

Empowerment of Exiled-Tibetan Youth: in the fires of modernity.

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Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Why might some Tibetans become violent, and why is conflict resolution important?	4
Why target Tibetan youth?	6
What is the profile of Tibetan youth that sign up for such programs and how do they find out about it?	7
Youth Empowerment Programme 2007:	7
What are TCCR's aims of the workshop for each participant?	8
What practical tools are the students introduced to?	8
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opening & Blocking Language:• Active Listening• Basic Conflict Resolution• Non-Violent Communication	
But what has training in 'conflict resolution' got to offer that isn't already taught and practiced in Tibetan Buddhism?	9
What do the participants think they have learned?	10
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cooperation• Communication• Confrontation• Caution	
Conclusion.	11
Related Links:	13

Abstract:

Background: Tibetan culture is fighting to hold its own in the battle with modernity for the hearts of the upcoming generations. Young people, more than anyone else, are at the cutting edge of the shifting tides of culture and popular opinion, and it is here, in the heat and dynamism of the academic institutions and fast-developing market economy, that the future face of exiled Tibet will emerge from the fire.

Project: A 4-day workshop for exiled Tibetan students enrolled at Indian universities, with the aim of creating greater awareness and training in the concepts and skills of Conflict Resolution, and to inspire leadership within their own community.

Results/Conclusion: The students were able to make a connection between the practical tools of resolving conflicts and the virtues inherent in Tibetan Buddhism. Not only so, the workshop highlighted subtle misconceptions regarding the understanding of conflict. For example, that the polarity of conflict is first determined by one's perception and handling of the situation, and that self-expression is not always self-centred 'attachment', but can also be other-centred concern, enabling the other party to better understand one's suffering. The feedback from the students clearly indicate that the workshop empowered them to communicate more confidently and confrontationally, but also more cautiously, with greater awareness of the snares of 'ignorance' when faced with conflict situations.

Keywords:

Tibetan; conflict; empowerment; buddhism; youth; resolution.

> **Introduction**

The events following the March 10th demonstrations against Chinese occupation in Tibet has brought the plight of Tibetans to the world's attention like never before in the run-up to the Olympic Games in Beijing in August this year. Although a number of Tibetan protesters have violently provoked yet another heavy crackdown by the Chinese authorities, they have also provoked a cascade of 'Free Tibet' demonstrations the world over in the last 2 months. Perhaps the international community's sympathetic perception of the Tibetan, non-violent struggle for survival, their admiration of the Dalai Lama's wisdom and influence, and their openness to the teachings of Buddhism at large, has justified a license to take sides against the Chinese empire, whose rising super-power and alien political systems seems to evoke Cold War antibodies. While it may be justified to strengthen the weak and advocate for the oppressed, a line is, however, crossed in the human-felt need to lay blame and create an enemy out of our oppressors. How can the international community therefore, do more for the Tibetan people, who have found a place in many of our hearts, without giving the Chinese cause to become defensive? How can threats of Olympic and 'Made in China' boycotts help Tibet's leaders enter into meaningful dialogue with the Chinese government? How can we combine our perception of freedom and equality with the vision of interdependence at the heart of Buddhism and other faith traditions? Although this article does not attempt to answer all of these questions, it examines an example of an initiative, seeking to inspire such a vision of interdependence among exiled Tibetan youth in India.

This article seeks to explain why Tibetans, like any other human being, can become violent; thereby contextualising the relevance of empowerment programs, such as Conflict Resolution Training among exiled Tibetans, particularly exiled Tibetan youth. The article gives an overview of the main skills and tools introduced by such training, and summarises the impact it has had on the participants outlook.

(* Unless otherwise stated, use of the word, 'Tibetans' refers to exiled-Tibetans.)

