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Palden Gyatso

— a brave man of Tibet

On this 51st anniversary of the Lhasa uprising in Tibet, I'd like to talk about one of the bravest people I've ever met, a Tibetan monk called Palden Gyatso.

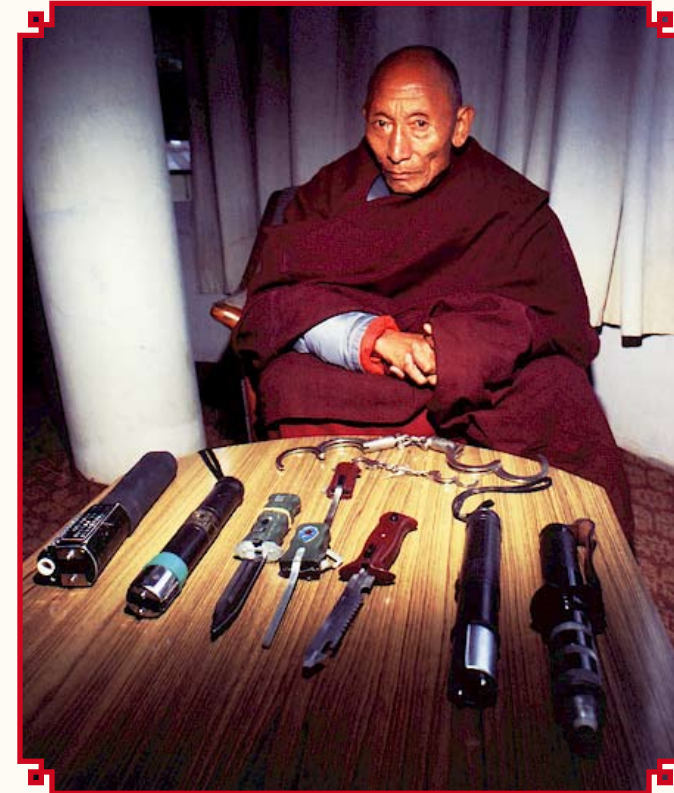
Palden Gyatso was born in 1931 in a place called Panam, the Gyantse District of Tibet, and he was ordained at the age of ten. During the 1959 uprising he led a hundred-man force against the Chinese. It was made up of monks from Drepung monastery but they never fought. He was first arrested in 1959 and spent the next thirty-three years in prisons and labour camps, being severely tortured and brutally punished for refusing to denounce the Dalai Lama and for refusing to say that Tibet was really China.

He was arrested and re-arrested many times during those thirty-three years because the authorities have to let you go once you have served your sentence, but you can hardly move before they arrest you again for a further 'crime'. Shortly before Palden Gyatso's release, therefore, in 1992 he arranged for Tibetan friends to bribe prison guards into selling some torture implements, and, as soon as he could, he headed for the Nepalese border disguised in Chinese clothing. He knew the police were looking for him, but he made it to India.

Now he is a free man and is doing his best to persuade the free world to do something for the Tibetan people. In 1995 he came to visit us in Totnes, South Devon to

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Regards, Eds



Palden Gyatso. Photo: www.freetibet.org

10th March 2010 marks
the 51st anniversary of the
Lhasa uprising in Tibet.

give a talk and to display those terrible instruments of torture. On the morning of that talk, we spoke with him and his interpreter, Ugyan Norbu, at Sharpham House:

RSR: How old were you when you were arrested, and what had you done?

Palden Gyatso: I was twenty-eight. I stated that Tibet was an independent nation, and that the Chinese were forcefully occupying it. I was an active participant in the March 1959 uprising. When they arrested me they said, 'You are a reactionary. You are anti-establishment.'

Were you brought to trial?

I was examined, so to speak, in a kind of court after about a year.

And were you beaten during that year?

I was beaten at every interrogation. And if I couldn't answer as a result of the beatings, they would take it that I was refusing to answer and sometimes would try to make me answer. They would tie my hands with ropes behind my back, put the ropes around both my arms and pull them back. And then they

would tie a knot in the rope and attach it to the ceiling. I would then be hauled up into the air and hung there. Then they would hit me with anything they could lay their hands on. Sometimes they would also put petrol on the floor and light a fire underneath me. I would become overwhelmed with the heat and there would be tremendous pain; it was like being roasted.

What did they want you to say?

They wanted me to say that Tibet was part of China. They wanted me to quit my 'reactionary' attitude and to say that Tibet had always been part of China and that the new establishment was good for the people and good for me. But I said none of these things.

I can't imagine what it must have been like for you during those moments of being tortured. I think the severest pain I've ever had in my life was when my hand got trapped once under a machine. It didn't last for very long, maybe half an hour, but it was very painful. The peak pain probably lasted for about five minutes. So I can't imagine being tortured and having to endure sustained pain. How did you feel in yourself?

