



RUNNING FROM

TENPA GYAMAR

A volunteer's story of life with
the refugee children of Tibet

Foreword by His Holiness Dalai Lama

LESLEY FREEMAN

Running From Tenda Gyamar

A Volunteer's Story of Life with
the Refugee Children of Tibet

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I dedicate this book to all
Tibetans who are still running,
and for those who can't.

Tenda Gyamar: Red Chinese, Enemies of Religion

Foreword

It is 43 years since Tibet's centuries old troubles finally came to a head and China forcefully took control of our country. Feeling a strong need to be free to continue trying to serve my people, I escaped to exile in India, followed by many thousands of Tibetans. In Tibet, despite brief intervals of relaxation, the relentless move to subsume the Tibetan identity and way of life completely under Chinese dominance has not let up. In exile, we have made great efforts to preserve and promote the Tibetan cultural heritage believing not only that Tibetans benefit from it, but also that humanity as a whole would be the poorer if it were lost. We have educated our children and re-established our various religious, cultural and administrative institutions. We could have achieved little of what we have done without tremendous help from many quarters, just as I believe we will not secure freedom in Tibet without further international help and support. Circumstances remain very tough for Tibetans in Tibet and opportunities for improvement are few and far between. Those of us who live in exile are free from the fear and oppression, but even a refugee's life is marked by insecurity and uncertainty. This is why we value so highly the friendly assistance we continue to receive not only in financial and material support, but in the personal contributions of volunteers who give us their time, their expertise and their care.

In this book, Lesley candidly describes her own experiences teaching for a year at a Tibetan vocational training institute in North India. She has included the ups and downs without glossing over the difficulties and frustrations she faced. But it is her concern for the young Tibetan students in her care that shines through and telling her own story provides an opportunity to recount theirs.

These accounts of the difficulties of life in Tibet, the hazards of escape over the mountains, the bewildering changes of life as a refugee are not new, they have been told by others many times over the last 40 years. But they were new to Lesley, and I imagine will still be moving to many other people previously unaware of what happened in Tibet. I am convinced that dignity and freedom will ultimately be restored in the Land of the Snows. And I am equally determined that this just result must be achieved by peaceful, non-violent means, taking what I call a middle way approach to our problems. If we are to succeed, we need widespread international support. I feel sure that people reading this book will be inspired to lend their backing to our cause.

September 19, 2002

Acknowledgements

Saying thank you to everyone who made it possible for me to begin a new chapter in my life as a volunteer teacher in India is almost impossible. I am afraid that I am unable to express here in black and white what I feel in my heart and soul towards you. I lack the appropriate words to sufficiently emphasise the knowledge, energy and support you have bestowed upon me.

Without the children at Selakui this book would never have been conceived. Thank you for being brave and strong in giving so much of yourselves, not only to our book, but also to me. Your love and friendship is as precious to me as that of my own children. Gratitude goes to my family and friends for their encouragement, support, love, reassurance and constant enthusiasm. Through all this, your individual strengths enabled me to realise my own ambitions. I want to mention a special friend, Tim, for helping me to see that there's a life out there to be lived. Thanks to you Tim, I'm living it.

I must thank Dory, for opening the door to my adventure. Your support and advice will never be forgotten. I am also extremely appreciative to Chris and the Rizong Foundation for sponsoring my air fare to India.

I want to say a special thank you to all my friends at Selakui, for their compassion, patience and love, especially Yonten Dolma La, for putting up with my temperament and my poor attempts at Indian cooking! I want to thank my beautiful students, Chuzom Ongmo, Kalsang Yangzom, Pema Yangchen, Pema Yangzom, Tenzin, Tenzin Desang, Tenzin Dicky, Choekyi Tsering, Tsering Diki, Tsering Dolma, Wangmo and Dawa Tsomo. You taught me as much as I taught you.

It means a great deal to me to express my gratitude to you, Sonam Sithar La and your lovely family, for your dedication and hard work on the translations.

To Louise and Joe, my two wonderful children: you both made sacrifices by 'giving up your mum' for the sake of the Tibetan refugee children. God couldn't have blessed me with two more special people to love and be proud of.

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Finally I need to say a special thank you to my amazing husband Steve, without whom this book would not have been published.

