic poetic words
could create.

The fast forward journey we took into the modern world from 1959 –
when we first emerged from behind the Himalayas – has brought us on
a collision course with modernity. What we have learned from the new
world, without losing our own traditional and cultural values, is for me a
matter of great celebration. Our culture and tradition have been greeted
by people all over the world with great respect and admiration.
In the beginning, our traditional education and value systems struggled to negotiate with the new exile education environment. It was in those years that Men-tsee-khang, the Tibetan institute in Varanasi, Kolam Doegar and the handicraft centres were seen as places for school dropouts. Now, over the years, the Tibetan studies being offered at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Varanasi, and the medical studies at Men-tsee-khang have acquired great respectability. The Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarah grew phenomenally into a highly-respected college in a short span of time. However, thangka painting and other arts have still not gained genuine respectability. Our traditional monastic-type education system started having an uninstitutionalized parallel — the modern-type school systems — in the new exile education scenario.

One significant change the 45 years of exile saw was in our language.

*I have three tongues
the one that sings
is my mother tongue*

Yes, though I am most comfortable speaking in Tibetan, I write in English. Because much of our school education happened in English, the literary language is naturally English, learned from Indian teachers.

In school, spoken English was in name only. The students pulled each others’ legs whenever somebody dared to speak in English, calling the person “Mr. John”. That has resulted in dumb Tibetans in college. When the Indian students spoke the foreign language with ease and flair, we stuttered and stammered. It was so embarrassing talking to Indian classmates in broken English. This affects the students’ behaviour adversely, lowering confidence and morale. One becomes a lonesome Tibetan among a sea of Indians.

Most of us in exile are bi-lingual, some even tri-lingual. But among the youngsters I have noticed that their spoken Tibetan isn’t very good. It’s blunt, poor, interspersed with inji or Hindi words, and some even speak
a constipated Tibetan, directly translating foreign expressions, much to the consternation of sanjorwas.

As a remedy of sorts, it was a joy watching Samten-la and Dhargye-la, the two young artists from TIPA, do their stand-up comedy routine. I saw the duo doing the comedy in Dharamsala along the lines of Lhasa’s Thupten-la and Migmar-la. The beautifully-crafted social commentaries, rich in language, spiced with apt proverbs, wit and humour, not only entertained the audience, but also made the public laugh at their own vices. They make us realize how rich our oral expression is. The performances are a celebration of Tibetan language, and are in their own right tributes to the rich Tibetan culture.

Our English language education from the times of essayists such as Dawa Norbu, Jamyang Norbu, and Thubten Samphel la, has been a serious process that has brought in a lot of changes in our outlook and attitudes. For many, it is not just the other language, it is a mother tongue.

Our romance with this language has produced quite a body of literature too. Buchung D. Sonam has compiled 40 years of Tibetan poetry in English – from Gedun Choephel and Gyalpo Tsering to today’s young budding poets like Tenzin Palzom and Tenzin Gelek. The soon-to-be-released anthology titled “Muses in Exile” has 139 poems by 33 Tibetan poets. This contribution to English literature announces the birth of Tibetan English.

While we romance with English due to our exile situation, our counterparts in Tibet have been taking Chinese language to greater heights. Tibetans are recording history and writing poetry and stories on love, religion and culture in Chinese. They are singing in Mandarin. The Chinese cannot but regret they gave the Tibetans their tongue, now the Tibetans’ Chinese tongues are setting the red flag on fire.

Recently I read an article on a Tibetan woman writer, Woeser, by Wang Lixiong, an independent Chinese scholar. Talking about Woeser and another
Tibetan writer, Tashi Dawa, Wang says: “Not having a good command of Tibetan is indeed a major handicap of Woeser’s generation. But it is the result of history, for which the authors themselves cannot be responsible.” I saw Wang pointing a finger at me. But then he consoles: “On the other hand, because of their nationalism and faith in religion, I still have high hopes in these writers’ potential to shoulder the burden of articulating the Tibetan nation’s aspirations.” Woeser’s book “Notes on Tibet” has been banned in China on charges of “serious political mistakes”.

Yes, nationalism, love for one’s nation and culture due to one’s deep appreciation of the beauty and richness of the culture, makes a great cause for human lives. There can be no bigger cause to live for than working for the freedom and dignity of a nation fighting foreign invasion and injustice.

