



Let his forehead glow

July, 6, 2005

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, is 70 years old today. What a remarkable life! At the age of four, he was enthroned as the incarnation of his predecessor, the Great Thirteenth who ruled Tibet between 1895 and 1933. The Land of Snows had for centuries managed to remain untouched by the changes and revolutions happening elsewhere in the world.

Tibet was still Shangrila on earth, when in October 1950, this serene state of affairs dramatically changed: The Chinese PLA marched unhindered on to Tibetan soil. A new ideology, less compassionate than the Buddha Dharma, pretended to 'liberate' the Land of Snows. For India, it translated into the loss of a buffer zone and a new neighbour. Its peaceful and undisputed northern border was soon the object of a bitter dispute which continues 55 years later.

In November 1950, at the age of 15, the young Lama became the formal head of the Tibetan nation. For a few years, he tried to 'cohabitate' with the invaders. In 1954, he went to China to meet his new Communist masters. He thought that Marxist ideology could perhaps be useful to develop and modernise his country. During six months, he had numerous encounters with Mao Zedong and other old revolutionaries from the Long March (he once told me, Marshall Peng Dehuai was his 'favourite').

While in Beijing, he even met Nehru, Khrushchev and Bulganin who had come on a state visit. Sometimes in the evening, the Great

Helmsman himself used to come to his guest house to discuss with him. Mao wanted to convince him that "religion is a poison". The Dalai Lama was ready to accept many compromises, but not this one. Dharma had ruled Tibet for centuries and his foremost objective was that religion should remain the centre of the nation's life.

On his return to Lhasa, he discovered the other ruthless and totalitarian aspects of Mao's religion: Compassion and tolerance had no place in the dictatorship of the party; Marxism could not help the Land of Snows. The rest of the story is well-known. In March 1959, after an uprising in Lhasa against the Chinese invaders had only brought suffering to the people, the Dalai Lama had to flee his country.

Following an epic ride through the highest passes of the world, he reached the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh and was immediately granted asylum by India. After a few months in Mussoorie, Nehru Government found a suitable place for him in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh. For the past 46 years, he has lived as a refugee in India, the land of Buddha.

While Nehru provided rehabilitation and education for 85,000 Tibetan refugees, the Indian Prime Minister made it clear from the start that India would not give political support to free Tibet from Chinese yoke. Delhi attached too much importance to an illusory friendship (or brotherhood) with Beijing. The Dalai Lama began then his quest to find a 'middle path' solution to the sufferings of his people. But what is this Middle Path?

Once, during an interview, I remember the Tibetan leader laughing away when he stated, "Non-violence, good, Chinese 1.2 billion, Tibetans six million, good." Indeed, what can a small, peaceful nation do against an aggressive neighbour whose population is 200 times

larger? His belief in non-violence is not just pragmatic; he practises it and lives by his Buddhist values. However, the Tibetan leader always remains down to earth. The Middle Path solution is probably born of this realism. He is convinced that if a solution has to be found to a problem, each party should make a step forward and meet in the middle.

But the Chinese are not easy negotiators. In 1920, the 13th Dalai Lama described thus the Chinese method: "The Chinese way is to do something rather mild at first; then to wait a bit, and if it passes without objection, to say or do something stronger. But if we take objection to the first statement or action, they urge that it has been a misunderstanding, and cease, for a time at any rate, from troubling us further."

When India and the World did not object to the invasion of Tibet, the harm was done. Now, to change a 55-year-old fait accompli, is not an easy task. The Dalai Lama had little choice but to drop his claim for independence and just plead for 'genuine autonomy'. This major compromise has taken the Dalai Lama half-way to his earlier request for independence.

Being in a position of force, Beijing probably believes that the Middle of the Path will continue to come closer to their position and the Tibetan leader will be forced to concede further compromises. Time seems to be on the side of the Chinese; Beijing knows that the Dalai Lama is not here forever. They know the weakness in the reincarnation system: There is always a gap of 20 years before a new leader is able to take the reins of the nation.

To gain time, they continue to blow hot and cold. While Beijing tells the Americans that they are ready to negotiate with the Dalai Lama's representatives, the latter are treated like 'overseas Chinese visitors'

when they go to China. Jampa Phuntsog, the puppet chairman of the Tibet Government in Lhasa, recently told Xinhua: "All the locals want the current stable and sound situation in Tibet to continue but the Dalai Lama, judging from his words and deeds, wants to destroy it." He added: "And the result is he has grown more and more unpopular in Tibet." It is just fake propaganda, but many are ready to bite it as it is so much easier to agree with China.

In these conditions, it is difficult to see how negotiations can even begin, especially when Beijing is investing billions of dollars in "China's Western Development" and particularly in Tibet. As Jampa Phuntsog says: "We have every reason to claim that Tibet is at its best time given its speeding economy, solid ethnic minority unity and consolidated border defence."

India has religiously tried to remain aloof, being so busy with the Hurryiat leaders' adventures in Pakistan or the quest for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. As in the 1950s, India is sleeping while Beijing speaks of "consolidated border defence". This clearly means the railway line coming to India's northern borders! Meanwhile, the Dalai Lama's margin of manoeuvre is getting very limited. Interestingly, he recently declared to a national daily that the "post of the Dalai Lama should be abolished if Tibet became autonomous and democratic."

But a democratic Tibet would mean a democratic China. Is Beijing ready for the Great Leap? It is very doubtful. The Tibetan leader, however, made it clear, "If I were to die in the next few months or before we were able to return to Tibet, there will be a new Dalai Lama." Six years ago, he had already explained, "(the) Dalai Lama's reincarnation will appear in a free country and not in Chinese hand as the purpose of a reincarnation is to carry the work started by the

previous life and yet not fulfilled."

Hopefully, reincarnation is still far away. Several years back, the Dalai Lama had told me of a Tibetan belief: When someone's forehead starts shining, it is an indication that the person's 'bad karma' is getting exhausted; a brighter future awaits him. On the occasion of his 70th Birthday, we can only wish His Holiness a very bright and shining forehead. No doubt, millions of persons around the world, who believe in justice, peace and non-violence, will be praying to see more and more of this glow on his forehead.

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