



THE DHARAMSALA PROJECT

A BRIEF REPORT, APRIL-MAY 1999. BY ELSE HAMMERICH AND BJARNE VESTERGAARD

Preface

During April – May 1999 we had the great pleasure of conducting the first of a series of workshops in India, the first part of the Dharamsala project, a partnership between Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution and the Tibetan exile community in India. This brief report tells about the contents, the process and the mutual learning experiences.

The overall purpose of the project is to support the Tibetan exile community in India to develop democratic processes as dialogue, negotiation, conflict resolution, mediation and communication, in order that our partners – if they wish so – carry on the process by establishing their own framework for conflict resolution, for instance by initiating a Tibetan group of trainers and mediators and a Tibetan teaching manual. The participants of the workshops are key persons from the Central Tibetan Administrations and major NGOs.

The raw material of this brief report is a complete LOGBOOK of this first workshop and the international compendium of Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution.

We would like to express our gratitude for valuable support and advice to the Central Tibetan Administration, especially the Department of Information and International Relations, to DANIDA and the Danish Embassy in Delhi. Thanks to DANIDA for financing major parts of the project and to our colleagues at Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution for their engagement in the project.

A special thanks to Amdo Gyamtso, a Tibetan artist and monk, for drawing the illustrations of this report. One of them symbolises the Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the main causes of conflicts: Ignorance (the pig), attachment (the bird) and hatred (the snake). The other one depicts what basic conflict management is all about: Two winning yaks finding common ground.

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Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution, Delhi, May 1999*

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WHY DID WE DO THIS? - THE BACKGROUND

In May 1996 His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited Copenhagen. Due to Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution's participation in the organising of this event Else Hammerich was received in an audience, during which this co-operative project with the Tibetan exile community was initiated.

A work group under the supervision of Rinpoche Lakha Lama studied relevant issues for two years. After this preparation and two fact finding missions to Dharamsala (Bjarne Jørgensen, Birgitte Winkel and Else Hammerich) a brief outline of the project was designed grounded on statements from a wide range of key persons in the Tibetan community.

The conclusions of these interview rounds were that the best way of supporting the various institutions and NGOs of the Tibetan exile community would be to use our capacities and experiences by conducting workshops featuring conflict resolution, democratic processes, mediation and negotiation.

AGREEMENTS ON THE FIRST WORKSHOP

At a meeting before the first workshop in Dharamsala April 1999 with Secretary Mr. Thubten Samphel and other officials from the Department of Information and International Relations (D.I.I.R.) it was decided that:

- It should be developed in *mutual co-operation between the participants and us*. The theories and the tools will be developed in a dialogue: no cultural imperialism, or, as Thubten Samphel put it, *cultural bombing*.

- This first workshop will be the basis for further mutual planning the next steps of the project.
- The first step is to create awareness and interest of conflict resolution among key persons in the Tibetan exile community.
- The workshop should be useful to daily working life, in order to have the tools survive and develop. If it becomes too theoretical or hits an unrealistic level, for instance the Sino-Tibetan negotiations, the ideas will quickly be lost in the turmoil of daily work, as has happened with other workshops.
- We should ask the participant about their specific needs for conflict resolution skills.
- The evaluation of the workshop is crucial to the further process.
- From the everyday level we might proceed to other levels of conflict resolution later on. We talked about future visions: training the leaders of the different settlements in India - a trainers' training course - a Tibetan training centre - a Tibetan manual in conflict resolution and mediation.
- The general goals of the project were mentioned: Improve daily teamwork – strengthen the Tibetan exile community – prepare repatriation with predictable problems between returning Tibetans and Tibetans who have lived under Chinese occupation, and problems between Tibetans and Chinese who will stay in Tibet after the change.

We were encouraged after this inspiring dialogue containing both visions and practical necessities, in a straightforward atmosphere that led to mutual creativity. We noticed that our Tibetan partners seemed to have similar educational ideas as ours, stressing:

- the benefit of equal exchange ,
- respect for the participants' experiences and resources,
- a practical, personal approach as the best basis for the learning process.