The measurement of the pain is beyond comprehension. I think that the worst that could be administered was administered to me; there couldn't have been more than that. I hung in the air and was beaten, with the fire beneath me. Then they would draw my hands up further and all the nerves in my body would shudder with pain. The urine and excreta, everything, just came out of me — that was the level of pain.



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Foreword by Jack
Kornfield

Ajahn Sumedho invites us to become aware of the freedom beyond all conditions, a freedom from fear, gain and loss, pleasure and pain.

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Ordained in Thailand in 1967 Ajahn Sumedho trained under the guidance of the highly respected Ajahn Chah. He is the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist monastery in England.

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And how did you cope with that?

I survived. There was no magical way of coping with it. The pain came. I had no control over what came, or what was meted out to me. But I always had the absolute conviction that I had done nothing wrong. My belief concerning the rights of the Tibetan people was fundamental. We were living in our own country and somebody from another country had come along and invaded our land, our homes. I also believed that my suffering could somehow be of benefit to the Tibetan cause, and so I produced a sort of anger in myself. I literally bit into my tongue with my teeth so that it bled, and I made a vow never to speak contrary to my beliefs, never at any time in my life to say that Tibet has always been part of China. That was my determination.

*As a Buddhist monk, what were your feelings towards those who were torturing you?
How did you feel towards them?*

Even though the punishments were various and severe, I have no bad feelings towards them at all. They were merely doing what they were instructed to do from above. The prisoners on the staff, they were the people who were actually handling me; they were doing mere work.

Is that how you felt at the time?

Yes, I felt that at the time. There was no revenge factor in me. If and when Tibet gets its independence and if we were to do to the Chinese what they have done to us, then we would be as bad, if not worse. That was the kind of feelings I had when they were torturing me.



Photo: Lisa Daix

Did you ever lose faith in the Buddha-dharma?

On the contrary. My faith in Buddhism strengthened. Buddha endured a lot of suffering; he endured physical pain and made many sacrifices for the benefit of other beings. Who was I? My suffering, my pain, was no match to the pains of the Buddha. If I died, it would not have been important. I could have died at any time, but I felt that my suffering, what I stood for, might somehow be making a small contribution towards the benefit of the Tibetans.

I remember, when I was a small boy, we had a neighbour who had been tortured in a Japanese camp in Burma. He told us it was often the camaraderie between the prisoners that kept them going. What sort of relationship did you have with other prisoners? Did you support each other? After those periods of horrendous torture, were you kept in isolation, or were you put in a cell with others?

Sometimes I would be put in a room by myself after-



Zen Teaching of Instantaneous Awakening

A Classic Zen text.

Translated by John Blofeld.

Written in the 8th century by Hui Hai. Student of Ma-tsu and from the same line as Hui Neng, Huai-hai, Huang Po and Rinzai (Lin-chi).

The wise regulate their minds rather than their persons; fools regulate their persons rather than their minds.

All good and evil proceed from our minds and mind is therefore the root. Unless you can penetrate to this truth, all your efforts will be vain.

Zen master Hui Hai

wards, and at other times I was put with a crowd of prisoners. There could be as many as twelve others, or as few as five or six. And the comfort I might get from the other prisoners would vary. Some could not be trusted; some were Chinese whose beliefs and reasons for being there were completely different from mine. But, in any case, the prisoners were not allowed to help each other. If you were beaten and then somebody said, 'Oh you are in pain. What can I do to help?' and touched you, or put something on your wounds or whatever, they would receive the same treatment. But those who did share the same feelings — perhaps they were monks from the same monastery — would give advice somewhat quietly, in a very careful manner. And the advice would often be about thinking very carefully, thinking about what Buddha had done, about what Buddha had suffered, and about what he had achieved, or thinking about Milarepa — his sufferings and determination — or thinking about various Tibetan deities who have done tremendous work for the benefit of other beings, and about the Dalai Lama who is ceaselessly, endlessly, working for the Tibetan people — thinking about these things very carefully. You knew what they had done, so you thought about them. And that was the sort of advice one monk might quietly give to another.

Can you say something, then, about how you practised as a Buddhist monk during this time? Often any suppression of the Buddha-dharma in the past has strengthened the individual — it might have weakened the institution, but it has strengthened the individual because the practice was actually forced deep within. So what sort of practices



Photo: Lisa Daix

did you do which, presumably, had to be kept secret?

One of the meditations was on karma, realising that positive thinking, positive action, paves the way to a positive result. And that negative actions, physical or mental, will go in the wrong direction. Another meditation was on the three refuges — taking refuge in the Buddha and his teachings, and also on Chenrezi, the Buddha of Compassion. However little I was doing, these meditations were directed towards the benefit of the Tibetan nation and to Tibetan independence.

