

The Dharma of Politics

By Rebecca Novick

"If we serve sentient beings by engaging in political activities with a spiritual orientation, we are actually following the bodhisattva's way of life." HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA



I met my lama at a demonstration. It's hard to imagine a less spiritual place – a busy intersection beneath the drab utilitarian architecture of the Los Angeles Federal Building at rush hour. It was December 10, 1991 – International Human Rights Day. Less than one year later, I found myself half way around the world in the North Indian town of Dharamsala, filming a documentary about human rights abuses in Tibet. I remember my teacher telling me once, "Spirituality and politics aren't different. People think they are, but they are the same." He put out his two forefingers and rubbed them together side by side as he spoke.

I had never been interested in politics before I became a Buddhist, but the Tibetan cause seemed to be

a special case because it represented something beyond the sphere of conventional political goals. This thought was echoed in something that His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said: "The political struggle for the restoration of Tibetan freedom should not be seen in the same light as we view ordinary politics." He went on to explain that this is because Tibetan freedom is focused on a culture that "has the potential to bring happiness to all sentient beings".

In Tibet, taking refuge is a political act. The Guru – the fourth Jewel – embodies the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. The Dalai Lama, who China's leaders have called "a monster with a human face," is considered the guru of most Tibetans. Even possessing a photo of him can be cause for arrest. And because of the history of protest against its rule, the Communist Chinese government views Tibetan Buddhism itself as a seditious system. But even before the Chinese occupation, Tibetans happily merged Dharma and politics, with a system of government made up largely of monastics, and a domestic policy based on religious principles. The Tibetan freedom struggle is rooted in the Dharma. It's no coincidence that monks and nuns are usually at the forefront of dissent.

In speaking with hundreds of Tibetan men and women – torture survivors and veterans of protests in Tibet from fifty years ago to the present – I've heard stories that both break your heart and mend it. Many of these people told me about doing *tonglen* for their torturers – mentally taking on their suffering and negative karma and giving them their happiness. A young nun told me how she prayed every night that tomorrow

the prison guards would beat *her* instead of her cellmates. Ani Pachen described how, after being released from a nine-month sentence of solitary confinement, she asked the guards to close the door because she hadn't finished her retreat. Every day, Mahayanists are taught to pray to take on the suffering of the world. These are people who really *know* how to live and die for others.

In the pain and loss that went along with these experiences, it has been repeatedly brought home to me that the Dharma we now enjoy in the West spilled out of Tibet in rivers of blood and tears. To my confused and painfully self-conscious mind, the Buddha's teachings seemed a miraculous elixir of sanity and happiness. Maybe it's just the way I was raised, but I couldn't imagine taking it without a proper thank you. I joined a local Tibet Support Group, organized campaigns, and stayed up late licking cheap envelopes. Later, I started a radio program about Tibet. I also attended Dharma teachings and tried to practice them as well as I could. It wasn't always an easy balance, and I found myself thinking that if I could completely devote my life to my practice I would be a better practitioner. Or alternatively, if I just dedicated my life to activism it would make me a better activist. I don't think that way any more.

Things shifted during March of this year. I had been ramping up my practice for about a month before the protests in Tibet began. Rather than racing through my commitments as if I were being chased by wolves, I slowed down and allowed the meaning some time and space to seep in. The harmony of emptiness and dependent arising, for so long an exquisite idea lying on some distant shore, for the first time seemed to hold the promise of true revolution right

And then March 10, 2008 arrived. Tibet erupted, and I was flung off my cushion and back out onto the street. The shift felt completely natural, as if the work in the world was simply a continuum of the work in the mind. The tension I had sometimes felt between the two seemed to have disappeared. And strange as it may sound, there was a huge sense of joy among my activist friends, even with the emotionally difficult news coming out of Tibet. It felt like *tsundü*, enthusiastic effort. Simply, joy in doing good. The feeling of camaraderie among those who work for Tibet transcends all boundaries of age, race and culture. This isn't just a *Tibetan* cause. It belongs to all of us.

Not everyone responded in the same way, of course. Some practitioners understandably took off for a bit of peace and quiet away from the action where people *weren't* shouting and marching all day long. Others got involved for the first time in their lives and found themselves standing on street corners handing out flyers and forwarding email petitions to their office buddies. One Dharma friend who'd been frustrated at not knowing what to do with herself had the idea of writing out the bodhicitta prayer that the Tibetans were chanting all the time into English, and passing it out to the foreign media who had flocked to Dharamsala after the protests broke out. A simple but meaningful act. On visiting a hermit friend up in the mountains, I noted a small Tibetan flag on the wall of his retreat hut that hadn't been there before.

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under my nose. I spent my days merrily experimenting with ways to actually *enact* this liberating reality, however imperfectly, rather than simply admiring it and chatting about it with my Dharma friends.

Mahayana practitioner: generosity, morality, patience, enthusiastic effort, concentration and wisdom. I'd read in a booklet, *Gems of the Heart*, by the Dalai Lama, "If we serve sentient beings by engaging in political activities with

a spiritual orientation, we are actually following the bodhisattva's way of life." As the days rolled on, these words seemed to come alive as the practice became the action, the action became the practice. It all seemed to arise as *tenjung*, interdependent origination.

It was in this atmosphere that the Dalai Lama gave three days of teachings on emptiness to about two hundred Westerners in a hotel in New Delhi. The audience included heavyweights of Tibetan Buddhist thought, including Jeffrey Hopkins, Alexander Berzin, Anne Klein, Georges Dreyfus and Bob Thurman. It was the fourth week of March, and in light of the turmoil in Tibet, it was remarkable that the

today this struggle is being played out in the living rooms of Kham, Amdo and U-Tsang, and in the monasteries and nunneries of Tibet.

It was at these same teachings that Bob Thurman told me that those who think that Tibet is a lost cause are suffering from "a failure of imagination". He said that the Tibetan cause is "a complete focus of where the energy should go. The Tibet freedom movement must not be allowed to fail. It represents the antidote to all the trends that are destroying the planet: commercialism, industrialism, militarism and environmental destruction". Besides, he notes, it is on the whole a joyful movement.

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teachings went ahead. His Holiness was clearly distracted and disturbed. During the question and answer session on the second day, one of the attendees brought up the elephant in the room and asked "How can we help Tibet?" His Holiness looked genuinely at a loss. "I am helpless," he said. His face showed that he meant it. "I don't know. Perhaps you can give it some thought." He looked carefully around the room at each of us.

He then told the story of a French monk in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition who had told him, "You know, I really love the Buddhadharma, but I'm not interested in the Tibetan cause." His Holiness recalled saying to him, "The freedom of the Tibetan people is a guarantor of the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism. When you work for the Tibetan cause, you are really joining the Nalanda struggle." He was referring to ancient India's great institution of learning that became a focus of Mahayana Buddhism and was emulated in the great monastic centers in Tibet. Nalanda's destruction in the twelfth century by Muslim invaders, with the wholesale slaughter of monks and the burning of its library, said to have taken several months, sits in eerie comparison with the takeover of Tibet eight centuries later. The "Nalanda struggle" is the effort to keep truth and knowledge alive in times of darkness, and

While His Holiness the Karmapa was in Seattle addressing an audience of Dharma practitioners on his first US visit, he said something that surprised a number of those present. He'd been asked a question about the most important subjects for Dharma students to study in this age. Rather than giving instruction on individual practice, he spoke about the importance of engaging in actions for the benefit of the world and said that seeking personal liberation is no longer sufficient. "Go beyond limited concepts of what it means to have a Buddhist practice."

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