WHO ARRANGED AND ATTENDED THE WORKSHOP?

The recruitment of participants was carried out by D.I.I.R. It turned out to be an advantageous mix of various ranks and professions. It led to a dynamic atmosphere throughout the workshop. Many of the exercises in small groups or pairs became due to this variation both realistic and

The participants represented various departments and ranks of the Central Tibetan Administration and two members of NGOs. There were four women and ten men, and we agreed upon a more equal representation of gender in future workshops.

AIM AND PURPOSE

The purposes of the workshops and the entire project are developed in close collaboration with our Tibetan partners, after interviews with a wide range of resource persons and more intensive dialogues with some of them.

The immediate aims of the workshops are that the Tibetans sharpen their tools of democratic processes, co-operation and conflict management, in order to strengthen the exile community as a whole.

An important part of this aim is that the Tibetan community takes over and develops its own type of conflict management in Tibetan language and with their own trainers.

A long-range purpose is to prepare and facilitate repatriation in Tibet, with the predictable need for constructive conflict resolution, which that situation will imply. Our partners have mentioned the possibility of conflicts between the Tibetans who stayed under Chinese rule and those who went into exile, some of them for a lifetime. They also mentioned the obvious problems between Tibetans and the Chinese who will stay after the political change.

EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

It is an outspoken Tibetan wish that the learning experiences build on a mutual unfolding of ideas between the participants and us, between Tibetan tradition and our Western approach, leading to a common ground for training of relevant skills. This core principle is fully shared by Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution.

So every time we made a presentation of conflict concepts, the participants were asked to reflect and express their attitudes, contributions and amendments according to their own life experiences and their Buddhist philosophy of life. An important example of this approach occurred during the first day of workshop, when we introduced our basic concepts and definition of conflict:

Conflicts are disagreements that lead to tensions between people

- Conflicts are part of life; they are part of any change. They may lead to progress or havoc, depending on how we live through and approach them. The point is - in accordance with Gandhi - that conflicts should neither be suppressed nor explode in violence, but be transformed into energy.
- Enmity and violence are parts of the human potential, not an inevitable programme in us.
- This means that we can learn to manage conflicts more constructively. We do not need to be conflict illiterates.

We asked the Tibetans: To what extent do you agree on our concepts and definition? What are your comments and what do you wish to add? Some answers were:

- The enemy is our best friend, because he gives us insight. We say that conflict is a base for enlightenment. Conflicts do not always lead to enmity, but also to openings.
- Conflicts also exist within each person, and that is the reason for violence. In the West the enemy is conceived as being apart from one self. But the fight also takes place within. The first step of conflict resolution is an inner condition, because the enemy is in our own mind.
- In Buddhist tradition the root cause of conflict are the three poisons of life: - ignorance, attachment and hatred. The basic cause is ignorance (symbolised by a pig). Ignorance could be about the situation, you and the enemy. Ignorance leads to attachment (symbolised by a bird), and hatred (symbolised by a snake). In fact the three poisons are inter-connected. The bird, the snake and the pig are depicted at the centre of the Tibetan “wheel of life”.
- The major cause of conflicts in the world is that people try to fulfil their greed instead of meeting basic survival needs.
- In Tibet we think that free release of negative emotions leads to conflict. We Tibetans keep the tension inside – and that also has a prize.
- Tibetans are not self centred, but focus more on community and wholeness. For us the concept of Karma is a reality.

After lengthy dialogues an integrated working definition emerged:

Conflicts are disagreements that may lead to tensions within the individual and between people. They can move towards solutions or enmity.

CONTENTS AND METHODS

In order to have the learning experiences connected not only to Tibetan philosophy but also to daily life, the participants spent much time checking up on what working situations they wished to cope more constructively with, and what skills they needed to develop to that end. The participants also took into account their particular situation of living in exile and working for common political cause.

