



Building Bridges

**Address to His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama
at the occasion of his visit to the Tibet Institute Rikon (TIR)
on April 8, 2010
by
Rudolf Högger, Chairman of the Foundation Council TIR**

Your Holiness,

Dear Guests !

Following the Venerable Abbot and the Monks' Community, I now have the honour to express additional words of welcome to all of you. I do this in the name of the Tibet-Institute's Foundation Council and its Honorary President, Mr. Jacques Kuhn. I also do it on behalf of all those who work in and for the Institute.

Your Holiness: Thank you for being with us! It is a matter of great joy to receive you, and – at the same time – to receive your attendants and a considerable number of sponsors, who provide – year after year – their financial support to this monastery. I also welcome the political representatives of the Swiss Confederation, of the Canton of Zürich and of the Community of Rikon/Zell, as well as our friends from various Tibetan organisations in Switzerland.

Your present visit to Rikon is of course not the first. During the last four decades, you have come at least 10 times, and at each occasion you nourished us with new inspiration, or you formulated additional tasks which we were to explore and to implement. These tasks are manifold. From providing spiritual support to the Tibetan Community to the establishment of a modern library on Tibetan Buddhism, from acquainting the younger generation with the Tibetan language to introducing monks into the realm of Science, these tasks constitute a broad range of challenges. We all need to learn and to grow constantly in our efforts to live up to them.

Today, on the occasion of your visit, it seems to be appropriate to reflect for a while on the inspirations and mandates which you have given to us. How far have we got in our endeavor? How successful have we been? And what should be the guideline for our future activities?

In order to answer these questions, please allow me to use a metaphor – an image which is likely to draw our attention to the core task and to the very spirit in which – as we believe – you want us to accomplish our mandate.

The metaphor I use is the bridge. Visitors who climb up on the road from the Rikon village to this Institute suddenly find themselves in front of a bridge. It

leads from the road to the monastery. Who wants to enter this building, who is interested in contacts and learning must first walk across this bridge and ring the bell. Whenever I do this, I am reminded of its symbolism. In my view, the bridge leading from the road to the monastery is an image of the central task you have given us and of the spirit in which this task should be solved. There is an outer and an inner aspect of this image. Outwardly, the Rikon Institute is to build bridges between cultures, religions, institutions and generations. Inwardly, however, our activities should encourage and support the struggle of people to cross the bridge, to reach the other shore, as Buddhist and Hindus and Jains alike would formulate, i.e. to leave old attitudes behind, to adopt new attitudes and new ways of understanding the world and our life.

Let me exemplify this.

For many years it has been a big wish of your Holiness that the Rikon monastery may not only be a home for monks of the Gelug Order, but also of the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Over a long time, there seemed to be no possibility to fulfill this wish. But then, a few years back, when a new batch of monks was recruited, an opportunity arose. Thus, in the years of 2006 and 2007, monks from the Nyingma-, the Kagyü- and the Sakya-Traditions joined the community at Rikon. To our knowledge, Rikon became the first oecumenical Tibetan monastery in the world. In this way, the Rikon Monastery has become a bridge between the four traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. An important task of outer bridge-building could be fulfilled.

Other examples of bridge-building may be added. E.g., whenever the monks of Rikon go out to the homes of Tibetan families in order to perform funeral rites, or whenever they conduct ceremonies or teachings, they build bridges. They link the everyday life realities of people living in 21st-century-Switzerland with the religious traditions handed down through the centuries by people living in Tibet – bridges, also, between the older generations living in exile and the younger generations, who share no personal memories of a former Tibetan home.

Another task of the Rikon monks is to build bridges for Western seekers interested in learning about Tibetan Buddhism. These bridges consist in many courses and teachings – about 100 annually – which are offered to the public. Altogether some 2000 Tibetans and Non-Tibetans seek orientation in Rikon every year.

We are happy about these achievements, but we realize that they reflect only an outer reality, measurable facts that cannot in any way be taken as proof that the inner-human task, to which the monastery should lead, has been fulfilled.

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This inner task, the bridge-building which is to take place within the human heart, is more demanding and more difficult to achieve than any organizational program. If we refer to the oecumenical effort undertaken at Rikon, it means that bringing together the different traditions of Tibetan Buddhism is only a beginning and that the most difficult task has to be accomplished again and again in the hearts of the monks themselves. Inner barriers must be crossed, inner bridges must be built and unknown shores of new understanding have to be reached. But it is the accomplishment of this inner task that will make a difference to the world, even more than any number of visitors to this monastery.

I believe that this truth applies to all fields of activities of our Institute. It is not so much the quantity of learning in Dharma or Science, which really matters, but rather the quality of change within people, the crossing over to new understandings and attitudes in individual lives.

With this, I should now like to turn to the future of the Rikon Monastery. What should be our guideline and what our main focus in our coming activities? The answer, I think, is simple : We must continue to build bridges in all the directions which have been mentioned. But while doing so, we must clearly focus on the question: What can we do to help those with whom we work to accomplish their inner task, the river-crossing in the heart?

I should like to illustrate this with a topical example:

Today, Switzerland counts probably more than one thousand school children and youths of Tibetan or half-Tibetan origin. Some 150 of them attend Tibetan schools on Wednesday afternoons or weekends, while many others seem to have little inclination or opportunity to follow specific classes on Tibetan culture, religion and language. The reasons for this are manifold, but for the Tibetan religion we may assume that they are not entirely different from the reasons that make it difficult for all traditional and religious teachings, including the Christian faith, to reach their audience in the modern world. It has become a very demanding task to talk about moral values and spiritual experiences in a credible and convincing manner. This is especially true with regard to children and youths.

Therefore, the most difficult task for all teachers of ethics and religion is not an organizational one. It is not in the first place a matter of setting up classes or summer camps or other special events. Rather, **the enormous challenge lies in**

finding the right language, the proper images and the suitable activities that may truly help the younger generation to discover and to cross their inner bridges. What is it that these children are longing for from the depth of their heart? How can we, the elder generation, accompany them on their own inner journey?

Neither Tibetan parents nor teachers nor monks nor the Rikon Foundation Council have ready-made answers to these questions. But we all are resolved to explore new possibilities of teaching and supporting the young generation. Therefore, a few weeks back, the Rikon Foundation Council has decided to organize even during this year what is called a *future-workshop* for children. The idea is to invite a broad selection of Tibetan children from all parts of German-speaking Switzerland and to explore with them – in carefully conducted group discussions – what **they** are longing for, what **their** curiosity is drawn to, and what aspects of Tibetan religion **they** are interested in.

Thus, it is from the fresh minds of the children that we hope to receive new inspiration for our educational task. Based on the results of the workshop, new religious topics and new didactic concepts shall be added to the ongoing forms of teaching. The Tibet-Institute and its monks' community are ready to join hands with parents and teachers and the Tibetan Community in such an effort. And we trust that many new bridges can be built: between the Tibetan Tradition and modern Swiss culture; between the older and the younger generations of Tibetans in this country; and – most importantly – within the hearts of Tibetan children.

Your Holiness, thank you for your patience in listening to these reflections.

I will now ask Geshe Nyima Tashi to inform you about the status and the future prospects of the Project *Science meets Dharma* in India. After that, it will be our privilege to listen to your comments and guidelines.

Thank you !

Rudolf Högger, Chairman of the Foundation Council TIR