> ***Why might some Tibetans become violent, and why is conflict resolution important?***

It would be a misconception to only perceive Tibetans as peace-loving, mindful, and harmonious. In fact, the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1951 did not ravage a virgin land, innocent of regional and sectarian conflict. On the contrary, Tibet's history is wrought with tribal violence and war! Not only has Tibet seen internal rivalry between the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism throughout the centuries, but they have warred with Nepal in 1792 and 1858; Ladakh, in 1842; the British, in 1903; and China, in 1720s, and 1910.⁷ It seems therefore that Tibetans, like much of the human race, have been exposed to violent conflict for centuries. His Holiness The Dalai Lama, in his inauguration of the Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution, (TCCR) in November 2000, stated that conflict is an unavoidable part of being human:

'As long as there is human society, there will always be conflict. As I always say that if we do not want conflict at all, we have to make the entire humanity stupid or dull, and then there will be no problem at all...As long as there is human intellect, there will, without doubt, be different ideas, viewpoints, and

*outlooks. This is also a basis for human conflict. As long as human beings have conscience, and intellect capable of thinking about the future, there will be conflicts. Conflicts are made by human beings and methods to solve them must be created by human intelligence.*⁸

The Tibetan political and spiritual leader has unquestionably, a vision for Tibetan unity and a recognition that the work of organisations like TCCR will help to actualise such a vision among the Tibetan community. Even if the conflict over Tibetan independence cannot be resolved, there is no shortage of internal and intercultural issues on either side of the Indo-Tibetan border to take its place. For example, 1st-generation Tibetan exiles or 'new-comers' might be judged and ostracised as being rude, harsh, and uncivilised, or for their clothing or appearance by Tibetans who have lived their whole life in exile. The new-comers, in return, might judge 2nd or 3rd generation Tibetan exiles as conformist to Western ideals of consumerism and individualism, and perhaps also for compromising the dharma, (Buddhist teaching) or their political call of duty.

An unavoidable reality that all Tibetans must face, however, (whether they have been oppressed by the Chinese authorities and risked the treacherous journey over the Himalayas or not) is that all exiled Tibetans live at the mercy of the Indian government and the cooperation of the Indian people. Fortunately, India seems largely unconcerned by their Tibetan neighbours, in a land that is perhaps just as renowned for its accommodation of diversity as its intolerance thereof. However, in a land as diverse as India, generalisations bring no security guarantee. With Sino-Indian relations growing stronger in recent years, an indefinite future for exiled Tibetans in India cannot be taken for granted. Everyday is therefore a constant test of character, treading carefully on Indian soil so as not to spark a conflict that might burn their bridges.

Most Tibetans in India cannot even rest on the laurels of refugee status as few actually fulfil the criteria. Most flee from Tibet because they seek the opportunity to practice Tibetan Buddhism and experience Tibetan culture in freedom. They are drawn by the educational opportunities, (including the English language) and the inspiration of being near their political and spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. Those who do not qualify for refugee status are issued Registration Cards, (RCs) which must be renewed annually. The dream of emigrating further a field to Europe, America or Australia becomes a reality for very few, who must first be in possession of a passport. Many exiled Tibetans are ashamed to carry a Chinese passport, which may have been confiscated, lost or discarded, leaving them with the moral dilemma of forging a counterfeit in order to keep such a dream alive. In addition to this, they must obtain a letter of invitation from a friend or relative in their desired country of emmigration, raise adequate funds for a flight ticket and visa, and a measure of good fortune with the emmigration authorities! Tibetans are, however, not land-locked upon arrival in India or Nepal. In fact, the Dalai Lama himself encourages most new arrivals to return to Tibet and empower the Tibetan community of Tibet with the inspiration of Tibetan Buddhism and Democracy. The statistics from the Exiled-Tibetan Reception Centre reveal that 70% of 1st generation Tibetans do in fact return again to Tibet.⁶ One might argue that this is good news, as the exiled Tibetan community simply cannot contain the constant flow of new arrivals. Unemployment is of increasing concern because of the challenge to cater for the educational and employment needs of a growing exile community. Although India have

been very generous in extending free education to Tibetan children, they are, eventually, more than likely required to run the gauntlet of Indian communalism and regionalism, if they are to compete for jobs. Within the settlements, a Tibetan bias might work in their favour, but this may not serve as much consolation if there are little jobs to choose from. The stigma attached to vocational training offered to students with inadequate grades for university, also creates employment instability and disillusionment, which for many, precipitates and perpetuates the problem of unemployment and substance abuse, which in turn cripples the function of the family unit, breeding poverty for future generations.

