

**“I AM JUST A SIMPLE BUDDHIST MONK—
NO MORE, NO LESS”
CANADIAN ENCOUNTERS WITH HIS HOLINESS,
THE 14TH DALAI LAMA**

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PROLOGUE: IN SEARCH OF A BEGINNING

When a writer attempts to turn any experience into a story, forging real, breathing life into an orderly march of interconnected passages, she must make crucial decisions. She must choose, for instance, where to set the arbitrary boundaries of said story, plunking down an artificial beginning and ending in a stream of life that has no such bookends.

My experiences with the Dalai Lama in the month of April in Vancouver, British Columbia, are no exception. As I search for some method by which to frame a series of extraordinary events and encounters, I wonder back as to when they really began. Was it at the University of Washington when a comparative religion class rocked me off my Catholic foundation and into the sacred texts of Buddhism, Hinduism & Islam? Does my Dalai Lama story really begin when I was living and teaching on the island of Taiwan, spending weekends meditating and worshipping with Buddhist monks in a remote monastery? Or does it start when I first directly encountered Tibetan Buddhism during the creation of an intricate, sacred sand mandala by visiting monks to Western Washington University's campus?

I wonder if my recent soul-shaking encounters with the Dalai Lama, the exiled ruler of Tibet, somehow started when a friend returning from a trek in the foothills of the Indian Himalayas gifted me with a small, traditional pendant of His Holiness, or maybe when I bought and moved into a home formerly inhabited by Tibetan Buddhists who had infused the space with devoted chanting and mediation. Some part of me delights in thinking that an unexpected encounter with novelist-bodhisattva Tom Robbins in Bellingham's REI the day before I left for Vancouver has some part to play in my story.

With limitless options for a sacred starting point, I relish this secular one: pulling up to the international border crossing at Blaine, a Canadian customs official, wearing a stylized mullet and thick gold chain, asked me the usual litany of questions: “Where are you from? Where are you going? What for?”

When I told him I was traveling to Vancouver to see the Dalai Lama, his forehead wrinkled and he said, “Dang, there’s a lot of you people. What’s so great about this guy?”

“Well....” I thought for a moment, “he’s a world leader for nonviolence and compassion, and lots of people look up to him for inspiration.” It came out sounding rather bland, I admit.

“I’d rather see a *hockey player* myself,” the border guard replied, rolling his eyes.

I couldn’t resist needling him: “The Dalai Lama is *also* a living Buddha, the Ocean of Wisdom, Holder of the White Lotus, protector of the Land of Snows and an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, Buddha of Compassion.”

“You people are driving me *crazy!*” he said, rolling his eyes. “Go on, keep moving...”

I drove on towards Vancouver, towards the rest of my story, laughing.

A LIFE OF LOVING AND LOSS

Born in a mud-and-stone cowshed in rural Tibet in 1935, Lhamo Dhondrub was only two years old when he was identified, through a combination of holy visions and rigorous testing, as the 14th reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, a manifestation of the Buddha of Compassion who choose to reincarnate for the purpose of serving humanity. As a young boy, he was taken to the capital city of Lhasa where he was enthroned as the country’s “God-King” and began rigorous training in the philosophy, cosmology and sacred arts of Tibetan Buddhism.

At the age of 15, the Dalai Lama assumed full political power after China initiated a brutal invasion of his country. When his attempts at reaching a peaceful solution with Mao Tse-Tung failed and a national independence movement was crushed, the Dalai Lama and 80,000 followers fled to India in 1959, where they received political asylum and established a culture-in-exile in the mountain-town of Dharamsala.

Since that time, the Dalai Lama has slowly risen from a lone voice for Tibetan independence all but ignored by the modern world to a universally-recognized proponent of human rights, compassion, inner peace and nonviolence. Through many interviews, best-selling books, Hollywood-generated movies of his life and a non-stop global speaking schedule, His Holiness has become a beloved figure for millions across religious and cultural lines. He’s attained a celebrity status that has drawn attention not only to the Tibetan independence cause, but also to his lessons on cultivating peace and happiness, within both the self and the wider world.

His acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, which he dedicated to the “oppressed and all those who struggle for freedom and work for world peace,”

solidified the Dalai Lama's standing as one of the world's highly-regarded spiritual leaders. But even with all of the accolades and awards, the devout followers and his bright place on the worldwide stage, the core of his existence is still haunted by the loss of his country and the 1.2 million Tibetans killed during China's occupation. His days are weighted with the collective grief of his fellow Tibetans, 140,000 of whom live in exile, 6 million more under the humiliating rule of the Chinese. Despite dedicating his life to his country and his people, the situation on-the-ground in Tibet has, if anything, only worsened over the years.

In a 1998 essay entitled "Making Kindness Stand to Reason," writer Pico Iyer puts it this way: "The Dalai Lama is rightly known for his unstoppable warmth, his optimism, and his forbearance—'the happiest man in the world,' as one journalist-friend calls him—and yet his life has seen more difficulty and sadness than that of anyone I know."

Perhaps it is this feat of having gone through extreme hardships and sadness only to come out stronger, wiser, and broader that has endeared him to so many people around the planet. Like his friend and fellow Nobel laureate the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama has suffered the worst kind of grievances but, as both maintain, they are the better persons for it. "Difficult times," His Holiness said in Vancouver, forced him to gain "more inner strength and determination;" they've provided him a route towards "deeper experiences and wisdom."

THE DHARMA COMES TO CANADA

The first public appearance of His Holiness took place on April 18 at the Pacific National Exhibition, a hockey arena on the outskirts of Vancouver's downtown. A culmination of three years of collaborative efforts between the University of British Columbia's Institute of Asian Research, the Tibetan Cultural Society of B.C., the Westcoast Sacred Arts Society, Simon Fraser University and a local coalition of Buddhist dharma groups, the Dalai Lama presented a morning "spiritual" talk and an afternoon "public talk" to a combined audience of over 25,000 people, including 400 accredited members of the international media.

Whatever the specific qualities that attracts people of all faiths to him may be—tolerance, strength, love—thousands gathered at a hockey stadium on an overcast day shot through with sunbreaks to hear him speak. Outside, the cherry trees were in full bloom as Buddhist monks with shaved heads and saffron robes, skate punks, gaggles of school girls, businessmen, long-bearded rabbis, dreadlocked hippies, priests wearing stiff white collars, Asian émigrés of distant countries, bright-eyed students and suburban families gathered at the Pacific Coliseum by way of car, foot, bus, bike and skateboard.

His first talk—which I did not attend—was a traditional transmission of the Dharma, a ritualized presentation of the Tibetan Buddhist worldview, spoken in Tibetan from atop an 8-foot tall red throne. Surrounded by colorful *tankas*, holy images of Tibetan

deities and dreamscapes, and altars holding perfumes, fruit, candles, incense, bells and flowers, the Dalai Lama gave what amounted to “a primer on the Buddhist Way,” as one friend relayed to me, alternately “captivating” those familiar with the spiritual system and mystifying others new to the complex Tibetan cosmology. It was a silent affair, said my friend, and the drab stadium took on the deep vibrations of a temple.

“Universal Responsibility” was the theme for his second talk of the day, a freewheeling forum that generated more of a rock-concert response to His Holiness. When the diminutive, red-robed figure suddenly appeared on stage and waved to the milling thousands, a cheer erupted from the crowd; it grew into a roar that deepened in intensity and volume, not unlike remembered Grateful Dead shows of the not-so-distant past. His materialization upon the stage brought with it a charged gravity; the gathered began to not only realize, but actually *feel*, the immediate presence of an enlightened being. The rush of this recognition sparked from person to person as the welcome to Canada grew more ecstatic, more joyful.

A second smallish, hunched figure appeared close behind the Dalai Lama, and when that figure revealed itself to be Archbishop Tutu, the crowd’s heartfelt reception threatened to raise the roof off the rink. Here, in this dim place, was holiness, deep-seated human goodness, manifest before our very eyes.