Some of the situations in their working life they would like to handle better:

- Decision-making, problems with assigning responsibility: what authority do I have?
- Recruitment of staff: how to interview future staff members and make clear cut contracts
- Improving staff efficiency: how to be a role model, clear communication
- Handling complaints of injustice, facing criticism

- Newly arrived Tibetans with great aspirations and different backgrounds & attitudes: how to investigate and meet their needs in a realistic way
- Lack of directives. how to demand directives, how to conduct criticism without negativity
- Differences in opinion: how to make my point without offending, create openness without diminishing my own values
- Lack of interest of Tibetans in democratic processes: how to create public awareness of democracy

As a result of this process we adopted a rough schedule of contents:

- To understand conflict, basic concepts: Positive and negative consequences
- To analyse Conflicts: Escalation and types of conflict
- To meet conflicts: Three basic patterns, to explore own resistance. Dealing with negative emotions. Giving and taking criticism.
- To address conflicts openly: Nonviolent communication, how to be direct without offending, active listening
- To solve conflicts: The processes of basic conflict resolution, dialogue, negotiation and mediation
- To improve relations: Teambuilding, clear cut agreements, strategy of change, interview skills, morning meetings, continuous evaluation, reaching consensus via open rounds.

All our presentations were short and followed by reflection, dialogue, questions and related exercises. There were frequent training sessions with the participants being divided into two groups, the trainers coaching each group. There was work in pairs and in small groups with observers and reflective teams.

We were highly impressed by the seriousness, courage and playfulness of the participants in the role-plays, especially taking into consideration that the role-plays mirrored authentic situations and took place in a diversified group, consisting of both very high ranking and junior officials. We have not experienced a similar boldness in Denmark.

WHAT THE PARTICIPANTS FOUND VALUABLE

This passage is built on the evaluation form from the last workshop day, and all direct quotes are printed in italic.

All participants stated that they found the learning experiences useful to their daily lives and places of work. Some typical statements:

- This particular workshop is practical in every aspect of profession and social life
- Useful in the sense that we have learned the basic concepts of conflict resolution, which can be applied to daily life at solving simple day by day problems.
- I hope and am sure that this workshop will help the Tibetans a lot
- We do need more such workshops for Tibetan leaders

This feed back was naturally satisfactory, but to check the sustainability of the usefulness, a post evaluation will be conducted six weeks after the workshop, in July 99.

What were the insight and skills that the participants favoured most? The ability to solve conflicts constructively was clearly the highest priority. Some remarks:

- Insight into conflict and it's resolution process – managing conflict much better whether between me and my boss or me and my subordinate staff
- Facing conflict with a positive attitude – I will try to handle conflict through my daily routine
- Conflict solving, the nature of conflict – improve personal and work environment by cool minded analysis.

During the workshop the integrated concept of conflict resolution was unfolded and vitalised in many various ways. During these five days the participants worked hard to transform the concepts into active tools for practical use.

There were some specific tools that the participants found profitable - here ranked in accordance with the most often mentioned skills:

Interview techniques

Listening ability

Nonviolent communication

Teambuilding

Types of conflict

Escalation

Mediation

Morning meetings

SOME CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

An integrated philosophy of life

From the very beginning of the workshop we found it most remarkable how Buddhism as a philosophy, a psychology and a belief was integrated and outspoken among the participants whether highly educated at Indian and Western universities or not, and how Buddhism was naturally applied in everyday situations. Maybe because Buddhism offers its followers a sophisticated and comprehensive system of life understanding.

The participants expressed their life understanding throughout the five days, both when they were asked and spontaneously. Some of the points relevant to conflict resolution were:

In Buddhism the enemy is seen as providing an opportunity to gain insight, reducing ignorance about the situation and about one's own mind processes. Therefore it was obvious for the participants to acknowledge conflicts not only as negative forces but also as means to positive transformation. To see conflicts as constructive is often difficult to westerners.

The participants understood conflict primarily as an inner condition, similar to the preamble to the UNESCO Declaration: war starts in the mind of man, and it is therefore in the mind of man that peace has to be defended. In Buddhist tradition the major cause of conflict are the three poisons of life: - ignorance, attachment and hatred. The basic cause is ignorance about the life situation, oneself and the enemy. Ignorance leads to attachment and hatred. This applies to inter-personal as well as global conflicts: the ignorance is our lack of understanding that the global resources can fulfil the needs of all, but not the greed (Gandhi). These lacks of wisdom leads to attachment to an exaggerated consume, and enmity develops when we feel our cravings threatened.

