

COMPASSION, THEIR PRECIOUS TREASURE

Told by Robert Thurman

Maybe it was the land itself—the largest and highest plateau on earth, ringed by the world’s tallest peaks. For centuries Tibet has been known as “the rooftop of the world.” Her gentle people became a symbol of inspiration because of their mystical talent for finding the sacred dimension of everyday life. The rich culture, spirituality, and language of this land of snows were uniquely and beautifully her own.

In 1950, Chinese forces invaded Tibet to gain control of what they perceived to be a strategic border area, but once there, they aimed to eradicate the Tibetan identity and make Tibet indistinguishable from China. Tibetans were not allowed to worship, and most of their monasteries and other holy sites were destroyed. The Tibetan language was forbidden, and all aspects of Tibetan culture were rigidly suppressed. Tibetans who continued to follow their own religion were tortured and killed. For more than fifty years the world has remained mostly silent as the Tibetan genocide went on and a once-thriving nation was turned into a devastated economic wasteland.

Tibet’s leader, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, born Tenzin Gyatso, was forced to flee the country in 1959 along with thousands of his followers. He established a Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India, and has worked diligently since then to preserve Tibetan arts, scriptures, and medicine. His wisdom and compassion in leading a nonviolent struggle

to regain his homeland have made him an inspiration to millions of people of various faiths from all over the world.

In 1985, 200,000 Tibetans risked the arduous journey over the mountains to Bodhgaya, India, the place that Tibetan Buddhists venerate as the spot where the Buddha attained Enlightenment, and where they celebrate one of their most sacred ceremonies, the Kalachakra initiation. To ensure their prompt return, the Chinese government held the families of the pilgrims virtually hostage.

For many it would be the first time they would see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a moment they had anticipated their entire lives. Yak herders, shoemakers, people who couldn't read or write, were nonetheless united in keeping this sacred commitment. They had lived through countless examples of unspeakable horror and violence—suffering that was locked away in their own souls as they crowded onto buses and braved treacherous roads, and Nepalese and Indian police along the way extorted unlawful tolls.

The task now before Tenzin Gyatso seemed insurmountable. He knew he must speak to his people about the Buddhist principles of tolerance and compassion. Yet he was acutely aware that he was addressing individuals who had been tortured, who had seen their families raped and mutilated, who had spent wretched years in prison.

You could almost feel the Dalai Lama's own heart break wide open as he sat close to his people. He implored them to respond to their enemies without violence or hatred. He asked them to find compassion for their oppressors and to overcome their instinct to strike back.

He acknowledged that their families had been destroyed, their land,

their life, their country, and their religion robbed from them. Yet he beseeched them to take all their suffering as a spur to conquer any vindictive, hateful, or destructive tendencies within themselves:

“This is war, but it is an internal war. It may seem the world has forgotten us, allowing the Chinese to do this to us. But we can win the war by completely conquering our inner enemy. If we wage this war against our natural instinct for revenge, and conquer the vengeful egotism we have within ourselves, then we will have done something very special. Then the world will have to recognize our stand against the endless cycle of violence. The world will then see to it that there will be justice. But it must be done without vengeance against the Chinese.”

As he spoke, the Dalai Lama, usually composed and stoic, was openly weeping. So were the majority of the 200,000 assembled before him. You could see the struggle in the faces of the children and teenagers. They did not know whether to believe this man or not. Over the years the Chinese had worked hard to turn them against him and his teachings. But the Dalai Lama reached them with his tenderness, and after some moments in silence, they accepted the wisdom of his message and respected his open heart. In turn, they took his high aspirations with them back to Tibet.

Four years after this amazing scene, the Dalai Lama received the Nobel Prize for Peace. In his acceptance speech he reaffirmed his belief in the path of tolerance and compassion:

“I accept the prize with profound gratitude on behalf of the oppressed everywhere and for all those who struggle for freedom and work for world peace. I accept it as a tribute to the man who founded the modern

tradition of nonviolent action for change, Mahatma Gandhi, whose life taught and inspired me. And, of course, I accept it on behalf of the six million Tibetan people, my brave countrymen and women inside Tibet, who have suffered and continue to suffer so much.

“They confront a calculated and systematic strategy aimed at the destruction of their national and cultural identities. The prize reaffirms our conviction that with truth, courage, and determination as our weapons, Tibet will be liberated.”

The Tibetans’ struggle is gaining recognition and support. In May 2000, the Dalai Lama traveled across the United States, addressing more than 160,000 people, inviting each of us to put compassion into action to transcend violence, heal spirits, and help the world.

Love and compassion are the basis of hope and determination.

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

Pray for peace and develop compassion in your heart. If you want to help the Tibetan people and preserve Tibet’s precious civilization, contact **Tibet House**, the Dalai Lama’s official cultural organization in America. Write to them at 22 West 15th Street, New York, NY 10011 for their membership materials, or visit these Web sites: www.tibethouse.org or www.bobthurman.com.