Historical Overview

Buddhism was introduced to Tibet in the eighth century when its influence spread from India. Tibet was under Mongol rule almost continuously from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. Chinese control grew from the eighteenth century during which time Tibet endeavoured to remain isolated from the rest of the world. Its society was still structured as a feudal system with the majority of the land in the ownership of monasteries while the bulk of the population were serfs. Following the British Empire's occupation of India, China feared Britain would further expand its influence to include China, using Tibet as the back door. China therefore invaded and by 1910 had instigated direct rule of Tibet; the Dalai Lama fled to India. With the collapse of the Chinese Empire in 1911, Tibet declared its independence. The Dalai Lama returned to Tibet from India in July 1912, following the fall of the Qing dynasty. The existing *amban* (a high official appointed to govern Tibet on behalf of the Chinese) was expelled from Lhasa along with all Chinese troops. The Dalai Lama ruled unchallenged until the communist regime in China took hold. Once again Tibet came onto the radar of the Chinese authorities when the Chinese People's Liberation Army invaded the Chamdo region of Tibet in 1950, defeating ineffectual resistance from the Tibetan Army. In 1951, Tibetan representatives travelled to Beijing where a seventeen point agreement was signed giving the Chinese joint rule of Tibet. Yet the Tibetans continually fought against the Chinese occupation and the many revolts which ensued culminated in the 1959 uprising in the capital Lhasa. Chinese military might crushed the rebels and, from then on, military rule was imposed. The Dalai Lama fled to India where he and his followers were granted political asylum. The Dalai Lama established a Tibetan government in exile. In 1965, the Chinese abolished serfdom in Tibet and the area that had been under the control of the Dalai Lama's government from 1910 to 1959 (Ü-Tsang and western Kham) was renamed the Tibet Autonomous Region or TAR. A proviso of the autonomy was that the Head of Government should be ethnically Tibetan, but this was never the case. During the 1970s, the Chinese Army pursued a course of violent cultural revolution in Tibet whereby thousands of the ancient monastic estates were broken up and cultural sites were vandalised. Tibetan libraries were raided and books destroyed in an attempt to obliterate the Tibetan language and history. The Panchen Lama remained in Lhasa after 1959. However, following his death in 1989, China rejected the Dalai Lama's choice for his successor. It is believed that the Dalai Lama's chosen Lama was subsequently executed by the Chinese. The Chinese appointed the

own choice of Lama, causing increased tension with the Tibetan government in exile. This tension persisted and relations between the Chinese and Tibetan governments remained poor. When the seventeenth Reting Lama was ordained in Tibet in 2000, the Dalai Lama refused to recognise him. China encouraged the migration of Chinese settlers into the Tibetan region, causing further tensions. It was felt by Tibetans that this was a further attempt by China to dilute and ultimately eradicate the distinct culture of Tibetans. China continues to portray its role in the region as that of the moderniser, bringing trade, improved living standards and freedom from the Tibetan feudal system. Internationally, organisations have expressed fear about human rights violations in Tibet. Amnesty International has stated its extreme concern that basic human rights are being routinely abused. Tensions in the region are still running high and numerous examples of monks self-immolating (suicide by setting fire to oneself) as an act of protest, have been reported in 2011. However, most governments officially recognise the sovereignty of China over Tibet today.

Some useful facts...

Tibet is one of the most ancient nations of the world. The name Tibet is derived from the Sanskrit word '*trivistapa*', meaning '*heaven*'.

Tibet is 1.2million sq. km. and the capital city is Lhasa. There are 6 million Tibetans and an undetermined number of Chinese, most of whom live in Kham and Amdo. The religion is Tibetan Buddhism, which is practised by 99 per cent of the Tibetan population, and the language is Tibetan (Tibeto-Burmese), though since the Chinese occupation in 1959 the official language is Chinese.

Animals native to Tibet include wild yak, sheep, musk deer, Tibetan antelope, gazelle and wild ass, while the birds include the black necked crane, great crested grebe, bar headed goose, ruddy shelduck and the lammergeyer. As a result of the uncontrolled deforestation in eastern Tibet, widespread desertification and the poaching of large mammals, major environmental problems are occurring.

The average altitude is 14,000 ft (gaining the name 'roof of the world') and the average temperature in July is 58 degrees F and in January 24 degrees F. The highest mountain is the Chomo Langma, (Mount Everest) at 29,028 ft and the mineral deposits of borax, uranium, iron, chromite and gold are being mined at an alarming rate.