As has already been mentioned, Tibet itself is so stranger to tribal conflict, whether it be inter-state, inter-class, or inter-school conflict. Those who return to Tibet are therefore confronted with no lesser a complex of problems albethey even greater? On top of probable internal animosity concerning the decision to stay or flee from Tibet, the season of exile, and of Chinese occupation in Tibet over the last 50 years has increased the diversity of cultural expression, language, and political viewpoints. It is no secret that Tibet has been undergoing rapid cultural and infrastructural change, particularly in the urban areas. The completion of the highest railway line in the world from Beijing to Lhasa in 2006 is likely to increase the flow of Chinese migration, perpetuating Chinese domination and Tibetan decline. Although the Chinese government has improved employment opportunities and income in urban areas, the Chinese have taken control of the various employment sectors, including health and law-enforcement. The Dalai Lama has called it 'cultural genocide' and the Tibetan community face poverty and cultural imprisonment if they do not succumb to Chinese ideology and their re-education program. It is for these reasons that training workshops in 'conflict resolution' have been deemed relevant and important for exiled Tibetans.

> ***Why target Tibetan youth?***

Tibetan culture is fighting to hold it's own in the battle with modernity for the hearts of the upcoming generations. The moral heritage of the Tibetan people is being severely tested as their ticket to freedom is often perceived as 'economic prosperity', leading them into the danger zone of a materialistic world of capitalism and individualism. Such a tidal pull is threatening the very fabric of communal Tibetan existence. There cannot be many Tibetans who face this 'tidal pull' more than the current young generation. Indian and Tibetan youth alike, are exposed to a culture that promotes the personal pursuit of wealth and well-being, often dismissing tradition and religious practice as 'old-fashioned' and undervaluing family and social support networks, which serve as the mainstay of both Indian and Tibetan society. Indian and Tibetan students alike are faced with the challenge of working out how to straddle the culture and values of their past with the opportunities and prospects of the future. History has shown that the young generation bear the potential energy that can transform the culture of society. E.g. The Cultural Revolution in China, The Civil Rights Movement in the US etc. It is therefore no surprise that one of the largest NGO's in India, 'The Art of Living'¹ is also prioritising 'empowerment' workshops for young people.

Tibetans are severely outnumbered in the Indian universities, many of whom are the only Tibetans in their class, or indeed their entire college! Often far from family and friends, the desire to feel accepted and included is strong, and many struggle with the dilemma of remaining true to their roots at the potential cost of enduring alienation, or neglecting their roots to feel included and accepted. Some Tibetan students describe only subtle emotional alienation, unable to fully connect or feel accepted in Indian culture, despite having lived in India their whole life. Others feel more desperate, struggling to deal with the anger that arises in the face of discrimination and isolation. It is while the blood is boiling to retaliate violently in word or deed, yet desperately trying to exercise 'patience' and self-restraint and remember the wisdom of Buddhism, that Tibetan youth need empowered, and equipped with the basic tools of conflict resolution. One might fear that unrestrained passions would otherwise set a blaze that would have dire consequences for the entire exiled Tibetan community in India.

> ***What is the profile of Tibetan youth that sign up for such programs and how do they find out about it?***

The Tibetan Youth Congress², (TYC) is the largest network of active non-violence in the exiled community, with 82 regional divisions in 11 countries around the world, most of which are in India, Nepal and Bhutan. Founded in 1970 at a conference of 315 Tibetan youths from India and Nepal, they resolved to struggle for Tibetan Independence, without succumbing to regionalism or sectarianism, under the guidance of H.H The Dalai Lama. Despite His Holiness's encouragement, *'to establish your present will and determination like a mountain'* their striving for 'complete independence' is a political agenda more radical than 'The Middle Way' approach currently advocated by him. One cannot ignore the significance of such a difference in the political mandate of the Tibetan people as frustration rises under Chinese oppression. It is largely the TYC that organises the 'Free Tibet' campaigns, including the 1998 Hunger Strike, which led to the martyrdom by self-incineration of Thupten Ngodup, mirroring the memory of Thich Quang Dee, 35 years earlier, during the Vietnam War. Two years later, Pema Lhundup, (Former General Secretary of TYC) died following his participation in the '1999 Unto Death Hunger Strike' in Geneva - the birthplace of the International Declaration of Human Rights, where he made this statement: *'Even if I die in this campaign, I have no regrets since our campaign in Geneva is one of the few non-violent means left for the Tibetan people to alert the world about the ongoing plight of the Tibetan people.'*

