

# Full transcript of interview with the Dalai Lama

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*Lionel Barber, editor of the Financial Times, James Blitz, the FT's diplomatic editor, and Lifan Zhang, editor of FTChinese.com, interviewed the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader of Tibet, in Nottingham on May 24, 2008. The following is an edited transcript of the interview.*

Financial Times: Your Holiness, since the violence in Tibet last March, we have seen a terrible earthquake in China, and many people believe now that there has been a change in atmosphere. China has moved from being villain to victim, and there's a sense that perhaps some of the steam has gone out of your campaign for greater Tibetan autonomy. Is that what you think?

Dalai Lama: No, I don't. No. Of course, temporarily, of course, naturally, people are showing more concern about the victims, I think – large scale earthquake – particularly those children, those students who perished. Naturally, because of the one child policy, many of these children's parents have only one child. So that is more precious, that if one child perishes, how much they grieve, naturally, naturally. Inside Tibet, I heard some monks in some monasteries are actually collecting some money for the earthquake victims.

But then, the Tibetan issue is actually a story for the last 50, 60 years, therefore it is more complicated.

FT: What is happening now in Tibet? Are people still being arrested? Is there a forcible re-education programme going on?

Dalai Lama: Yes, re-education, that is going on. It seems quite clear. Then arrest, some say yes in some areas, but it's very difficult to know. So that's why I always appeal to the international community, and also Chinese government: please allow more people, let them go there and see themselves and [conduct] thorough investigation, particularly [into] the Chinese accusation towards us, that all these problems started from outside. So, we are ready to welcome anyone, including Chinese officials, to come to Dharamsala, and [conduct] a thorough investigation, let them see our files and also my talks, sort of records. Occasionally there's a Tibetan coming from Tibet. I usually meet them and converse with them. All of these are recorded. So let them see.

FT: Now, you have a new round of talks, critical talks in June between your representatives and the Chinese government. What do you expect from those talks, and what are your priorities?

Dalai Lama: This time, unlike previous meetings, this time the Chinese government announced the meeting. That means, I think, on 4th May [we had] some sort of urgent meeting - we call it an informal meeting. The government announced [the meeting], and before the announcement, the foreign ministry in Beijing called some ambassadors of some countries, and informed them. And then more important, President Hu Jintao himself acknowledges this contact, and also shows his seriousness. So this is a hopeful sign, but still too early to say, till the next, seventh, roundtable talks meeting takes place.

FT: But what are your priorities for these talks?

Dalai Lama: Stop the arrests, and release [the arrested]. Those arrested should, I think, have the opportunity to bring their own case through normal law.

FT: Let's turn to President Hu Jintao. He was the party leader in Tibet more than 20 years ago; do you have a personal message to the President?

Dalai Lama: Just after the crisis happened, I appealed to him. I sent a letter to him.

FT: What was in the letter, Your Holiness?

Dalai Lama: Mainly I appealed for some practical help to those injured people, and particularly in the remote areas, [which have] no proper medical facilities, and then investigation, thorough investigation, which I have mentioned.

FT: Have you had a response?

Dalai Lama: No.

FT: Not from any other lower level Chinese government officials?

Dalai Lama: Then perhaps this meeting, as it happened. Maybe [it was] some kind of response, I don't know.

FT: And if we come to the talks in June, your requests for the Chinese go beyond dealing with the events in March, such as the release of prisoners and an investigation, an international investigation?

Dalai Lama: As early as the 1980s, the Chinese government offered a five point proposal about my return, [which said] I would get all the privileges or status [that I had] before 1959, all these kinds of things. Then I responded: this is not the issue. The issue is the 6m Tibetan people's wellbeing, their right, and the Tibetan culture, these things. So now, our main aim is building confidence. Of the situation in Tibet, we know better. Inside Tibet, [there is] no opportunity [for people] to explain what they really feel, but only through demonstrations. Then the crackdown. So we are here acting like free spokesmen for them.

