

FOCUS

Talking to freedom

Dissident Tibetan monk speaks at Dalhousie law school

BY AARON DHIR

Seven years in Tibet? How about 33 years in occupied Tibet as a prisoner of conscience under Chinese rule?

On Dec. 13, during the middle of the craziness that is exam time, room 105 of the Weldon Law Building was filled with people anxiously waiting to hear the Venerable Palden Gyatso speak about issues of torture, brutality, human rights, and compassion.

On Dec. 10 the Tibetan monk, who was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International during his incarceration, received the John Humphrey Freedom Award from the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development. His speaking engagement in Halifax was the second stop in a North American lecture tour that was part of the

award.

At the age of 10 Gyatso took monastic vows, and later began living in a monastery in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. In 1959 he participated in the Tibetan National Uprising, which led to a violent Chinese crackdown on Tibetan dissenters and the subsequent flight of the Dalai Lama to Dharamsala, India to set up a government-in-exile.

During the uprising Gyatso was captured by the Chinese army in the Tibetan city of Panam, and was to endure over three decades of torture and brutality in Chinese prisons and labour camps for "counter-revolutionary propaganda and agitation".

Speaking through a translator,

Palden Gyatso told a story that often left the crowd silent — and in utter disbelief.

During his first interrogation by the Chinese, he was kicked,

"There are some prisoners who are very stoic, who never say a word. Compared to them, I am nothing. I begged [the Chinese] to kill me several times." - the Venerable Palden Gyatso

punched and beaten with a stick with nails at the end of it. The first two years of his initial seven-year sentence were spent entirely in chains.

Gyatso escaped from prison in 1962, but was soon recaptured by Chinese soldiers. This would be the beginning of a descent into a physical, psychological, and emotional hell.

With admirable poise and dignity, Gyatso spoke of the various forms of torture that he and many other Tibetans endured at the hands of the Chinese. Particularly horrendous was the experience of having his body suspended from the prison ceiling by his own arms, which were tied behind his back. Around him, his fellow prisoners wasted away — many committing suicide. The prisoners were often compelled to witness the execution of their fellow Tibetans. Severe hunger reduced Gyatso to survive by eating a boot. Other times, in order to live through the prison policy of malnourishment, he ate mice and worms.

Perhaps the most striking part of the presentation was the display of various instruments of torture which were used on Gyatso.

Shortly before his release from prison in 1992, the 67-year-old monk arranged for prison guards to be bribed into selling him these instruments, so that he could provide the outside world with a glimpse of the objects which are used upon Tibetan prisoners.

The audience stared in disbelief as Gyatso raised a large electric cattle prod in the air which had been shoved in his mouth, breaking his front teeth and causing permanent damage to his inner mouth.

Gyatso now works with Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala. In addition to lecturing and publishing a book on his life story in order to

spread awareness of the plight of his people, he has testified about his experiences before both the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva, and the United States Congress.

Gyatso emanates a presence of warmth, gentleness and kindness. His statement of harbouring no resentment towards his Chinese oppressors, only compassion, absolutely confounded me.

To speak with, and listen to, a human being so committed to the peaceful resolution of a conflict that has taken the lives of over 1.4 million of his people, was truly humbling. If nothing else, it caused me to re-examine the cynicism that I often have about the potential of a benign end to the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