And this is what we were taught when we were growing up in school. I am grateful to all the school staff who gave us such a wonderful dream to live for. But now, in recent years, political education in school seems to be dwindling. A new orientation seems to be in order in some schools; a quasi-Western squeamishness – saying children shouldn’t be told of “death and destruction in Tibet...also the images of [Powo Thupten Ngodup’s] self immolation”. A highly-placed school authority said to me: “Children’s minds are fragile like flowers. They cannot take shock, we keep them away from ‘politics’”.

I know many of my schoolmates who have now grown up and are serving the Tibetan community in different capacities. If they wanted they could have gone out on their own for comfortable, independent lives. We stuck on because we were so inspired by the courageous acts of defiance and the dignity the Tibetans in Tibet showed in the 1987-89 demonstrations in Lhasa. We grew up on the video images of the demonstrations brought to our school by two American doctors.
Every year the exile government produces scores of graduates for too few jobs available in the community. The 200-year-old Indian education system – a legacy of the British Raj – which we follow, mechanically manufactures graduates of the same shapes and sizes. After 15-17 years of education, if they cannot think, be innovative and enterprising, what is the worth of that education?

Most graduates inevitably flock to Dharamsala. Obviously there is no vacancy. I admire the few Tibetans who are variously skilled, daring to find their spaces in the Indian community and abroad. Their skills are being honed professionally, and all of them put together will be our future Tibet.

I read the second draft of the New Education Policy being designed and promoted by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. It promises a lot of things that are exciting and sound great. All over the world thinking people have been putting together bold and new alternative education systems. Ours is one such. The challenge is in the execution of the plans in a world swept by globalization, where the object of education is only to produce workers and not thinkers.

Toy
Celebrating Exile-II
OUR RELIGION AND THE STRUGGLE

Many of my non-Tibetan friends get quite disappointed when I say that I don’t do prayers, prostrations and other rituals. They want me – not only me, all Tibetans – to be staunchly Buddhist; wearing a rosary around our neck, saying prayers all the time and meditating in the mornings and evenings. I don’t do all these and yet I boldly claim that I am a Buddhist.

Much of these expectations and images of Tibetans are of our own making and partly their imagining. It is interesting to note that some Tibetans seem to describe the Tibetan race as non-violent, traditionalist and compassionate to the core – just the way westerners do. Such reverse education and insistence of identity!

That’s why the reality disappoints them: Tibetans in jeans, enjoying discos, monks on motorbikes, doing the things they do in their lives. Their imagined glass idol is broken. For me kindness and sincerity are guiding principles of Buddhism in life. One’s service in action for society is true worship.

This is my last article for this column called Semshook. For the past one year, every month, in this one-page column I have tried to raise my concerns and share my opinions on different issues relating to our freedom struggle and also on our community in transition. In this article, continuing to talk on reasons to celebrate our exile, I would like to discuss our religious perspectives, old customs and new habits, our ideas and their implications for our freedom movement.

In exile Tibetan schools, children do their regular prayers as per the school curriculum, sitting in neat lines in the school hall, singing sacred lines of poetry in praise of a hundred thousand deities that we children
never really understood. In school we were quite religious, making prostrations every night before going to bed. Later, in college, these habits slowly wore off after the first year.

What remained with us is this spiritual strength which helped us in the most difficult psychologically and morally challenging situations. In the years of loneliness, being the only Tibetan in a sea of foreigners, our Buddhist spiritual upbringing helped us, took care of us, guided us.

Religion, if not taken with a spadeful of scepticism, could become quite a dictated routine. During the public rituals initiated by monasteries, like the Kalachakra or the boomtsok, why do people fight, physically, clambering over each other’s shoulders to grapple for the blessed string, sungdue, and sweet ball, tseril? If people’s lives would be longer or healthier just by relying on these symbolic tokens, then where is Karma, the basic philosophy of Buddhism?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama repeatedly advises us to understand and know the meanings of what we do as religious practice. Much of our rituals are done without any contemplation on the significance of these religious acts. It has been centuries since there have been attempts to separate rituals from pure religion.

In the past ten years, the exile community has been seeing monasteries mushrooming with all grandeur, becoming more like museums to attract tourists and shows of monastic power than any place of worship.