Our meeting [has] nothing to do with our own future, including my own future. Right from the beginning, in 1974, we made up our minds in Dharamsala, while in China the Cultural Revolution movement was still going on, sooner or later we had to talk with the central government, not seeking separation, not seeking independence, but within the framework of the Chinese constitution, the meaningful realistic autonomy [for Tibetans]. Now, that is our goal. We will continue. On one occasion, the Chinese officials also acknowledge we are not seeking separation. But somehow, in the public, they still accuse us.

FT: Dalai Lama, Just to clarify, are you willing now to renounce the claim to historical Tibet, to greater Tibet?

Dalai Lama: Everybody knows we are not seeking separation. "Greater Tibet", now, this very word comes from the Chinese government side. We never state the greater Tibet. We are simply asking for meaningful autonomy or genuine implementation, [of] what the Chinese government states [as] the minorities' right, particularly in a white paper about the policy of the minorities. Many detailed rights are mentioned there. [If] all these points are implemented on the spot faithfully, then it's sufficient.

FT: Let's call it historical Tibet. Your Holiness, that amounts to a quarter of the landmass of China.

Dalai Lama: Historical Tibet, that also is difficult to say. History means 7th century, 8th century, 9th century, [that is] one period. Then, another sort of history, a part of history, I think is the Yuan, and then Qing dynasty. Where we are seeking for genuine implementation of the rights of the minorities is those areas the constitution recognises as [autonomous regions for] Tibet ethnic groups, whether in Sichuan province, whether in Qinghai province, whether in Gansu or Yunnan. Tibetan ethnic groups there are also facing the danger of the elimination of their culture, their language. So, we are acting on behalf of all these Tibetans.

FT: So, just to clarify, Your Holiness, you are seeking specific rights for the ethnic minority Tibetans in China. But you are willing to renounce any notion of a great or historic Tibet as a separate or autonomous territorial entity?

Dalai Lama: What do you mean there? Autonomy is already in the constitution mentioned or granted in the autonomous regions, autonomous districts, autonomous prefectures, autonomous counties. Already the constitution recognised these autonomies. Now [it is] illogical if we, as free spokesmen, talk only about autonomy inside Tibet. The culture, language, religion [problems are affecting] the rest of the Tibetans, 4m Tibetans living in other areas. It's difficult. We have to act on behalf of all these Tibetans. But the final arrangement must come through talks.

FT: But, Your Holiness, do you not have some sympathy with the Chinese authorities who worry about a claim to a quarter of China's territory?

Dalai Lama: Actually, [when] more rights [are] given to Tibetans, that's the guarantee that Tibet remains always within China. If resentment remains there, ignore this resentment, then more danger. President Hu Jintao very much emphasises the promotion of harmonious society. We fully support that, we fully agree, we appreciate that. Harmony must come from satisfaction, must come from heart, not under gun. Under gun, supposedly, harmony is already there for the last 60 years. You know, in the Tiananmen wall beside Chairman Mao's picture, it says: "Long live unity of all people". If that slogan has achieved the real goal, then no need for Hu Jintao's emphasis to promote harmony.

FT: If there was no progress in the talks, Dalai Lama, do you fear there will be another bout of violence in Tibet?

Dalai Lama: I don't know. I don't know. During the past 50, 60 years of history, violence, and unfortunately real violence took place in 1956, 1957, 1958 till early 1960s. A lot of casualties. Then that cooled down. And then again, in 1987, 1988, 1989.

FT: Is it getting worse, do you think, or is it getting better, this historical trend?

Dalai Lama: Now after 20 years, compared with 1987, 1988, this time, [the unrest is of] much greater scale, all over Tibetan territory.

FT: So it's getting worse?

Dalai Lama: Yes, including those Tibetan students who study in China, in Beijing itself. They have a lot of good privileges, but these people also joined the demonstrations.

FT: I think many would say that you have been a restraining influence over this situation, over the Tibetans, but there are others who say he is losing control, the Dalai Lama is losing control over his supporters.

