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# Stories Over Miles: Religious and Political Coping Among Tibetan Former Political Prisoners

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Stories Over Miles:

Religious and Political Coping Among Tibetan Former Political Prisoners

By

Dylan Harris

A Thesis

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The University of Southern Mississippi  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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**Abstract:** Tibetan former political prisoners suffer before, during, and after imprisonment; however, their distinct coping mechanisms, in this case, specifically Buddhist coping and political coping mechanisms, allow them to overcome suffering. By examining Tibetan culture and contemporary history and concepts of suffering and coping specific to Tibetan former political prisoners, this thesis will answer the question: to what extent do Buddhism and politics effectively aid coping in the lives of Tibetan former political prisoners exiled in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India?

Keywords: coping mechanisms, Tibetans, Buddhism, political prisoners

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Endurance is part of the human condition; coping is a part of life. In cases of extreme suffering, science has attempted to make connections between various coping mechanisms and their effectiveness in overcoming suffering. However, there is no definitive understanding of suffering. Suffering is a relative concept. Due to the ambiguity of suffering, the idea of overcoming suffering is speculative at best. Religious coping may be an effective method for overcoming suffering. Science argues that a belief system, not a specific religion, provides an understanding of the world, and an understanding, at least, provides an individual with a mode of coping (Seybold and Hill 2001: 21).

Like other religious traditions, Buddhism provides followers with an understanding of the world and the individual's place within it. In particular, Buddhism provides a follower with a deep understanding of the human condition in terms of suffering. According to basic Buddhist teachings, *dukkha*, suffering, is a part of life. In order to experience eternal happiness, one must overcome suffering. Suffering in the Buddhist sense refers to anything that is unsatisfactory or imperfect. Everything is *anicha*, or impermanent, and, therefore, must be understood as suffering. The Buddha teaches that there is a release from suffering. One must experience *anatta*, no self, and realize *nibbana*, the end of suffering. In order to realize nibbana one has to overcome *samsara*, the perpetual cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Every being is propelled through samsara via *karma*, the principle that beings are reborn according to the nature and quality of their past actions (Harvey 1990). Varying levels of suffering can be



attributed to a being's karmic record; suffering is caused by one's own actions. In terms of overcoming suffering, the Buddhist notion of karma provides a lens through which suffering can be understood.

The idea of Buddhism as a coping mechanism can be understood by examining the Tibetan situation. In 1950, The People's Republic China invaded Tibet claiming to 'liberate' the country by returning it to the 'motherland.' Since the imposition, China has engaged in a large-scale destruction of Tibetan culture, people, and religion, and millions of Tibetans have died. The Chinese government often prohibits freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, and Tibetans are commonly killed or arrested because of their political and religious beliefs. While in prison, Tibetans are subjected to torture – including but not limited to acts such as rape, beatings, electric shock, starvation, and isolation. They are interrogated and asked to pledge allegiance to China. However, most Tibetans refuse and are subjected to prison sentences ranging from a few days to decades, during which they are continuously tortured. Many Tibetans die in prison as a result of harsh conditions. If a Tibetan prisoner is released, they are strictly monitored by the police, unable to get a job, and are forced to check-in with the local police before traveling anywhere outside of their assigned precinct. Monks or nuns that have been imprisoned are forbidden to return to their monastery or nunnery after being released. With this in mind, one can see that the experience of being a political prisoner extends beyond imprisonment. The need for coping mechanisms becomes apparent. In order to better understand suffering and coping, this thesis will examine the coping experience of Tibetan political prisoners who have endured extreme suffering.

The teachings of Buddhism discuss a cosmic, intrinsic connection between all things in the universe. For example, after years of solitary meditation and practice of extreme asceticism, the great Tibetan Buddhist, Milarepa, contended, “I understood that in general all things related to samsara and nirvana are interdependent” (Lhalungpa 1977: 127). Thus, Buddhism could portray an understanding of intersubjectivity and solidarity in a suffering individual, placing his or her suffering within the context of a collective identity. Collective identity denotes shared experience, which also aids an individual in overcoming suffering. In modern political social movement theory, the idea of collective identity is becoming more widely accepted as a major component of politics (Goodwin and Jasper 2009: 105). Elsass and Phuntsok define political coping among Tibetan refugees as participation in and association with the just cause of Tibetan independence. In the Tibetan situation, political coping can be understood dually: 1) Tibetan political prisoners were imprisoned as a result of their collective identity, which aligns with the definition of political coping presented by Elsass and Phuntsok, and 2) Buddhism posits a connection amongst all living things, creating solidarity not only between Tibetan political prisoners, but also between prisoners and Chinese authority, etc. The dual influence of religious and political aspects in Tibetan society is highlighted in the now-divided (as of Summer 2011) role of Tibet’s spiritual and political leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Therefore, Buddhist and political coping complement each other as effective coping mechanisms for Tibetan former political prisoners.

Because the Chinese authorities block information flow, the exact number of Tibetans who have been detained is unknown. Since 2008 alone, it is estimated that there have been more than six hundred Tibetans detained because of their political activity

(International Campaign for Tibet). Upon release, Tibetan ex-political prisoners flee across the Himalayas to seek refuge in India where His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso resides along with the Tibetan government-in-exile. In India they are granted refugee status and receive meager compensation from Tibetan authorities. Upon reaching India, all Tibetan refugees are granted an audience with H.H. the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, during which he instructs the refugees to tell their stories truthfully. Under religious obligation, Tibetan refugees, especially former political prisoners, take every opportunity to share their stories with the world. Many Tibetan former political prisoners speak publicly, write, and talk with tourists in order to spread awareness about the Tibetan situation. In many Tibetan former political prisoner stories, the notion of Buddhist coping mechanisms presents itself as a way in which Tibetans overcome suffering while imprisoned.

Tibetan former political prisoners suffer before, during, and after imprisonment; however, their distinct coping mechanisms, in this case specifically Buddhist and political coping mechanisms, allow them to overcome suffering. By examining Tibetan culture and contemporary history and concepts of suffering and coping specific to Tibetan former political prisoners, this thesis will answer the question: to what extent do Buddhism and politics effectively aid coping in the lives of Tibetan former political prisoners exiled in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Before continuing, one must understand the varying factors that contribute to Tibetan former political prisoners' experience. This paper will provide an analysis of

Tibetan religion and Tibetan political ideology and provide a link between Buddhist and political coping through an analysis of Tibetan culture and religion and post-Chinese occupation history. The idea of suffering must be analyzed and applied to the context of the Tibetan situation. Here, something must be said to clarify the extent to which Tibetans suffer, both physically and mentally, while imprisoned. Significant attention must also be paid to defining coping and exploring different coping mechanisms that are grafted onto the Tibetan situation. Narratives acquired from sixteen Tibetan former political prisoners living in Dharamsala, India during the summer of 2010 will provide further insight into the varying levels of suffering endured during Chinese imprisonment. This paper will focus on Buddhist coping, specifically the doctrine of karma, and political coping. Finally, this paper will construct an understanding of suffering, coping mechanisms specific to the Tibetan situation, and connections between Tibetan religion and politics, which act as coping mechanisms for Tibetan former political prisoners.

### **Suffering**

Suffering is commonly synonymous with pain; however, suffering can and must be understood as an emotion. The most widely recognized definition of suffering was coined by Cassell, who states ““suffering can be defined as a state of severe stress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person”” (Carnevale 2009: 174). This understanding of suffering encompasses the physical and mental realm of suffering, presenting suffering as a threat to the normalcy of a person. Suffering can also be understood as a boundary that limits the ordinary experiences of humans as beings in the world in relation to other people and things, where being and becoming are intrinsically connected (Long 2006: 140). This understanding may seem complex. However, it

creates a helpful dichotomy between the self and others. Another explanation of suffering comes from basic Buddhist teachings. In an analysis of the *Dhammapada*, one of Buddhism's oldest doctrines, Kupperman argues:

“... much as pleasure and happiness differ from one another, and joy and bliss differ still further – suffering is not exactly equivalent to misery, desolation, or distress, and certainly is separable from pain” (2007: 33).

To further explain his point, Kupperman gives the example of childbirth techniques used by women in labor. Women giving birth escape suffering by focusing on controlling their pain, which exhibits the idea that a person in control of their mental processes can remove pain from suffering (Kuppmeran 2007: 33). In the context of this paper, Tibetan former political prisoners, through the practice of Buddhism, are able to separate pain from suffering. As a coping mechanism, political prisoners do not experience suffering in the long term. Instead, they focus on pain as a separate, fleeting feeling.

There are several studies that suggest a connection between suffering and solidarity. Through suffering, people are united because of shared experiences (Long 2006; Young-Eisendrath 2008). In the case of Tibetan former political prisoners specifically, unity through suffering could be attributed to the shared belief of Tibetan Buddhism and, by the nature of Tibetan culture, politics. In her article *The Transformation of Human Suffering: A Perspective from Psychotherapy and Buddhism*, Polly Young-Eisendrath makes important connections between the teachings of Buddhism and suffering and correlates her findings to the axiomatic themes of interdependence found in Buddhism as a potential adjunct of contemporary psychotherapy, specifically in helping patients overcome suffering (Young-Eisendrath 2008: 548). Suffering is a part of the Buddhist reality. Overcoming suffering is the goal

of Buddhism. Therefore, suffering in itself provides Tibetan former political prisoners with an opportunity to hone their spiritual mind.

## **Coping**

Peter Elsass and Kalsang Phuntsok's study of Tibetan torture survivors provides insight into the coping mechanisms specific to the Tibetan situation. Elsass and Phuntsok conclude that the two most effective coping mechanisms found among Tibetan refugees were Buddhist and political coping (2009: 7). Building on their research, I will focus on Buddhist and political coping mechanisms amongst Tibetan former political prisoners. However, I will also make an argument for a connection between Buddhist and political coping mechanisms based on an examination of Tibetan culture and contemporary history.

Their study constructed nine distinct categories of coping mechanisms: political coping, Buddhist coping, spiritual attitude, positive thinking, networking, social support, psychotherapeutic help, meditation and stress reduction techniques, and negative answers. The top two categories of coping mechanisms were political coping and Buddhist coping, followed by spiritual attitude and positive thinking, both of which are part of the Buddhist tradition (Elsass and Phuntsok 2009: 6-7). Their study makes an important distinction between Buddhist coping and political coping, but the two will be presented as one and the same later in this paper. Elsass and Phuntsok's work is helpful in understanding the role of Buddhist teachings and Tibetan political involvement as coping mechanisms for torture, but it does not provide proper insight into exactly what constitutes Buddhist and political coping.

## **Buddhist Coping**

In this thesis, Buddhist coping can be understood as any invocation of the teachings of the Buddha or traditional Buddhist practices such as meditation and chanting. An analysis of Buddhism will provide insight into the doctrine of karma; which I argue provides the core of Buddhist coping among Tibetan former political prisoners. Belief in karma provides comforting thoughts in the face of the tragedy because life crises are understood as the result of one's own actions and not the result of an angry or unjust God. Karma creates a universal blueprint that renders human experiences meaningful (Anand 2009: 818-819). Potter argues that belief in karma opens the door to understanding life from a naturalistic point of view, and "by so viewing the world can we hope to free ourselves from the suffering..." (1964: 49). However, other aspects of Buddhism such as the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold Path are essential in understanding how Buddhist teachings act as a coping mechanism for Tibetan ex-political prisoners. Here, the works of Peter Harvey, Fred W. Clothey, and Geoffrey Samuel will be presented and discussed to create a foundation upon which the doctrine of karma can be analyzed.

It is important to fully discuss the intricacies of karmic theory in order to understand how it acts as a coping mechanism, and later, to be understood as a political coping mechanism. Aside from a theoretical understanding, its effects in the realm of coping appear in a number of studies. Levy, Slade, and Ranasinghe provide insight into the role of karma in relation to health in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka (2009). Davidson, Connor, and Lee's study explains the role of karma in survivors of violent trauma (2005). In their study of Cambodian immigrant women and their battle

with domestic violence, Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan, and Shiu-Thornton discuss karma as a way in which the women accept and overcome spousal abuse (2005). In response to the outbreak of communal violence in Sri Lanka in 1983, Jonathan Spencer studies the roots of violence which has a potential causal relationship to the teachings of Buddhism, specifically karma (1990). Also, my own research in the Dharamsala provides further insight into karma as a coping mechanism for suffering.

Although it is not technically the same as the doctrine of karma, the Buddhist doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada* (variously translated as interdependent origination, conditioned genesis, dependent co-arising, etc.) is similar in the sense that one's actions not only influence the future outcomes of one's future, but every being's future, providing further insight into Buddhist coping. This doctrine essentially argues that all beings are interconnected to one another in a web of mutual causality, and every action warrants another reaction that is shared by all beings (Keefe 1997: 62-63). This idea can be understood as a Buddhist coping mechanism because it:

... means that other people are not fundamentally separate from our own selves, then we need to experience not only the suffering of others as our own suffering, but also and most painfully to see the violence of others as our own violence (Keefe 1997: 64).

The boundaries between what one would consider self and another person begin to look arbitrary. When a person sees someone else suffering, one should essentially understand that another person's suffering could have just as well been his or her own suffering (Kupperman 2007: 27). In this way, Tibetan political prisoners are able to come to terms with suffering because they are enduring for the sake of all living things. This particular aspect of Buddhist coping helps to inform the idea of political coping.



## **Political Coping**

Elsass and Phuntsok defined political coping as factors that "...included sentences that the fight for a 'Free Tibet' was considered as important for their way of cultural and spiritual surviving" (2009: 6). In this thesis, political coping will be presented as two different ideas: 1) the type of political coping as defined by Elsass and Phuntsok, and 2) political coping as informed by the Buddhist idea of interdependence as informed by Buddhist doctrines of karma and *pratitya-samutpada*, which, for the sake of clarity, will be anglicized as "conditioned genesis" for the rest of the paper.

Based on several accounts of Tibetan former political prisoners (including my own research) Tibetans were imprisoned because of political activity which is most often tied in some respect to reverence for His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama or, as mentioned, to an association with Tibetan nationalism. Several autobiographies by Tibetan former political prisoners, namely Ama Adhe, Palden Gyatso, Ani Panchen, and Venerable Bagdro, discuss the political activities that were the reasons for their indictment. While in prison, suffering for the sake of Tibetan independence provides them with a cause for which to suffer. The pain of suffering becomes a medallion of Tibetan freedom, a type of hardship endured for all Tibetan people. In terms of Buddhism, the concept of self is maintained through suffering (Mellor 1991: 49). Here it is important to recall the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned genesis, which suggests that there is no individual self. When a person is enduring for the sake of all Tibetan people, their suffering can be understood as a Buddhist practice.

It is precisely because of this concept that Buddhist and political coping are one and the same for Tibetan former political prisoners. Aside from the doctrine of

conditioned genesis, belief in karma can be viewed as a uniting agent for Tibetan political prisoners, giving them the strength to persevere and overcome suffering. In her article *Suffering the Winds of Lhasa: Politicized Bodies, Human Rights, Cultural Differences, and Humanism in Tibet*, Vincanne Adams remarks, "...accounts are interpreted as utterances of suffering, not simply the sort that can bring spiritual salvation, but of the sort that can bring about a political revolution" (1998: 82). Through suffering, which can be attributed to karmic causes, people become united politically. The interdependence of Tibetan people creates a notion of collective identity, which is a growing subject in the field of politics (Goodwin and Jasper 2009; Keefe 1997).

### **Narratives**

The narratives I acquired over the summer of 2010 are from sixteen Tibetan former political prisoners who discussed their experiences in Chinese prisons and how Buddhism helped them overcome suffering brought about by torture. These narratives (described in greater detail below) present the opportunity to understand exactly how religious and political coping helped this specific population of people during imprisonment. The narratives also provide the intellectual space in which the notions of Buddhist and political coping will be discussed both individually and together.