Because of this attitude it seems quite natural for Tibetans to acknowledge the continuous inner work that is part of the process of learning how to live through and cope constructively with the conflicts of daily life.

The problem of anger

The Tibetans see free release of anger as harmful to the individual and the community: *we think that free release of negative emotions leads to conflict.* Showing anger is sometimes compared to throwing a glowing piece of coal at somebody. Maybe it hits the other person, maybe not – but anyway you will burn your hand.

This attitude to anger is rather different from the attitude of much Western psychology and personal development practice, and it is clearly expressed in the most recent work of the Dalai Lama: *Not only does anger immediately destroy our critical faculties, it tends inevitably towards rage, spite, hatred, malice and conceit – each of which is always negative in that each is a direct cause of harm to others. As such, anger has no use but to cause suffering.*

This attitude towards anger is however not an appeal to suppress or deny the feeling: *It is far better to confront a person or situation than to hide our anger away, brood and nurture resentment in our hearts. The important thing is to be discriminating, both in terms of the feelings we express and in how we express them. But if we do not first exercise restraint and simply let out each of them as they come to us on the grounds that they must be articulated, there is a strong possibility of reaching excess and losing control* (quotations from “Ancient Wisdom, Modern World – ethics for a new millennium.” by His Holiness the Dalai Lama)

In several disciplines of the workshop we experienced a clash between our Western, assertive ways of expressing feelings of resentment, and the Tibetan reluctance to do so. A meeting point, however, was found in the idea of inner processing of the conflict situation and the interwoven anger, *before* addressing the opponent. Here we found Nonviolent Communication (Marshall Rosenberg) useful, when introduced without dogmas, using the four points (identifying facts, feelings, needs and request) as one of several possible guidelines to such an inner processing of afflictive emotions. The participants found it meaningful to meet conflicts openly, if it was well considered and openly without hurting the other person. The participants told us, that they often keep tensions inside, and that this attitude also has a prize:

“We have to speak about the disagreements between us, not to keep them in our hearts, because they are not only negative, but also necessary for change”

“At our work we are afraid of disagreements but now I have learned that disagreements are not only negativity, but also positive. Our closedness can cause inefficiency.”

However the contrast between Western and Tibetan dealing with anger is not “solved” or integrated by these experiences and considerations, and it probably should not be. We think the contradiction is very real, and that the dialogue is essential. We are hoping to explore the question of anger in the cultural contrast more deeply, as the project develops.

Focus on relatedness and community

Tibetans focus less on the individual and more on the community than people from the West normally do. To be assertive was not spoken of as an ideal, whereas inner peace certainly was highly valued. This difference of attitude was evident in training situations where the training object was to express one's own feelings, needs and requests in authentic workplace disagreements. The participants found it difficult and unusual to express personal feelings and needs. We do not think that Tibetans will ever find it proper to be assertive and express own needs, if the purpose is to feel better or to seek self-fulfilment.

But on the other hand: the participants did express a wish to become more direct - but when they did so, it was always within the framework of the community, approaching a common goal, improving their work for the common cause. Here are some statements about the usefulness of clear, assertive communication:

'It can develop democracy at work place'
'Improve efficiency in work teams'
'Encourage substance and vision at working place'
'Lead to closer relationship between staff members and leader'.

The Tibetan sense of community also appeared in exercises of telling stories to each other and listening actively. They found it crucial that the topics must be of interest to the listener, not just to the storyteller, as several participants told us. Another example of the participants' inclination to fellowship was their enthusiasm for one of the tools we trained: Interview skills. It was remarkable how often they mentioned these skills as fertile. There were no blockings and hardships in this discipline, as there in fact was with the more assertive skills training. We think the reason was that interview skills especially imply understanding of and focusing on the other person, not focusing on own interests.