During the many Buddhist repressions throughout history, the Pure Land schools often prospered because people went into their own hearts and thought of Amitabha, or Akshobya — a person is in an absolute hell realm, say, and overcomes it by thinking of Amitabha. Did you ever do practices like that to transcend your situation?

Yes, I did. We can say prayers, but that is not it. The engineering by the mind and the belief in pure honesty and justice, are the basic tenets. So one practises religion because one simply recognises the suffering of all sentient beings great or small and recognises that they are seeking happiness.

I bear no grudge against the Chinese. If I did, I would be going against what I believe. The Chinese are beings, we are all beings, and there is the recognition of their mistakes. That is religious feeling. Politically also, when you are seeking your own liberation, you want democracy, you want to have human rights. But if, while you are wanting that, you are wishing to deny it to somebody else, then you are contradicting yourself; that is a kind of self-defeat.

These practices are contemplative in the sense that you are comparing yourself to others and I can see that they would really help to keep your sanity in those situations, but I'm trying to get to a deeper level in some respects.

If you want to meditate on this cup, you will have to know, examine, look at this cup properly and see how it is made — the flower, the pattern, the colour. You have to look at it thoroughly and try to understand it. And then you take the cup away. The cup is no longer there, but you visualise it; you see the cup without it being there in physical form.

If, instead of the cup, you focus on Buddha Shakyamuni



Photo: Lisa Daix

himself, you examine how he got enlightened, where he started, what he was from the beginning. You work out how he actually bore his sufferings. You observe these things, perceive them. Buddha looked at beings and felt the suffering of those beings. His understanding and compassion grew and then he had a new vision, a new understanding. And the Buddha wanted to extend his understanding of an animal, the suffering of a particular animal, and of the suffering of so many beings all over the world. He had the wish to liberate, to do something positive. Then he was no longer an ordinary being, but an extraordinary human being. There were signs on his hands and forehead, and his ears became extended. Different things appeared on him — a golden wheel of life in the hands and on the feet and other signs that he was extraordinary.

Buddha had all sorts of auspicious symbols, marvellous symbols, but other beings don't have them. Why? It is necessary to examine why he had these things. The Buddha helped other beings and the result of this was these marvellous signs. He did something that no one else could do. He was also able to understand even the minutest insects, all phenomena; he was able to understand phenomena in its entirety and context.

If you know the Buddhist doctrine and then focus on the image of the Buddha, look at the physical appearance, say, of a bronze figure, examine it and focus on it carefully in all its contexts and levels, and then visualise it totally without the bronze figure being present, when you receive the reality of meditation, you see that Buddha in a kind of flesh form, and you see his lips moving. When this becomes deeper and clearer to you and more

familiar, then this mind which is instantly able to absorb the Buddha, will be much deeper and clearer and more solid. So first you perceive this Buddha-image in a more or less flesh form — it comes and then disappears — but then it will have more reality and you will be able to see it for longer than just a quick flash. One can also contemplate the Buddha of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, in the same way as I described for Buddha Shakyamuni. And White Tara, White Dolma, who symbolises long life — likewise, you meditate or visualise her in the same way. If you can't recall the image properly, you look at the picture, or the photograph, or whatever it is you have in front of you. You look at this and then try again until you get it. It takes time, but eventually you should be able to do it.

It is a kind of repetition. You focus on these three — the Buddha Shakyamuni, Chenrezi (the Buddha of Compassion), and Dolma (White Tara), and you do that in the way I mentioned. You have to practise constantly until you get it right, and it has to be in a place without distractions, a quiet, clean place. You must not be disturbed by outside interferences — somebody opening the door, or whatever, or distract yourself by thinking of shopping, or some business you have to attend to, or anything like that. If you practise enough, and in the right way, then you should be able to achieve it.

There are various meditations. You could meditate on the development of animals for the improvement of their standards of life; you could meditate on enlightenment, the nature of emptiness, the interdependence of things, impermanence. There are different elements on which to contemplate.

And the right motivation is altruism, a kind of determination to help other beings. When you have bodhicitta [the wish to attain liberation for the sake of all beings], then you have a determination. This is not something vague. You have a conviction. You realise the necessity of helping other beings.

Now, this torture and so forth went on and on until 1992. If I were to speak about these things in great detail, it would almost be unbearable. And you may not be able to conceive or believe that one human being could do such things to another. So, not only would it be unprofitable to recall all these details, but it would be disturbing for me. It would provoke intense memories about those realities and sometimes a temporary anger rises up in me. It also brings tears and makes me cry. It disturbs my mind. It would also take a long time to explain all that happened.