By examining these narratives closely one begins to see the extent to which religious and political beliefs not only provide solace for political prisoners, but are also reified by the political prisoners' experiences. Michel Foucault posits that practice precedes self and that the body becomes the site of politics, meaning that politics, and arguably religion, are defined by lived actions (Robbins 2012: 75). In the case of many Tibetan former political prisoners, their actions and lived experiences – being imprisoned

and tortured, forced to flee their home country, living in exile, etc. – create a stronger bond between the political prisoner and his or her beliefs, reinforcing the notion that both religion and politics can be utilized as a coping mechanism. Again, the narratives provide the space through which all the before mentioned ideas coalesce.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

#### **Sample**

The data for this thesis will come from the narratives that I gathered in McLeod Ganj, Dharamsala, India during between May and July 2010 from sixteen Tibetan former political prisoners in exile. The narratives of the Tibetan former political prisoners were acquired through open-ended interviews, reinforced by the scientific use of empathy as well as implementing the growing use of reflexive ethnography. They were recorded as notes and later digitally transcribed. This type of ethnography evokes a reflexive self-consciousness on the part of the researcher, which Capper argues, “is essential for textual, social scientific authority, rather than an obstacle to such authority...” (2003: 236). Rather than the classic form of ethnography, reflexive ethnography utilizes empathy as a strong tool to better understand the cultures being explored. Heinz Kohut’s posthumous psychoanalytic studies define empathy several times, most commonly as “vicarious introspection.” His understanding of empathy augments the idea of reflexive ethnography by allowing a researcher “the capacity to think or feel oneself into the inner life of another person,” which ostensibly echoes Freud’s definition of empathy as the ability to ‘feel oneself into somebody’ (Capper 2003: 237-238). Felman and Laub eloquently sum up this type of research:

The listener of the trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event... The listener has to feel the victim's victories, defeats and silences, known them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony (1992: 57).

The researcher, while maintaining a certain professional distance, attempts to relive the trauma of the interviewees.

Most participants were chosen because of their prison experiences as Tibetan former political prisoners. However, a few of the interviewees were never incarcerated, which calls for an amendment to the traditional definition of an former political prisoner from a person who was imprisoned because of their political beliefs to a person who was forced into exile and subjected to suffering as a result of their relationship to political prisoners. Many of the interviewees were students at Gu Chu Sum, an organization devoted to the aid of Tibetan former political prisoners and their families. Several interviews took place amongst the administrators of Gu Chu Sum, who were also Tibetan former political prisoners. The remaining interviews took place in several settings, such as public speaking forums held at local schools, rooftop restaurants, and, on one occasion because of his disability, in a man's bedroom. Because many of the refugees spoke little English, Tseduk Tseduk, a Gu Chu Sum student with advanced English skills, helped me to translate the interviews.

As mentioned, the interviews were open-ended and discussion-based. The questioning always began with a cup of tea, where the interviewee discussed where they originated from in Tibet, how old they were, and how long they had been in McLeod Ganj. Then the conversation would segue into a discussion about their political activity in Tibet, their reasons for arrest, and their experience in Chinese prisons. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, I tried not to probe too deep into the conversations about torture

and suffering; however, the interviewees were almost never reluctant to discuss even the smallest details. After they were done discussing their experience, I would ask them about their post-prison experience, their journey to North India, and finally about their religious experience as a result of imprisonment. Throughout the interviews the topic of coping with suffering and imprisonment surfaces multiple times. Due to the frequent theme of coping ideals, this study attempts to explore the idea of religion a coping mechanism. Because of the open-ended nature of the interviews, I gained more information from certain interviewees than others; however, the overall sample size presents an array of perspectives and coping themes. Similarly, the autobiographies of Tibetan former political prisoners, although they are much longer, present perspectives that fall within larger general themes. The themes presented in the interviews are similar to themes found in studies conducted to understand the coping mechanisms of Tibetan former political prisoners.

### **Procedure**

Elsass and Phuntsok catalogue themes into nine categories: political coping, Buddhist coping, spiritual attitude, positive thinking, networking, social support, psychotherapeutic help, meditation and stress reduction techniques, and a negative answer. Their study concluded that Buddhist and political coping were the two most significant forms of coping mechanisms (Elsass and Phuntsok 2009: 7). The authors of the study used systematic, qualitative analysis to derive meanings from their interviews, relying upon the *grounded theory* approach. In the assessment, the researchers chose 30 random interviews in which the intent of the responses to the question, “How do you think you managed to survive all the suffering?” were identified and categorized. Based

on these identifiable categories, the authors created a scoring manual, which was then applied to the remaining interviews. In the case that several interviews contained several examples of one category, the authors then analyzed the answers to the next question, “What was most important for you?” (Elsass and Phuntsok 2009: 5-6). In their findings, the results are presented in numbers and percentages. The researchers used nonparametric statistical analysis applied with the use of the Kruskal-Wallis test to estimate the statistical differences between the categories (Elsass and Phuntsok 2009: 6).

In order to analyze my interviews, I will draw procedural concepts from past researchers. I will use the categories created by Elsass and Phuntsok. Because of the similarity in topic and interviewing style, I will borrow from Vahali’s analysis model used in her book, *Lives in Exile: Exploring the Inner World of Tibetan Refugees*. Vahali pairs excerpts of interviews with conceptual insight in a relatively straightforward fashion.

This research will explore the ‘why’ and ‘how’ these two coping methods are the most effective in helping Tibetan former political prisoners overcome suffering. These two questions will be answered in a further analysis of the constituents of Buddhist and political coping. Buddhist coping will be better understood through the analysis of Buddhist teachings, focusing mainly on the doctrines of karma, which was mentioned time and time again in my interviews. Also, because the doctrine of karma is partly informed by the doctrine of conditioned genesis, any mention of interdependence will be noted. Political coping will be better understood through the analysis of Tibetan political activism. Then, after a study of Tibetan culture and contemporary history, an argument will be made linking Buddhist and political coping as one type of coping. Because of the

nature of Tibetan culture, religion and politics are understood as one and the same, which is echoed increasingly in the Tibetan mindset since the Chinese imposition of 1959. In understanding Buddhist and political coping as one and the same, this thesis will explore the extent to which Tibetan coping mechanisms are informed by Tibetan understanding of religion.

It should be noted that major developments have taken place in the political and spiritual nature of the Tibetan milieu since this research was conducted. For centuries, the leadership position of the Dalai Lama was both spiritual and political. This idea is physically symbolized by the Dalai Lama's original home, the Potala Palace, in Lhasa. Historically the Potala palace has housed the Tibetan government as well as served as the spiritual epicenter for Tibet, intrinsically linking the two ideas together. However, as a result of democratic elections held worldwide in the summer of 2011, the Dalai Lama has decided to give his political power to newly elected Tibetan political leader, Lobsang Sangay. At the time these interviews were conducted, the Dalai Lama was still the spiritual and political leader of Tibet.

#### **Chapter 4: Stories and Meaning**

*Is there any match for the suffering we endured, the losses we felt, the cries we made, even in the eighteenth layer of Hell? (Gyatso 1997: Poem of Dedication).*

In this section, the stories of the interviewees will be contextualized by an analysis of the concepts raised in the interviews. In order to preserve the natural flow of the interviews, the section will be stylized in a way that tells as much of the relevant political prisoner's story as possible, keeping with the wishes of the interviewees and fulfilling their obligation to the Dalai Lama of telling their stories to the world. Because

of the nature of the interviews, some are longer than others, some are more explicit than others, and some are more relevant than others. However, each interview provides individual windows into the experience of Tibetan former political prisoners. A discussion of the concepts raised in each story will follow the interviewees' discussion. For the sake of organization, the interviews are arranged according to a classification of interviewees: 1) laypeople, 2) former monks, 3) monks, and 4) nuns. Then the last two interviews, both by former monks, provide an alternative understanding of the types of coping mechanisms discussed by the other interviewees.

Losar Sonam's story serves as an introduction to the experience of Tibetan former political prisoners. It provides a detailed account of prison life and covers the bases of suffering and religious and political coping discussed in this paper. I met with Losar one evening while he was leading a discussion about his experiences as a political prisoner at an organization he helped found, Learning and Ideas for Tibet (L.I.T.). Before his discussion, I met with him several times while I was volunteering for his organization. Despite having trouble speaking because of injuries sustained in prison, he is always willing to talk with Tibetan refugees, curious Indian citizens, and foreign tourists. He has informally been designated as a sort of mouthpiece for the Tibetan community, giving interviews to national and international journalists and providing advice to fellow Tibetans. Aside from co-founding L.I.T., Losar works with newly arrived former political prisoners with Gu Chu Sum, helps run a restaurant and community center devoted to peaceful Chinese-Tibetan discussions, and teaches at various schools throughout the Tibetan community in exile.



Losar's story provides the reader with a detailed account of the hardships that political prisoners endure in Chinese prisons. In addition to insurmountable physical suffering, Losar was forced to watch other Tibetans die excruciating deaths, resulting in detrimental mental suffering. Most of his account is devoted to describing his prison and post-prison experience, but he does briefly mention the role that Tibetan Buddhism played in helping him overcome his suffering. While his account leaves out any mention of why he was arrested, I can say that he is an avid supporter of the Free Tibet movement.

### **Losar Sonam**

I was a farmer from Tibet. In prison, I was suspended by handcuffs and whipped with metal wires. Once, I fainted from pain and awoke with a large scar on my face. I was held in Gudza for 4 months and only interrogated at night so other prisoners could not hear my screams. The doctors would often take two cups of my blood a day, checked the blood for diseases, and then sold it to Chinese policemen. Many of my friends would faint while their blood was taken, and I remember always feeling dizzy. The food was poor and bad for our health. We would eat boiled cabbage from the fields. Sometimes, there were worms in the cabbage, which I initially refused to eat. However, after days without food, I had to eat it. My friend and I were both sentenced to 13 years and my other friends were sentenced for 15 years because they were caught making Tibetan flags. After I was sentenced I was taken to Tsedang prison, one of the most infamous prisons in Tibet.

In prison, we were forced to memorize an entire rulebook written in Tibetan and Chinese... There was a field inside the prison where our food was grown, which was watered by raw sewage that we were forced to carry on our backs. There was a rule that the prisoners had to make at least 12,000 yuan a year from sources outside of prison. If we failed to meet the quota, we were severely beaten. The guards left cuffs on our ankles. We were fed sparsely and irregularly. We had no blankets and no pillows. There was no toilet, forcing us to urinate and defecate where we slept. It was always pitch dark, which kept us from knowing whether it was night or day. I was detained in solitary confinement once for 3-4 months, even though it was supposed to be for 12 days, because I did not meet his 12,000-yuan quota. We were often beaten for no reason.

The hours when I was awake were easier because there was no food at night and I was always haunted by dreams. From 1992-1995, my job was to plant vegetables. From 1995-1997, I was made to do various exercises, but because of malnutrition, my body was too weak to do the exercise and I was tortured. An example of an exercise was when I was forced to stand barefooted on a block of ice for hours outside during the winter. When marching in lines, we were forced to say aloud that Tibet was a part of China. We were brutally beaten if we did not chant.

In May 1998, there was a youth festival within the prison. The political prisoners began shouting at the Chinese guards and 5 women and 2 boys were killed on the spot. 3 women were killed by gunfire. The other two women were forced to strip, and their clothes were shoved down their throats with sticks until they suffocated to death. One of the boys was beaten to death, and the other boy was made to hang himself to keep people from shouting slogans. 12 more people's sentences were extended 2-3 years.

After one month of not leaving our cells, we were allowed outside for only five minutes to get fresh air. We used the bathroom in our cells. During the winter, the smell was barely tolerable. During the summer, we had trouble even opening our eyes because of the horrible smell. We were interrogated often. We were taken one by one into a small room where we would be forced to write "Free Tibet" and asked to correct it. If we refused, we were beaten badly. In 2005, all of the political prisoners were moved to another prison. In the new prison, we had small rooms equipped with four cameras. There was also a microphone in the middle of the room that recorded the conversations between the two political prisoners per room. In the new prison, each prisoner had his or her own interrogator. During interrogation, we would be tempted with good food and cigarettes. They were attempting to bribe the mind of the political prisoners. If we still refused, we were beaten with various instruments. At night, I was not able to sleep because of my injuries, which were inflicted by a lead pipe filled with sand. It was a favorite among the guards because it did not leave visible wounds and bruises. Sleep was excruciating. I could not lie down at all. I stayed in the new prison for two months.

At first, I was angry. I was a Buddhist before I was arrested. 99% of Tibetans are Buddhists. Prison did not alter my devotion to Buddhism. Prison actually made me more comfortable with the teachings of the Buddha. It has helped me cope, and I am proud to have had the opportunity to practice Buddhism.

My sentence was finished on 30 June 2010... I no longer had a home. My family had moved because our home was destroyed. I sat down on the ruins of my childhood home and lit a cigarette. A small girl passed by and asked who my parents were. When I replied, she ran away to the other side of town and returned with my mother. The young girl was my sister, who was so young when I was arrested in 1992. Now, she was 20 years old. My mother recognized me, but the rest of my family did not because I was the oldest son. Their neighbors came over, offering tea and other goods. After one month, I left home to find a job in the mountains because it was unsafe to stay with my family. I found a job as a shepherd for 6 months. Then, I went to Lhasa to make my own way. I worked in a shop, but I was forced to quit by Chinese authorities. I returned home and began contemplating whether or not to come to India.

I had many friends in Lhasa that I met in prison. They tried to help me get a visa. I made my way to the border and paid a guide 6,000 yuan to show me the way to Nepal... Then, I made my way to Delhi and eventually traveled to Dharamsala. I stayed at the reception center in Dharamsala for one year where many journalists interviewed me. I made sure to tell the truth because I wanted them to know exactly how terrible the Tibetan situation is. I came to India with 200 other people, but I was the only political prisoner. We were all given the opportunity to meet the Dalai Lama. Later, I had the opportunity to meet with the Dalai Lama alone for 18 minutes. I told the Dalai Lama everything I knew in that short period. The Dalai Lama advised me to tell no lies. He

told me to tell each and every detail truthfully. I went to school in lower in Dharamsala where I was able to study English and Tibetan... I received the opportunity to teach at Gu Chu Sum. After one year of working there, I... created Learning and Ideas for Tibet (L.I.T.).

Losar's story begins with his being beaten by metal wires until he faints from pain. Unfortunately, his story does not improve until the end. After nearly two decades in Chinese prisons, Losar returned to a destroyed home and a family that hardly recognized him. In order to sustain himself and protect his family he was forced to find work, first as a shepherd followed by working in Lhasa; however, because of his status as an former political prisoner he was forced to make the decision whether or not to flee to India. As he told his story, somberly and quietly, one could see the permanent effects of torture that haunt him. When he discussed certain aspects of his prison experience he would have to stop talking, collect his thoughts, and continue to trudge through his memory. Despite the hardships he endured, he has managed to create a productive, happy life in exile. In order to overcome his suffering, he referenced his belief in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism.

Losar admits to being human and becoming angry. However, through the practice of Buddhism, he was able to overcome his human experience and create a niche through which he could learn more about the teachings of the Buddha. Fortunately Losar was a Buddhist before he was arrested. He was able to cultivate a deeper understanding of Buddhism and was proud to have been given the opportunity to practice his religion, which, as he explicitly mentions in his account, helped him cope during his prison experience. Because of his faith in Buddhism, he was able to create a worldview that

made his situation make sense and was able to overcome suffering and eke out a positive existence after he was released from prison.