The major rivers of Tibet are the Yangtse, Salween, Tsangpo, Yellow, Mekong, Indus and the Karnali. The provinces in Tibet are U-Tsang (central), Amdo (north-east), Kham (south-east) and the bordering countries (see map) are India, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma and China.

The Tibetan national flag depicts snow lions with red and blue rays. The three-sided yellow border portrays the prospering teachings of Buddha, while the side without a border represents Tibetan openness to non-Buddhist thought. The snow-clad mountain symbolises the great nation of Tibet while the sun's rays at the tip of the mountain, shining in all directions

represent the equal enjoyment of freedom, spiritual and material happiness and prosperity to all beings in Tibet.

Please note: A glossary of Tibetan terms can be found at the back of this book.

Prologue

This book tells the story of a race of people whose lives have been cruelly affected by the Chinese Communist regime that believed it could 'liberate' Tibet and its inhabitants, and destroy an 8,000-year-old culture and history. It centres on the refugee children of Tibet, who want to share with the world specific and valuable details of their lives.

You will read, in the children's own words, how they witnessed family members being tortured and murdered in cold blood by sadistic Chinese soldiers; how some were forced to choose which parent was to be shot; and how, if they refused, both parents risked slaughter. These children are so mentally and emotionally scarred that some are unable even to verbalise their experiences; some stop talking altogether.

Many children were ordered to shoot their farm animals and family pets. Every child I spoke to who had attended a Chinese school told of being regularly beaten for no reason other than being a Tibetan, making them terrified to go.

Parents would pay huge sums of money to have their children safely delivered to the Tibetan Refugee Reception Centre in Kathmandu, Nepal; yet stories emerged of children being raped and abused by their trusted guides and witnesses reported seeing guides stealing the children's rations. The children faced the horror of being chased by Chinese soldiers, who fired guns at them as they made their escape across treacherous mountain paths, being buried in deep snow, often up to their shoulders, and struggling to cross deep, freezing rivers. Their courage is unfathomable and fills me with deep admiration.

As a counsellor and a mother, I desperately wanted to help them, but the language barrier and their fear of reliving the trauma proved impossible to overcome in the short time we were together.

I struggled to contain my reactions to their accounts of being parted from their families, witnessing the terror of uncertainty, of not knowing where they were going or what the future held for them. They conquered confusion, fear and anxiety, torture and discrimination. Their spirit and determination to survive these things, against all odds, should be commended and recorded for posterity.

Many Tibetan children live with emotional scars caused by separation from their families and the barbarous treatment meted out by the Chinese. Tragically, there are many children who suffer physically too, succumbing to frostbite during their journey and having limbs amputated. Many men, women and children have lost their lives when journeying from Tibet.

to India, freezing to death in the treacherous climate of the impenetrable mountains that for centuries have been a cocoon for Tibet and its people, protecting them from the outside world. And always there was a yearning, praying, that one day someone would arrive bringing news of their families and beloved country. While I was at Selakui the father of two young boys died suddenly and we were forbidden to tell them; their suffering had already been too great.

My Tibetan colleagues urged me not to sensationalise the trauma and suffering of the children, asking that I write these poignant and heart-rending stories exactly how the children told them to me; unsophisticated, innocent and sincere.

These children speak on behalf of the thousands of children who have lived as they have, suffering ill-treatment at the hands of the 'Red Chinese'. They speak for those who have endured the punishing journey to freedom, across hostile and inhospitable terrains.

As you read this book, there are many more children making the same journey in a brave attempt to overcome persecution and find freedom. Some will fall sick and die; some will be handicapped through frostbite. Yet, through all this, they will have the resilience to maintain a sense of humour, altruism, compassion and love.

The Tibetans are educating themselves and striving to keep their race and culture alive in the midst of great adversity. This fight for freedom and education is their weapon. I want to share with the reader details of my own life as a run-of-the-mill person who took a big risk to do an extraordinary thing. You will learn about me as a person, my hopes, fears, strengths and weaknesses. All these personality traits have, unknowingly to me until now, been part of my karmic life plan.

I left my two children, family, friends, home, and job opportunities that would have certainly provided me with a secure future, for a journey into the unknown. I left all that behind to face uncertainty, anxiety, loneliness, yet also excitement and a new-found energy; a new lease of life.

I describe my life at the Vocational Training Centre in Selakui, where I was a volunteer teacher for one year. I became a member of a community so different to my own, and part of a major educational project for the Tibetans – the first of its kind. Barely two days after my arrival at the centre I was placed under great pressure and given the responsibility of constructing a training course with only a few low-grade materials, and having to use my own experience as a basis for the syllabus. With the help of my assistant, Miss Samten Dolma, I was expected to prepare the syllabus in just three weeks.