“Big monasteries with no monks, lots of monks with no discipline”

So goes the casual chatter. And the public tongues’ concerns are not unfounded. Yes, still these days there are hundreds of monks and nuns who are strictly disciplined, devout and exemplary followers of the Buddha, but then there are those few who roam the streets in this brash manner and bring bad names to all the red-robbed. This is one reason why
there are only a few takers among the youngsters when it comes to “rinpoches” and their big mansions, foreign trips and rich lives sodden with controversies.

I am a staunch believer in Non-Violence. In Violence, the tension lasts temporarily causing harm to the self, the other and the surroundings. For example, in an outburst of Violence involving a killing, one dies but only once. In Non-Violence, however there is no momentary time shot to take. It is an ongoing process in enforcing the Truth. While on the journey the practitioner suffers, dying every day. This is a difficult path, and there is no shortcut available. That is why when people give up they take up Violence as a last resort.

But the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of Non-Violence is extreme. Tse-med-shiwa literally could be translated as “non-harming Non-Violence”; even for a new tree to grow, the seed must die, and from the heart of that dying seed grows the new shoot.

Such a conceptual creation of Non-Violence may be for those who have renounced the world and are seeking Buddhahood, but in our exile community this definition of Non-Violence is the basic principle of our exile government. One of my teachers in critique of it says so succinctly: “We look for freedom IN the world and not freedom FROM the world.”

Seeking Buddhahood is one thing and freedom for a country is another. “Chosi-Sung-Drel” the philosophy of rule in Tibet — a harmony of Spiritual and Temporal principles — may sound wonderful but is it working today? It might have worked in that isolated independent Government of Tibet before 1949. The Spiritual has mainly meant Buddhism; does the practice of this philosophy then provide the secularism that the charter of the Exile Government promises?

These are my concerns, and yet I love the Lhabsol, the ancient ritual where after a public prayer we throw tsampa in the air and shout: “Lha Gyal lo!” Victory to the gods! I love the bright colours of the prayer flags, the poetic act of sending prayers in the wind on windhorses (lungta)
the folk songs and dances, so rich and colourful; my eyes well up in tears when I watch such cultural performances. And our Buddhist culture, which we have carefully studied and nurtured for the past 14 centuries, is so incredibly profound. All this gives us a cultural identity, a sense of belonging, even though as refugees every evening we return to our rented rooms, and have no real home to live in.

It’s a matter of great celebration that even though we lost our land to foreign invasion and suffered catastrophic destruction, we never gave up. With the care and leadership of His Holiness we have rebuilt our community and culture in exile. Our resilience gave us the strength and we survived the Cultural Revolution, while it proved catastrophic in China. Today, with the new spiritual awakening, as the younger generation of Chinese search for their cultural roots, do they find much in the morally corrupted and capitalistic country that China is today, being run by the CCP in the name of communism?

For the past two months I have been simultaneously working with seven writers and poets in Dharamsala translating into Tibetan and English a long poem originally written by a Tibetan woman poet, Woeser, in Chinese. I look at her act of writing “Secret Tibet” as an effort to reach to the Chinese masses to make them understand how much the Tibetan people suffer under their occupation.

Next month, the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao is scheduled to visit India. Here is another opportunity for us to make Beijing know of our earnest desire for freedom and how much we are ready for it. The Chinese are very conscious of their newfound image as the fastest developing nation in the world. And this time, when their Prime Minister comes to India to talk business and borders, we must remind him that he has been feasting off Tibet, and raise the issue that China cannot dance on our backs and yet at the same time shake hands with India.

This is not only a duty but also our right. This will make the Chinese ask themselves “Why do the Tibetans shame us?” Just as the Americans asked after 9/11, “Why do the Muslims hate us?”
Two Tunnels
INTERNAL FIRE

The problem is our unprecedented fast-forward move into the outside modern world. While in isolation, we missed the winds of change that swept the world beyond the Himalayas after the Second World War. So behind the Himalayas the community had become a feudal society run by mostly orthodox religious leaders and power-hungry aristocrats. Though on one hand our scholars had taken Buddhism to new levels of understanding and practice, on the other hand it was increasingly becoming a ritualistic mumbo-jumbo with a huge capacity for blind faith.