Although Losar does not mention why he was arrested, there are a few inferences that can be made about the role that political coping played in helping him endure his time in prison. He mentions that when he was initially sentenced, before his time was extended by five years, that his other friends received 15 years because they were caught making Tibetan flags. By associating with people who were making Tibetan flags, one could at least assume that Losar was taking part in some political activity, especially to receive such a harsh sentence. However, it is his time in prison that highlights the potential role of political coping in helping him endure. He discusses a youth festival during which people were punished severely for participating in anti-Chinese activity. Although he does not mention his involvement in the festival, his awareness of the festival and forced attendance of the participants' execution implies a certain level of solidarity that existed between the prisoners. Also, later in his sentence when he was moved to a prison built specifically for political prisoners, he still refused to correct the phrase Free Tibet on a piece of paper, despite the looming threat of further torture. Losar's devotion to a Free Tibet is evident in his political involvement in exile. Losar's political convictions, although not mentioned explicitly in his story, more than likely combined with his religious fervor to help him endure his experience as a political prisoner. The next story was also collected in a similar discussion setting and describes a very different experience.

I met Norbu Wayang at a small school one evening while he was leading a discussion about the Tibetan situation. With his arm wrapped in a makeshift sling, he sat

in a folding chair in front of an overcrowded room full of Tibetans, Indians, and foreign tourists who had gathered to hear him discuss his story and to understand more about the current situation in Tibet. With a translator at his side, Norbu spoke to the eager audience, using a mixture of Tibetan and broken English, for nearly two hours. From his story, the reader can gather the degree to which Tibetan political prisoners suffer. The themes of religious coping can be seen in his dedication to the Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama, and the monk, Kunga, whom he risked his own life to save. Without his religious conviction, Norbu may have never been moved to protest. Similarly, themes of political coping are also apparent in Norbu's narrative. He discusses the lack of freedom and human rights in Tibet, which, in combination with his religious devotion, led him to protest in solidarity with his fellow Tibetans, which is an inherently political activity.

### **Norbu Wayang**

On 14 March 2008, the soldiers opened fire on the protesters. Since 1959, the Tibetans have always protested peacefully because the Dalai Lama insisted to do so. Human life is too precious to protest violently... The Chinese government is exploiting the Tibetan people and their natural resources. Since 2008, countless Tibetans have died. The Panchen Lama is the Tibetan cultural leader. The Dalai Lama is the Tibetan spiritual leader. The 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama has been in prison since he was 6 years old; he would now be 21 years old.

In 2007, Chinese officials went from door to door, asking people to denounce their allegiance to the Dalai Lama and to forget about the Panchen Lama. In Tibet, there are two kinds of people, nomads and farmers. I am a farmer. As a farmer, I was forced to plant crops. Now, farmers are only allowed to grow wheat or grasses, not useful crops. Farmers do not produce enough to support their livelihood.

Tibetans have no freedom under the Chinese government... The Chinese do not allow Tibetans to become monks and nuns until they are 18, rather than the traditional age of 4 or 5. The Chinese also choose who can be monks or nuns. There are also limitations on how many monks can be in the monastery. If there are more people present they have to pay fines or shut down. There is no freedom of religion, human rights, or freedom of speech. If someone has a picture of the Dalai Lama, they go to prison for 6-7 months. The Tibetans feel helpless. Many thought they were going to die, so they began to protest.

On 10 March 2008, protests began in Lhasa and spread throughout Tibet. There were protests all over for nearly a year. I joined the protest March 24. There were two large protests in my village. 130 Nuns and 300 lay people began the protest at 4 in the afternoon. At the time, I was working on the pipelines just outside of my village, near a monastery... I left my work and joined the protest. Upon arrival, there were lots of police who spread the protesters in many directions. More than 200 people resumed the protest. The police opened fire, wounding several people. The people, covered in blood, continued to protest.

A monk, Kunga, twenty years old, was shot and fell to the ground in front of my eyes... I made my way to the monk and tried to save him because monks are sacred in Tibetan society. I grabbed the monk's hand and was shot in the kidney only three steps later. I didn't tell his fellow protesters because I didn't want to lower their spirits. Therefore, I kept carrying the monk and was shot again only a few steps later. The bullet went through my elbow... and I let the monk slip from my grasp. I lost consciousness and many people came to my aid. My friends put me on a bike and drove me away from the protests. Then, I fled to the mountains, where I stayed 1 year 2 months, and 27 days, to avoid arrest.

Because I was hiding in the mountains, I didn't receive proper medical treatment. I tied my arm with a rubber strap to stop bleeding. After two months, my wounds started to smell horrible with infection, but my bandage was already stuck to my wounds. When I removed the bandage, my skin was rotting and there were maggots inside the wounds. I was not able to do anything because I was in the mountains. I stumbled upon a bottle of Chinese white wine and used a blade to remove the rotting skin. I found and used petroleum jelly to put inside my wounds. After the protest, I was put on China's most wanted list. The government offered 150,000 Chinese yen for my arrest. Because of my status, I was not able to go to a hospital for proper treatment. Instead, I lived like a wild animal in the mountains for 1 year, 2 months, and 27 days.

I knew that the Dalai Lama was in Dharamsala. I believed that the Dalai Lama came to Dharamsala to tell the world how the Chinese treat Tibetans. In my village, there were more than 14 killed and hundreds injured in one hour. It is hard to tell how many were killed all over Tibet. I refuse to fix my arm so I can show people what China has done to the Tibetan people.

Norbu, led by his religious and political convictions, engaged in a protest near his village. In the protest he was shot while helping a monk. After fleeing the authorities, he was forced to hide in the Tibetan wilderness, enduring harsh conditions for over a year. During that year, he was forced to treat his own wounds and, aside from the occasional visit from his friends, lived alone. Although Norbu was never actually arrested, he falls within the extended definition of ex-political prisoner that is being used for this paper.

Although he was not tortured in prison, one would be hard pressed not to consider his hardships in terms of suffering. The reasons that Norbu decided to protest may provide insight into the coping mechanisms he employed to overcome his suffering.

While Norbu never makes specific reference to his religious affiliations, he begins his story with a discussion about status of Tibet's most important religious figures, the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. He remarks about Tibet's lack of religious freedom and the Chinese intervention in the traditional Tibetan practice of sending young children into the monastery. During the protest he sacrifices himself to save a fallen monk because he recognizes their sacred place in Tibetan society. Even if Norbu never references his religious beliefs, it is clear that he reveres Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike other former political prisoners who note specific aspects of Tibetan Buddhism that help them overcome their suffering, Norbu's story at least alludes to a religious inclination. One could speculate that religious ideas crossed his mind during his time in hiding.

In terms of political coping Norbu is clear about his political leanings. While he does not identify with a specific movement (such as a 'Free Tibet' movement), he, like most other former political prisoners, was involved in a protest. In his story, he mentions that there is no religious, political, or economic freedom, and, because of Chinese oppression, Tibetans are beginning to feel helpless. March 10<sup>th</sup>, the day that protests began in Lhasa, is memorialized as Tibetan Uprising Day, marking the anniversary of the day Tibetans revolted against the People's Republic of China in 1959. Because the Olympics were being held in Beijing in 2008, large protests took place across Tibet on March 10<sup>th</sup> to garner attention from the world community about the Tibetan situation. By March 24<sup>th</sup> the protests had spread to Norbu's village. In solidarity with villagers who

were protesting, Norbu joined the demonstration. By participating in the protests, Norbu was engaging in political activity with fellow Tibetans. In his story, he never mentions how his participation helped him endure during his time of suffering. However, the fact that he refuses to fix his arm in order to show others what he endured implies some level of political coping. Rather than fixing his arm, he chooses to stand in solidarity with his fellow Tibetans who were arrested or killed in the protests of 2008. The next story also discusses events that took place in 2008.

While doing my research, I volunteered and taught English at Gu Chu Sum, an association for the assistance of Tibetan former political prisoners and their families. Every July, Gu Chu Sum receives new students for the year. During the transition period between academic years, there is a week for new students to move in and settle into their new rooms. My translator knew many of the new students and introduced me to several of them before they became busy with classes.

Tsering Gedun was a new student at Gu Chu Sum who I was able to talk to before the new academic year began. After the interview, I got to know Tsering better in class; however, he maintained a quiet persona. Although he was never arrested, Tsering, along with ten other protesters, participated in a Free Tibet rally after which he narrowly escaped arrest. After the protest, five of the protesters were able to flee to India, and the other five were sentenced to prison. Tsering explains that six of the ten protesters were close friends, and that his closest friend was arrested and is serving life in prison. Tsering's story provides further insight into the wave of protests that took place in 2008 around the Olympic games in Beijing. Although he made it to India, he still invokes his beliefs in Tibetan Buddhism to help him understand the Tibetan situation.



## Tsering Gedun

I am 40 years old, am from the Amdo region of Tibet, and am a new student at Gu Chu Sum. On 14 March 2008, I joined a small demonstration with ten others. Of the ten protesters, five came to India, and five remain in Tibet... Six of them, including myself, were very close friends. I chose to participate in the protest for three reasons. First, China was holding the Olympics, and we knew the world would be watching. Second, it was around March 10<sup>th</sup>, which is Tibetan Uprising Day. Third, there were large religious ceremonies taking place in the area, and we knew we could get the attention of Chinese authorities then more than any other time. We were protesting about the absence of human rights in Tibet. We carried a large red flag with the words, "No Human Rights in Tibet," written across it. Our group of ten eventually joined a much larger demonstration, gaining more supporters onlookers. We protested nonstop for two days.

On the first day, there were not many Chinese police. On the second day, there were dozens of policemen. The police threw poisonous gas grenades into the crowds, causing several people to faint and injuring dozens of other protesters. I recall the moment the police began throwing grenades into the protesting crowds on the second day of our demonstration. It was confusing and difficult to find my friends and make their way through the dizzying crowds. There were lots of policemen, but there were also lots of Tibetan protesters, which allowed my and my five close friends to escape immediate danger. We moved around Tibet tirelessly, living with various nomadic families or in the wilderness because we knew that we were being tracked by the Chinese authorities and would be found in larger cities.

By 10 May 2009 we fled to India. However, three members of my group were arrested: one sentenced to life in prison, another was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and another one for 8 years. If I were caught alongside my friends, I know that I would have gone to prison. Before the demonstration, I had already resolved the fact that I may lose my life and was willing to do so for the just cause of Tibet. I knew that I would have gone to prison for 8 to 15 years, maybe life, or even executed. However, the demonstration was worth the danger. The prisoner that was given the life sentence was my closest friend. We lived and ate together. I recognize that this entire situation is a matter of karma. I realize that Buddhism was necessary in helping me overcome my struggle. Because of my firm belief in Buddhism, I was not hesitant to give my life up for the cause.

Tsering's story emphasizes the significance of the protests that took place in 2008. As he mentions, the world was watching because of the Olympics, and Tibetans saw an opportunity to show the world the atrocities of the Tibetan situation. Tsering's group was protesting the lack of human rights in Tibet and eventually joined up with a larger demonstration, protesting for two days. Fortunately, Tsering was able to avoid

being arrested and tortured. However, his experience is still wrought with suffering. Like Norbu, Tsering falls into the extended definition of a former political prisoner. While he and a few friends made it to India, he was still forced to leave his closest friends in the hands of Chinese authorities. In order to avoid arrest, he and his friends were forced to hide in the Tibetan wilderness until they were finally able to make the dangerous journey across the Himalayas. In order to make sense of his experiences, Tsering explains the Tibetan situation as a result of karma.

Tsering walked into the protest with the knowledge that he may have been arrested or killed, and he argues that, because of his beliefs in Buddhism, he was able to participate without hesitation. He reasoned that whether he lived or died was a result of karma, giving him validation for his actions. In Tsering's story, his religious outlook gives way to his political participation, linking the two ideas together.

Aside from the significance of 2008, Tsering and his friends took part in the protests because they fell on Tibetan Uprising Day. Tsering and his friends were joining with other Tibetans in solidarity by protesting against the Chinese imposition. He contends that the cause outweighed the danger of being arrested. Although he is in exile, he still feels connected to his friends who were arrested, which may be providing extra hope to his friends while they serve their sentences.

Like Norbu and Tsering, *Happy Guy* Dhondup falls within the extended definition of political prisoner. Happy Guy was one of the students I helped to tutor in English at Gu Chu Sum. Every evening after classes, I, along with other volunteers, would meet with several Gu Chu Sum students and act as conversation partners. Happy Guy boasted that he always had a smile on his face and refused to be named otherwise.

After coming to India, he learned as much as he could about the Tibetan situation and decided he needed to go back and educate other Tibetans. He returned to India only because Chinese authorities were pursuing him. His religious views are not as apparent as his political views. However, his story provides the unique insight of a person who traveled extensively across Tibet. His political convictions are more complex than the pursuit of a Free Tibet. Happy Guy wants to see a future where Tibetans and Chinese people work together.

### **Happy Guy Dhondup**

Every person in Tibet wanted to see their leaders, but especially the Dalai Lama because he is their spiritual and political leader. I came to Dharamsala in 2001 to learn more about the Dalai Lama and how the government-in-exile worked... I was extremely happy, but sad at the same time. I was happy when I met the Dalai Lama because he is passionate about Tibetans, the Chinese, and world peace. I was sad because the Dalai Lama was a wonderful Tibetan leader who had no chance of returning to his homeland... Also, many other Tibetans would love to see the Dalai Lama; it is many people's goal to meet the Dalai Lama before they die.

When I came the first time at 18, I stayed only one year and decided to make the journey back across the Himalayas by myself. During my time in India, I learned as much as possible by reading many books and talking with many refugees. I wanted to take all of my newfound knowledge back to Tibet and educate Tibetans of their situation... I went back specifically to teach illiterate people in small villages. I traveled across Tibet, giving speeches and educating people about the Dalai Lama and the government-in-exile.

The Chinese always looked down on our culture, which made Tibetan people feel like animals. Many people in Tibet want to help but they lack the ability to do anything. I felt that it was my job to teach them how they can help. Most of the younger people's futures and pasts are lost... The younger generation feels hopeless but they can't fight the Chinese. All they have is the Dalai Lama's message and advice. When I would travel to villages and cities, I met many different people including lamas, teachers, students, parents, nomads, and farmers. I told them that they needed to understand China's politics, the definitions of human rights, and how they are important... I met with many young people and set up debates. Many young people wanted to fight China and others suggested that Tibet should cultivate friendships with the Chinese, listening to the Dalai Lama. However, the Chinese were simply not listening. Some people said that they should revert to terrorism because the Chinese use terrorist attacks against them. Many people said they should use violence. Some people said they should listen to the Dalai Lama because there is no way to fight the Chinese. Since the Cultural Revolution,

the Chinese wanted to destroy their culture. The people became very angry over this. I worked in Tibet for 4 years alone. At that time, I was only 25 years old.

In 2007, I found out that the Chinese were looking for me and I fled to India. I knew that the Chinese would have imprisoned and tortured me for many years. Even if they found me, I would never regret my actions because I am proud to have helped Tibet... Through my experiences, I gained more of an understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. My beliefs were strengthened. When I was younger, I was aware of the teachings, but my experiences solidified my beliefs and made them grow. Tibet will gain freedom. Tibetan and Chinese people should connect and understand each other. I also feel that the West should be more involved in order to make this a reality...