My responsibilities were intensified by the fact that I was teaching refugee students, which proved to be a huge burden for me to shoulder. It is hard for Tibetans to secure employment within the Indian commercial world, as some Tibetan schools are not affiliated to an Indian Government examining body or a recognised organisation. The SOS Vocational Training Centre at Selakui was in the process of becoming affiliated to the Industrial Training Institute

(ITI).

I found it overwhelming to settle into and familiarise myself with both the Tibetan and Indian cultures, while at the same time dealing with the confusion and frustration at the lack of information on hand for volunteers. These problems led to my disappointment with the administration and managerial structure of the organisation. I often felt exasperated at the 'under-developed' attitude, system, rules and regulations of the centre and its management.

I found myself constantly comparing Western ways with Eastern ones. Communication was poor between management, staff and students, and the Tibetan culture of behaving subserviently to a person considered higher than yourself irritated me. I scolded many students for not looking directly at me, until I was informed that it was not customary to do this and that it was seen as aggressive.

It was in complete contrast to the way I was raised and lived, and also to what the director expected of the students and me. He required the students to be strongly influenced by western teaching and culture. Yet, at the same time, vigorous efforts were made to protect them from the outside world and all its temptations. There were times I honestly felt I was fighting a losing battle. Unconsciously, I put all I possessed, from professional skills and experience to personal experiences, my love, heart and soul into my work and the students. As a result I became too emotionally involved.

I expected the same level of commitment from them in return, which they were unable and perhaps unwilling, to give. I became incensed and increasingly upset, scolding them for even the slightest mistake, which resulted, unbeknownst to me, in them becoming afraid of me. I was too blind to see that I was breaking down the trust and good working relationships we had all toiled to construct. I feel many of these problems and uncertainties stemmed from the differences between our cultures, along with my lack of flexibility towards this new centre and its teething problems. If I had been more aware of myself I'm sure I would have been able to reflect on my work and behaviour more positively and I am certain I wouldn't have experienced so many problems. My friends and colleagues warned me that I was taking my work much too seriously, but at that time it was still my belief that teaching was sacrosanct. Luckily, before it was too late, and much to the relief of my students, I realised that teaching should also be fun. In the light of this, I called the students together for a process group. I apologised, endeavouring to share my feelings and emotions. This was gratefully received by the girls and, after tears from the whole group, resulted in the relationships growing stronger – not just with me, but with each other.

After many years of being single, and often lonely, I met and unexpectedly found love with a Tibetan man, Dawa Tsering, accepting his marriage proposal after only two weeks. And so I lived at Rajpur, an ordinary western woman living in a Tibetan community in an Indian mountain village, achieving an extraordinary thing.

I illustrate the obstacles that Dawa and I faced due to the differences in our cultures and

the doubts and uncertainties these created. In order to survive in the community and in the marriage I felt it necessary to change myself almost overnight, altering my attitudes and beliefs, the way I thought, spoke and behaved. I felt I was losing myself, becoming alienated from my true self. I felt controlled, not only by Dawa, but the whole of the Tibetan community.

I was gradually becoming someone else. I wasn't the person I had worked so hard to be. My feelings of suffocation and claustrophobia grew alarmingly. Dawa struggled relentlessly to understand me but, through no fault of his own, often failed. The progress and increased awareness I had gained in the two years before coming to India were being steadily eroded by the mere struggle to carry out my everyday domestic activities, and to conform to the local culture. It could be argued that maybe I didn't try hard enough, or that I was just unwilling.

But there was also the joy and sense of belonging that comes from being among these remarkable people, along with feelings of compassion, affection and mutual esteem that fed and nurtured my soul. I took particular delight in attending the many cultural programmes, festivals and *pujas* (prayers) at monasteries. I have many tender and poignant memories of watching the talented students performing their traditional Tibetan and Hindi songs and dances. Even the smallest children were eager to participate but I often wondered if the little ones fully understood the meanings of the parts they performed, especially when one was dressed in a mock Chinese soldier's uniform and was beating another dressed as a monk.

