

Feature interview with Lodi G. Gyari, co-chair of the Kreddha council

Truthfulness gives inner strength

“Throughout my life, I have never looked for confrontation but always for solutions, even within my own community - in building bridges, creating common ground and bringing people together. This I am sure is because of my Buddhist upbringing.” Lodi Gyaltzen Gyari, who chairs the Kreddha council together with Rodrigo Carazo Odio, is himself involved in a long process of negotiations with China on the future of Tibet in his role as Special Envoy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This work he also considers to be an opportunity to contribute to reaching genuine understanding and mutual respect.

Lodi Gyari grew up in the Eastern Tibetan province of Kham, where both his parents were deeply involved in the resistance to the Chinese occupation, which started in 1950. He was educated in a monastery as other incarnate lamas¹ are, but had to flee the country after China's army put down the Tibetan uprising in 1959 and the Dalai Lama himself fled into exile in India. After playing leadership roles among the exiled Tibetan youth, Lodi Gyari worked closely with the Dalai Lama, accompanying him on his first visit to the West in 1973 and remaining one of his closest collaborators to this day. He was elected to the Tibetan parliament in exile, of which he became the chairman, and later was appointed minister of international relations and information in the Tibetan government in exile. From 1982, he has been involved in efforts to establish a dialogue with the Chinese government and for the past twenty years he has served as the Dalai Lama's special envoy, posted mainly in Washington D.C. He currently leads the Tibetan team of negotiators in a new series of talks with China's leadership, which started in 2002.

Lodi Gyari's belief in building bridges was severely tested when he was first sent on a delegation to China in 1982. “I was unhappy to be on the delegation. I was still an activist at heart at the time and very sceptical of His Holiness' policy of reaching out to the Chinese. The first encounters with the Chinese officials were so difficult for me – even shaking hands made me feel like I was betraying my people, because my own brothers and other family members, like so many other Tibetans, had been killed and others suffered so harshly at the hands of the Chinese.” Since then things have changed, and today Tibet's most experienced diplomat considers his role as Tibet's chief negotiator to be “an opportunity for self-growth, tolerance and patience.” Gyari explains: “Following the Dalai Lama's approach to negotiations, which is simply to be truthful and avoid the usual negotiation tactics such as posturing and bargaining, I have developed calmness and patience which helps me even when the other side puts much pressure on us.” At first, President Jimmy Carter and other persons with whom Lodi Gyari discussed this approach on behalf of the Dalai Lama were surprised and sceptical about the wisdom of simply stating the bottom line, putting all the cards on the table as it were, even before talks had started. “There was no changing

¹ Lamas are Buddhist teachers (often monks) in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Incarnate lamas are those who are recognised as incarnations of great Buddhist masters. Tibetans generally use the respectful title of ‘rinpoche’ when referring to or addressing such a person. Thus Lodi Gyari, who comes from the place Gyari, is known as Gyari Rinpoche among Tibetans.

His Holiness' mind, however. He would say 'As a Buddhist monk, I can only speak the truth. It may take some time for the Chinese leaders to understand that I am not playing games. Eventually they will understand and appreciate.'"

How does his work with Kreddha fit in all this? "We Tibetans get caught up in our own tragedy. Sometimes we fail to see the greater picture and recognise other people's suffering. Yes, our situation is urgent, we suffer injustice. But there are many such situations, and they are human problems, inherent in human nature. I have benefited, as have the people on whose behalf I negotiate, from my exposure to other people trying to resolve the problems they are in. The involvement of eminent leaders of states, Nobel laureates, but also leaders of the victims, victimised populations, in Kreddha is unique and has benefited me tremendously. I now hope to have the opportunity to share my experience and to contribute to the resolution of other conflicts through Kreddha. I hope my experience in approaching negotiations with China on the basis of truthfulness, which is also a core principle of Kreddha, can benefit others."

Through the years, Lodi Gyari has played a leading role in many initiatives ranging from inter-religious dialogues, environmental protection and sustainable development projects and peace missions, to engaging senior politicians, actors and global business leaders in supporting the people of Tibet in various ways. His friends include heads of state, Hollywood stars, senior diplomats, members of parliament and senators, social activists, spiritual leaders, leaders of population groups struggling for justice, rock musicians, presidents of international institutions such as the World Bank, Nobel laureates and leading intellectuals around the globe. He travels the world not only to nurture these initiatives and his personal friendships but also to visit his children and other family members who live in Bhutan, Nepal, India, the United States and Japan. His lifelong devotion to the Dalai Lama and to his own Buddhist spiritual tradition is both a driving force in his endeavours and an inspiration for those who know him.

A word of advice? "I am pleased that Kreddha is truly committed to working with parties to find sustainable solutions. Long-term commitment is another core value of Kreddha which I find very important. Sometimes third parties are motivated by an interest to broker a deal. Maybe because they are under pressure to deliver if they are politicians or in government. We have seen so many such orchestrated deals: famous handshakes that fall apart. What makes Kreddha special for me is that our commitment is not motivated by personal agendas nor tight timeframes, and this allows us also to work quietly behind the scenes, even letting others take the credit for successes if need be."

Interview by Miek Boltjes
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