Happy Guy was never arrested or physically tortured by Chinese authorities; however, his journeys back and forth across the border were indelibly difficult. He begins his story by discussing Tibet's desire to see the Dalai Lama. Unlike many other Tibetans, Happy Guy was informed of the Tibetan situation when he was a child, inspiring him to make the journey to India when he was only 18. After only one year, he learned as much as he could about the Tibetan situation and the teachings of the Dalai Lama and made the journey back across the Himalayas, a journey that claims hundreds of Tibetan lives a year, by himself. Upon returning to Tibet, Happy Guy, realizing the helplessness that many Tibetans felt across his country, began to teach the information he accrued during his time in India.

Although religion does not play a large role in his story, Happy Guy mentions that his experience solidified his beliefs in Tibetan Buddhism. Throughout his experience, his faith grew, which could have given him the extra courage to continue his mission. Part of his mission was to teach Tibetan culture, which is invariably fused with Tibetan Buddhism. Also, during the debates he set up, Happy Guy emphasized the need for cooperation, not violence, which could also be tied to his religious affiliations. In the middle of his story, he makes the profound statement: *All they have is the Dalai Lama's*

*message and advice.* In order to combat the helplessness that Tibetans feel, Happy Guy invokes the words of the Dalai Lama, which can be construed as both religious and political.

The courage to travel back and forth between India and Tibet and to travel extensively across Tibet illegally came from Happy Guy's commitment to the freedom of his country. As he mentions, he traveled across Tibet, risking his life to teach others about the Tibetan situation, in the hopes of a Free Tibet. He is optimistic that Tibet will gain its freedom. For four years, Happy Guy evaded Chinese authorities while disseminating illegal, vital information across Tibet. Because of the threat of being arrested, Happy Guy had to flee his homeland. However, even if he had been caught, he mentions that he regrets nothing because his actions were all for the freedom of Tibet. The next interviewee, Lobsang Kocha, also made several trips across the border between Tibet and India with the hopes of distributing information about the Tibetan situation to unaware people across Tibet.

I met with Lobsang Kocha late one afternoon just as a thick fog began descending from the mountains behind McLeod Ganj. He wore camouflage shorts, a Free Tibet shirt, and a black bandana to represent his struggle as a former political prisoner. He said he would remove the bandana once Tibet was free. He was also interested in learning the path across the Himalayas so he could guide more Tibetans to India. Lobsang's story gives a detailed account of the interrogation process political prisoners endure, noting the way in which the Dalai Lama is portrayed by Chinese authorities. Although he admits to not being particularly religious before his arrest, Lobsang was able to find solace in what little he did know about Tibetan Buddhism and makes an interesting

observation about the role of religion in helping other prisoners overcome suffering.

Being an outspoken advocate of a Free Tibet, Lobsang's account sheds light on the role that political coping plays in the lives of Tibetan political prisoners.

### **Lobsang Kocha**

I was born in the Amdo region of Tibet and am 31 years old. I have made the journey between Tibet and India 4 times. The first time, in 1997, I was only 16. In Tibet, there are no rights, and I desperately wanted to meet the Dalai Lama. In 1999, I went back to Tibet to learn the road between Tibet and India in order to help people escape and also to smuggle books from India to Tibet. I wanted to help the political situation... I knew that Tibet was a free country, and that it was my duty to ensure its independence.

In 2000, I returned to Tibet, taking many books with me about Chinese politics, the Tibetan government-in-exile, and the Dalai Lama. On this return trip to Tibet, the Chinese found me and began to interrogate me. From a small city near the border, the police sent me to another police station in Lhasa, where I was detained for 8 months. Then, I was sentenced to 4 years in prison. Because I came from India and I refused to be cooperative, 6 months were added to my sentence... The policemen told me that the Chinese had given Tibetans many benefits and that many Tibetans are unaware of their actions. They told me that the Dalai Lama was wrong and was an insurgent... a separatist. But, I refused to believe their accusations. I stayed strong in the name of true justice.

During the 8 months awaiting my sentence, I was tortured extensively... everyday until I was released from jail. They used many different torture methods. Mostly they would beat me with electric batons. I was not allowed to see the sun. Sometimes I would fall unconscious because of the pain and they would suspend my body by handcuffs and light a fire beneath my unconscious body until I awoke. When I was being tortured the guards told me that I could stop the torture if I denounced the Dalai Lama... For 11 months of my sentence, I was allowed to be around other prisoners, but I spent the rest of my sentence in solitary confinement because authorities were afraid of my influence. I was 21 years old when I was sentenced. After I was released, I made the journey back to Dharamsala in 2005.

I began to study Tibetan Buddhism when I was 6 years old. I practiced lots of meditation but I admit that I was not the best practitioner. In prison, there were people who followed the teachings of the Buddha and there were those who did not. Because I was a practicing Buddhist, I found it easier to tolerate the Chinese guards. I meditated inside my mind because the Chinese authorities did not allow outward expression of religion. I would follow the directions of the Buddha on how to deal with suffering. I would focus on compassion. I was very angry but knew that anger only brought more suffering. I changed my mind and decided it would be more beneficial to build a friendship with the Chinese people. Other prisoners would tell me to take refuge in the teachings of the Buddha in order to deal with the suffering. The ones that did not practice Buddhism ran into mental problems and anger issues. Those who don't practice cannot control their

rage and eventually become depressed. I want to share my experience about being a political prisoner so that the world will understand the Tibetan situation. I want to share however I can. It was the worst experience in my life, but it was also the best because I understand the life of a Tibetan political prisoner.

After taking refuge in India, Lobsang felt the need to return to Tibet after only year. He was arrested at the border and taken to a detention center where he was interrogated for months. Although he was beaten, he refused to give into the claims that the Dalai Lama was a separatist. It is interesting to note the guards' argument that the Chinese have made the lives of Tibetans better, while the Tibetans remain unaware of the benefits. After 8 months of interrogation, Lobsang was sentenced to 4 years and six months in prison, most of which he served in solitary confinement. During the long hours of solitary confinement, Lobsang found solace in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and was able to overcome his suffering. For the entirety of his imprisonment, he was tortured extensively but he never cracked, upholding his belief that Tibet should be a free country.

Lobsang explicitly mentions the merit of Tibetan Buddhism in his prison experience. Although outward expression of Tibetan Buddhism is illegal in prison, Lobsang was able to meditate inside of his head. He was able to invoke compassion towards the Chinese guards, easing the pain of his suffering. He realized that being angry would only cause more suffering. Rather than harboring anger towards the Chinese people, Lobsang realized that it is more beneficial to make friendly connections between Tibet and China in order to establish a truly Free Tibet. It is interesting to note that Lobsang mentioned how other prisoners invoked the teachings of the Buddha in order to overcome suffering and that those who did not practice Buddhism suffered from mental and anger issues, which gave way to depression and more suffering. Because of his time

in prison, Lobsang's beliefs have been further solidified and he has a clearer image of what a Free Tibet, one in which Tibetans and Chinese cooperate, may look like.

By refusing to cooperate with the Chinese authorities, Lobsang was acting on his political beliefs. His willingness to risk his life traveling back and forth from India to Tibet and ability to endure torture are testaments to his commitment towards a Free Tibet. In prison, he was separated from other prisoners because of his political influence, which implies that his defiance was a sign of solidarity with other political prisoners. Although he was held in solitary confinement, away from his fellow Tibetans, Lobsang maintained a strong attachment to his duty to preserve Tibet's freedom, which is evident in his willingness to return to Tibet after being imprisoned for over 4 years. In exile, Lobsang is an outspoken activist. His conviction in his political beliefs is evident in the clothes he wears as well as his involvement in various political organizations based in McLeod Ganj. Lobsang's identification with the Free Tibet movement, as well as his pursuit of Tibetan Buddhism in prison, helped him overcome his suffering and continue to struggle for Tibet's independence. The next story features another Tibetan who made several journeys back and forth from India and Tibet.

Like Gu Chu Sum, there were other venues that hosted discussions by Tibetan ex-political prisoners. The Tibetan Hope Center, a small organization aimed at helping the larger refugee community as well as educating foreign tourists, hosts an event every Thursday night where a former political prisoner tells his story. Lhamo Kyab was one of these storytellers. After being released from prison in 2009, Lhamo made his way back to McLeod Ganj. At the time of this discussion, he had only been back a few months and still had his experience as a political prisoner fresh on his mind. He was dressed in



traditional nomadic clothing to display his pride in his heritage. Lhamo served three years in prison and his story provides further insight into the role that religious and political beliefs play in helping political prisoners overcome suffering.

### **Lhamo Kyab**

I was born in the Amdo region of Tibet to a nomadic family. I came to India in May 2006. For 10 years, I traveled with my family, but, between the ages 10 and 23, I had to take full responsibility for my family. I always wanted to have an audience with the Dalai Lama and after 13 years my wish was fulfilled. Most of the young people who come to India from Tibet are able to attend the TTS. I spent almost one year there, but I was not used to such a structured lifestyle and found it hard to accommodate... After attending that school, I decided that I would go back to Tibet holding a Tibetan flag.

I made the journey back to Tibet in 2006 and went to Lhasa. Then, I went back to my village to raise a Tibetan flag. Despite the danger, I felt that I needed to complete my plans. Chinese spies followed me to my village. Because of the danger imposed by the spies, I never got the chance to raise the flag in his village. In May 2006, I went back to Lhasa and was confronted by two officials. They told me that I was being arrested. I tried to convince them that I had done nothing wrong. But, they had recorded my phone conversations and I knew that I was caught... I was sentenced to prison for 3 years.

First, I was taken to a small jail and interrogated. I was asked two questions over and over again – “Why are you here with a Tibetan flag and who sent you?” After being sentenced, I was taken to a larger prison. Within each jail cell, there were Chinese spies waiting to report anything we did that was anti-Chinese to higher authorities. Just for standing with my arms crossed, I was accused of reciting mantras mentally. As punishment for standing with my arms crossed, I was forced to do things like stand still in the sun for six hours. Because I am human, I was angry at first. However, with the help of Buddhism, I was able to feel sympathy for China. They have to do bad things in order to support their livelihoods. Because I understand this, I can feel compassion for them.

I was released 12 May 2009. My relatives came to pick me up from prison. Afterwards, I decided that I wanted to go to the monasteries in Lhasa to pray, but I did not have proper authority. Two officials accosted me and I told them that I just been released from prison. They ran my records for 30-40 minutes and called higher officials. Ten minutes later, two more officials accosted me and told me that I had no right to be in Lhasa and must return to Amdo immediately. After my release, I was still monitored constantly. The next day I began my journey to Sagyal but I did not have a passport with me. That night, I snuck across the border and walked across the Himalayas alone for 8 days with no food. When I arrived in Nepal I was taken directly to a hospital. My ears were useless and my liver was failing because of the rotting meat I was given in prison. Because I was so weak, the Tibetan Reception Center in Nepal arranged a flight for me to Delhi. Now, I feel like I have a new, productive life where I can study and practice my own culture and religion.

After coming to India once when he was 23 years old, Lhamo decided to go back to Tibet to raise a Tibetan flag in his village. Although he never raised the flag, he was traced by Chinese authorities through his phone conversations and was cornered at a small café in Lhasa. He was taken to a detention center and interrogated about the reasoning behind his actions and, after refusing to cooperate, was sentenced to 3 years in prison. Because of Chinese spies inside of his cell, Lhamo was not allowed to pray or meditate. However, as he mentions, he was accused of reciting mantras just for standing with his arms crossed. As punishment, he was subjected to severe punishment. The level of monitoring inside the prison indelibly causes mental suffering. However, Lhamo's suffering did not cease after he was released from prison. Afterwards, he was not allowed to pray in Lhasa without his papers and was eventually forced to make the dangerous journey to India.

Lhamo was fortunate to know about the Dalai Lama when he was younger and gain at least a basic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism that helped him overcome the suffering of being a political prisoner. Lhamo admits to harboring some anger because of his limited human experience. However, he able to transcend his anger and begin to 'feel sympathy' for China. He realizes that "they [Guards] have to do bad things in order to support their livelihoods," which allows him to practice compassion towards them. By practicing compassion for the guards, Lhamo is invoking the doctrine of conditioned genesis. By feeling sympathy for the Chinese guards, realizing that they must beat him in order to support their families, Lhamo is aware of the intersubjectivity of life. His experience is inextricably linked with the experience of the Chinese guard, and, through

understanding this, Lhamo is able to practice compassion and overcome the suffering of prison. Lhamo's desire to go directly to a temple to pray after being released from prison underlines his devotion to Tibetan Buddhism.

Lhamo was taking part in political action by risking his life to take a Tibetan flag back to his village. He does not discuss much more about his political views other than his desire to fly his country's flag but the act itself indicates several possible scenarios. By carrying a Tibetan flag, Lhamo identified as a Tibetan, which carries the political clout that may have given extra courage while he was in prison. He is happy to be in Dharamsala because he can continue to openly practice his culture and religion within a larger community of Tibetans. Lhamo had an understanding of Tibetan culture as a child, but this is not always the case for other Tibetans. The next interviewee admits that he began to identify as a Tibetan in response to his prison experience.

I met with Sonam Kunsang on the rooftop of Hotel Ashoka. Sonam's story has garnered significant attention in the Tibetan community, which, as my translator indicated, has accrued him the status of a local hero. Sonam's story is unique because he was imprisoned three times for his political actions, two of which were taking part of protests and the other was for distributing illegal information about the Tibetan situation. Before imprisonment, Sonam admits that he was not particularly religious. Other than vaguely hearing about the plight of his grandparents during the Cultural Revolution, Sonam was unaware of Tibetan culture. In prison, he learned the intricacies of the Tibetan situation and began to practice Tibetan Buddhism. His story provides detailed insight into the prison experience of Tibetan political prisoners and highlights the religious and political coping mechanisms discussed in this paper.

## Sonam Kunsang

I was born in Tibet and am 39 years old. Before coming to India, I took part in three large protests. The first protest took place in Lhasa in March 1989. There were already large protests and I joined in one of the demonstrations. During the demonstration I was arrested by Chinese policeman and imprisoned for eight months. At the time, I was only eighteen years old and mostly unaware of the Tibetan situation. However, during imprisonment, I met with several monks and nuns who were tortured in prison. From coming into contact with them, I learned more and more about the Tibetan situation. Initially, I joined the demonstrations because I was proud... not because I understood the Tibetan situation.

For three days, I was suspended from the ceiling of my cell by handcuffs. Because I was generally unaware of the political ramifications of my actions, I escaped the intensive torture endured by the older monks and nuns around me. For many days, there was no food or water. At best, we had just a little of either. At the time, I knew little about the Buddha's teachings. My grandparents were tortured and killed by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. I learned about Buddhism and the Dalai Lama in prison.

When I was released from prison, I took time to learn more about Tibetan culture and Tibet's political situation. I feel like it is every Tibetan's responsibility to preserve Tibetan culture. In 1999, during a large celebration in Tashindo, I passed out information about the Tibetan situation to the crowds of people. Later, I took down the Chinese flag and hung up the Tibetan flag. Due to the large crowd, the police could not pinpoint who raised the flag. While the people kept me hidden, I continued to pass out information. In order to find the culprit, the police called in back-up authorities.

When more policemen began showing up, my friend and I fled... The police tracked us and burst into our room in the middle of the night. We were arrested and taken to the police station where we remained for three days of questioning. They tortured us, but not as badly as the monks and nuns in prison. The police kept asking us who was behind the protest, trying to make us admit that the Dalai Lama orchestrated the demonstrations from India... They also asked who supported the overall movement towards Tibetan freedom, whether it was the Dalai Lama or businessmen inside Tibet. We told them that we had no support. We proudly took full blame for our actions...

After the three days, we were moved to a larger jail. Inside there was a room designated as a space for torture. The floor inside the room was covered in shallow water and wired with electricity. We were forced to stand in the middle of the room, with the water up to our ankles... The torturers asked us to admit that the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile were insidious and announce who was behind our actions. They electrocuted us, asking us to confess. Because we refused to be dishonest, the torture continued. When we refused to cooperate, we were submitted to even crueller torture. We were forced to strip and submerge ourselves in a box filled with water. With our heads pushed under the water, we were exposed to a higher voltage of electricity than previously.