I gained much delight and happiness from cooking for the children, sharing our food with as many of them as Dawa's miniscule salary would allow. Dawa often told me how rare a treat it was for the students to be invited to eat with us, sitting at our table. I am sure that many of them benefited from the warmth of a family atmosphere. I even heard of the older students boasting to friends that they'd learned how to 'eat like a westerner' using a knife, fork and napkin!

I have written about my experiences of life in India. Upon reflection, after writing this chapter, I must honestly confess that, had I held a more positive image in my mind of the culture, environment and people and the effect these would have on me, living there would most certainly have been more comfortable and enjoyable. I focused instead on the factors preventing me from doing what I wanted and all that I was missing from my western life. This, I fear, clouded the good times and wonderful experiences gained from such an adventure. I shut out all the accomplishments, wallowing in self-pity at the trials I faced. And too readily I blamed others, when I could have been using my energy and creativity to treat the encounters as they occurred as being part of the process. I squandered precious energy on my selfishness, resulting in negative opinions being formed about almost everything, including certain individuals, who were unquestionably undeserving of such judgment.

Yet all of these experiences, for good or ill, have been part of my karmic direction and would not alter a thing. It has been unrelenting and oppressive at times, but I know that I've

been in the right place, doing what I was meant to be doing.

PART 1

Chapter 1

Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV)

Tibetan Children's Villages (TCV) was set up in 1960 by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. Subsequent to the invasion of Tibet and violation of the Tibetan people by the Chinese in 1950, His Holiness escaped from Tibet through the Himalayan Mountains to face uncertainty in India. Thousands of Tibetans – men, women and children – followed their temporal and spiritual leader to begin a new life in exile as refugees in India.

The massive influx of Tibetan refugees caused a huge problem regarding the welfare and educational needs of these children. His Holiness, being aware that they were the future of Tibet, decided to establish an organisation that would save them from the desolate circumstances and terrible conditions they faced. His Holiness's Sister, Madam Tsering Dolma Takla, agreed to take charge of the children, who began to arrive at the centre daily.

Most of the children came from road workers' camps, as this was the only work available to the uneducated Tibetans. Men, women and children lived and worked in appalling conditions, many of them afflicted by diseases such as tuberculosis, and stomach and skin problems caused by exposure to the harsh environment and climate they had faced during their journey. The children were sick and there was a desperate shortage of the basic necessities such as food, clothing and medicines. Every effort was made to find carers who would give these children the love and attention they needed. As time went by international aid organisations, pressure groups and individuals learnt of the Tibetans' sad plight and began to support TCV.

Tragically, in 1964, Madam Tsering Dolma Takla died, so her younger Sister, Madam Jetsun Pema, took over as director. Since then, due to Madam Pema's determination, dedication and tenacity, TCV has expanded and has many branches, caring for over 11,000 Tibetan refugee children. In 1972, TCV was officially registered as Tibetan Children's Villages and became a member of SOS Kinderdorf International in Vienna.

With their support TCV continues to expand and in 1973 a sponsorship fund was created to secure sponsors for the children's welfare and education. The sponsorship provides food, clothing, medical expenses, school uniforms, books and stationery.

There are now children's villages, residential schools, TCV day schools, day care centres, vocational training centres, youth centres, outreach programmes and old people's homes that are supported by TCV, SOS and sponsors from across the world.

Details of the charity can be found in the 'Useful Addresses' section at the back of this book.

Chapter 2

Myself

My initial vision and objective in writing this book was to tell the stories of Tibetan refugee children and hopefully, through people's increased or newfound awareness, to secure financial support for them. However, since working at Selakui, moving to Rajpur and witnessing for myself the children's educational and emotional welfare needs, I decided that not only financial help was required, but also a huge increase in volunteers. Therefore, it is also my hope that this book will inspire others to do as I did and to consider volunteering. A Tibetan once said to me, "Lesley, there's nothing stronger, or more sincere, than the heart of a volunteer."

For that reason, before you begin reading the children's stories, I want to tell you about myself and how I became a volunteer for Tibetan refugees. I want to share with you some of my experiences, to help you build an image and have some insight into my thoughts and feelings, the obstacles leading up to my departure from England and what my life was like when I returned to India.

I want you to get to know me and understand why I chose to make such sacrifices. I didn't realise my life would change in ways beyond anything I could have imagined. I believe this may be a valuable background for anyone who has yearned to make a similar journey but, for whatever reason, procrastinates.