The TYC has many student divisions that cover about 90% of exiled Tibetan students. It works to support exiled Tibetan students through organising social events to help maintain and strengthen the sense of Tibetan identity and of course, champion the Tibetan cause, during the often alienating years of college. TCCR uses therefore the regional TYC student network to promote it's Youth Empowerment programme, and most of the participants are therefore TYC members, although not exclusively.

> ***Youth Empowerment Programme 2007:***

TCCR's Youth Empowerment Program for 2007 consisted of 2 teams, each providing a 4-day workshop in Basic Conflict Resolution in 4 different cities in India. Team 1 visited Vijayawada, Dharwad,

Mangalore, and Trichy. Team 2: Bangalore, Mysore, Hyderabad, and Delhi. The rest of this article includes firsthand observations and viewpoints from the participants of the Bangalore and Mysore workshops.

All of the 17 participants, who successfully completed the Bangalore workshop were RTYC members and aged between 19 and 24. 40% of the participants were 1st generation exiled Tibetans, and the rest were either 2nd or 3rd generation exiled Tibetans. There was an equal spread of males and females, 60% of whom were Commerce students at Bangalore University. By comparison, in Mysore, only 85% of the 21 participants on the first day, were RTYC members, indicating that promotion of the workshop via the RTYC network reaches out beyond its membership. Only 2 (10%) of the participants were 1st generation exiled Tibetans, and there were more males (65%) than females (35%). Most of the participants were again, Commerce students (55%), the rest reading Business Management, Science or Arts. The proportion of students who admitted to having some fears before the workshop began ranged from 45%, (Bangalore) to 55%, (Mysore). Two participants in each group had previous experience of conflict resolution, either through attending part of a previous workshop or reading a book on conflict resolution.

> ***What are TCCR's aims of the workshop for each participant?***

- To contribute towards making a difference in the understanding of conflict, and in the methods and approaches of handling conflicts in daily life.
- To empower the participants to take responsibility in their own community and in society as a whole.
- To strengthen belief in the democratic process and in non-violence.

> ***What practical tools are the students introduced to?***

The following tools were taught via initial theoretical explanation including day-to-day examples, followed by group participation via role-play, games, and small-group discussion and presentation.

Active Listening:

Often a very significant tool for the students, Active Listening is taught by drawing on the familiar 'Three Vessels Model', learned at school in relation to one's approach to learning. The first vessel has a whole in it, and so symbolises one who cannot hold the information being given. The second vessel is closed, symbolising one who ignores the information being given. The third vessel is dirty, symbolising one who pollutes the information being given by one's own bias perception. This understanding develops into a 'Three Doors Model', which proposes that 'active listening' requires awareness of the 'doors' of the Body, Speech, and Mind when we listen. The awareness of such 'doors' are also common to Buddhist teaching from which virtuous living is determined.

Opening & Blocking Language:

Here, the students are made aware of the type of language that opens dialogue, (e.g. I-language, asking open questions) and that which closes it, (e.g. You-language, interrupting etc) provoking the escalation of a conflict. The students are encouraged to make the connection with their Buddhist roots again by seeing the virtues of 'patience' and 'positive thinking' as those underlying open language, and 'ignorance' as underlying blocking language.

Basic Conflict Resolution:

Once briefed on the model, the students engage in role-play, where they process the various stages outlined. A conflict begins with a disagreement, two parties divided by their positions. But by listening to each other's position and uncovering what it is that the other really wants and needs, a space is created for dialogue and the outworking of potential solutions.

Non-Violent Communication:

Here, the students are made aware of the importance of stating what they observe in a conflict, as the starting point of communicating non-violently. This observation then supports the communication of how one feels in a given situation. Particular feelings are present because they are the manifestation of an underlying need. Once this need is identified, the student is encouraged to request that the other party help them meet this need.

