



An Interview with Hilary Papworth of `English Language Scholarships for Tibetans`, who have been holding a Three Week Workshop at Sarah near Dharamsala, by Tsering Thondup, for the Tibetan Review (published October 2001)

1. Tsering Dhondup: How did you first become interested in the Tibetan issue and how did you first become connected with Tibetan people?

Hilary Papworth: I first met Tibetans in England over ten years ago. It was in the context of religious dialogue between Tibetan Buddhism and the western religious traditions. My interest in Tibetan people and issues has grown out of friendships with Tibetans, firstly in England and subsequently in India. And of course from reading.

2. T.T. Do you believe in Buddhism?

H.P. Although my own area of study is within western traditions, I can see that Buddhist teachings are profound and wide-ranging. There is an obvious accord between the religions at an ethical level (being kind, good-hearted, compassionate to others, etc). What is perhaps more interesting is the accord between the teachings of religions of east and west at a philosophical level. To take an example, the metaphysical insight based on the perception of the two truths (ultimate and conventional) as the foundational basis of reality is necessarily universal. This perception and its philosophical ramifications are main-stream in the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, but are more of what you might call a `specialist area` in the western traditions. We are looking forward to the time when there are more good translations of Tibetan texts available in English.

3. T.T. You have been inviting professional young Tibetans to the U.K. for English language teaching for some years. How did this start?

H.P. Actually the initiative came from the Tibetan side. A young doctor of Tibetan traditional medicine with whom we had discussions in India asked us for help in improving his English. On our return to the U.K. we worked with our friend Geshe (now Dr) Thupten Jinpa, translator to His Holiness and now Director of the `Institute of Tibetan Classics`, who was living in Cambridge. Together we managed to raise sufficient funds for travel costs to the U.K. and living expenses. In the end that person was unable to take leave, but Dr Tenzin Kyizom from Men Tsee Khang (TMAI) came instead. A friend gave accommodation and the `Studio School of English`, a language school in Cambridge generously gave a place on a 12 week full-time intensive English language course. The whole arrangement was so successful that we began to look at ways to raise more funds to offer similar opportunities to other young Tibetans.

Incidentally we accept applications not only from professionals but from any young Tibetan who is already proving his or her ability and has the potential and commitment to make a positive contribution to the Tibetan community and the wider world, for example, business people or secular or religious scholars.

4. T.T. You have seen a number of Tibetans complete the ELST programme in Cambridge. Do you perceive real improvement from when they arrive in Cambridge and when they complete the course?

H.P. In order to make real progress in only three months it is necessary to start with a reasonable standard of English. All five Tibetans who have come to Cambridge have worked hard at improving their English language skills by attending language class and doing their homework. The more accomplished of them have sat and passed the `Cambridge Proficiency in English` - this is a very tough exam. What we have particularly noticed, over and above improved language skill, is the huge improvement in confidence in speaking English. I think this confidence continues to build even after they leave England.

5. T.T. Are you satisfied with what the Cambridge ELST scholars have learned and with their contribution to Tibetan society?

H.P. The ELST scholars so far who have visited Cambridge are two doctors, a monk, an administrator from TIPA and a teacher from TCV. When we arrived in Dharamsala recently we found that two of our former ELST scholars, Dr Tenzin Kyizom and Dr Tenzin Namdul of TMAI, were organising an important high-level conference conducted in English the following day. One was giving a medical paper, the other was master of ceremonies for the whole event. Feedback from TMAI Directors suggest that Doctors Kyizom and Namdul have not only made progress in language skills, but also, and even more important, have gained enormously in confidence from their Cambridge experience. They are increasingly valuable to their Institute.

Two other ELST scholars, who were brought up in Tibetan institutions, are now in the U.S.A. Perhaps they will return to Tibet or to the Tibetan community in India. Either way, we know that they are both sincere individuals who are not motivated merely by self-interest. We take the view that they still can make a more effective contribution to the welfare of the Tibetan people and the maintenance and spread of Tibetan culture because of their experiences with ELST in Cambridge.

6. T.T. Once you have invited a Tibetan for a programme of study, how do you select the teaching institutions that they will join? Do you always send them to the same school?

H.P. As I mentioned, so far all our ELST scholars have attended the `Studio School of English` in Cambridge. This is a large and I think happy language school. The Director, Mr Christopher Roberts, has been unwavering in his support and has continued to give free places to ELST (maximum two per year) even though he has over 700 requests each year from all over the world for scholarship places. He and his teaching staff do this as they are impressed with the quality and dedication of the Tibetans who have attended. Success builds on success. One seriously badly behaved scholar could jeopardise the whole programme!

The `Studio School` is not part of Cambridge University but, as I mentioned, the students have the opportunity to take the `Cambridge Proficiency in English` or a lower level of examination if appropriate, which is set and awarded by the Cambridge University Board of Studies.

7. T.T. Are there different levels of courses for different standards of English ability? How are they taught? How long do they spend in the U.K. for the course?

H.P. The `Studio School` staff always make an initial assessment to determine the level of reading and writing ability. The student is then placed in a class at the appropriate level. Students at the school come from many different countries in Europe and Asia so it is possible to meet and make friends with people of diverse nationalities. We also encourage the student to go on trips to places of interest arranged by the `Studio School` and paid for by ELST.