When we surfaced for air, they would shove electric batons into our mouths, pushing our heads back into the water. Afterwards, my hands were handcuffed behind my back. Beneath the chains, the torturers placed bottles to add further pressure and pain. Eventually, the pain made me lapse out of consciousness. When we would regain consciousness, they were often suspended by their handcuffs and beaten with sticks, boots, and electric batons. For fifteen days, we were tortured. Each day, we were asked to denounce the Dalai Lama and the government-in-exile by three different officers... I remained in jail for five months until I was sentenced to four years and six months imprisonment.

In prison, I was placed in solitary confinement... I spent most of my time thinking about what I did to free Tibet. I reminisced about my grandparents' death and began to pray to the Dalai Lama and the Buddha. I began practicing meditation and prayer regularly. It was in prison that I finally learned about Buddhism. During confinement, I refused to stand for the duration of my confinement, causing me to be unable to walk. When I was completely paralyzed, I was removed from solitary confinement and taken to a doctor. I was forced to pay for 6 months of treatment until I could walk slowly. Then, I was taken to a hard labor camp where I spent the remainder of my sentence. Because I was unable to walk, it was difficult for me to find a job in Tibet. I finally found work watching over a farmer's pigs. Shortly afterward, my mother died from worrying about me... I never saw her after being released from prison out of fear for her life.

I traveled to Lhasa in 2007 with the hopes of opening a business. My business prospered well for a few months, but I had to close it that same year. In March 2008, there were large protests all over Tibet, and I decided to join the uprising. The protests were peaceful until the Chinese became violent towards the protesters. Chinese policemen fought with knives, electric batons, and guns, but we had nothing... I knew that many would be arrested... On March 26<sup>th</sup>, I left for India. If I stayed in Tibet, I knew I would have been executed. On March 28<sup>th</sup>, I arrived in Nepal. However, the Chinese were searching for me in Nepal. On April 28<sup>th</sup>, I fled to McLeod Ganj... I miss everything in Tibet. However, because of my time in prison and exile, I have faith in the Dalai Lama and understand more about Tibetan Buddhism. I feel like every Tibetan has the responsibility to struggle for a free Tibet. Religion helped me cope in prison and gives me hope for a better future.

Sonam admits that he initially joined the protests because of his pride rather than on behalf of the Tibetan situation. However, during his first imprisonment, he met with other political prisoners, monks and nuns, who were imprisoned for their religious and political beliefs. While he was not tortured as excessively as the other political prisoners, he was mistreated and began to develop some understanding about the Tibetan situation. He began to make connections between his situation and the stories about the hardships

endured by his grandparents. Because of his time in prison, Sonam began to identify as a Tibetan, adopting Tibetan religious and political positions. The solidarity he felt with his fellow prison mates was fundamental in forming his new identity. Sonam's prison experience made the Tibetan situation real for him, inspiring him to explore more about the Tibetan situation upon release.

Sonam's newfound identity as a Tibetan led him to another protest. Instead of acting on pride, Sonam joined the protest in solidarity with other Tibetans. He passed out illegal information to other Tibetans and managed to hang a Tibetan flag in place of a Chinese flag. His actions clearly indicate his political leanings towards a Free Tibet, which may not have developed if he were not imprisoned with other Tibetans. After hanging the Tibetan flag, Sonam and his friends fled the protest to escape arrest. However, they were found and taken to a jail where they were tortured extensively. The physical torture Sonam endured indelibly caused suffering. Sonam's second prison experience highlights the religious and political coping mechanisms discussed in this paper.

Unlike other political prisoners who were religious before entering prison, Sonam actually became religious because of his prison experience. While being tortured, Sonam was repeatedly asked to denounce the Dalai Lama. Despite being exposed to increasing levels of torture, Sonam continued to oppose the Chinese guards. Because of his noncooperation, Sonam was forced into solitary confinement, during which he really came to terms with Tibetan Buddhism. In order to pass time, he reminisced about his grandparents' story and began to pray and meditate for the first time in his life. One of the last things he mentions in the interview is that his religious views helped him

overcome his situation and gave him hope for a better future. Although he does not explicitly reference the doctrine of karma, the idea of having a better future implies some sort of karmic understanding. Because he has endured such torture, he has acquired positive karma that will benefit him in a future life.

Sonam's involvement in the protests, acting in solidarity with other Tibetans for a Free Tibet, was the reason for his arrest. In prison, because of the Dalai Lama's status in Tibet, being asked to denounce him is both religious and political. By opposing the Chinese claims and being exposed to more torture, Sonam's political convictions were further solidified. At the end of his interview he contends that every Tibetan, an identity he fully adopted because of his prison experience, has the responsibility to struggle for a Free Tibet. The connection he felt with his fellow Tibetans gave him the courage to protest the Chinese as well as to uphold his beliefs in prison. After being released from prison the second time, dealing with the death of his mother, and heading a failed business, Sonam took part in another protest before being forced to flee to India to save his life. Otherwise, he may still be in Tibet, struggling for its independence with his fellow Tibetans. He mentions that he was proud to have gone to prison because it was for a Free Tibet. His political identity as a Tibetan, as illustrated by his political actions, helped him overcome his suffering.

Up until this point, this paper has focused on lay people's stories. The next set of stories comes from lay people who were once monks. In many cases, monks are not allowed to rejoin their monasteries after being released from prison, which serves as an impetus for them to escape to India where they can rejoin a different monastery. However, many political prisoners make the conscious decision to lay down their robes

after being released from prison. Because of certain experiences related to being a political prisoner, many former monks join the ranks of lay people after being released from prison.

My translator introduced me to Dhondup Tsering, the shy secretary for Gu Chu Sum. We met on the roof of Gu Chu Sum just as the sun was setting over the Himalayan foothills behind McLeod Ganj, and he began to tell his story. At first he was a bit hesitant because it was his first time discussing his story in detail. As Dhondup was telling his story, fulfilling his obligations to the Dalai Lama, he became less tense and opened up. Before being arrested, Dhondup was a monk for seven years. However, he was forced to leave his monastery after being released. During his time in prison, he was able to invoke what he learned as a monk to help him overcome the suffering of prison. Dhondup's story is interesting because he consciously avoided politics until the day he decided to protest for Tibetan independence. Like other stories already discussed, Dhondup was unaware of the Tibetan situation. Upon learning about the Tibetan situation, Dhondup began to identify as a Tibetan and joined the resistance.

### **Dhondup Tsering**

I am from Lhasa and began protesting in 1995. Before 1995, I had no intentions of being involved with protests. I walked from my room to the main temple and joined a demonstration of people demanding independence and the return of the Dalai Lama and the exiled. Earlier that year, I learned that Tibet used to be an independent country, spurring me to participate in the movement. During the protest, I was arrested alongside my friend. We were taken to a police station for 15 days. We were asked why we believed that Tibet was an independent country, especially since we were both born in 1973. We told them that they would never understand because Tibet and China are completely different. We were interrogated for two days. During the interrogation sessions, we were beaten with electric batons and kicked all over. After two days, my friend and I were sentenced to 5 years in prison.

It was a difficult life. We had poor or no food and were tortured constantly by the guards for no reason. For the majority of 5 years, we were handcuffed but the guards



continued to kick and beat us with electric batons. Sometimes we were suspended by our handcuffs and beaten continuously. There were 13 cells in the prison and there could be as a few as 6 people or as many as 12 people in one cell at any given time.

I was released in 2000. During imprisonment, both of my parents passed away. I was able to get some money from relatives to start a small business. I was basically homeless, and lived with different friends and relatives. I kept my business open for 5 years, during which I was also able to start a motorcycle sales business. However, any time I needed to travel, the Chinese would closely monitor my movements. I came to India in 2005 because there was no freedom, especially for ex-political prisoners.

Before I was arrested I was a monk for 7 years at Tolung Gompa monastery. During my time in prison, Buddhism helped me control my mind and overcome suffering. I gained a deeper perspective and understanding of the Buddha's teachings. After I was released from prison, I was not allowed to go back to my monastery. Living outside of the monastery, especially having to run a business, I had a hard time upholding all of my monk vows. I learned Buddhism in a new way. Although I am no longer a monk, I try to uphold as many vows as possible. I still read many books. Upon reflection, I am confident that being a monk prior to imprisonment was what helped me overcome my circumstances.

After being arrested, Dhondup and his friend were taken to a local jail and interrogated for 15 days. During that time, they refused to cooperate and were beaten repeatedly. After interrogation, they were sentenced to 5 years in prison. In prison, he and his friend were denied food and water and were handcuffed for most of their entire sentence. However, Dhondup's suffering did not end after he was released from prison. While in prison, his family passed away, forcing him to open up a small business to sustain a living. Because of his status as an ex-political prisoner, he was heavily monitored and was eventually forced to close his business. Because of his business, he was forced to break several of his monk vows. After heading a failed business, Dhondup was forced to seek refuge in India. The suffering he endured as a political prisoner was softened by his monastery education. Although he is no longer a monk, he still struggles to uphold as many vows as he can and educate himself in Tibetan Buddhism.

During imprisonment, Dhondup was able to invoke the 7-year knowledge he learned from his monastery and is confident that his experience as a monk prior to imprisonment helped him overcome suffering. He mentions that his Tibetan Buddhist education helped him control his mind to help him endure, as mind control is a fundamental tenet of Tibetan Buddhism. Hours upon hours of meditation teach monks to focus their minds, allowing them to transcend ordinary human experience. By focusing his mind, Dhondup may have been able to move past the physical pain of torture and focus on the deeper truths of Buddhism. The Buddha argued that suffering is an inherent part of life. By overcoming suffering through meditation Dhondup was exploring the depths of Buddhism.

As mentioned, Dhondup consciously avoided politics until he became aware of the Tibetan situation. His identification as a Tibetan gave way to his involvement in politics, resulting in him joining a protest that led to his arrest and imprisonment. In solidarity with his friend who was also arrested, he defied the claims that his interrogators made about Tibet despite being beaten. After taking refuge in India, Dhondup still identifies with the Free Tibet movement and works as the secretary at an association that aids former political prisoners. His experience as a prisoner solidified his Tibetan identity. His identification and involvement in politics, in tandem with his religious beliefs, gave him courage to overcome the suffering he endured in prison. The next story also comes from a former monk.

I met with Gyaltzen Tsering a few days before I left India at a Gu Chu Sum potluck for former political prisoners. Gyaltzen's family enrolled him into a monastery because they were too poor to send him to school. After distributing illegal information

around his town, Gyaltzen and his friends were arrested and detained for three months, during which they were interrogated and beaten. However, Gyaltzen and his friends were able to outmaneuver the guards and avoid receiving a sentence. Although he was a monk, Gyaltzen does not really discuss the role that religion played in helping him overcome his experience. But, his story highlights the role that political coping plays in helping political prisoners overcome suffering.

### **Gyaltzen Tsering**

I went to a village school when I was 5 years old for 5 years, but my family was too poor to continue my education. At 13, I joined a monastery. There, I learned about Buddhism and the Tibetan situation. My friends and I began putting Tibetan flags and pictures of the Dalai Lama and the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama on notice boards around the city and distributed them door-to-door. Later, my friends and I decided to start a group with the goal to purposefully go against what the Chinese mandated. Police began monitoring us, asking us about our daily lives and activities. Because the police were after us everyday, we began to feel like we had no rights. Because we had no freedom, we attempted to leave in 2000.

When we reached the border we were captured by Chinese policemen and held in jail for 3 months. The Chinese guards accused us of putting up Tibetan flags and spreading anti-Chinese propaganda. At the time we knew that there were others doing the same thing and refused to answer the policemen. We knew that we could not be proven guilty and that the Chinese just wanted to put us in prison. In jail we were beaten for no reason. Despite telling the truth the Chinese refused to accept that we were working alone and demanded that someone was behind our efforts... We were beaten with belts, chairs, fists, electric batons, and tables. We were being forced to accept Chinese lies. We were beaten 3 times a day until we bled or fainted. For breakfast we were given black tea and tasteless porridge. For lunch we were given a few vegetables.

Even though I was beaten I felt proud to have suffered for the cause of Tibet. During my imprisonment it became clear to me that Tibet was not a part of China. Sometimes I was beaten by Tibetans and could not help but feel remorseful because my people were so divided. Also I realize that I was only in prison for 3 months, helping me overcome the pain, because I knew people who were in prison for 3-20 years, for life, or executed. Everyday, I felt closer to attaining my dream of a Free Tibet.

In 2000 I was released because they were unable to prove that I was guilty. However, Chinese policemen still monitored me constantly. The spies were inside of my family and friend circles and the pressure of always being watched began to torment me. I was banished from my monastery and unable to find a job. If I worked at a restaurant, I would be fired or the restaurant would be forced to close. If I stayed in Lhasa, my family

and friends would have continued to suffer. In 2003, I paid 7,000 yuan for a guide to show me to India.

Before leaving for my journey, I heard about a young girl who had died on the trek across the Himalayas. I was terrified of the journey. I walked for 1 month and 15 days. Many people in my group died from falling off of cliffs or washing away in rivers. Sometimes I would walk as many as 5 days with no food. At random houses we would exchange articles of clothing for food. Several times I thought about dying, but the idea of meeting the Dalai Lama motivated me to continue. During my trek I would contemplate the Tibetan situation. I wanted to come up with a solution. China had killed so many people and the suffering would not stop until the government was removed. The largest problems were the lack of food, lots of leeches, and people who were injured because they lacked the proper equipment. If I was ever able to fall asleep, I was always jolted awake by nightmares about being found by Chinese authorities.

Gyaltsen's story is not atypical for many poor families in Tibet. Gyaltsen was sent to live in a monastery because his family could not afford to send him to school. Gyaltsen was exposed to the Tibetan situation while living in the monastery and became involved in political actions for the sake of a Free Tibet. He and a few friends started a small group with the specific goal of defying Chinese authority and began distributing illegal information about the Tibetan situation across his village. When the authorities caught wind of their activity, they began to monitor Gyaltsen and his friends, questioning them daily. Threatened, Gyaltsen and his friends began the journey to India, only to be captured and detained at the border. In jail, Gyaltsen and his friends were subjected to enhanced interrogation, beaten with various instruments and deceived by misinformation. However, they were able to see through the police's deception and were released after three months. Yet the torture continued. The Chinese police infiltrated Gyaltsen's family and friends with spies and he was forced to make the arduous journey across the Himalayas. Again, Gyaltsen hardly makes any mention of his religious experience. However, he was able to overcome his experience through identification with the Free Tibet movement.

Before he was detained, Gyaltzen was already invested in the cause for a Free Tibet. He and his friends risked their lives to distribute information about the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama to people in his village. Gyaltzen mentions that despite being beaten in prison, he was proud to suffer for a Free Tibet. By enduring torture, Gyaltzen, in solidarity with his friends and the entire Free Tibet movement, was making a stand for his political beliefs. His time in prison solidified his belief that Tibet was not a part of China. Gyaltzen was beaten by Tibetan people while in prison, a common torture tactic used by Chinese authorities, which recapitulated his negative feelings towards China. Gyaltzen viewed his experience as joining the ranks of other ex-political prisoners, taking solace in the fact that he endured for a Free Tibet.