Are there still prisoners being tortured and mistreated in Tibet today?

There are a lot of them. And new people are being arrested all the time.

There are Westerners actively trying to raise the consciousness of people to the Tibet situation by protesting and trying to make things happen. And sometimes it becomes quite frustrating because we seem to be getting nowhere. Do you think it really helps to have western groups putting pressure on their own governments?

I feel there is tremendous benefit in your efforts, in the efforts of ordinary people, or ordinary supporting groups, or any groups who are supporting Tibet. In

prison we sometimes heard that there was pressure from the West to release prisoners or to do something on human rights. Whenever these things were happening — demonstrations or some greater action — there seemed to be some better treatment, or a lessening of something. That was my experience. And merely hearing that there is a power somewhere else, that the outside world is acting and writing, gave great pleasure to the prisoners. Although they are in prison, they do hear about activities outside.

Geshe-la, I thank you very much for your time. I hope you have a long and happy life from now on amongst friends and colleagues and one day I hope you return to a free Tibet as a free man. Thank you very much.

I am very grateful for being invited here. People like yourselves, I feel, are not merely concerned about Tibet, but concerned about human rights all over the world — the alleviation of suffering, the wish to bring some balance, some sort of justice to the world. And I feel this shows a human decency and a recognition of the plight of other people. I feel it is also in line with the Buddhist teaching. At the moment the campaign is for Tibet versus China, but one day it might happen that the Chinese people themselves will need help. Maybe the Chinese people will need help from the Chinese! Therefore, I am sure, by the way you are conducting yourselves, that you may also extend your help or support to those people as well. And that time may come!

Earlier in the year Palden Gyatso had attended a UN

conference in Geneva on human rights where he told his story and wept. His next venue was the UK House of Lords where he wept again. But he is not a broken man; he is a remarkable man with a mission, who will never lead a normal life, or the life of a normal Buddhist monk because at night when he goes to sleep he's back again in the prisons, in the labour camps, being starved and tortured. And he recalls those feelings of horror when he witnessed the macabre tortures dished out to the old people and the brave people of Tibet.

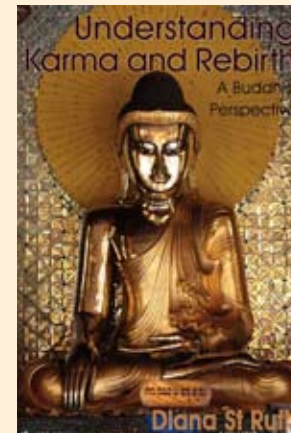
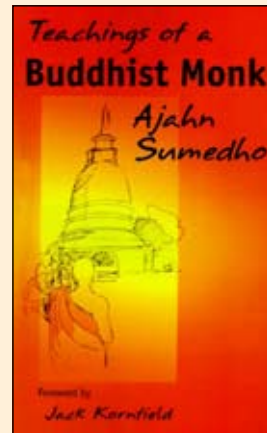
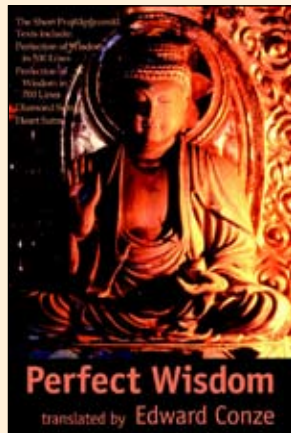
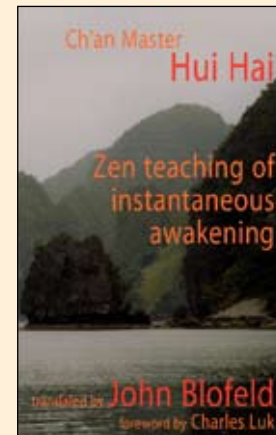
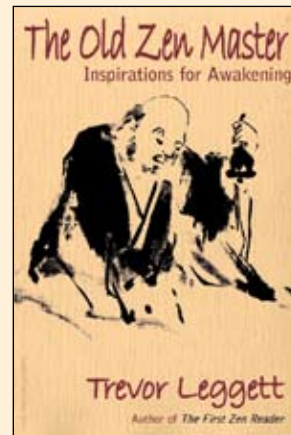
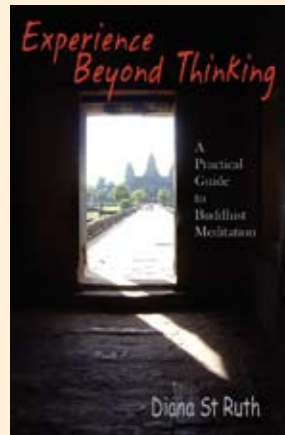
Palden Gyatso now works as part of the welcoming committee for Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, North India.

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