From school time, I grew up with a fascination for Tibetan intellectuals like Gedun Chophel, Dhondup Gyal, Dawa Norbu, Jamyang Norbu and Lhasang Tsering. Milarepa and Ling Gesar are my all-time favourite Tibetan icons.

As a schoolboy, in eighth standard, I remember watching Lhasang Tsering making dramatic speeches “fluent in Tibetan and English”—from the rooftop of Friends’ Corner restaurant in McLeod Ganj—to a sea of emotionally-charged Tibetans and foreigners. It was so inspiring watching him lead all the people in Dharamsala to unity with one slogan.

And then, slowly, I learned about the other side of their stories; the uneasiness and the struggle they had to undergo personally to bring out their new ideas and new ways of working in the community to the point that they were almost ostracized by the public. So, suddenly, their work looked confusing to me at that age, grappling with the idea of patriotism and also the need for change from within the community.

In 1997 I met Jamyang Norbu and Lhasang Tsering for the first time when I returned from my Tibet trip. I had gone to Amony Machen Institute to meet them. I was nervous to speak to them, but I told them...
my impressions of Tibet and the story of my imprisonment there.

I now meet Gyen Lhasang Tsering regularly in Dharamsala and remain in touch with Jamyang Norbu over emails and phone calls. I read Dawa Norbu’s book *Red Star Over Tibet* when I was in school. In 2002, when I met him in person, he spoke highly about my poetry. It was such an encouragement for me. I respect them all for their work for Tibet and for who they are.

Interestingly, all of them had a good English education and also wrote in English. Their foreign education gave them a different perspective and their expressions were often found conflicting and sometimes clashing with traditional Tibetan thinking.

English language expressions can be easily seen as disrespectful, even interpreted as arrogance by not-so-well-meaning people. Moreover, those were the years of Tibetan insecurity, usually expressed in the name of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. All three of them were trapped in the treacherous quagmire of being “anti-Dalai Lama”. And this is the worst thing to happen when you are so sincerely working for the cause. Just because you work and think differently you are labelled like this.

Often I have been cautioned against this by our elder generation Tibetans. But times have changed! If I had been born 20 years back, I too could have attracted pointed fingers for all the socio-political criticism I have been writing. Today, we have a much larger number of people with modern education, playing key roles in the society; and Democracy and Pluralism share some place in the Dharamsala psychology.

While this story is a singular and linear narrative, talking about these three people as foremost modern thinkers and writers in the exile Tibetan community, however – along with K. Dhondup and Tsering Wangyal – they did leave in their wake an impressive lineage of new Tibetan thinking, and set the ball rolling for Tibetan writing in English. For this they will always be remembered.
It is sad that Dawa Norbu died even before the wider Tibetan community realized his contribution to Tibet. As is the fate met by most thinkers, poets and artists, he will now be recognized posthumously. However, Lhasang Tsering and Jamyang Norbu still live among us. Along with the change we seek from outside, let us change from within.
Hindustan Times, November 2006

WATER MATTERS

Forgetting politics, the waters from the Tibetan Plateau are enough headaches between China and India

Over and above the insulting 47 years of China’s occupation of Tibet, the PRC has been most extraordinarily provocative this year. After linking the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, to Beijing with a direct railway network in July – in the face of protests from Tibetans and Tibetan supporters worldwide – “China has launched two other railway lines that permanently attach Tibet to China, daily disgorging no less than 4,000 Chinese in the heart of the snowland.

As if this is not enough colonial aggression, China gifted the biggest-ever statue of Mao Zedong to Lhoka, the airport town 20 minutes’ drive from Lhasa, as a symbol of cultural victory. Then, riding high with confidence, Chinese and Tibetan officials from the regional administration in Lhasa started hurling abuses at His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

And just last month, when we learned that Chinese police on the Tibet-Nepal border had shot at a group of Tibetans escaping over the Nangpala pass on their way to India, killing two escapees “like dogs”, we were enraged. The shooting outrage captured by a Romanian TV crew was screened at a public gathering here in Dharamsala. My immediate reaction was to sprint down the hills and set fire to the Chinese Embassy in Delhi.