Because there is hardly a distinction between politics and religion in Tibet, it is no surprise that monasteries and nunneries are often the locus of political activity. Many protests begin with monks and nuns. Unfortunately China, realizing the connection between religion and politics, targets monasteries and nunneries and imposes strict control. The absence of religious and political freedom discussed by lay former political prisoners is more oppressive for monks and nuns. Over the years of China's imposition in Tibet, monasteries and nunneries have been destroyed. Many have been converted into prisons. Monks and nuns bear the brunt of China's violence in Tibet. The next three stories come from monks who have rejoined monasteries in India.

I met Geshe Lobsang Gyatso while volunteering for a small school in the evenings. After meeting him, I learned that he was also the Buddhist philosophy teacher for the younger monks at the monastery where I lived. As he describes it, he holds the highest rank of Tibetan monks, Geshe, which he earned in South India. He does not

discuss much about his prison experience and makes no mention of his political leanings. However, his story provides the reader with a more complex understanding of the role that religion plays in helping political prisoners overcome the suffering of prison. Because of his advanced education, he provides insight into why Tibetan Buddhism helps monks, nuns, and lay people endure their circumstances.

### **Geshe Lobsang Gyatso**

I am 36 years old and from Lhasa. I received my Geshe designation in South India... I am the youngest to have received the designation. During my time in prison, I mentally read scriptures and prayed, analyzing their meanings. I did not get much opportunity to read my physical scriptures. After being released, I was banished from my monastery and monitored constantly by Chinese authorities. I escaped to India and began my degree in 1991.

While in prison, my faith grew much stronger. I felt anger initially; we are humans. When I was beaten, I was angry, but I later developed a sense of pity because it was the Chinese guards' job. Even though the Chinese beat me, the teachings of Buddhism helped me overcome my suffering because of my understanding of fate. I know the wheels of karma have been turning and that I am paying penance for my past lives.

Tibetan political prisoners focus on the concept of cause and effect. Being a Geshe, it is easy for me to invoke compassion, but for a layperson it is difficult to understand. Still, their basic knowledge of karma helps them move forward and aids them in dealing with suffering. I also think of the theory of relativity [conditioned genesis]. If one hurts you, they will be hurt in return. Therefore, it is best not to hurt back, which makes the practice of compassion easier and practical. The fate they discuss is usually meant to describe their future as a result of their past. Lay people probably do not understand the complexities of the theory of relativity. However, I think most people have a basic understanding.

Although he admits to feeling anger at times in prison, Geshe Lobsang reminds the reader that he is just human. As a human he has basic emotions. However, because of the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, he was able to overcome his human experience in prison and hone his spiritual awareness. After reasoning through his experience as a result of his karmic record, Geshe Lobsang was able to feel pity for the guards. By focusing on what he refers to as the "concept of cause and effect," he argues that political

prisoners are able to reason through their suffering. While paying penance for his past lives, he realizes that the guards are accruing negative karma that will affect in a later lifetime.

Geshe Lobsang's ability to view his situation in terms of multiples lifetimes, inextricably connected to one another through a network of causality, is an inherently Buddhist idea. He mentions that lay people at least have some understanding of karma that affords them the ability to view their situation through a lens of compassion. However, monks and nuns well versed in the teachings of Buddhism are able to invoke an understanding of what Geshe Lobsang terms "the theory of relativity," which I refer to as conditioned genesis. He argues that enduring and overcoming suffering is practical in the sense that what affects one person affects another. By persevering, Geshe Lobsang, along with countless other Tibetan political prisoners, are making their situation better, if not in this lifetime then perhaps in the next. In this way, by utilizing the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism as a coping mechanism, political prisoners are creating a better future for Tibet. Geshe Lobsang has created a productive life for himself in exile and continues to practice Buddhism. The other monks I interviewed also maintain a productive life in exile, helping in any way they can.

Oebar Tenzin is one of the co-founders and current head of Gu Chu Sum. Other than providing aid to the former political prisoner community, Gu Chu Sum houses a small school for up to 12 students a year where former political prisoners are taught English, Tibetan language and history, and computer science. Gu Chu Sum also facilitates an in-house public museum devoted to documenting the Tibetan situation from a political prisoner's perspective. When I met with Oebar he insisted that he spoke in

English and was more than willing to discuss his story. His story, although shorter than others in this paper, discusses the hardship of being a monk in Tibet, the importance of his religion during imprisonment, and ends on a hopeful note about Tibet's political future.

### **Oebar Tenzin**

On 27 September 1987, I participated in a pro-independence rally in Lhasa sponsored by the Drepung monastery monks. The peaceful demonstration was against the Chinese rule of Tibet. That day I was detained in Gutsa Detention center for taking part of the protests. I remained at the detention center for 4 months. During this time period, I was interrogated often. The main questions they were asked were: why were we protesting, and who was behind the protests? When I refused to answer the questions, I was tortured, but not as badly as the Tibetans that are currently tortured. I was kicked and punched in the stomach and the back of the head. After 4 months, I was released temporarily. I returned to my monastery with a few other monks, but was monitored because we were considered suspects. After one year, we were expelled from the monastery because we were suspects. I remained in Lhasa for one year and fled to India to avoid inevitable arrest. I arrived in Dharamsala in 1991. At that time, I founded Gu Chu Sum alongside other political prisoners who had already taken refuge in India. Since 1991, even though a few of the other founders have left, I have maintained the organization to help other political prisoners.

Buddhism helped me a lot in prison. When I was angry, I tried to feel compassion for the guards. The whole time, the teachings of the Buddha were on my mind. I feel that Tibetans are better able to control their anger because of the Buddhist religion. They do not want revenge or torture in return. In those 4 months, I was able to solidify my beliefs. We were not allowed to outwardly express devotion, but I secretly practiced more in prison than I had at any other time in my life. It helped me overcome the challenges of prison.

I think that Tibet must struggle for freedom because Tibet should be independent. China is far more powerful, but I am optimistic that Tibet will be free.

Oebar was arrested for participating in a Free Tibet rally sponsored by the Drepung monastery in Lhasa in 1987. He was taken to a detention center where he was interrogated and refused to cooperate. He was beaten badly but recognizes that the torture he endured was far less than that endured by prisoners today. He mentions that his time in prison solidified his beliefs, helping him endure his situation. Although



Chinese guards beat him, Oebar consciously tried to feel compassion for them, because the notion of compassion is an anchor in Tibetan Buddhism. By actively feeling compassion for the guards, Oebar was fulfilling his religious duty as a monk. Speaking on behalf of other political prisoners, Oebar contends that faith in Buddhism acts as a coping mechanism because it allows one to control his or her anger and to not seek revenge, thereby maintaining a karmic balance. Although religious practice was banned, Oebar admits that he practiced more in the 4 months he was in prison than at any other time in his life, which helped him overcome the situation.

While Oebar does not discuss much about his political beliefs in prison, he was arrested for participating in Free Tibet rally and ends his story optimistically by saying that Tibet *will* be free. In solidarity with other prisoners, Oebar maintained his political views during interrogation. During imprisonment, camaraderie with other prisoners more than likely gave him extra courage to persevere. By setting up an association that aids Tibetan former political prisoners in India, Oebar continues to stand in solidarity with his brothers and sisters for a Free Tibet. The next interviewee did not attend classes at Gu Chu Sum, but, due to the influence of his story, is in and out of Gu Chu Sum's office helping new arrivals adjust.

Venerable Bagdro is well known in the Tibetan community as the author of his autobiography *Hell on Earth*, which has garnered worldwide attention. After he was released from prison, he was taken to France for special treatment and almost immediately began sharing his story with dignitaries and celebrities from across the globe. Although he is a busy monk, he took time out of his schedule to meet with my translator and me on the roof of a small restaurant. His story is unique because it sheds

light on the general lack of awareness of Tibet's younger generation towards the Tibetan situation. Before entering his monastery, Venerable Bagdro was mostly unaware of the Tibetan situation, which underlines the dual political and religious role that monasteries play in contemporary Tibetan society. Venerable Bagdro's brief stint in a monastery before being arrested provided him with a religious foundation. His story provides the reader with a younger monk's perspective towards the Tibetan situation as well as the types of coping mechanisms this paper discusses.

### **Venerable Bagdro**

I arrived in India in October 1991. I have been in Dharamsala nearly 20 years. In 1991, I arrived with many injuries and was sent to France in 1993 to receive medical treatment. Afterwards, I traveled to 31 countries to talk about my time in prison and the Tibetan situation. In 1988, I was arrested in Lhasa for participating in a protest on March 10<sup>th</sup>. I was in prison nearly 3 years...

In 1983, I became a monk because I wanted better food. My father tried to marry me to a wife in order to prevent me from becoming a monk. Regardless, I went to the religious office in Lhasa for a year and became a monk. At the office they made me promise to hang up Mao's pictures. Slowly, I learned about the spiritual practices of Tibetan Buddhism such as meditation. Then, I read My Land and My People, the autobiography of the Dalai Lama. My learning more about the Tibetan situation coincided with the death of my sister. Her starving to death made the Tibetan situation more real to me. I began to accept that I was a Tibetan. I began to fight for Tibetan freedom, specifically hanging up posters telling China to leave our country.

In 1988, our monastery initiated a peaceful protest in honor of the teachings of the Buddha and justice. The Chinese policemen opened fire and I saw many people die. I was shot in the leg but was able to flee. In order to disguise myself, I began dressing in women's clothes; however, I was eventually arrested.

I was still very young and was not advanced in his Buddhist education. At first I was very angry and tried to kill myself several times to escape the torture. However, I learned the ideals of compassion and began to express them inwardly. Because they lacked compassion, the Chinese guards did not accept Tibetan prisoners as humans. The leaders of the Chinese army have no compassion, making them incredibly dangerous. They are empty with nothing inside. However, I remembered a book that I read when I was younger about a man who would give parts of himself away in order to help others. I prayed for the guards because they had children and wives, and would lose their jobs if they did not work as guards. I prayed for their government to give them more money.

Because the Chinese guards hired Tibetan spies to infiltrate our cells, I would pray beneath my blanket. Being in prison helped me develop a sense of compassion.

They tortured my family and killed a lot of my close friends because of my actions. In prison, I was tortured badly and lost lots of weight. At first I wanted to fight back, but the Dalai Lama told me to let go of violence when I eventually met him. After the Dalai Lama talked with me, I broke down in tears. He gave me information on forgiveness... The Dalai Lama gave me further knowledge of Buddhist teachings and told me to write books. I continue to educate myself on the ethics of nonviolence and my family remains in Tibet.

Venerable Bagdro does not explicitly discuss the torture he endured; however, it is clear that he suffered. He makes the peculiar statement, "I became a monk because I wanted better food," which needs further explanation. In his book, *Hell on Earth*, Venerable Bagdro explains that his family was too poor to feed him and his siblings. After trying to marry him into a richer family, Venerable Bagdro's father pleaded with a monastery to accept him. Although he was not the usual candidate for the monastery, he was accepted as a monk because of his family's status. This short anecdote illustrates the poverty that so many Tibetans have found themselves in after the Chinese occupation. Although the Chinese claim to help Tibetans, the reality is that many Tibetan families are too poor to feed their children. Venerable Bagdro's suffering began years before he was arrested for protesting.

Upon entering the monastery Venerable Bagdro was sent to the religious office in Lhasa, run by Chinese authorities, and made to promise to hang up pictures of Chairman Mao in his room. This splinter of information sheds light on the religious restrictions endured by the monasteries in Tibet. Venerable Bagdro learned the basics of Tibetan Buddhism in the short time he was in the monastery but he was also able to read the Dalai Lama's autobiography, which enlightened him on the Tibetan situation. As he was learning about the Tibetan situation, his sister starved to death, which compounded his willingness to participate in a peaceful protest on Tibetan Uprising Day in 1988.

While in prison, Venerable Bagdro was able to utilize what little religious knowledge he learned in his short stay in the monastery to help him overcome the suffering of imprisonment. He admits to trying to kill himself at first. However, his Buddhist education proved useful in terms of coping. As mentioned earlier, compassion is a cornerstone of Tibetan Buddhism. With that in mind, Venerable Bagdro began to see the Chinese guards as beings who lacked compassion, and, as such, were incapable of viewing the Tibetans prisoners as humans. Because they “have nothing inside,” Venerable Bagdro began praying for the guards and their families. He realized that they would not be able to support their families if they were not guards. He references a Tibetan Buddhist folk tale of a man who gave parts of himself away to help others. By allowing them to torture him, Venerable Bagdro was invoking compassion on his part. Venerable Bagdro’s compassion towards the guards can be understood in terms of the doctrine of karma. By practicing compassion towards the guards, allowing himself to be tortured in this life, Venerable Bagdro was ensuring a better next life. He mentions that his time in prison, the nights he spent secretly praying beneath his blankets, helped him develop his sense of compassion. By developing compassion, Venerable Bagdro was able to endure his suffering.

Although he does not discuss his political leanings as much as his religious beliefs, Venerable Bagdro was shot while protesting. During his time in the monastery, Venerable Bagdro began to see himself as a Tibetan. His identification coincided with his participation in the demonstration, which implies that he shared a bond with his fellow Tibetans. His solidarity with the Tibetan independence movement gave him the courage the protest and inevitably gave him extra strength to persevere during

imprisonment. In exile, Venerable Bagdro continues to protest mainly through writing and remains an outspoken advocate for a Free Tibet.

Although this paper does not go into depth about gender differences, it is important to note that nuns, along with monks and lay people, are just as politically active in the struggle against Chinese oppression. The gendered nature of the conflict comes to light in the story of nuns, giving rise to many women's organizations and nunneries devoted specifically to helping women in exile. Other than being divided into gendered prisons, women are often subjected to different forms of torture than men. It goes without saying that women endure torture differently than men, because suffering for women, specifically nuns, has different implications than suffering for men. For example, rape is often used as a form of torture for both men and women. However, because of their vows, nuns are technically no longer nuns after they are raped. In the case of nuns who were raped, they begin to question whether or not they are able to take refuge in their faith, which has consequences in terms of religious coping mechanisms.

On my first day working at Gu Chu Sum, I walked onto an empty roof for English conversations. Just as I was turning to leave, a shy nun peeked from behind the door and asked if I was there for conversation. When I said yes, she ran downstairs to her room and grabbed two pillows for us to sit on, a notebook, and two glasses of tea. Dolma Lamdon was one of the first former political prisoners I met and one of the ones I got to know the best. After a few weeks as conversation partners, she began to tell her story. Prior to her arrest, Dolma was in her nunnery for one year, during which she attended two protests. Dolma and the following interviewee provide the reader with a nun's perspective on the Chinese imposition of Tibet and prison experience. Dolma's political

convictions led her to protest in solidarity with her fellow nuns. While in prison, Dolma invoked a complex understanding of compassion that helped her overcome her suffering.

### **Dolma Lamdon**

I am from a small village on the outskirts of Lhasa. At age nineteen, I became a nun. In 1989, I lived in the nunnery for one year. During that year, I attended two protests. At the first protest, I, along with five friends, was protesting the Chinese regime in Tibet. At the second protest, which took place on the day the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize, my friends and I were arrested.

For one month, we were interrogated at the police station. Then, I was taken to a prison. For the first year, I was forced to clean toilets and toil in the fields. At my trial, I was sentenced to three more years in prison. Every day, for three years, the Chinese guards took my blood and forced me to work. After two years and six months, I was transferred to another prison, where I was made to attend meetings with other political prisoners. At the meetings, we were asked if we had changed our minds about the Chinese government and their presence in Tibet during our time in prison. I, along with the other prisoners, refused to change my mind.

