

Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1958, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many others were forced to flee into exile. My parents were among those Tibetans who made the long journey into exile in India. To stay in Tibet meant accepting Chinese rule and being deprived of basic human rights such as the freedom to practice our own religion, maintain traditional cultural practices and speak our native language. Most of the ancient monasteries in Tibet have been destroyed by the Chinese occupation. Many Tibetan monks and nuns, who totally committed their lives to peace, have been killed for opposing Chinese authority. And sadly now in Tibet, kids are forced to learn Chinese instead of their own language.

My parents fled to India where I was born. As the only light-brown kid in school, I was picked on for being different and being a refugee. As a child, I was painfully aware of the fact that I had no country to call my own. I knew in my heart and from our history that there existed a land called Tibet to which I belonged. Through my own experiences and those of my parents, I knew how painful it felt to be exiled from our country and our culture.

As a young refugee, I have struggled to grasp what peace means to me. The Tibetan culture and our leader, The Dalai Lama, teach us that peace begins inside each of us – on a daily basis in how we live. I grew up with the Buddhist teachings of compassion. The Dalai Lama says, “If you can, help others; if you cannot do that, at least do not harm them”. I am constantly reminded that the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in compassion – even seeking to nonviolently overcome the brutality of the Chinese occupation of our land and people.

Peace to me is a concept that has no set boundaries. It is a lifetime practice that represents an individual path, a community at harmony, a circle of friendship, a freedom to pursue happiness and a loving respect for all of humankind. Peace is a sense and feeling that no human should ever be deprived of, but rather practice in their everyday lives.

My journey has taken me from exile in India to home in Portland, Oregon. I have witnessed how much most people cherish their religious and cultural values. I want to be a stepping-stone in which I give hope to my family and to my people that we someday will have freedom in our homeland, too. I carry not just my personal aspirations for a free Tibet, but dreams and hopes of all people for a world where we live in peace and understanding.

I proudly stand with my fellow Tibetans and others of many nationalities who help to make our call for a free Tibet echo around the world. I want people to understand that when we say “Free Tibet”, we are demanding basic human rights not just for Tibetans but for people across the world. I want to be a voice that stands up for those whose voices may not be heard and whose hopes may not be represented – a voice for compassion and peace.

I can live anywhere and appreciate any culture, yet I am a Tibetan, connected to my people’s history. That has been my motivation to keep our culture alive. I continue to be

inspired by what I see in other Tibetans in exile and in all who stand for peace and compassion as a way to resolve even the largest conflicts.