But, no. We want to find a peaceful solution to our political problem; we do not want to take the shortcut by picking up guns. It is easy to do that. We do not want to take to arms because we still haven’t lost hope in a peaceful solution under the Dalai Lama’s leadership so that tomorrow, even after freeing Tibet, we can live with the Chinese as our neighbours. We do not want to end up like Israel and Palestine.
Tibet as a Zone of Peace is what the Tibetan youngsters dream of, “a sacred dream” we are all struggling to turn it into a reality. This is my lifetime commitment.

Non-violence is not a strategy for us. It’s a holistic way of living, our basic principle for life. But not all six million Tibetans share the same commitment to this ideology. Some youth activists are so frustrated with this long route that they sneer at our Gandhigiri to free Tibet and criticize it for being worth only a two-column report in newspapers.

When our world is being torn apart by violence spearheaded by two of the world’s most powerful nations, the US and the UK, and the media only responds to more dramatic demonstrations by showing images of bleeding activists and newly-bombed smouldering houses, no wonder some modern-educated Tibetans seek inspiration from Hanuman’s exploits in Lanka to stage a Shanghai carnage.

Tibetans crossing the mountains to India say that the Chinese refer to Bharat as “Indu” where the population eats rice and lentil porridge with their hands, licking their forearms from fingers to elbow. This is the perception of India in China. Except for viewing a few Bollywood films, today’s Chinese have no way of knowing India. International media hardly penetrates the “Great Motherland” due to language barriers and cultural chauvinism.

Here, too, the average Indians’ imagination of China hasn’t gone beyond stereotypes; my Tibetan face is enough to invite catcalls like “ching-chong ping-pong” on Indian streets. The local image of China hasn’t graduated beyond Jackie Chan films.

So what are we actually talking about in the year of “Sino-Indian Friendship”? In reality nothing beyond deep mistrust and unending mystery. Except for the popularity of chowmein noodles and Tiger Balm ointments in India nothing has really transpired between the two countries.
Independent India’s first economic tie with Communist China was marked by what is now called the 1954 Panchsheel Trade Agreement. This was the first official document signed with Mao’s China by a third party, recognizing Tibet as a region of the PRC after the PLA’s invasion of Tibet in 1949. With this, India kicked off its diplomatic relations with China on a wrong footing, squandering the high ground of knowledge on the historic status of Tibet inherited from the waning British Empire. Nehru’s socialists signed away Tibet’s Independence without a word with the Tibetans.

This was the first time the government of modern India dealt with China officially. If India had no cross border relations with China before this, it was simply because there never was a common border between the two great Asian nations. With Tibet as a buffer state between imperial Russia, Qing dynasty China and the former British Empire, the imperialist powers maintained a wary distance from each other while playing the Great Game. Since independence, India has not really made any changes to its foreign policy on Tibet.

What is making India think twice today about Tibet is the geopolitical issues, how India and her South Asian neighbours are being adversely affected by what Beijing has been up to in Tibet in recent years. China’s development schemes for the Tibetan Plateau include large-scale mining, clear-fell deforestation, infrastructure and road-building and a burgeoning tourism industry.

Meanwhile, Indians living on the banks of ‘pagal nadi’, the mighty Brahmaputra, have been devastated by death and destruction as the river changes its course every season and floods due to heavy siltation caused by the ruthless deforestation of Tibet. Now environmentalists fear even more devastation and drought as China plans to divert a region of the Brahmaputra to the Mainland to quench the thirst of lands dried up under the development policies of Beijing.
Geopolitical experts say that if gold is seen as oil today, tomorrow it will be seen as water. With global warming, climate change and heavy industrial pollution destroying the globe, tomorrow fresh water will have unprecedented value. And Tibet, the 2.5 million square kilometer landmass situated on the Roof of the World, is perhaps the world’s major storehouse of fresh water in the form of glaciers, lakes and rivers. About a hundred rivers in South Asia originate from the Tibetan Plateau. So tomorrow, whoever controls Tibet will hold the power to rule Asia.

Tibet may be controlled by China today, but with one and a half lakh Tibetans living in India across 40 refugee camps, 100 schools and 500 monasteries, their leaders – both the Dalai Lama and the Gyalwa Karmapa – forced to be here, and even their exile government based in India, when recalling the 2,000 years of cultural brotherhood the Tibetans have had with India may just decide the benefits lie with India not under China.

