

NOTES FROM DHARAMSALA: HRIC CONVERSATION WITH YODON THONDEN

HRIC: How did you come to be a delegate?

Yodon Thonden: An announcement was made in late September that His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] was calling for a special meeting, to discuss the current crisis in Tibet in terms of the spring [2008] uprising, and to discuss ways forward in broader terms. The community was abuzz with talk and speculation as to what the purpose and outcome of the meeting might be. There was very little information on the specifics of the agenda or the process, so people had their doubts. But I was persuaded by friends who stressed to me the importance of this historic meeting, so I submitted my credentials and was told I was approved. They had an allotment of 50 seats for private delegates—the rest of the seats were reserved largely for representatives of the Tibetan government, Tibetan communities throughout the diaspora, and Tibetan NGOs and institutions in India. They tried to have a wide range of voices representing all the diverse parts of Tibetan society.

HRIC: What was the impetus for the meeting?

YT: There were a lot of different ideas floating around about why it was called. In his opening address at the conference, Samdhong Rinpoche, the *Kalon Tripa*, the prime minister [of the Tibetan government in exile], addressed the rumors and the speculation, and said there was no hidden agenda other than to have essentially a brain storming session—to

seek the public's input and ideas on how to handle our situation with China, and how to further our goals. The immediate reason was obviously the critical situation in Tibet today, after the largest uprising of the Tibetan people in 50 years. There were hopes for some sort of breakthrough or easing of conditions inside Tibet after the Olympics. But that hasn't come to pass. The formal dialogue has led nowhere, and perhaps even backward. His

Holiness is deeply frustrated, as are the Tibetan leadership and the Tibetan people. His Holiness is a true believer in democratic process and wants the people to play an active role in shaping the future direction of the government. He wants their input. He wants creative and new ideas to help us move forward.

HRIC: What was on the agenda and what was actually discussed?

YT: As I understood it, there were two broad points to be considered: the urgent crisis inside Tibet today, and then broader issues of the Tibet movement. Very vague. Personally, I think it could have been organized more effectively and had a more defined agenda. Because when you have over 500 people getting together, you need clear focus and direction. The first day

was public addresses by the Speaker of the Tibetan Parliament in exile, and by the *Kalon Tripa*. We were then broken up into 15 groups and dispersed to our loca-

In a conversation with HRIC on December 11, 2008, a New York-based Tibetan American who attended the Special Meeting in Dharamsala, India, as a "private delegate" described the significance and the outcome of the meeting.



Tibetan parliamentary secretary Phurbu Tsering addresses delegates during the Special Meeting in Dharamsala, India, on November 17, 2008. Photo credit: Abhishek Madhukar/REUTERS

tions. We spent three and a half days in the same small groups. In my group there were 35 to 40 people. We returned to the plenary on the 5th and 6th days to merge the 15 groups' thinking into one document.

There were some common and obvious themes running through the groups, but each group had its own range of issues depending on the group's composition. The delegates reaffirmed their faith in the leadership of the Dalai Lama as the legitimate representative of the Tibetan people, and expressed continued support for the "Middle Path" approach, and also their adherence to nonviolent means. However, a significant minority did support outright independence (*rangzen*), or self-determination, as an alternative to the current goal of autonomy. And these views were acknowledged and included in the final document. In the past, such views would probably have not been voiced without real social risk in the insular community of Dharamsala.

It was incredible because there were people from all walks of Tibetan society sitting at the same table talking to each other. Cabinet ministers, government servants, teachers, farmers, monks, business people, activists, you name it. No one was special because of his or her office. Representatives from the Tibetan government were instructed to speak their minds, not government position. Even his Holiness' Special Envoy was asked some very hard questions. His Holiness never attended the meeting because he didn't want people to be influenced by his opinions. He wanted a free exchange of ideas.

Representatives of the settlements [in India], representing thousands of people, came with long documents that were from their communities. They felt a great responsibility to accurately report their communities' views. The rest of the delegates pretty much spoke for themselves, not as representatives of larger bodies, but as concerned Tibetans.

HRIC: What did people want out of the meeting?

YT: I think it was unrealistic for people to expect a policy shift overnight, but I think people were hoping for this to be the beginning of a longer-term process of systematic review of policy towards China with public par-

ticipation. No one had hopes for dramatic change overnight—I certainly didn't.

There were significant steps made in terms of acknowledging that there are other voices aside from the "Middle Path" voice, and recognizing that the dialogue was at an impasse. My recollection is that one of the recommendations was that the envoys should discontinue their formal trips to China, but this is not in the [official statement in English that was issued after the Special Meeting]. Maybe the leadership felt uncomfortable with that and decided not to include it as a recommendation.

HRIC: Were there alternative views?

YT: There were people advocating independence and self-determination as an alternative to the Middle Path. They were both young and old, and some of the most passionate and persuasive of those who spoke.

The point the Tibetan government always makes is that when you consider alternatives, there is no international support for them, and there is certainly no support within China. The support that we have amongst Chinese people is not for anything but co-existence within China, and we would lose all international support by deviating from that. So the question raised then was what has that support actually gotten Tibetan people on the ground? If it's gotten us nothing then maybe we should start thinking about other options which would at least unite the people and make the end goal clear.

A lot of Tibetans feel quite confused, especially the younger ones. One young woman said in group: "My father raised me telling me that we had to work hard to get our country back. Now what am I going to say to my children? The message is so unclear." A monk asked, "Have you thought about what autonomy means? What you would have to do? Can you imagine singing the Chinese national anthem?"

HRIC: Do you see a subtle policy shift—or preparation for a shift—within the leadership in exile?