People consider me to be frank, compassionate, empathic, tenacious, romantic, stubborn and kind, but much too sensitive and emotional. I speak from the heart and I am true to myself, even if it means hurting others in the process. What I mean to say is that, since 1990, I have lived by my belief that: *'I don't have to give up myself to please others. I am free to do as I want.'* This has given me the courage and motivation to begin living my life in the way that my soul needs and, furthermore, I believe that living with this conviction has helped bring me where I am today.

I was born in St Mary's Hospital, Islington, North London in 1959. I have three sisters, one of whom is my non-identical twin, and two brothers. Most of my childhood years were spent first in Wiltshire and then in Essex. I had a miserable childhood, living in constant fear that my mother would kill me, which she tried to do on more than one occasion, and that my father would leave us, as he often did when they fought. I needed protection from Mum, but Dad was unable to provide it.

From the age of eight, every night before I went to bed, I would hide any matches, knives or other objects that I thought Mum would use to hurt or kill me. After several years of arguments, hostility, and witnessing things that little girls never should, things that fill people with horror when I tell them, Mum and Dad, thankfully, divorced. I was eleven. Mum is an alcoholic, she has epilepsy and suffers from 'nervous problems'; we have not seen each other for many years. I had nightmares about her for such a long time, waking covered in sweat and crying, which only ceased after I received counselling.

Following a year's intense and arduous therapy with Eva, my counsellor, I was finally able to forgive Mum and write a letter telling her so. Writing that letter was prompted by a Denise Lin tape that I had bought, which motivated me to forgive my parents. She advises us to "*Look at your mum and dad as small, frightened children themselves, and know that they, too, were hurt when they were young*". She says, "*Find a place in your heart where you can keep a vision of your mother as a scared little girl, or your father as a frightened little boy.*"

I desperately wanted Mum to take responsibility for her actions, but eventually faced the sad fact that she would be unable even to comprehend what I was saying to her, let alone accept that responsibility.

I sobbed as I read out the letter during my therapy session. Every word was painful to say but, at the same time, brought relief. When I finished I looked up and saw that Eva was also crying. She told me she had never heard such beautiful words in a letter and that these had come from deep within my soul.

I regret never keeping a copy of that letter, as I would like to read it now and again. The enormous sense of relief at letting the past hurt go and to say, "Mum, I forgive you" catapulted me into a new beginning; a new acceptance of her, my past and myself.

My next task was to visit Dad and ask him to take responsibility for not protecting me from Mum. He, like the rest of my family, knew I had been going through many 'transformations' since my therapy and I think they were all a little wary of me, even afraid. They repeatedly complained that they didn't know who I was anymore. I responded energetically by saying, "Nor do I, but I soon will and so will you, and we will like who I am."

I believe that each member of my family, including myself, were like cogs. We all needed to keep to our unconsciously allotted roles within the family structure to keep the wheels turning. The wheels stopped turning when I no longer wished to be just another 'cog': I had changed my mind and I wanted to do something else with my life, to find a new role that would feed and nurture my heart and soul. This upset my family because my self-development and the improvements in my life had the effect of forcing them to look at their own lives, which made them uncomfortable. There are particular members of my family who were terrified of facing certain issues, because they were either unwilling or unable to do so and this is why I felt different. Unless I faced what was given to me, how on earth could

develop and learn about myself?

Dad was shocked at my appearance: "Lesley, you look terrible!" he said. He was scared to confront the reasons why I had visited him and tried to change the subject. He couldn't even look at me. After several hours of talking, crying and hugging, he uttered the words I had been so desperate to hear: "Lesley, I take responsibility for not protecting you from your mum, and I'm sorry." At that moment it was evident that both of us had taken huge steps on our own ways. From then on my relationship with Dad improved.

Dad provided well for us. He worked hard to give us as comfortable a life as he possibly could. Although we weren't well-off by any means, we always wore smart, clean clothes and the cupboards were always full of food. Yet he was a difficult man to live with: he had a violent temper, which he often took out on us and we lived in fear of him, which is how, when discovered, he had lived with his own father. As I grew older I yearned for him not just to listen to me, but to hear me - my thoughts, feelings and opinions - but he could only hear his own.

The one thing about him that affected me more than anything else was that he never allowed me to complete a sentence. He continually interrupted me and was unable to hear and understand what I wanted to say. He took away my power of speech, which was a dreadful feeling. However, things have improved and now it feels good to sit and talk to him.