As Chinese President Hu Jintao visits India next week, the two fast-growing Asian giants poised to become world leaders will be seen flexing their muscles like a thundering dragon and an awakened, trumpeting elephant. With both being mammoth developing countries, their nature and modes of production, requirements for raw materials and power, and their searches for greener markets are parallel.

China and India are today locked in a competitive drive that is proving worse than war. There may perhaps never be a 1962 stand-off, but impending military threats, the military build-up on the border (where India used to have 60 solitary soldiers to guard its border with Independent Tibet in 1948, a military historian tells me India is now spending 63 crores every day), and this cutthroat competition in business are all becoming so costly and even more damaging than real time physical battles.
I am born in India, but I cannot become Indian. I once went to Tibet to see the situation myself. There I was arrested, imprisoned and finally thrown out by Chinese who called me “Indian”. In India we are living as refugees, but legally we are foreigners. China’s occupation of Tibet has left us homeless, our families broken and separated with nowhere to go. The situation inside Tibet is much worse. Tibetans are oppressed under the law, armed police, military and by the majority Han Chinese population.

In the past I have protested against the continued occupation of Tibet during visits to India by Chinese leaders. For this I’ve been beaten up, imprisoned and battled through long, drawn-out court cases. But I am not going to keep silent. I will protest again. This is my primary duty.
Tibetan Review, January 2007

PROTEST POWER

A people’s power that is once again revitalizing
the Tibetan freedom movement

Before it happened our Superintendent of Police, Kangra District, called me to his office twice and tried to advise me to keep silent. He even told some senior exile Tibetan government officials to counsel me. And when everything failed he slapped an official detention order on me saying that I couldn’t leave the hill town of Dharamsala for 14 days – “till the tension had subsided” in India’s capital.

Hu Jintao, President of the People’s Republic of China, was visiting India and the host government had to somehow keep me away from the scene of their diplomatic display of friendship and desire for business contracts – fearing I might repeat my protest stunts by breaching security and inviting myself to their banquet table shouting “FREE TIBET”.

The order states that I was detained due to my provocative protests in 2002 and 2005 – when Chinese Prime Ministers Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao visited India – and also on “substantial evidence” of plans to protest this time and add Hu Jintao to the list.

For the 10 April 2005 caper, I hid myself on the balcony of the bell tower atop India’s premier science institution for 24 hours. I had climbed the building the night before China’s Prime Minister was to address a conference in the Indian Institute of Science. So, as Wen Jiabao started his speech on the ground floor, I emerged onto the tower’s balcony brandishing the Tibetan national flag – a legal proof of nationhood that’s banned in Tibet – shouting “FREE TIBET”. By then unfurling a huge red banner reading “FREE TIBET” and flinging leaflets in the air, the massive media coverage meant to focus on the Chinese premier was instantly redirected to the plight of Tibet.
India was therefore worried that the nation’s security might be breached for the third time. So, along with the detention notice, 15 policemen in plainclothes with four cars and two motorbikes were deployed to observe my activities. There was no restriction within Dharamsala district, however the police joined me everywhere – in the toilet, at meetings, to restaurants, and even watched me buy the morning’s newspapers.

At our police headquarters I had my mug shot taken twice to be circulated, along with the detention notice, to all police stations in Himachal Pradesh state, not to mention Agra, Delhi and Mumbai – the cities Hu was to visit. By then I was finding everything amusing since I live frugally and save rupees by always walking up and down the hill roads in this district of the lower Himalayas. And suddenly there are all these cops following me. My Tibetan friends started calling them my “bodyguards”. Initially I found this intimidating, but it didn’t take time for me to understand the duty they were performing.

Nearer to the date of Hu’s arrival, the police again summoned me; the Additional Superintendent of Police placed me in front of him, explaining that the order was from the Central Government in Delhi and it would be better for me and for all Tibetans that I abide by the directive. “You are a Tibetan, a foreigner. You are here because of India giving you refuge. Why don’t you obey when the government tells you not to protest? As a foreigner, you do not have any right to do any political activity here”. And then he warned me, “If you breach this detention notice, we will have to deport you”. I said, “When I breach this notice in a few days, please do just that. I WANT to confront China face-to-face in my OWN COUNTRY. Please deport me.” The SP wanted me to give him my assurance that I wouldn’t slip away from here. I said, “Who am I to decide? I listen to only one thing”. He listened carefully, and then I continued “Life has thrust on me this responsibility for the freedom struggle. I listen only to this duty.”

