

Chapter 31

An Interview With His Holiness The Dalai Lama

The rising temperature on a mid-July early morn, couldn't come close to matching the warmth in the hearts of those gathered in the courtyard of the Kalmyk Temple of Saint Zokava at the Kalmyk Brotherhood Society in a working class neighborhood in Philadelphia. The radiance of the sun was eclipsed by that of the sparkle in the eyes of the man for whom several hundred people waited hours to catch a glimpse. An eclectic blend of humanity ranged from infants held in laps to elders sitting in the shade, dressed in rainbow-hued Tibetan and Kalmyk attire and Western garb.

Kalmyks are ethnic Mongolians who are in alignment with Tibetan Buddhism. It was they who issued the invitation for His Holiness to come to Philadelphia for the first time in 18 or so years.

Multi-colored Tibetan prayer flags draped the back of the courtyard and a vine encrusted brick wall bore a yellow and teal colored banner that read in Tibetan "The Philadelphia Tibetan Association Welcomes His Holiness, The Dalai Lama, the Reincarnation of Avalokiteshvara ("Embodiment of Compassion" in Tibetan Buddhism) We Are Very Blessed For Your Visit." This was translated for me by a young IT consultant named Dorjee who had traveled from Texas for the occasion. Visitors arrived from all corners of the globe to celebrate the arrival of this human symbol of grace in the midst of turmoil.

The 73 year old political and spiritual leader of a government in exile, now resides in Dharamsala, India, since the 1959 takeover of his mother-land of Tibet by the Chinese government. He seems to view the world as his home.

The aroma of sweet incense wafted through the air, mirrored only by the sounds of lilting music that filled the courtyard, creating the atmosphere for what was to transpire shortly. There was a sense of respectful anticipation and when His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama stepped out of the limousine, a sharp intake of breath was audible and a reverent sense of welcome palpable. In a presentation before those gathered, His Holiness spoke of the Kalmyk culture needing to continue through education of the next generation, since many of their elders were moving on to their next incarnation. Listening with rapt attention, mala (prayer beads) ran through the fingers of those in the seats inside the temple as well as those still standing in the courtyard, His Holiness' message being transmitted through speakers so all could hear. At the completion of the morning's event, a red prayer cord and Borstk, which is a traditional Kalmyk pastry, was blessed by His Holiness and offered to the departing crowd.

Later in the day, in the elegant Verizon Hall in the Kimmel Center, a capacity crowd filled the seats as they enjoyed elaborately costumed and choreographed Kalmyk and Tibetan folk music and dances, as well as mono-tonal Tibetan chanting offered by the

Drepung Gomang monks who travel the world to create exquisite sand mandalas, which when complete, are disassembled to represent the Buddhist concept of impermanence.

To the sound of thundering applause, His Holiness walked on stage, bowed three times and then prostrated himself before the image of the Buddha emblazoned on a 50 foot tall tapestry, known as a thangka. Taking off his sandals, he nestled cross legged in a radiantly orange chair to begin his teachings on "Buddhism in the 21st Century." His first words indicated that he was "Very happy to be here once more in this famous city," and then he made reference to the Liberty Bell and encouraged people to "fill up the crack with our own efforts."

The Dalai Lama indicated that Buddhism reflects three components "Science, philosophy and religion, but the top priority is unity, to minimize fear and hatred and increase love, compassion and forgiveness."

After the presentation, His Holiness was surprised by a large sheet cake in celebration of his 73rd birthday on July 6th. A delighted smile spread across his face, as he seemed not to be aware of the ritual of blowing out the candle. He then cut a large piece from the middle of the cake and ate with great enthusiasm. There was plenty left to share with his guests in the lobby as they exited the building, enjoying what seemed like manna from heaven. I was happy to receive the last available piece which I 'shared' with my mother over the phone. What a joy it was to have her vicariously experience this milestone with me, albeit 1200 miles away in Florida.

Greg Schultz, of Glenside, PA who was the manager of the event at the Kimmel Center, describes himself as " a practicing Tibetan Buddhist and close friend of the Tibetan people. His Holiness' message of peace and non-violence as being internal rather than external resonates deep within my very being. There was a moment when he greeted me with a gentle embrace with his head nestled on my shoulder and mine on his. This lasted for what seemed several minutes and left me feeling infinite joy and deep gratitude for all humanity."