> ***But what has training in 'conflict resolution' got to offer that isn't already taught and practiced in Tibetan Buddhism?***

The theory of Conflict Resolution was shown to have much in common with Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. The Youth Empowerment Workshop seeks therefore to offer a practical application to the values and theory that lie at the heart of Buddhism. Many students commented on the practice of compassion, patience, and the maintenance of peace and happiness through non-violence as the key elements of Buddhism that were common to Conflict Resolution. A few of the students elaborated further to explain that, 'Conflict Resolution' is inherent in The Four Noble Truths of Buddhist teaching⁴, (viewing conflict as a part of suffering). The first two noble truths relate to 'conflict' (suffering) itself. 'Suffering' is believed to be a delusion - a perception of reality dictated by one's attachment to three main poisons: anger, greed, and aversion.) The last two truths relate to the 'resolution' of conflict, (suffering).

The Four Noble Truths:

- (1) Suffering exists
- (2) There are causes of suffering
- (3) Cessation of suffering is possible
- (4) There is a path to cessation of suffering

Because suffering, (conflict) is a perception existing only in the mind, training the mind to be free of such perception leads, (according to Buddhist teaching) to a state of constant happiness and peace, (nirvana). Feedback from the students, however, revealed a misconception regarding the understanding of conflict. Because they relate 'conflict' to suffering, it is often mistakenly viewed as something negative. As a group of students proposed on the first day of their workshop, '*something which everyone sensible wants to stay away from*'. E.g. *trouble, darkness, no freedom, anger, pain, destruction, misunderstanding, disturbance of mind, frustration*. TCCR, supported by the Buddhist philosophical viewpoint of *emptiness, (shunyata)*⁵ proposes, however, that conflict is neither positive, nor negative in and of itself, but rather, that it's polarity is determined by one's perception and handling of it.

Emptiness refers to the impermanence of all phenomena. It is the understanding that nothing exists independently, but only by mutual dependence. Objects/phenomena are therefore said to exist relatively, (not absolutely) according to the determining factors with which they are dependent. Such determining factors are, of course, dependent on other determining factors to exist, or to be perceived as real. 'Conflict' therefore, is an 'empty' concept, without ultimate identity. Conflicts will therefore be perceived and treated in various forms and ways according to their determining factors, and the state of our mind.⁵

One other area where the understanding of Basic Conflict Resolution, (BCR) as support and practical application of Buddhism might create problems, regards the ability to express one's own position, feelings and needs in a conflict situation. BCR recommends the use of 'I-language', (the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings) in preference to 'You-language', (pointing the finger, blame) which it maintains, provokes the escalation of a conflict. 'I-language' can be a problem for Tibetans, because in Buddhism, the goal is 'transcendence of self' rather than 'self-focus'. 'I-language' is therefore commonly perceived as a form of 'attachment', rooted in ignorance. The reality for many Tibetans, however, is that they either choose to avoid conflict situations altogether, or resort to 'You-language', which often aggravates conflict situations. TCCR's Youth Empowerment Program therefore teaches that the use of 'I-language' is not always rooted in selfish 'attachment' but rather can be an invaluable tool in helping the other party to understand one's suffering, which is a crucial element of creating dialogue and forming a lasting resolution.

> ***What do the participants think they have learned?***

All the participants present on the final day of the workshop filled out a 'final feedback form' detailing what they felt they had learned and how it had changed their outlook on life.

In both Bangalore and Mysore, most students commented on the model of Basic Conflict Resolution, (BCR) as the salient learning point, or most important feature of the workshop, providing a *strategy* in conflict communication. For others, it was the importance of 'open language', which was viewed by one student as the 'critical point' determining a conflict's escalation or resolution. 'Active listening', the

discussion of current issues, non-violent communication', and the understanding of 'conflict escalation' were also listed as salient learning points.

The impact of the workshop on the participants' outlook can be summarised in four main areas:

(1) Cooperation: the importance of working well as a team, and, (in relation to conflict) the awareness that one is dependent on the willingness of others to come to a resolution. This also included the challenge, felt by students, to contribute to society.