This consistent focus on relatedness and community was quite thought-provoking to us. It really made us ponder if the role of assertiveness in Western psychology and in our workshops at home has been exaggerated with the danger of promoting separation and loneliness, and legalising plain selfishness. It is a common aim in courses of clear assertive communication to avoid disrespecting and harming others while being assertive. Maybe we should give active promoting the well being of others a more central stand in our educational thinking and practice. Maybe we should spend more time exploring the ethical foundations and consequences of social behaviour.

The role of the teacher, authority and respect

All workshop days started with a morning meeting and ended with various types of evaluation. Both practices are in order to improve our contact with participant needs and feelings and in order to introduce methods they might find useful at their workplaces. The morning meetings can help creating a useful routine for a calm and productive day, connecting yesterday and today, connecting personal and professional life, and bringing leader and staff into a closer social contact.

One day we had a most interesting discussion. We presented a conflict we wished to meet openly, facing a criticism that was expressed in the evaluation of fourth day by some participants. We had asked them to give us advice how to improve as facilitators and some of them had answered: *"understanding the social, historical and cultural background of the people to whom the workshop is being conducted"*. We asked into the issue: would you please elaborate on that? When did you feel our lack of knowledge?

After these questions a very long silence followed, maybe due to Tibetan courtesy. After some polite and rather generalising remarks we insisted on being informed *when* our lack of knowledge had occurred to them.

It then surfaced that this perception originated from the very beginning of the workshop, when we had a dialogue with the participants, exploring the relation between Western and Tibetan conflict understanding, asking into Buddhist concepts

and Tibetan linguistics. This had created the understanding that we were somewhat ignorant: “*we were somehow in doubt who was teaching whom.*”

We apologised, saying that we understood that they felt a lack of respect and interest for their background, and their confusion: Who is teaching whom? We told them that we had in fact studied the Tibetan background for some years, although we of course did not know enough. We explained that it was our educational principle not to superimpose Western ideas and not pretend that we are experts on Tibetan issues, but to ask rather humbly into their cultural expertise. All this to create a common ground for catapulting into new experience and knowledge, as a preparation to train concepts that we mutually agreed upon.

We explained that our educational style was dialogue rather than lecturing and that mutual learning for us is an ideal. We admitted, that we should have made our educational strategy more clear from the very beginning in order not to create confusion.

We think that one reason for the confusion “who is teaching whom” is that Tibetans have a more respectful attitude to their teachers than we have in Denmark. They might be more used to teachings and seem to expect a more lecturing role from their teachers. They might spontaneously have taken our questions as signs of ignorance, not as an educational method. Therefore it is crucial to be very transparent about our educational aims and strategies and to work with totally open files. Otherwise the students might think that the dialogue strategy mirrors a lack of knowledge and respect for them.

And by the way, we do think those thorough studies of the historical and cultural background of the participants is a must, not only because of concern for the quality of the workshops but also out of sheer respect for the people we deal with.

FUTURE PLANS FOR THE PROJECT

After the workshop we had evaluation and planning meetings with the minister of education Mrs. Hvad er det nu hun hedder? and the minister of information and foreign relations Mr. Tsewang C Tethong and other prominent members of the Tibetan administration and NGOs. These interesting conversations led to the planning of the next steps of the project:

In October 1999 we will conduct three workshops:

- for junior staff members of the Central Tibetan Administration,
- for the Nun Project
- for key persons from Tibetan Women Association TWA, Tibetan Youth Congress TYC, National Democratic Party of Tibet, The Gu-Chu-Sum Movement of Tibet and Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy.

During spring / summer 2000 we are planning workshops for settlement leaders in South India and Nepal. It is the intention to develop the concept of a trainer's

training education during these workshops and to facilitate the recruitment at the same time.

IN WHAT WAYS ARE OUR WORKSHOPS SUPPORTIVE?

Sometimes we have been asked – by us selves and other Danes – about the perspectives of introducing and training skills of conflict management with Tibetan people who are world known as firm believers in and practitioners of dialogue, patience and nonviolence. Who do we think we are?