For this journalist, what occurred the next day, fulfilled a twenty- year long dream, that of interviewing His Holiness. Ushered into a hotel room past a gauntlet of Philadelphia police officers and secret service agents, I found myself face to face with a man whose image had surrounded me, for the interceding years, as I had set intention for this day to occur. Immersing myself in the manifestation process, his photo is in my car, on a wall in my office and on several vision boards I had created over the years; the seed planting had blossomed into an exquisite garden. A delightful twinkle appeared in his eyes as he made contact with mine, which at that moment, were filling with tears. I approached him, katah (a traditional white silk scarf) in hand, to complete a ritual which involved holding it in prayer pose across my hands. He bowed, took it from me, blessed it, draped it around my neck and then drew me into a hug. He then motioned for me to sit nearby to begin our conversation. Periodically, His Holiness would reach over to touch my arm, to make a point. Despite speaking fluent English, a translator was nearby to offer

assistance when His Holiness searched for the occasional word. His speech is lilting and not always in keeping with grammatic flow. I have maintained the form of communication he used, for authenticity and to offer the flavor of the conversation. My intention is for readers to see the man behind the icon. He shared that he sleeps 8 or 9 hours per night, completes work at 4:30 p.m. each day, eats no dinner and then arises at 3:30 a.m. for several hours of meditation. Much of his work now is teaching, less the political leader and more in the professorial and spiritual roles.

Edie: How do you, as a human being, embody the spiritual and as a spiritual being, embody the human?

Dalai Lama: I'm nothing special, just an ordinary human being. That's why I always describe myself as a simple Buddhist monk. Different people describe me in a different ways. Some describe me as the living Buddha. Nonsense. Some describe me as 'God-king.' Nonsense. Some consider me as a demon or a wolf in Buddhist robes. That also, I think nonsense. I am simply just one monk. That's all. Then here, the certain temple rule, this seems to me to have a certain responsibility to look after the well-being of society and look after Buddhism and culture. I consider these part of the practice of spirituality. There is no competition between spiritual practice and party politics. That is outdated. We already, since 2001, have elected political position. My position is semi-retired. I am looking forward to complete retirement.

Edie: What would complete retirement look like for you?

Dalai Lama: More time to meditate and preparation for next life. I have three commitments. Number one commitment is promotion of human value. Number two commitment is promotion of race harmony. Number three commitment is about Tibet. My retirement is the third commitment. The previous two commitments, to my death, I have committed.

Edie: What brings you joy?

Dalai Lama: Joy, I think, talking with people and my own motivation is sincere. I consider others as just brothers and sisters. Nothing barrier. I think you notice, like yesterday, when I talk to a few thousand people, I just feel I am talking to an old friend. Like that. I never felt some kind of distance, so therefore, I feel one source of happiness. In that kind of atmosphere, my experience seems some benefit to some people. I feel like my life is something purposeful. Many people have told me that after they listen to my talk, some point which I made, they got certain ideas and their whole life is changed. They are happier. One scientist had discussions about love and compassion. Usually, he felt irritation. After our meeting, for some months, anger never come.

Edie: You speak a great deal about compassion. It seems easy to have compassion for those we feel are like ourselves. When faced with those whose values feel different or even threatening, how can we allow for that same type of understanding?

Dalai Lama: Basically, there are not much differences. They also want happy life. Their

method is different. On secondary level, always differences. Faith differences, culture differences, racial differences. Even within one person, yesterday and today, there are differences. We must look at a deeper level. I feel many problems that we are facing, are man-made problems, we have too much emphasis on this secondary thing, forgetting our foundation. At foundation, we are the same human being and we are sharing the same planet. Six billion human beings' future is my future and my future is never separate from the future of six billion human beings. Those people, whose early life, due to lack of affection, always have suspicion and distrust and always remain distant. They never open their heart to other people. I met an American lady many years ago, much distant. Then I told her about my own difficult experiences and I showed some genuine concern. She responded, "Why are you so concerned about me?" We need more patience. At a fundamental level, we are the same human brothers and sisters. Then forget it. The human mind is very strange. Like that.

Edie: How can we communicate that affection to those who cross our paths and so create a more peaceful planet?

Dalai Lama: Real affection comes from the face. Those political leaders, when they meet, they are always hugging, but not very genuine. Deep, sincerity comes from face and eye. When you entered, you showed that face. I thought, "This is sincere. Not political hugging."

Edie: No, definitely not political hugging. As you recently celebrated your 73rd birthday, I wonder what legacy you want to leave.

Dalai Lama: No, no, no. Many years ago, a New York Times journalist asked me that question. I told her, as a Buddhist practitioner, not allowed. If I take serious my legacy, that means self centered. So, I answer that and then again that lady asked a second time and I answered same way and then a third time and then I lost my temper. If you ask, I may lose my temper. (Laughter followed.) Your motivation should be sincere and your life should be of benefit to some people. That is the main thing. Don't care after my death.

Edie: The question wasn't referring to you as an important figure, but about making a difference in people's lives every day, that one among six billion. I won't ask you again. We're friends, I don't want to spoil that.

Although the photographers' camera shutters were clicking away throughout the entire interview, a memorable moment came near the end, when, seemingly posing playfully for the camera, His Holiness leaned back in his chair and with arms behind his head, allowed a last peal of joyous laughter to echo forth, with such gusto that the ripples could reach the homeland that he envisions awaiting his peoples' return.

To learn more, visit: <http://www.DalaiLama.com>

To learn more about Edie Weinstein, visit: <http://www.LiveInJoy.org>