Dalai Lama: Yes.

FT: Do you agree with that?

Dalai Lama: Yes, I agree.

FT: You are losing control?

Dalai Lama: Yes, naturally. My effort, you see, fails to bring concrete result, so these criticisms become stronger and stronger.

FT: But, if you're losing control, then why should the Chinese talk to you?

Dalai Lama: I don't know. In the sixth meeting, the Chinese official mentioned there's no such Tibetan issue. The only issue is the Dalai Lama.

FT: Do you expect to go to the Olympics, Dalai Lama?

Dalai Lama: Oh, that depends on many factors. Of course personally I want to go, if the invitation comes. But it depends on the situation inside Tibet, and also our talk. Still two months there. So, we'll see.

FT: Have you got a clear invitation from the Chinese to attend the Olympics?

Dalai Lama: Of course I have to take into serious consideration all other factors. My visit, whether helpful for the Tibetan people, inside Tibet, that's the key thing.

FT: And under what conditions would a visit to the Olympics by you be helpful?

Dalai Lama: At this moment it's difficult to say. [It] much depends on China, on China's government. So, let us see the next meeting and what result comes from that meeting. Then we can judge.

FT: And if there were one or two gestures or concrete gestures that the Chinese could make, what would they be, to pass your test?

Dalai Lama: Then stop, inside Tibet, arresting and torture. This must stop. And then they should bring proper medical facilities. And most important, international media should be allowed there, should go there, and look, investigate, so the picture becomes clear.

That I think is very important, even for the Chinese government leaders. It's important [for them] to know the reality. The party secretary of the autonomous region of Tibet, a few months ago, expressed that Tibetan people were so loyal to the Chinese Communist Party, that Tibetans expressed they considered the Communist Party as a Buddha. I think the lack of knowledge, the reality [explains] that kind of expressions, [which are] either completely exaggerated, or based on some Tibetans who are very capable of making appeasement.

FT: Do you think that the Tibetan issue will be resolved in your lifetime?

Dalai Lama: Sure. Because [it is in] the people of China's interest. The Tibet issue remains like this; reunification with Taiwan is more difficult. And I think around 6m or 7m people in Hong Kong also feel, deep inside, a little bit of anxiety, a little bit of fear. The Tibet issue I think is much easier than the liberation of Taiwan. So the easiest spot sends a signal to the rest of China, and [shapes] the image of China in the whole world. I think it has a very positive impact.

FT: I just want to be clear on a few points you made there, you said that you are losing control of your supporters in Tibet. That means what, as far as the Chinese government is concerned? They have to start dealing with you and give you something to reinforce your position. Is that broadly right?

Dalai Lama: Actually, I don't care whether I'm losing my influence or not. I'm already in a position of semi-retirement. Since 2001, we already have elected political leadership. These are mainly his job, not my job.

FT: You mentioned that you're not worried about you're losing control or influence. But do you think in the past Beijing saw you as part of the problem, but now they see you as part of the solution? Do you think Beijing is now worried about you actually losing control and influence?

Dalai Lama: I don't know. Ask them. I really don't know. But there is such an opinion. There are two opinions I think in the past 20, 30 years. One opinion among Chinese officials is let us wait for the Dalai Lama to pass away. When the Dalai Lama passes away, then the Tibet issue will automatically disappear. That is one opinion. Another opinion is it is better while the Dalai Lama is there because he can represent the majority of the Tibetan people so it is better [to deal with] one person who can influence Tibet.

FT: I want to be clear on your answers on the talks in June. If those talks break down, and there is no progress, there could be a risk of violence, of greater violence in Tibet. Is that possible?

Dalai Lama: It's difficult to say. Since the last few years, some Tibetans, some students, some even cadres, according to their expression, showed a clear sign of frustration. Even some Chinese have the view our non-violent approach may not be effective. So, that kind of sort of opinion is coming.