My working life in England was spent mostly as a personal assistant and secretary for various companies in the City of London with a break of two years during which I opened and ran my own tea and coffee house. This was without doubt, in my opinion and that of my bank manager, the worst decision I ever made. Although I was creative, excited, motivated and had firm ideas about what I wanted for my business, I was, unfortunately, also inexperienced in keeping accounts and supervising employees.

After selling my business a year later (for a very good profit, I might add, which eventually drew a smile of relief from my bank manager) and divorcing my husband, I returned to the City, resuming my role as a secretary. I soon felt demoralised and wondered if this was all there was to the rest of my life. I spent more time talking to colleagues and friends about their problems and endeavouring to work them out than sitting at my desk doing my job. Riskily, I decided to leave paid employment and return to school to study for a diploma in psychology. I wanted to become a 'therapeutic counsellor'. I wanted to help people: this, I knew, would feed my soul. I was confident it would lead to many new opportunities, though not the kind that it eventually did.

Part of the training course curriculum required all students to undertake their own personal counselling sessions. Although this proved to be the most difficult part of the course for me, it eventually helped me realise that I wanted to do something different and meaningful with my life. I needed to make some drastic changes, which meant making some big sacrifices and taking some big risks. I explained to Eva that I wanted to give something

myself to others in the world that would, hopefully, benefit their lives. I was determined to leave this world having done something useful and worthwhile for humanity.

I am by no means gifted academically and I possess no outstanding skills or qualifications apart from my counselling. There is only me, my life experiences and an abundance of love along with the need to care for and help others, and give them what I feel I missed out on in my own past. I knew I didn't want a life where I just woke up every day to live the same 'nine to five routine' only to return home again to an empty house with no one to share my evenings. I needed more than that: I needed something to feed my mind, body, heart and soul. However, I had no idea what that was, or how I could find it.

Eva mentioned an ex-student of hers whose parents worked in a hospital in Kolkata, India. They were looking for volunteers to support their HIV patients. Although I expressed great enthusiasm for this work, after a few weeks of waiting, nothing materialised so I carried on dutifully with my studies and therapy. However, Eva and I did not realise that she had unwittingly 'planted a seed' in me, which had begun to grow. I'm the kind of person who, once something penetrates their soul, does everything in their power to achieve it.

At the time of my therapy I was undergoing sessions of colonic hydrotherapy. For those of you who are innocent of this uncomfortable, distasteful and somewhat embarrassing practice, a tube is inserted into the rectum and cleanses the colon with purified water. This not only improved my physical health, but also improved my psychological state of mind. I won't expand on this. A small part of the tube is clear. Therefore, one can see, if one so desires, the built-up waste leaving the body. I would force myself to look at this and surprisingly (and somewhat disconcertingly), I soon began to envisage the bad feelings and hurt I had suffered in the past leaving my body. This visualisation worked extremely well with regard to people who had affected me negatively!

My 'bottom' therapist was interested in my 'spiritual path' and, having never before had this question set before me, I became quite stimulated, as it gave me yet another opportunity to analyse myself, which I am prone to do much too often. Six years previously I had been confirmed into the Catholic faith, but I remained unsure if this was, in fact, the correct and appropriate religion for me. She began to tell me how the Buddhist philosophy had greatly improved her life. She enthusiastically proceeded to share her many personal stories and by the time I left the clinic I was eager to read more about Buddhism. Walking as fast as my short legs would carry me, my brain directed me to the nearest bookshop. This surely must have been the quickest I have ever parted with my hard-earned cash, buying several books written by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama as if they were going out of print.

I feel ashamed to admit that before that moment I had never taken much notice of the Dalai Lama, his people or Tibet. In fact, I knew nothing at all. I didn't even know where Tibet was. As I read, I was appalled by how the Tibetans had suffered and continued to suffer at the hands of the Chinese. I was ashamed that I had been too selfish and preoccupied with

my own life to notice or learn anything about these people and their plight.

It also made me think of the people who were tolerating hardships in my own country and how, in the past, I had ignored pleas for help from people, regardless of whether I knew them or not. The words of His Holiness made me look at and reflect more deeply on myself, questioning my past motives, morals, values and actions. For the first time in my life I came face to face with the 'real me' and I didn't like what I saw. I disliked how I felt and how I thought even more. I realised that much of what I had suffered in this life had been of my own making. I used to believe strongly in destiny and fate, but this has been replaced with an even stronger belief in karma, the cause and effect of one's actions.