YT: I don't think the Dalai Lama will abandon the Mid-

dle Path. He genuinely believes in it, and it is part of his message. Peaceful coexistence. There is a lot of pressure on him for another path, and when he's [no longer] here, those forces may have a larger voice than they do now, so now is the time for the Chinese government to make a deal. The Dalai Lama is the best positioned person in the world to make a deal with the Tibetan people work. He is the one person who unites all Tibetans.

Another interesting thing you may not know is that they conducted a poll of about 17,000 Tibetans inside Tibet, to get their views for the meeting. It was pretty much in agreement with what came out in the final statement: unite behind leadership of the Dalai Lama; Middle Path—yes. There were also a surprising number of people who were advocates of *Rangzen*. I remember the number was 5,000, out of the 17,000. That's a pretty significant number, when put in context.

HRIC: But if the Chinese government will never give genuine autonomy, what would the strategy be?

YT: I was hoping more time would be spent on discussion of strategies but that didn't happen. And in a large public forum perhaps it shouldn't. But after the meeting concluded, [the Dalai Lama] gave an audience to all the delegates. He didn't speak on the subject of the previous six days but he did say he wanted this process to continue and wanted us to do this every year or every two years. I heard that after that, they would like to have these "check-ins" or "pulse-takings" of the people regularly.

HRIC: What do you think is the most significant outcome of the meeting?

YT: I thought it was a very healthy exercise in communication and breaking down some of the barriers we thought had existed before. It came forward that we're all pretty united. There were 15 groups. There were some off-the-wall suggestions but they were all recorded and will be distributed to the relevant departments within the Tibetan government and the leadership.

I think this is the beginning of a process. It was also important because it was a coming-together of the Tibet world from all corners of the earth. For me personally it was a huge education, I was learning a lot about my own

people. I think a lot of people, especially us coming from the West, had that feeling. It was a reconnecting to Dharamsala because it's not often that Tibetans actually go to Dharamsala which is the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile where the Dalai Lama is. I've been to Dharamsala twice in seventeen years. I'm so glad that I went because I feel like I have a stronger connection to the whole structure and the system, and I understand better the issues that they're dealing with. I learned so much from people from the settlements, who represent thousands in their communities, and were talking about education, employment, farming and livestock. And they appreciated hearing about us in the West, and our views on the same issues that matter to all of us.

HRIC: What do you think are the urgent tasks for the Tibetan people?

YT: We need to focus more on helping Tibetans on the ground. There was some discussion in our group on how to help Tibetans inside access information, how to communicate with them, how to make us really a transnational people because we don't have a country, how to strengthen the Tibetan identity, and how to equip them with skills and tools so they can better organize themselves and formulate strategies. There are a lot of Tibetans coming in and out every year, so we should give them training while they're out so that they can take it back in.

HRIC: How do Tibetans outside of Tibet view those inside?

YT: Tibetans in exile view the Tibetans inside as highly competent. There is a lot of introspection about our shortcomings in exile—we haven't specialized professionally and haven't achieved as much as we could have. For those who come out, many are seen as more competent than those who have been through the exile system in India. I suppose what we might be reacting to is their ability to successfully navigate two worlds, Chinese and Tibetan. There are a lot of very successful Tibetan business people in Tibet, while Tibetans in exile are still largely materially not at a level where we should be given that we've been in exile for fifty years.

I think things will change in the coming years. The

demographics of the Tibetan diaspora are changing. For many years the Tibetan government tried to keep the Tibetan community together in India and Nepal, largely poor but close and culturally intact. They resisted resettlement programs to Western countries, fearing cultural dilution and a weakening of the main base. On the other hand, I thought it was important to send capable and promising Tibetans abroad to resettle in groups. It's good for us to have successful Tibetans and Tibetan communities around the world who can advocate for Tibet. It was actually the government's policy for a while not to encourage resettlement. Since then they've changed their position and now the leadership sees that it's impossible to keep everyone together in India. The brain drain remains a huge issue. In Dharamsala, India, and Nepal, everyone wants to leave. If they have the opportunity they'll go West. It's really challenging to get people to stay and work for the government and in the settlements. I think eventually the community there is going to shrink, and that actually could be fine so long as we are able to have a system in place that allows us to collaborate and communicate from our little satellites around the world and with those in Tibet.

I think it's been a big burden for the central leadership to be a caretaker government for 100,000 refugees. That takes up so much of their time. Wouldn't it be better if they could concentrate on gaining some political ground in terms of China, and advocating for positive change for Tibetans in Tibet?

When we all come together, there are certainly barriers in terms of language and experiences and backgrounds. But in the end that's what was so nice about going back to India. We're all from such different places but we all had the same passion in our hearts.

HRIC: What do you think the Chinese policies are doing to young Tibetans?

YT: They're making Tibetans more Tibetan. It's a good thing if they can sing in Mandarin, so long as they know who they are. In some cases, kids grow up without awareness, but I think it's hard to not know what has happened. No matter how much propaganda surrounds you at school and in the press, you learn from your parents, and now young Tibetans will learn from the experiences of this past year. This will be emblazoned in everyone's mind, and young people will certainly remember this for a long time to come. The last time I was in Tibet, wherever I went, there was such a connection, when they realized I was a Tibetan from outside. In many instances, first they thought that I was Chinese, from Hong Kong, or even Japanese, and I got a completely different reception when they realized I was actually Tibetan. I remember riding in a truck and there was a guy on the side of the road asking for a lift—and someone said, "Don't pick him up, he's Chinese." And they went right past him and then saw an older Tibetan guy and they picked him up. That's not actually a great thing because you don't want to have this animosity between people, but there is solidarity.