Whenever that kind of indication comes, I always advise that our struggle is just cause. We must carry that just cause according to strictly non-violent principles. If we indulge violence then our just cause may lose many sympathisers in Europe, America and in Japan, and among the Chinese also. Particularly after the Tiananmen event many Chinese showed solidarity with us. All this happened because we were strictly following non-violence and secondly, not seeking separation. Therefore, more and more Chinese are showing solidarity. If we indulge violence, we will lose all these support.

FT: Of course you don't want it, but the objective reality is that if China does not give way, even if you do not want violence, it may happen. That is right.

Dalai Lama: Oh, if violence happens, then after my death, I have no concerns. While I'm alive if the violence grows out of control, then my only choice is resign.

FT: We've got a sense that, and the world have got a sense that you are frustrated, that your middle way policy or approach is now so far going nowhere. You're losing your support and influence among your own people, and the Chinese so far don't really believe your policy. Do you feel frustrated? What more can you do? Time is ticking away.

Dalai Lama: Yes, I really feel helplessness. That's all. I've done my best. And as a matter of fact, [I have for the] half century remained homeless with a certain goal. That means my moral responsibility to serve, to help the Tibetan people, fails. I am a Buddhist. If you think from the viewpoint of ordinary politicians or ordinary leaders' thinking or experience or vision, [my way of thinking] is a little bit different.

FT: Let's come back to the possibility for you to attend the Olympics. There's a lot of talk in recent weeks about such a possibility. What has been lacking seriously is trust. Were you actually waiting to go to the Beijing Olympics, if there is an invitation without any conditions, as a way of building more confidence and goodwill?

Dalai Lama: As I said earlier [it depends on] the inside situation. The inside situation may be such that my presence in Beijing [would cause] many Tibetans to get some kind of disappointment: even though the Dalai Lama is visiting and still nothing happens. Although I don't think that kind of feeling may come, but if they feel: Oh the Dalai Lama is now concerned of his own privilege or his own thing, he doesn't care about our sufferings – then what to do?

FT: Do you think that your mere presence in Beijing in the Olympic Games will itself be a symbolic breakthrough between your talks with China?

Dalai Lama: If all problem is my problem, and then entirely that problem depends on trust between Chinese leaders and myself, then of course [it is] very easy. [I would] go there, hello, hello, or ni hao ["Hello" in Chinese], ni hao. No problem.

My problem is the 6m Tibetans. To the Chinese government it is rather complicated to handle. Their policy regarding Tibet has repercussions in the Xinjiang autonomous region, other autonomous regions, and among the Chinese people themselves. So, there are a lot of complications there.

Sometimes I really feel sympathy for President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. The country, over 1bn human beings, has a lot of complications. There're still some wounds from the Cultural Revolution to some people, some generations. And for another generation, the wounds of the Tiananmen event are still there. Then there are a lot of complaints about corruption, such large scale corruptions. So, a very complicated country. All sorts of Chinese traditions are much damaged. It's a very difficult period, very difficult period. And I think the leadership is following a more cautious path. That I think is very realistic and understandable.

FT: Could you say what is it like for you to be attacked by the Chinese leadership in the terms that they attack you or the language that they attack you?

Dalai Lama: It doesn't matter.

FT: It doesn't matter?

Dalai Lama: Sometimes I make a joke.

FT: What's the best joke you've made?

Dalai Lama: The best joke? Well, a demon with invisible horns. One demon seems now multiplying more demons in Europe, in Germany, in England, also in Japan. These are to me - if the officials feel appropriate to call me a demon, or wolf with robe - perfectly all right. No problem.

But one concern, they're forcing Tibetans to denounce me, that's a serious violation of religious freedom and also a serious violation of human rights. Then I feel something. These days some people say I am living Buddha, some say God king. Nonsense. Some say demon. Nonsense. This doesn't matter. But one thing I have a little sort of sadness about is innocent millions of Chinese including those Buddhists, if they really feel that the Dalai Lama is something demon, then I feel a little sad.

FT: Thank you very much, Your Holiness.

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