

Woeser Rinpoche

Woeser Rinpoche is from Markham, Kham, in the eastern part of Tibet. Many people in his village thought he was a *rinpoche*, a “precious one”. He said that he had been officially recognized and confirmed as a *rinpoche* by the Dalai Lama after Woeser arrived in India. In his monastery in Tibet, he had many pictures of the Dalai Lama that he said he often distributed to build up the Tibetan people's stamina. But deep down, he thought that all the people of Tibet should rise up and join together to free Tibet from foreign occupation. After meeting Woeser Rinpoche, one can be convinced that he stands for this with all of his heart.

I asked Woeser what he thought “freedom” meant. He said it meant “freedom to become happy.” His conception of happiness meant that one's mind should be at peace from worrying about tomorrow. He thought that in Tibet, social conditions for Tibetans should be just as good as the social conditions enjoyed by the Chinese. Woeser said, “The fact is that they are not the same. It is absolutely clear to me that the Chinese people disrespect the Tibetan people and that Tibetans are discriminated against in their own land.”

When he first entered a monastery as a child, the Chinese authorities did not allow him or others to read *pecha* (Buddhist scriptures). He remembers that the Chinese consistently objected to the monks' attempts to observe traditional religious practice or to even study Buddhist philosophical texts.

Woeser Rinpoche paused in the interview to mention that because he was beaten up so much with a heavy police belt on the head and the side while in prison, he has lost some of his long-term memory. But still, he vividly recalls his experience around 1969, when he was a young monk. That was a time when the monks started reading Buddhist texts, and the Chinese interfered. They took books and scriptures away and burned them. Traditionally, young monks are required to orally recite them in a loud voice for the purpose of memorizing scriptures. But the loud chanting was cause for the Chinese to come and take all the religious texts from his monastery. It was either in 1969, or 1970, that this happened.

He left his hometown to go study in Lhasa. His aim was to enter a monastery and engage in studies under experienced, knowledgeable masters. At the age of nineteen he entered Sera monastery. Once in Sera monastery, Woeser Rinpoche found that the Sera monks were afraid to open up the scriptures. This was in the 1980's, even after the Cultural Revolution. During this time, the Chinese no longer explicitly said that monks could not read the texts, but it was implicit. Just outside the monastery they stationed armed military soldiers and government officials constantly interrupted the monks' study and practice by calling numerous meetings.

In Woeser's view it seems only reasonable that monks should have the right to have proper facilities to maintain their health, and to engage and pursue their studies. He thinks that if one is a monk, and attending a monastery, one should be accommodated in such a way to allow for the proper practice of their religion. But this is not the case for Tibetan monks. Woeser continued, “The Chinese intentionally make sure that if a person chooses to be a monk, then he faces social and physical hardships.” This