Our first and actual answer, now when we have finished the research interviews and the first workshop evaluation, is that the Tibetans themselves have stated that they find our contribution – the analysis and the skills training - most useful to their daily work for their community. They say that their outcome is a sharpening of their tools for democratic leadership and for co-operation. It is our impression that the positive feed back is not only due to Tibetan courtesy, for we have also met very straightforward statements in the daily workshop evaluations.

Nevertheless we continue asking the question: in what ways are the workshops supportive to the Tibetan exile community? For we must admit that we are deeply impressed by the Tibetan philosophy of life and their attitude to conflicts and difficulties. There is a practical wisdom embodied in every session and conversation we have had with our participants and the representatives for the government and the NGOs.

In order to understand the relation between the wisdom of the Tibetans and their outspoken wish for conflict management skills we have to distinguish between what we would call the level of *deep culture* – the Buddhist philosophy and psychology – and the level of *actual circumstances*: historical, social and political conditions and cultural habits. This distinction is not derived from theories of anthropology, but from our direct contact with Tibetans and from studies of Tibetan culture and history.

As to the deep culture we find it most productive for the basic dynamics of conflict resolution that we try to cultivate and develop in Danish Centre for Conflict Resolution and many of our international sister organisations. Until now we have found no severe contradictions and we have found that many of our concepts are deepened through the life understanding of our participants. For instance there is a more easy and natural understanding of some of the basic ideas of genuine conflict management than we usually find in the West:

- the necessary inner work of the process,
- the positive potentials of conflicts and
- reconciliation through compassionate understanding of the other person and of one self.

One of the reasons for this relative harmony between “western” and “eastern” theories of conflicts is that the thoughts of the western centres for conflict resolution are in fact inspired by eastern pioneers, first and foremost Mahatma

Gandhi, but also Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese thinkers. In contemporary time the works of the Dalai Lama are likewise a source of inspiration. This could be seen as a positive example of the cultural interdependence of modern times.

This means that the Tibetans have deep cultural resources that will enable them to reach far with relatively short programmes. On the other hand their conditions as an exiled people is a fact. This condition is mirrored in these two statements from one of the morning meetings of the workshop:

When I walked through the market, 2000 people were there in a 24 hour hungerstrike to support the unlimited hungerstrike by Tibetans in Geneva. Then I felt badly about not being with them, so I had an inner conflict, but I decided to put it aside thinking that my taking part in this workshop also benefits our cause. Then I felt more at ease.

I had various obligations helping the hunger strikers in different ways. So after coming back from the workshop I worked until midnight. And then again from seven in the morning because we had to write a letter to Kofi Annan.

The people we met who are working for the Tibetan community are very busy and engaged and their lives are not easy. They are living with the outer and inner pressure of an exile that has lasted for now forty years. They have insecure future perspectives and are constantly aware of atrocities and cultural destruction in Tibet. Due to their concentrated work for the common cause they have little time for studying and cultivating the co-operative practices that are so necessary especially in their condition.

Furthermore their experiences of democracy are relatively new, and they have traditional customs and habits that do not go easily with their outspoken wish for democratic leadership and participation. There are traditional rank behaviours, a sometimes-unpractical politeness and a tendency not to be open and clear but to keep tensions inside – the participants themselves have told us all these features. And of course they have conflicts, even afflictive, counterproductive and blocking ones. We who admire the dignified gentleness of the Tibetans have to see and respect them in their humanness – not as ethnic saints.

Getting to know our Tibetan partners more closely has reaffirmed our unwillingness to induce “western” culture upon them. But if that attitude becomes protective it might become less respectful, for the Tibetans are fully capable of taking and integrating from our workshops exactly what they need, and neglecting what is not valuable to them.

What we actually can do is to be catalysts, persons who help reframing valuable elements from the level of deep Tibetan culture, in order that they become useful at the level of the actual circumstances of the Tibetan exile community. We can do that by means of presentations of theory and tools, reflections and training sessions, but first and foremost by equal dialogues and mutual exchange.

So even if we are continuously examining the usefulness of our contribution we are rather confident at present – and that confidence arises from the giving experiences we are having with our Tibetan partners.