



ELST Article:

Tara Sinclair, Sept. 2001

### A Discourse In The Mountains.

Delhi in August is intense in every way: an overwhelming dance of humanity, heat and car fumes. Stepping off a luxurious British airways flight we entered a changed universe. Grimy and sweaty, after two days we were dreaming of the cool and tranquility of the Himalayan foothills where we would be spending the next three weeks. There were ten of us altogether—seven were postgraduate students from Cambridge University, although originally from far-flung corners of the globe such as Wales and Armenia, and three were the chairman and trustees of 'English Language Scholarships For Tibetans' or E.L.S.T. This charity, established in 1997 in Cambridge, was holding the first workshop of its kind in Dharamsala, where the Tibetan government in exile, and many refugees from Tibet, are based.

Bill and Hillary Papworth, long time residents of the university town, are the driving force behind E.L.S.T. following an initiative from Dr. Thupten Jinpa, translator to the Dalai Lama, who in 1997 was studying theology at Cambridge. Bill and Hillary realised the value of bringing young professional Tibetans to Cambridge to learn English so that they could effectively communicate with a wider world and in this way help to maintain and spread knowledge of Tibetan culture. The first E.L.S.T. scholar was Dr. Tenzin Kyizom, a Tibetan medical doctor from Dharamsala, and following on there have been participants from diverse backgrounds: teachers, monks and administrators. The idea behind E.L.S.T. is that these people return to their communities to pass on the skills they have developed, as well as use them to build awareness of Tibetan culture both within and outside of the community.

An overnight train journey, and a precipitous Indian taxi ride later, we arrived at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics just outside Dharamsala where we would be living and teaching as volunteer instructors to twenty-six young professional Tibetans. The workshop was to be focused around the learning of English, as had been the objective of E.L.S.T. in Cambridge, with the difference that now we were bringing this program to India with the hopes of being able to reach larger numbers of Tibetans. Our 'Cambridge team' of young graduate students, having been given the freedom to design our own program over the preceding nine months, were secretly envisioning mightier tactics than just English grammar and syntax: globalisation, nationalism, modernity and political conflict were also on our agenda.

The hardships of living in exile, which must be experienced by all Tibetans in India, were on our minds in Cambridge when we had translated the title of the workshop 'Communication Skills and the English Speaking World', to incorporate *all* the intellectual tools necessary for communicating the Tibetan situation to the wider world. Tibetans should be able to enter into a dialogue about nationhood, human rights and political conflict with a wide and influential audience. Such tools could also be used for resisting the forces of cultural homogenization: globalisation and modernity are apparently the enemies of culture.

But, during the first few days, our well-trained and self-reflective brains began to turn on us; perhaps we ourselves were the instruments of globalisation, modernization, or worse still - cultural imperialism. We were infiltrating these Tibetans in India, who are having a hard enough time preserving their culture, and teaching them to speak like us and also to think like us – in English and with the categories of western academia. Perhaps our very presence in the Tibetan community was an act of cultural destruction.

And then we met the Dalai Lama.

*"In the past, the elite of India, Pakistan and "the colonies" learned English. Some, like Gandhi, even studied in England". he said to the whole group in a special private audience where we expressed our fears, "For the future, knowledge of English will become even more useful. However this need not prejudice one's knowledge of and the value of one's own tradition. Yet someone who has only limited knowledge of his own culture is likely to be easily influenced. Preserving your own culture depends on your own effort and your conviction of it's value.*

*The world has thousands of languages. I think it is wasteful. For the future, fewer would be better, perhaps just three or four. In 200 years the Tibetan language, although we cherish it dearly, will no longer be spoken. Only about 13 million people around the Tibetan plateau now speak Tibetan; it will disappear; it doesn't matter. There is no need to stop the influence of others. If cultural identity and belief is strong and firm, then there is no danger."*

According to His Holiness, we are human beings first and only secondly members of a particular culture. Why not all speak English, or some other common language? What are important are *human* communication skills. Perhaps we are too eager to draw theoretical divisions between us and them, I thought as I looked around the room at the faces of the Tibetans and at the faces of those from Cambridge: Welshmen, Armenians, Englishmen and Canadians. We live in a world that is increasingly global and although we may struggle to impose divisions, such as between the Tibetans and the 'Cambridge team', in fact each individual is as similar to another as they are different.

Suddenly my fears of being a cultural imperialist were exposed for what they were: a particularly tenacious form of conceit. I had assumed that my cultural equipment was more powerful than theirs and would therefore overcome their native worldview. I had underestimated the integrity and intelligence of Tibetan culture and had assumed that once Tibetans knew English and all the clever ideas of western academia they would lose something of their own: an innocence perhaps. Casting aside this reinvention of the Noble Savage, I also asked myself what vanity leads to the assumption that globalisation is one-directional, from West to East? The Tibetans I met in these three weeks showed me another vision of the world, we cannot deny that cultures and people influence each other, and I can only hope that I too have been somewhat globalised.

Later in our interview with the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, he stated that Tibet and Britain had a long history of relations, apparently the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama had begun a policy of sending young Tibetan students to be educated in England. Beginning in 1913, this was an attempt to establish communications with the outside world: since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Tibet had been an isolated country, with closed doors to any foreign visitors. Globalisation, or the influence of other cultures, has long been seen as a potential enemy, but it is indeed possible that Tibet managed to preserve its Buddhist heritage uniquely. These young Tibetans were intended to facilitate a dialogue with the outside world and enter Tibet's voice into the international arena. His Holiness went on to say that had this policy continued and not been stopped after a few short years, then perhaps the situation in Tibet would not be as polarized as it is today.

In a sense, E.L.S.T. is continuing what the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama began: providing knowledge of the 'west' and facilitating an awareness of Tibet in other parts of the world, through the instruction of young Tibetans in western education. This workshop in Dharamsala was an illustration that such education will not result in a loss of Tibetan culture; we need not fear cultural imperialism. If we appreciate that globalisation, as the movement and spread of cultural ideas and experiences, is not just westernization but a meaningful exchange around the planet, then we can also understand that any loss of Tibetan culture is as much a loss to the human species. Knowledge of diverse cultures does not homogenize us, but enriches us, and could enable us to develop a truly human communication which reaches beyond linguistic, cultural or political borders.

On the last day we climbed the foothills of the Himalayas and took refuge in a teashop as the monsoon rains thundered down. Individuals from England, Israel, Germany, India and Armenia – all seeking shelter from the rain.