As a result of my own actions I make my own destiny, no one else. I am responsible for the way I live and the person I am. Up until that moment I had blamed others for my often lonely and miserable existence. I had failed to take responsibility for my own life. At my following session with Eva I explained to her, with surprising clarity, my 'new awareness'. She suddenly jumped and whooped with joy! She said I had made remarkable progress by finally admitting this to myself, and this was what she had been waiting for.

With her help and the support of my children, closest friends, tutors and group members at college, I worked tirelessly to revise the values by which I had previously lived. I knew deep within my heart and soul that my 'new' values and deepest beliefs must be strictly adhered to in order for me to make the true choices that would benefit my future.

I bought a small, very pretty statue of Buddha. Setting up a small altar, I began praying, prostrating and giving offerings of fruit and water every day. I made several attempts to meditate, buying numerous tapes, but there was always so much activity going on in my head that it was a constant struggle to '*empty the mind and let everything float away*'. My intuition told me that these sensations and this activity were signs that I was on the verge of something very profound in my life. I had an immense surge of energy, not needing much sleep and experiencing a wonderful feeling of being alive and alert.

I paid a visit to my local library to study the varied range of travel books on Tibet and India and came across a brochure on trekking through Tibet. I sat for hours just staring at the beautiful and interesting pictures, totally transfixed by the images of monasteries, monks and mountains. The brochure showed Tibet to be mysterious, enigmatic and almost unreachable except for a select few. Looking through the index of one book, I came across several e-mail addresses relating to volunteer work. It was at this moment that a bright light switched on in my mind, body and soul. I knew then that being a volunteer for Tibetan refugees in India was part of my karmic plan.

Shaking, I wrote several e-mail enquiries and four days later, I received my first reply referring me to other e-mail addresses and further contacts. Again, I received more replies giving more e-mail addresses and this went on for about a week. I was becoming rather impatient and disillusioned when I received an e-mail from a lady called Dory Beatrice in the

USA. Dory was the co-founder of a Tibetan support organisation called 'San Diego Friends of Tibet'. She e-mailed me details and an application form for a new vocational training centre for Tibetan refugees in northern India which needed a secretarial teacher. This centre was for young adult Tibetans, many of whom had been unable, for a variety of reasons, to continue past years eight or ten at mainstream school. In Tibet, the Chinese openly offer drugs and alcohol at prices low enough to make them easily available and attractive to young Tibetans. These youngsters soon become addicted, which obviously leads to many problems; sadly there are some boys who offend and commit crimes and girls who become prostitutes as a result. The main objective of the Chinese is to destroy the Tibetan culture. They believe the most effective way to do this is to sabotage the young.

My heart began to beat very fast as I read Dory's e-mail. I read and re-read every line hundreds of times, asking myself, 'Can I do this?' A frightened little voice in my head said, 'No you can't, you're not a teacher, you'd make a real mess of it. You're not a graduate, you have no teaching qualifications and ...you're not clever enough!' However, looking closer at the e-mail I was struck by the words 'secretarial teacher, teaching experience not necessary, but must have working knowledge of computers and professional experience'. Dory assured me the director would agree with her that my experience was worth just as much as a teaching qualification and urged me to apply.

I stared at the application form for several days, wondering what to do with it, and then I decided to talk it over with Louise and Joe. Initially, Louise's enthusiasm was distinctly muted, but Joe seemed thrilled. My lovely children have always accepted my choices and decisions with open minds and are supportive in anything I choose to do, even if they don't agree. They always put my life and feelings before their own and are truly altruistic human beings.

They encouraged me to complete the form and send it off. I was so nervous: what would I do if they accepted me? But at the same time I was curious to know if there was even a slight chance that I would be offered the job, not really considering what I would do if I was. Having no confidence or belief in myself, I felt obliged for the sake of the students, and my own fear, to over-emphasise on the form that I did not possess a teaching qualification or indeed any teaching experience. It took me five hours to find the courage to click 'send'.

My training course was steadily coming to an end: I had only two weeks left to go. I had been working extremely hard and long into the night for several tiring weeks, preparing my final essays, case studies and journal entries. However, throughout this whole time, the thought of travelling to India to work for the Tibetans continually lurked at the back of my mind like an ache.

One week later, Louise telephoned me during my class saying I had received an e-mail from Dory. To this day I remember her words very clearly: "Mum, they want you!" I was suddenly numb, but returned immediately to class and told my tutor and group the news.

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