(2) Communication: the use of open-language, active listening, and BCR in daily life. One of the students reflected on a well known Buddhist saying, *'a spark neglected burns the whole house down'*, which underlines the value of non-violent communication. Most of the students in both groups reflected on 'communication' as the main area of impact, which included the ability to practice previously familiar theory, and the boosting of self-confidence.

(3) Confrontation: to face conflicts, rather than fear them, or try to avoid them. This realisation unearthed the ancient Buddhist truth, (as quoted by one of the students) *'your enemy is your greatest teacher.'*

(4) Caution: the increased awareness of how conflict is fuelled by the ignorance of self/ego, and therefore heightened concern toward the needs of others. As one student illustrated, *'I have been reminded how important it is to lay down my ego. If I am treated badly by someone, I will say, 'Oh my God have mercy on him, for he has not understood mindfulness, nor seen beyond his ego.'*

> **Conclusion:**

In the context of the March demonstrations in Tibet, this article has sought to explain why some Tibetans might become violent. Firstly, Tibet has been no stranger to violent conflict throughout its history; secondly, Tibetans are human, feeling the desire to take revenge like everyone else in the world who feels mistreated. Thirdly, because the mistreatment of Tibetans by the Chinese authorities has not stopped in nearly 60 years, which increases the likelihood of a desperate change in strategy.

Conflict Resolution training is therefore relevant for Tibetans in exile because; (a) they experience conflict with their Indian neighbours over issues of equality, and opportunity. (b) They experience internal conflict between 'new-comers' and those who have lived their whole lives in India in regard to differences in behaviour and political/religious conviction. (c) There are differences in the political mandates of the TYC and the 'Middle Way' adopted by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, which cannot be ignored. (d) It is deemed relevant for the repatriation of exiled Tibetans.

Exiled Tibetan youth have been targetted as they are the ones with the greatest influence over the survival of Tibetan culture, language and tradition into the future. Those who have left the settlements to study in Indian universities are confronted with the appeal of modernity, which contests for their

identity and values. They also often feel marginalised and unfairly treated amongst their peers in an environment where they are strongly outnumbered.

Through the broad network of the Tibetan Youth Congress, (TYC) The Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution, (TCCR) can reach out to over 90% of exiled Tibetan youth - a blend of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd generation exiles. The observed programs in Bangalore and Mysore have demonstrated that the students were able to make a connection between the practical tools of resolving conflicts and the virtues inherent in Buddhism. Not only so, it highlighted subtle misconceptions regarding the understanding of conflict. For example, that the polarity of conflict is first determined by one's perception handling of the situation, and that self-expression is not always self-centred 'attachment', but can also be other-centred concern, enabling the other party to better understand one's suffering. The feedback from the students confirmed such clarification of understanding and equipping of conflict resolution skills, which indicates that the workshop has made a difference in their understanding of conflict and in their approach to handling conflict in daily life. There is also evidence from the participant feedback that the students felt empowered to realise the wisdom of cooperation in relation to conflicts, to communicate more confidently and confrontationally, but also more cautiously, with greater awareness of the snares of 'ignorance' when faced with conflict situations. The positive connection discovered by the participants between the practical tools of resolving conflicts and the virtues inherent in Buddhism created a deeper sense of 'meaning', which naturally inspires responsibility⁹, although no specific plans of action were discussed. Although the students were not asked directly whether their belief in the democratic process had been strengthened, there was evidence from their feedback that they had been inspired by a non-violent approach to resolving conflicts.

Young people, more than anyone else, are at the cutting edge of the shifting tides of culture and popular opinion, and it is here, in the heat and dynamism of the academic institutions and fast-developing market economy, that the future face of exiled Tibet will emerge from the fire. One only has to observe Tibetan youth today to realise that they are being influenced by the latest trends of modernity. They are by no means 'backward' or 'naïve', but are showing great resolve in the daily struggle to preserve their dignity and existence in a tense, uncertain, and at times, hostile exiled land. Will they succeed in finding continued meaning in the preservation and practice of their rich culture and spirituality? TCCR's Youth Empowerment Programme is an endeavour to support Tibetan students on this journey.

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