I then consulted my lawyer friend Mr. Deepak Thakur, an advocate with
Delhi’s High Court, an expert on refugee law. He said “Tsundue la, Tibetans as foreigners are in India because of the government’s permission allowing you to stay in India and it has absolute power to control all your activities including imposing the restriction on you not to move out of Dharamsala for a specific period.” Then I asked myself “As a human being do we have no right to protest injustice? United Nations doesn’t take our membership, big countries talk of justice, peace and non-violence, but their business interests far supersede these high morals. Now where shall I take my protest?”

By then the news of my detention was spreading like wildfire across all the media. Letters of support were pouring in from all corners of the world. Young Tibetans were inspired and fired by the detention notice and so my friends were saying, “Let’s all go to Delhi if Tsundue can’t.” Then six major Tibetan NGOs banded together and orchestrated the “Chalo Delhi” Tibetan People’s Movement to mobilize a huge gathering of Tibetans in Delhi to sit there in protest. Then, when this was posted on the internet, Tibetans and Tibet supporters the world over sent donations to ensure the success of this spontaneous movement.

This in turn inspired me. For me, my protest activities are only a small fraction of my work for the freedom struggle. Creating a Tibetan Movement from within the Tibetan community has been the most important focus of my work. And when I saw the flowering of this momentum being created before my eyes I saw no reason to escape Dharamsala and go anywhere. So on the day when our people were being bussed down to Delhi, I met the chief of police again and requested smooth and safe passage for those demonstrators and a guarantee of police protection for our people who would sit in protest in Delhi.

Then I decided to stay. But I made it very clear to the police that the moment our peaceful public protest was disrupted by them we would have to play the old “chor-police” cat-and-mouse game. That evening, when almost a thousand emotionally-charged Tibetans gathered at McLeod Ganj square to board the buses for Delhi, I looked at the police
surrounding us. No lathis. No side arms. The police hierarchy had kept their promise. But that night they stepped-up their vigilance on me to around 20 policemen and a fleet of cars and motorbikes choking the tiny, congested square.

On the second day of the protest in Delhi, the police had asked all Tibetan protesters to stay in the Tibetan camp and said they would allow them to come to the protest site the next day. We suspected it as a ploy, and doubted they would turn up at 7.30am the next morning. With two mobile phones, one tapped by police, I was waiting with bated breath for news from my friends in Delhi at 7am. I had my plans made if things turn out otherwise.

The protest went smoothly, with police protection. The police again kept their promise and even escorted the protestors on their way to Jantar Mantar, the protest site in central Delhi. India supported us when we lost Tibet to the Chinese invasion. After 47 years in exile, we are once again fighting China with more than 130,000 exile Tibetans living in India in 40 refugee camps, 100 Tibetan schools, and over 500 monasteries across India. India’s support has resuscitated our dreams of a Free Tibet. The Tibetans remain grateful to India. On the other hand, India’s policy that Tibet is a part of China – the policy inherited from the British Raj – has placed India herself in a dilemma today.

We Tibetans have no political strings to pull, no money power, we have no crude oil to offer in exchange for help; what we have is only history and truth. Our struggle is based on truth, and non-violence is our principle of life. By sheer power of protest, people’s power, we draw the attention of the world. For the truth we fight for, we are willing to sacrifice everything, even our lives. With the arrival of younger generation Tibetans on the horizon bringing in new education, skills and worldwide contacts, this time, we have made China and India realize that without solving Tibet’s issue there can be no lasting friendship between the two republics founded in 1949 and 1947 respectively. The issue of Tibet covered up by China
as “internal” and ignored by India as “foreign” is today staring in their face.

After everything was over, a Tibetan woman who had recently escaped from Lhasa came up to me and said “you sound the end of ‘Dao’.” She said: “A Chinese astrologer predicted the end of new China when a leader called Dao comes in. That’s when the new China will see itself in its epitome of progress and from his rule, just like grapes, ‘Dao’ in Chinese will rot; then China will start to degenerate”. She said you people say “Hu Jintao.” It’s the wrong pronunciation. The correct name is “Hu Jindao”.