For twelve days, I was placed in solitary confinement. Each day, twice a day, I was asked many questions and beaten by Chinese soldiers. During the beatings, I was electrocuted in the mouth by a taser gun. They also used electric batons in various places all over my body. Sometimes, I would be forced to stand with my back to a brick wall while the soldiers rammed their long guns into my stomach, crushing my spine against the wall. At times, I was even denied food. I wore self-tightening handcuffs. Sometimes, at night, I would lie awake because they would get so tight and painful, causing my wrists to bleed continuously. I still have scars on my wrists from the handcuffs. After three years, I was released but not allowed to return to my nunnery. I spent three years with my family, but the local authorities and government constantly harassed us. I would even have to ask permission from the police just to pray in Lhasa. Until 1995, I lacked proper education in prayers, chants, and Buddhist philosophy.

The guards outlawed any form of religion, so I prayed secretly. I was not depressed or sad during my imprisonment because of my faith in Buddhism. I was never angry with the Chinese people and was nothing but sympathetic towards the government. I realize that my time in prison was a result of my karmic history. Buddhism focuses on the past, present, and the future simultaneously... I am a stronger Buddhist because of prison.

When enduring torture, I especially focused on the teachings of Buddhism. Sometimes, when I was beaten excessively, I would become angry. However, I always remembered that my ordeal is the result of my own karma, which allowed me the space to develop compassion towards the policemen. Buddhists constantly focus on the past, present, and the future simultaneously, which gave me a special perspective. I believe that I am stronger Buddhist because of my time in prison. When I was enduring torture, I especially focused on religion. Sometimes I was beaten more and sometimes I became angry, but then I would focus on developing compassion for the policemen. For hours, I

would quietly recite the mantra for compassion, *Om Mani Peme Hoong*, under my breath. I would wait patiently until the guards fell asleep so I could do my prostrations and prayers.

During her one year at her nunnery, Dolma took part in two protests. In the second one, she, along with five of her friends, was arrested and taken to a detention center where they were tortured and interrogated. For her lack of cooperation, she was sentenced to three years in prison, which she served in two separate prisons. During her imprisonment, she was exposed to various forms of torture, including beatings, malnourishment, and solitary confinement. Although she endured unspeakable suffering, Dolma was able to overcome her situation and continues to study Tibetan Buddhism in exile.

It should be noted that Dolma's story was the basis for my research. Every day during our conversations, she smiled constantly. It was difficult to not notice her teeth, which were broken when Chinese authorities shoved electric batons in her mouth during interrogation sessions. Although she endured such suffering, she maintains a positive disposition in exile. Instead of being bitter and angry, Dolma understood her situation as being the result of her karmic history. Humbled by her positive attitude, I sought out to understand the coping mechanisms utilized by Tibetan former political prisoners.

While in prison, Dolma was forced to pray silently; however, she never once felt depressed or sad because of her faith in the teachings of the Buddha. Rather than retreating into fear or anxiety, Dolma was able to hone her religious life. Although she was only in her nunnery for one year, she was able to develop her understanding about Buddhism during her imprisonment and argues that her time in prison made her a better nun. Because she was able to focus on the "past, present, and future simultaneously,"

Dolma was able to view the Chinese government with compassion. Even when being beaten, Dolma consciously felt compassion for the guards who were torturing her. Dolma reasoned that her imprisonment was a result of her karmic history and felt the need to endure her suffering in order to have a better next life. Because of her faith in Tibetan Buddhism, Dolma still maintains a positive disposition in exile.

While she is more open regarding her religious experience in prison, Dolma's political connection with her fellow nuns also played a major role in helping her overcome her suffering. During her second protest, Dolma was arrested with five of her friends. In solidarity with each other, they refused to denounce their actions in their interrogation sessions. In her discussion about compassion, she mentions that she is able to feel compassion towards the Chinese government. By praying for the Chinese government, I would argue that Dolma is invoking a form of political coping.

The same afternoon I met with Dolma, I was introduced to her roommate Pema Phuntsok. Pema's story almost parallels Dolma's. They are both from areas just outside of Lhasa and were both in their nunneries for one year before being arrested for protesting. Both of them were arrested the same year while protesting in smaller groups. Both of them were sentenced to three years in prison, which they served in two separate prisons. As with Dolma, I met with Pema nearly every day as a conversation partner. Over time, she began to discuss her story as well. Although their stories are very similar, Pema's story is unique because she was spared the violent interrogation sessions. Unlike other protests for a Free Tibet, Pema and her friends were protesting to against the Chinese government because they wanted to see the Dalai Lama. However, because of the status of the Dalai Lama in China, she was sentenced to time in prison. Her story



provides the reader with another nun's perspective of a political prisoner's experience, giving specific details about the conditions of the prison as well as providing insight into her religious coping mechanisms.

### **Pema Phuntsok**

I am from the outskirts of Lhasa. I went to normal school for 7 years and decided to become a nun in 1988. I stayed in the nunnery for one year. Then, I went with 7 friends to protest the Chinese government in Lhasa. We simply wanted the freedom to see the Dalai Lama.

We were caught by Chinese police and sentenced to 3 years in prison. Unlike many others, I went straight to prison without a period of detainment in a local jail. I went to one prison for 2 years and 6 months and another prison for 6 months. In prison we were asked who led our protests multiple times. I was not electrocuted but my friends were. I was forced to listen to my friends' screams as they were being beaten. During prison we were given little food for two months. We lived in small, cramped room with 6 to 7 people. We were mixed in with the other prisoners – murderers, rapists, and thieves. In our cell we had four beds and a tiny space in the corner with a bucket for the toilet. For one month we were interrogated daily. The rest of our sentence was spent going in between our cells and the fields to do hard labor.

I prayed when the police were not looking. Sometimes I was beaten if I was suspected of praying. Also I tried to meditate, but the police would often inspect our rooms. Prison strengthened my religious beliefs. Since being released from prison, I am more devoted to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. In prison I would specifically try to hone my sense of compassion. Prior to prison I was only in my nunnery for one year and was not very educated because the majority of the year was spent rebuilding the nunnery. What little I did know, I recited in prison. I would try to pray every day. Sometimes my cellmates and I would carefully do prostrations.

When I finished 3 years I wanted to return to my nunnery but I was not allowed to return because of my political prisoner status. They were afraid that I would spread anti-Chinese propaganda. I stayed with my parents for 3 years. Then, I wanted to get an education and work so I traveled to Lhasa, but the police would not allow me to work. In 1995, I fled to India to escape Chinese oppression and save my family. In India, I joined the Dolma Ling Nunnery in 1995 and came to Gu Chu Sum in 2009.

Unlike the other interviewees, Pema was not subjected to intensive physical torture. However, she was forced to listen to her friends being tortured and live among common prisoners in derelict conditions. The only time she was not in her cell, which she shared with 6-7 other prisoners, was to do hard labor in the fields surrounding her

prison. While Pema is the exception to the many violent stories of political prisoners, she was forced to overcome various forms of suffering. After she was released, like so many other political prisoners, she was not allowed to rejoin her nunnery, perpetuating her suffering and eventually becoming the catalyst for her to take refuge in India. Throughout her entire ordeal, she maintained a strong sense of faith, which, as she discusses, helped her overcome her suffering.

Pema spent the majority of her year in her nunnery doing construction work and was not very well versed in Tibetan Buddhist teachings upon being arrested. However, while in prison, she was able to hone what little she did learn. In the quiet of her cell she would recite the few mantras she learned from her nunnery despite the risk of being beaten. Although she was caught from time to time and beaten, Pema was able to consciously practice compassion towards the Chinese guards. When she was able she physically did prostrations with her cellmates. Despite not having a firm grasp on Tibetan Buddhism before entering prison, Pema contends that her faith was solidified. By practicing compassion towards the guards, Pema was able to overcome her suffering.

As mentioned, she does not mention much more about her political leanings outside of her support of the Dalai Lama. However, by participating in a protest with 7 of her close friends, Pema invoked some form of political coping via means of collective action. Although she is not explicit about the role of solidarity in helping her overcome her prison experience, one could argue that being in the same prison as her friends played a role in helping her endure suffering.

The last two interviews, both from former monks, are significant because their story of religious coping provides a sort of foil to the stories up to this point. While both

discuss the positive role that Buddhism played in helping them overcome suffering in prison, each one articulates a slightly different interpretation of Buddhism. Their stories are significant because they add some diversity to the role of religious coping.

I met with Tenpa Dorjee, an incoming student at Gu Chu Sum, late one afternoon in new his new room. Because of the injuries he sustained in prison, he had a hard time telling his story, but he insisted on finishing. Tenpa escaped arrest by fleeing to India yet felt obligated to return to Tibet with information about the Tibetan situation and a Tibetan flag. He was arrested at the border and sentenced to 5 years in prison. His story provides the reader with more insight into the types of torture political prisoners are forced to endure. Tenpa's discussion about his religious beliefs in prison differ slightly from other discussions and provides further insight into the role that politics plays in helping political prisoners overcome their suffering.

### **Tenpa Dorjee**

I am from the Amdo region of Tibet and am 35 years old. I was in prison for 5 years. I have come to India twice. Beginning in 1998, Chinese propaganda began to criticize the Dalai Lama inside of my monastery and we rebelled. We were punished and tortured for rejecting the Chinese sentiments and I decided to escape. The first time I came to India was in 2000 but I went back in 2001 with copies of the Dalai Lama's books, many other books about the Tibetan situation, and a Tibetan flag. When I was crossing the border, I was arrested by Chinese border guards.

I was not taken to prison at first... I was interrogated many times at the border. They would ask me who was behind the movement for a Free Tibet, who told me to bring back the books, and to criticize the Dalai Lama. At this time, I was still a monk. I was beaten with electric batons and a special long arrow. The beatings were excruciating... Then, I was taken to Drapchi prison, the most violent prison, in Lhasa where I stayed for 3 years. After 3 years, I was transferred to a prison built specifically for political prisoners for 18 days.

When I was arrested in 2008, I was beaten worse and on a daily basis with several different instruments of torture. They also put poison in my eyes. Now, my breathing and vision are incredibly weak. I have a condition with my nervous system that restricts my breathing.

After getting out of prison the second time, I lied and convinced the police to take me to a village that was not my home so I could avoid endangering my family and falling back into the hands of the local policemen that would remember my previous sentence. In the new village I organized my escape to India. Ex-political prisoners have no freedom without consent from the Chinese government. On 10 March 2008, I joined a protest in Lhasa and was arrested and detained for nearly two months. In 2009, I arrived in Nepal and made my way to Dharamsala.

My religion helped me overcome suffering. I focused on the impermanent nature of everything and my past lives. While in prison, I prayed continuously and meditated as much as I could without alerting the guards. Because of my religion, I had a stronger disposition to fight the Chinese during my stint in prison. I was not afraid of dying and had no regrets. No matter where I go or live, my belief in the teachings of the Buddha remains the same.

Tenpa's story highlights the lack of religious freedom in Tibet. Inside his monastery Chinese authorities began enforcing anti-Tibetan propaganda. When they refused to accept the propaganda, members were tortured inside of their own monastery. Tenpa fled to India to escape the torture but, led by political convictions, felt the need to return to Tibet with information about the Tibetan situation. After being arrested at the border he was sentenced to three years in Drapchi prison, a converted monastery that is one of the most infamous prisons in Tibet. In prison he was subjected to various forms of torture, some of which had permanent debilitating effects on his health. However, after being released from prison, he chose to participate in another protest, landing him in prison for two more months before he was able to escape to India again. Because he was a monk before being arrested, he had a solid Tibetan Buddhist foundation upon which to focus his mind. But unlike other interviewees, Tenpa used his religious beliefs to *fight* the Chinese rather than feeling compassion towards them.

During his sentence Tenpa was able to focus on the impermanent nature of life, another basic tenet of Buddhism. Because everything is constantly in flux, there is no inherent self. Because there is no inherent existence since everything passes in time,

Tenpa was able to reason that his experience was fleeting. By focusing on his past lives, he was also invoking the doctrine of karma, which implies that his next life will be better if he endures his punishment. He mentioned that he prayed and meditated as much as he could without alerting the guards, which can be understood as his attempt to overcome the physical pain of torture. It is interesting to note, however, that Tenpa, unlike the people discussed to this point, was not interested in practicing compassion towards the Chinese. Instead, he was interested in *fighting* back. While he may have been physically incapacitated, he used his training in Tibetan Buddhism to mentally fight back against the Chinese. While this is a subtle difference in religious coping, it is worth noting because it provides a different - perhaps less passive - perspective regarding religious coping.

Although he was not arrested initially for protesting, he was caught transporting illegal information about the Tibetan situation at the border. By refusing to accept the Chinese propaganda in their monastery, Tenpa and his fellow monks were defying Chinese rule. During his time in India, Tenpa was moved to join the Free Tibet movement, which inspired him to make the arduous journey back to Tibet from India. Before returning to India for the final time, he took part in a Tibetan Uprising Day protest in Lhasa, for which he was detained for another two months. His political convictions developed into a personal mission to save Tibet from Chinese rule, which, as he states at the end of his story, was done with no regrets. Similarly, the next interviewee lived a life with no regrets and has perhaps the most interesting story of all my interviews to tell because of it.

Several other former political prisoners referred me to Tashi Tenzin. Because of his experience, he has been lauded as a Tibetan hero and has a personal relationship with

the Dalai Lama. Given his reputation I was taken aback by the setting in which our meeting took place. My translator and I descended a set of crooked, earthen steps through a construction site and made our way across a concrete slab to a ramshackle tin structure held together by ropes and blue tarps. We knocked on the door and a slender, older Tibetan lady welcomed us inside the one-room shack and showed us to two seats that situated beside Tashi's bed. Tashi, an aged Tibetan man with a long white beard, sat with his legs thrown over the edge of his bed. He greeted us warmly and insisted that we each have a cup of traditional Tibetan butter tea. As he and my translator discussed my project, I made several mental notes about his home.

Although the outside of his home was dilapidated, he managed to make the inside cozy enough. Nearly every inch of tin was covered in scrolls scrawled with Tibetan symbols, pictures of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, and relics from Tibet. If there was an empty space, he used chalk to scribble various Tibetan Buddhist symbols and phrases. An ancient dog sat curled beneath Tashi's feet, wheezing heavily and staring across the room through cataract eyes. As his helper busied herself with the tea, Tashi, nearly paralyzed from his experience, shuffled across the room to show my translator and me notes of Tibetan paper money that he managed to save from before 1949.

Once we had our tea, Tashi began to recount his story. Tashi's story is unique because it spans 29 years, beginning with the shelling of the Potala Palace in 1959 and ending with the large protests that broke out across Tibet in 1988. He left the monastery to fight in the Tibetan national army against the Chinese invasion of Tibet and, unsettled by the state of Tibet after he was released from prison, was one of the main propagators of the protests in 1988. His story provides the reader with a detailed account of the life of

a political prisoner during the earlier years of the occupation and makes specific note of the role of religious and political coping in helping him overcome his experience.

Although his religious beliefs have helped him deal with his suffering, he still harbors anger towards many Western countries. Through a Buddhist lens, Tashi holds a critical view of their actions in response to the Tibetan situation. Tashi's story is a powerful account of the Tibetan situation that to my knowledge has not had much recognition outside of the community in exile.

### **Tashi Tenzin**

I am from Lhasa and am 75 years old. I was born in 1935. I became a monk at Sera monastery in 1959. The Chinese came to Tibet in 1949. By 1959, the Chinese completely occupied Tibet. Within the monastery, several monks decided to join the Tibetan national army to fight the Chinese occupation. In my group there were ten monks who left the monastery to join the army. Before joining Sera monastery I was a monk at another monastery for 7 years. I was only at Sera for one year before I decided to leave the monastery to fight for Tibet.