The actual course is 12 weeks, but we encourage ELST scholars to arrive a few days early, to find their way around and get to know the host family, and to leave a few days after the end of the course. If the ELST scholar already has friends in England he or she may arrive or leave earlier or later by arrangement, but ELST cannot cover any extra costs outside the 13 to 14 weeks arranged in Cambridge. ELST also provides the Tibetan student with an allowance to cover everyday expenses and occasional outings. The host family provides breakfast and evening and

weekend meals and the student is encouraged to become part of family life. Momos and thenthuk are becoming quite popular in Cambridge!

In exchange for experiencing many aspects of British and western life and ideas, our Tibetan visitors are also encouraged to promote Tibetan culture, by giving talks and by other means. One individual even spoke on the radio and another organised and presented, with the help of the `Tibet Society`, a major photographic exhibition which was shown at the `Tibet Foundation` in London, and in Cambridge. These remarkable photographs had been taken secretly in Tibet. They show the environmental damage now being done by deforestation, strip mining and other programmes. The exhibition points out the potential threat to two-thirds of the world's population as a consequence of upsetting the delicate ecology of Tibet and the major rivers of India, China and south-east Asia that arise on the Tibetan plateau.

8. T.T. How do you select the students?

H.P. ELST advertises for the Cambridge scholarships through open public advertisements. These advertisements are generally placed in January and February for places in spring and autumn of the following year. Previously we have advertised in the `Tibetan Review` but we may also use the `Tibet Times` in the future. This advertising material is also sent to Tibetan departments and institutions. Applications are sent directly to Cambridge where they are carefully considered by the ELST committee according to the criteria stated in the advertisements: "ELST is identifying candidates who are already proving their ability and is selecting them for their potential and for their commitment to Tibetan, Indian and world communities." Short-listed candidates are interviewed by Dr Rajiv Mehrotra of the Dalai Lama's Foundation for Universal Responsibility` in Delhi. The ELST committee make their final choice based on Dr Mehrotra's recommendation.

9. T.T. The Workshop you are now holding on the campus of the `College of Higher Tibetan Studies` at Sarah near Dharamsala is a new venture for ELST. How did you select the candidates?

H.P. The Workshop 2001 is not only the first ELST Workshop, but I think the first event of its kind for Tibetans. The application and selection procedure is similar to that I have described. Applicants apply directly and the selection is by the ELST committee in Cambridge. Obviously interviews would be impractical for the numbers involved in the Workshop. The 26 Tibetan participants selected for Workshop 2001 have traveled from as far as Ladakh and south India; they cover a wide range of skills, occupations and ambitions. They include doctors, teachers, monks, an academic, a person embarking on a career in hotel management and a video camera expert. The Cambridge team of 7 young post-graduates are also from a wide range of disciplines which include anthropology, engineering, finance, history, law and literature.

10. T.T. What is the programme for Workshop 2001? Do they learn only language skills, such as English as grammar, practical writing and conversation?

H.P. The course is quite varied in form and content. There are four English language teaching groups, graded according to level of ability. At other times of the day there are also groups working on theme areas such as Finance and Economics, Information Technology and Literature. Everyone will be involved in making a presentation, in English, to the whole group on themes such as Buddhism, Tibetan Medicine, Refugees and Education. There are also days in which the whole group works together on major seminar themes, `Globalisation` `Political Conflict` and `Development and Progress?`. So in addition to the language teaching element there is much opportunity for conversation, discussion and debate, with written and spoken presentations.

I should also mention that the Tibetan participants and the Cambridge team have between them arranged a programme of evening entertainments that have included watching videos, walks,

games, basketball and debating around a bonfire. These events have been fun and have helped to build goodwill, understanding and friendship between all those involved in the Workshop.

11. T.T. Do you plan to conduct further ELST Workshops in the future, either in Dharamsala or in other parts of India?

H.P. As soon as we return to the U.K. we will seek funding and a volunteer instructor team for ELST Workshop 2002. At present we believe that this should address the unemployment problem of young qualified Tibetans. This problem can be summarised as 'The Sweater-Selling Syndrome'; this was addressed in the leading article of the 'Tibetan Review' March 2001. Workshop 2002 is provisionally entitled **Communication Skills and Business Creation and Development**. Programme content will balance the need to both improve English language and communication skills and to acquire business and entrepreneurial expertise.

Finding a suitable campus location for such a Workshop is always difficult, whether it be in the Dharamsala area or nearer to the settlements in south India. All Tibetan institutions are very heavily utilised and it is difficult to find the necessary facilities. We are very grateful to the College of Tibetan Higher Studies for the wonderful welcome and support they have given us this year for Workshop 2001. If any of your readers have any ideas to solve this location and resource issue, we should be very glad to hear from them.

12. T.T. You have known and interacted with Tibetans for many years. What are the best qualities found in Tibetans? What in your view is the way for Tibetans to maintain our 'Tibetan-ness'?

H.P. There is no doubt that Tibetans are a very charming people. If this were not so, you would not have so many friends all over the world. It is my turn to ask you a question. Do you think that the qualities that we westerners find so attractive in Tibetan people, such as honesty, sincerity and good-heartedness, have been brought about by many generations of the practice of Tibetan Buddhism? If this is so, then it suggests that maintaining 'Tibetan-ness' means maintaining the religious integrity of your culture. The maintenance and continuance of Tibetan Buddhist culture is not purely for the benefit of the Tibetan people but is also a special gift to the rest of the world and a world resource.