About the Author

Tenzin Tsundue is a restless young Tibetan who, after graduating from Madras, South India, braved snowstorms and treacherous mountains, broke all rules and restrictions, crossed the Himalayas on foot into forbidden Tibet! The purpose? To find out if he could lend a hand or two in the freedom struggle. He was arrested by the Chinese border police and pushed back to India after cooling his heels in prison in Lhasa for three months.

Born to a Tibetan refugee family who laboured on India’s border roads during the chaotic era of Tibetan refugee resettlement in the early seventies, Tenzin Tsundue is a writer-activist, a rarity in the exile Tibetan community.

He published his first book of poems “Crossing the Border” while doing his Masters degree in Literature from Bombay University. He won the ‘Outlook-Picador Award for Non-Fiction’ in 2001. In this all-India contest Tsundue took first prize from 900 entries. His second book Korai is in its fifth edition, selling more than 10,000 copies, besides French and Malayalam translations. His third book – Sanshook, a compilation of essays on the Tibetan freedom movement – was published in March 2007.

Because of him staging two prior protest actions against Chinese leaders in Bombay and Bangalore, the Government of India restricted his movements at the request of the Beijing government during President Hu Jintao’s visit to India in November 2006. He was detained within Dharamsala jurisdiction for 14 days, surveilled by police and an intelligence escort.

Tsundue has been wearing a red headband for the past six years which, he says, marks his pledge that he will work everyday for the freedom of his country and never take it off until Tibet is free. Red for him is the colour of courage.


As a poet he represented Tibet in the Second South Asian Literary Conference in New Delhi in January 2005 organized by Sahitya Akademi, Poetry Africa 2005 in Durban, South Africa and KATHA Asia International Utsav 2006, New Delhi. Both as an activist and a writer, Tsundue fights tooth and nail, night and day for the freedom of his country. His writings are published online at www.friendsoftibet.org/tenzin
About TibetWrites

Exile and dislocation has given us the linguistic skill to express ourselves fluently in English and to read what the world beyond Tibet writes. Influenced by teachers, professors, the riches of libraries, film and the performing arts, our educations in India, Nepal and the diaspora beyond have given us our own voices. TibetWrites emerged from a core of writers and poets creating in the English language and now includes translators fluent in Chinese, English and Tibetan, filmmakers, artists, cartoonists, scriptwriters and researchers – some with privileged educations in Beijing, Lanzhou, Lhasa, the USA, England and India.

Although we post the creative work of Tibetans, TibetWrites benefits from the input and collaboration of international friends who are themselves acclaimed writers, editors, photographers, computer wizards, social workers and research analysts.

On our website you will find the works of Woenser – the star among our literary contemporaries who writes poems, essays and illuminating blogs in highly creative Mandarin. The political thinking of Baba Phuntsok Wangyal is also posted in a translation from Chinese by TibetWrites’ publishing team for our book – Baba Phuntsok Wangyal: WITNESS TO TIBET’S HISTORY. (See www.paljorpublications.org)

TibetWrites will publish further works in English, Tibetan and Chinese. The breadth of our content is varied and inclusive. We invite your feedback, involvement and contributions.

Special thanks to: Ibiblio and Worldbridges for hosting us for free, and James “Cyber Wallah” Walker – who single-handedly has worked to empower so many exile Tibetans on the World Wide Web – for being a guide, guru and a friend. And Jane Perkins, our editor.

Tenam
Bhuchung D. Sonam

TibetWrites
Dharamsala, February 2008
Written with the passion of a lifelong activist for a Free Tibet, and the eye for detail of a poet, these essays bring to life the struggle of Tibetans – in global exile – to regain an independent homeland. These are the powerful essays of a powerless, homeless man who has dedicated his life to showing how much difference one person can make if they live and breathe *semshook*, an embodied commitment to truth, speaking the truths governments of all persuasions do not wish to hear. With humour, much story-telling, and poignant details of what it means to be a refugee in day-to-day life, Tenzin Tsundue brings us face to face with both the pain and achievements of exile which he celebrates.

*TibetWrites*

*TibetWrites* is a Tibetan writers’ circle that, besides running the literary website tibetwrites.org, focuses on and publishes the creative work of contemporary Tibetan writers.

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