Many monks went to the Potala Palace to protect it from the impending Chinese forces, who intended to bomb it. I, along with hundreds of people, monks, and soldiers, stood in front of the palace to ward off the Chinese. There is a hill in front of the palace from which the Chinese shot and killed many people... The Chinese also shelled the Norbulingka Palace because they thought that the Dalai Lama was there. Many people had surrounded the Norbunlingka palace and were summarily killed... The Chinese had guns and tanks but the Tibetans stood with nothing except their beliefs. We were not prepared to fight the Chinese. The Tibetan army was stationed in Lhasa for 3 days until we were forced to retreat. Lots of people... fled to India at this time.

In Lhasa we couldn't fight the Chinese any longer. The Chinese completely occupied Lhasa and the Tibetan army had no place. We fled south, searching for another avenue to fight the Chinese army. We were only able to kill Chinese soldiers by accident or by surprise. When Tibetan soldiers killed Chinese soldiers, they were able to replenish their ranks with fresh soldiers. If Chinese soldiers killed Tibetan soldiers, we had no way of replacing our troops. Chinese soldiers were constantly restocked with new weapons and supplies, but we had no way of replacing our supplies as quickly as the Chinese. Also the Chinese had a seemingly unending supply of bombs and heavy artillery and we had no way of fighting back. The Chinese were also organized and the Tibetans were not, further limiting our ability to effectively fight the Chinese. If Tibetans were actually trained and prepared to fight, I believe that we would have beaten China and ended the occupation in 1959. During a battle in the South, I was injured by a Chinese bomb and was captured by Chinese soldiers after a battle in July 1959.

My lower back was injured, causing me to need two operations during my imprisonment. My third operation, which was done in India, finally worked. I was in prison for 24 years. During my incarceration, I persistently fought against the Chinese police and demanded that Tibet will be free. I would say that Tibet was a nation, an independent country because we already had everything without having to depend on China. We had a flag, an anthem, religion, a long history, and culture. China and Tibet are different and I took it upon myself to remind Chinese policemen of the differences. I would argue that Tibet had been independent for thousands of years and needed nothing because it was already rich. Tibet was completely autonomous and had been for centuries... The Tibetan land has lots of crucial minerals, which is why China invaded Tibet.

I lived in the prisons for a long time. I would accuse Chinese guards of wanting to make Tibetan people disappear, deleting our culture so they could destroy our land looking for minerals beneath the banner of Communism. Because of my statements I was held for 24 years. The Chinese government tried to sentence me to execution on several occasions but a large outpouring of support from outside kept me alive. They wanted to execute me because they knew I would never agree with the Chinese government. Chinese officials believed that I headed a large organization outside from my prison cell but I would always tell them that I was doing nothing. The police would attempt to find the members of my organization, but many of them fled or would commit suicide because they did not want to be captured by the Chinese. Most of them were my friends, but some of them were just supporters of my cause.

Even though I had two operations, I was still in incredible pain from my injuries. I had trouble walking but was still forced to work at least 12 hours a day to stay alive. Many people starved and their bodies would become too weak to work. If a prisoner refused or was not physically able to work, the guards would stab him or her in the buttocks with long knives. We were given very little food, less than one cup of tsampa a day, and many prisoners starved to death. Family members were allowed to visit rarely, but when they did they brought good medicine.

We were forced to do several kinds of work, but my specific job was to dig trenches for electrical wiring. Also, I was forced to do carpentry work and build new cars occasionally. We had to carry on with our work for many years on the whim of the Chinese government. I believe that the prisoners make the Chinese government rich. The government used everything we made. When our products fell into disrepair, we fixed and resold them as new products.

I was moved to many prisons because Chinese police were scared that my influence would turn the prisoners against them. They were terrified of me. The first prison I went to was called Serang Chi, which was a monastery that had been converted into a prison. All the prisoners were held in one large room. When new prisoners arrived, they lived in smaller rooms and were questioned before being moved into the large room. I lived in a small room for 6 months where I was asked to comply with the Chinese government. They did ask me many questions because I refused to change my position. They would have released me if I agreed with them. I was handcuffed by my left index finger and suspended. Now, I cannot feel or use my finger. I would remain suspended for an hour at a time. I recall that being the worst pain I have ever



experienced. I was subjected to countless methods of torture but that was the worst. Next to that, the lack of food was agonizing. While I was in prison I witnessed many prisoners who were forced to eat their own feces because there was no food. When there was no water, not even dirty water, we would take turns urinating into each other's hands and drink it. It would take days for me to discuss all of the torture that I had to endure. In my jail there were nearly 1000 prisoners but only 15 survived because of malnourishment and torture.

I was released from prison in 1982... I joined another demonstration in Lhasa in 1988. I joined the protests because the Chinese claimed that they had improved Tibetan society. I traveled for 5 years to small, poor villages to see if the Chinese had actually improved the lives of Tibetans. They had not. I met several people who told me that their families were murdered. No sign of improvement could be found. With this knowledge, I started the protests in Lhasa in 1988. I realized that Tibetans did not have enough to eat and that any surplus food was given to the Chinese government. If farmers tried to hoard food and try to explain their action to the Chinese government, they were deemed liars and imprisoned.

Countries all over the world, especially the United Nations, do not respect or understand justice because they ignore Tibet. I hate the UN and many other countries because they did not help Tibet because my country is poor by their standards. The Chinese are able to buy amnesty from the UN. The UN only does what China desires. America executed Saddam Hussein, but if they really checked, they would realize that China commits more evil than Iraq. Tibetans are beaten bloody everyday... The Chinese people still kill many people, put many people in prisons, displace many families, but so many countries pretend to be blind and deaf towards the Tibetan situation, especially the UN. In 2008, China began to place Tibetans in fires, attempting to burn Tibet out of existence. The ones burned were those fighting for human rights in Tibet. Chinese people also put Tibetans in refrigerators. These people, if they survived, would come out completely paralyzed. Many Tibetans' leg nerves have been sliced behind their kneecaps to sever their nervous system. I have talked to many Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet to gain this knowledge.

I came to India in 1989. The Tibetan government-in-exile published my biographical book in 17 countries. Three men secretly entered Tibet without passports to do interviews and went back to their countries to write and publish my story. From this book, the Chinese government discovered that I had escaped to India. China told the English embassy that the story is not true because there is no actual person named Tashi Tenzin that has ever lived in Tibet. If I had never left Tibet, his history would have never been debated. I am now a ghost in the foggy hills of India... Later, journalists traveled to Dharamsala to interview me and rewrite my story, which was then republished by the Tibetan government-in-exile.

When I escaped Tibet, I was arrested and detained in Nepal for 7 days. I had to give the Nepali government all of my money in order to be released. When I finally arrived in Nepal, I had no money, and the Tibetan Reception Center would not admit me because they thought I was a Nepali beggar. Because they did not know who I was and I had no money, I went to the reception center 5 times and was denied each time. I eventually made my way to the Indian embassy, which, somehow, was already aware of

me. I was aided and sent to India as a refugee. The Indian government issued me a red paper, which granted me permission to enter India and the opportunity to travel extensively across India. I finally arrived in Dharamsala in 1989.

For one month I found it difficult to stay in Dharamsala. The Tibetan government-in-exile did not recognize me. When I went to the welfare office to ask for my obligatory visit with the Dalai Lama, they demanded that I filled out a certain application. The government told me that I was not special enough for a visit. Eventually, the Dalai Lama realized who I was and demanded to see me. When the Dalai Lama selected me specifically, the government-in-exile realized who I was and attempted to make amends with me. When I met with the Dalai Lama, we held a long audience and discussed the Tibetan situation. The journalists who secretly interviewed me had already told the Dalai Lama about me. Because the journalists did not have passports, they were able to continue their work without being threatened by the Chinese government.

In 1959, I went from being a monk to being a soldier. I realized that Buddhism helped me overcome suffering because I took refuge in the doctrine of karma. I know that my next life will be better. I was able to maintain sanity because I knew that I would have a better future. When I became a soldier, I made the decision to put religion to the side in order to aid Tibet in its fight against China. The political circumstances overstepped my religious obligations. Being a monk would have only helped one person, myself.

Although I hate the UN and other countries that refuse to help Tibet, I would still consider myself a Buddhist. They are not compassionate, and I do not feel the need to feel compassion for them. They live blindly and avoid the truth. Their speech and actions are different, which makes me very angry. They don't even live up to their own standards. Since being a monk, 52 years ago, my devotion to Buddhism has remained the same. Prison tested my belief in karma, but, as a result, I believe in it more. I was not afraid of being executed by the Chinese government because I would have benefitted the Tibetan struggle for freedom. It is natural that everyone dies.

Tashi's story begins when the Chinese Liberation Army is shelling the Potala Palace, the home of the Dalai Lama and national symbol for Tibetan religion, culture, and politics. Tashi puts aside his vows as a monk to fight against the Chinese. After retreating to another battle after the loss of the Potala Palace, Tashi was injured in an explosion and arrested as a prisoner of war. Throughout his prison experience, he was subjected to various forms of torture, both physical and mental. Having lived through some of the worst years of the Chinese occupation to date, Tashi was exposed to hardships that many younger Tibetans cannot fathom. After being released from prison,

Tashi traveled across Tibet to see how it had changed under Chinese rule and was leveled by what he found, leading him to protest in some of the largest protests in Tibetan history.

If he were arrested again, Tashi knew he would be executed and was forced to leave his home to find refuge in India. However, after making the arduous journey across the Himalayas, he was detained by corrupt Nepali authorities. He was forced to give them all of his money to prevent being sent back to Tibet, and as a result was denied access to the Tibetan refugee center in Nepal. Eventually, he made his way to India only to be overlooked by the Tibetan government in exile until the Dalai Lama found him. Although the Tibetan community has accepted him, he still suffers from his injuries and spends his days praying for a Free Tibet in a small tin shack. However, like so many other former political prisoners who have managed to overcome their suffering, he maintains a positive attitude and is content to be around the Dalai Lama.

While in prison, Tashi was able to invoke what he learned as monk to help him endure his prison experience. He explicitly states that Buddhism helped him overcome suffering because he was able to take refuge in the doctrine of karma. By knowing that his next life would be better, he was able to look past the normative experience of humanity. However, he argues that he needed to put aside his religious life in order to fight for Tibet. He felt that being a monk was selfish, which undermines the notion of conditioned genesis and the overall ideal of monks and nuns in Tibetan society. Instead of seeing himself as a monk within the intersubjective nature of existence, he felt the need to change his status to benefit others. And rather than the unconditional compassion for others practiced by most Tibetan Buddhists, Tashi selectively practices compassion.

Although he still considers himself to be Buddhist, he actively *hates* the United Nations and affiliated countries that have refused to respond to the Tibetan situation. He reasons that he does not need to feel compassion for those who are not compassionate. Despite his alternative beliefs, Tashi contends that his belief in Tibetan Buddhism has not changed since he was a monk 52 years ago. He realizes that prison tested and validated his faith and gave him the courage to fight for Tibet's freedom.

Tashi's political involvement began in 1959 and still thrives in exile. His prison sentence was extended because of his Tibetan pride and he was eventually forced into exile because he was a catalyst for the 1988 protests. Rather than refusing to cooperate with Chinese authorities in prison, Tashi took it upon himself to constantly remind them that Tibet was a free country and that the Chinese liberation of Tibet was a ruse meant to hide insidious intentions. He remained an adamant opponent of China throughout his entire prison experience, despite being tortured. He became the face of an opposition movement, fighting the Chinese invasion without leaving his prison cell. For the majority of his sentence, he was held in isolation because the Chinese authorities feared his influence. Throughout his entire experience, he held his head high and struggled, even the face of death, for a Free Tibet. It is without a doubt that Tashi's political views were what carried him through his suffering and are what continue to provide him with hope that his country will be free.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions**

*Oppressors will always deny that they are oppressors. All I can do is bear witness and set down what I saw and heard and what the strange journey of my life has been. Suffering is written now in the valleys and mountains of Tibet. Every village and*

*monastery in the Land of the Snows has its own stories of cruelty inflicted on our people. And that suffering will go on until the day Tibet is free* (Gyatso 1997: 232).

Palden Gyatso spent thirty-one years in Chinese prisons and is perhaps the most famous Tibetan former political prisoner. His book, *The Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk*, has been read worldwide, bringing necessary attention to the Tibetan situation. Gyatso spent several years traveling and discussing his story, carrying a few of the torture instruments that he was able to smuggle away from his guards when he was released. Now the ancient monk spends most of his time in meditation in exile, praying for a Free Tibet. He laments, “Suffering is written now in the valleys and mountains of Tibet... And that suffering will go on until the day Tibet is free.” Gyatso’s poetic statement reinforces the stories in this discussion. The suffering of Tibet is not limited to political prisoners, those who are still living in Tibet, or those who are in exile. The suffering of Tibet permeates its landscapes, its ideals and myths, and its heritage. The mystical rooftop of the world, the Land of the Snows, has been invaded and transformed at the expense of Tibetan lives.

Gyatso was released in 1992 and his account does not include the situation that has developed in Tibet after the 2008 Olympics. On a recent visit to the United States, Chinese Vice-president, and expected successor as Chairman of the People’s Republic of China, Xi Jinping, “stressed that China has made tremendous and well-recognised achievements in the field of human rights over the past 30-plus years” (BBC 2012). But as this thesis shows, the situation in Tibet has not improved since the 1959 invasion, especially in the years after 2008. The animosity and tensions in post-2008 Tibet have recently grabbed the attention of Western media due to a wave of self-immolations that

have taken place over the past year across Tibet and China. The act of lighting oneself on fire in political protest, self-immolation has grown in the past year as a popular form of dissent among monks, nuns, clergy, and most recently lay people. Since March 2011, there have been sixteen reported self-immolations. Though like most protests in Tibet, there is no way of knowing exactly how many Tibetans have self-immolated in the past year (LaFraniere 2012).

The self-immolations, performed in the name of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, have been described in Chinese media as extremist activity and further justification for the occupation of Tibet. While the Tibetan community generally condemns self-immolation, their disapproval has not stopped dozens of monks and nuns from taking their lives over the past fifty years. Given that Buddhist ideals undergird Tibetan society and culture, one can see that these violent acts of suicide are done out of desperation, visible displays of the helplessness that many of interviewees discussed as the catalyst for their political activity. Although it is difficult to prove, one could assume that the increase in self-immolations is a marker for the increased crackdown on Tibet by the Chinese government. The few video clips that have surfaced from Western media outlets reinforce this assumption. Although the situation seems to be increasingly worse, many Tibetans maintain an optimistic worldview that Tibet will be free and the Dalai Lama will return to his homeland.

From a Western perspective, it is difficult to imagine a worldview in which suffering is a cause for optimism, rather than fighting or inciting global skepticism. While it would be ideal to not suffer, most Tibetans realize that suffering is a part of life, and that the suffering caused by the Tibetan situation will pass in time. This is not to imply

that Tibetans are passively waiting until the balances of karma tip in their favor. Rather, in the meantime Tibetans are involved in political protests, which are mostly nonviolent. Unfortunately, some protests have given way to violence. Despite millions of Tibetans losing their lives, the Tibetan people maintain a peculiarly positive outlook and continue to struggle for a Free Tibet.

Much of the optimism held by Tibetans in exile, especially Tibetan former political prisoners, comes from the types of coping mechanisms they utilize to make sense of the Tibetan situation. The interviews that comprise most this research are evidence of the ways in which former political prisoners are able to invoke Tibetan religion and political ideas to persevere through their circumstances. Rather than being bitter about the Chinese invasion, many Tibetans look forward to a future where Tibetans can live alongside Chinese people peacefully. By invoking Buddhist ideas, such as karma, Tibetans are able to construct a worldview that gives them hope for a better future. Similarly, Tibetans have banded together beneath the greater issue of a Free Tibet, supporting one another in and out of prison and galvanizing a greater community in exile.

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