Tutu, after pointing out that there are “very few people as holy as His Holiness,” introduced his old friend as “a pool of serenity,” “playful as a schoolboy” and “fun, fun, fun!” Invoking the spirits of Mother Theresa, Aung San Suu Kyi and his countrymate Nelson Mandela, Tutu, the man responsible for navigating South Africa through the healing process in the post-Apartheid era, said of the honored guest, “the Dalai Lama is a well of goodness, and he makes us feel *good* about being human, about being *alive*.” The Dalai Lama, looking like any ordinary, bald and bespectacled old man, only chuckled, clearly marveling at the sight of a favorite friend.

INNER PEACE LEADS TO DIALOGUE, COMPASSION TO COMPROMISE

An outline of any of the Dalai Lama’s talks would stress the logical limits of any journalistic account of them such as this. He begins with a general theme, and from there pushes forward into an inspired mix of teachings, anecdotes, exhortations and explanations, all of it seemingly improvisatory but deeply intertwined. One subtopic branches off into another and another yet, each one illuminated by a mosaic of accumulated information: a childhood memory, world events in recent headlines, bits of quantum physics, Ayurvedic philosophy and transpersonal psychology, insights gleaned from a recent study of primate family structures or a bit of chaos theory, lessons learned from studying European history or tinkering with the gears of a wristwatch.

In Vancouver, he discussed his message of Universal Responsibility, a set of values that he believes are necessary for human survival in the new millennium. Universal Responsibility entails many skills and practices—building community, taking care of one another, realizing the interconnectedness of the world, fostering dialogue and working with compromise, “being an open and friendly person,” as he said—none of which are exactly new, groundbreaking ideas. The world’s great saints have been trying to convince us of these ideals for thousands of years. But to actually hear the messages *directly* from a prophet’s mouth, while he is flanked by yet another of his enlightened kind—well, then one tends to sit up straight and listen. The aura of deep experience and conviction turned familiar sentiments on community values into something visionary, and completely convincing.

But before a person can be of benefit to their community, the Dalai Lama explained, she has to first take care of and learn to love herself. According to His Holiness, one’s “internal well-being and peace are the most important factor,” and everybody must first do the “inner work” before they can be effective in the world. After explaining the different levels of the mind (or of our varieties of reality), from sensorial to sublime, he explained that human emotions are the level which need the most attention (and help). According to Buddhist thought, the suffering we experience in our daily lives is a result of identifying with and grasping on to the ever-changing theater of our emotions—happy, sad, mad, happy, sad, mad, over and over again. Understand the nature of this roller-coaster ride and you can conquer it, or, at the very least, not get so spun out by it.

“Anger, envy, jealousy, too much attachment, all of this can be trained out of us with effort and practice,” the Dalai Lama explained; “a calm mind is the most important element for a peaceful life.”

The personal trait most valued by the Dalai Lama, the one he has dedicated his entire life to cultivating, is compassion. In Vancouver, he differentiated compassion from its’ more common cousin, love. Love, he explained, has a nice “closeness feeling” to it, but it tends to be based on “another’s attitude towards us.” Love differentiates, whereas compassion is “unbiased”; it isn’t based on another’s attitude towards us, but instead creates an unwavering “sense of care and concern for others, even towards our enemies.”

“Compassion,” furthered the Dalai Lama, “brings us inner strength, an opening, and an ability to communicate with other beings.”

Once a person has begun to work on and refine these traits—training the mind, working toward inner calm and peace, and cultivating compassion—she is then ready to be a positive force in one’s community and around the world. “Love oneself first,” he told the attentive crowd, “but then reach out to friends, family, neighbors, community, all fellow humans and all fellow sentient beings on this planet!”

It is this ability to successfully work with others that is the crucial skill needed today, according to His Holiness. “Today’s globalism means that we are more interdependent than ever,” explained the Dalai Lama, citing the worldwide economy and global environmental challenges as two forces that bind “our survival, our well-being and our happiness” together in complex ways. To be narrowly focused upon ourselves, self-centered and oblivious to the effects our actions have on others, nations included, is “self-destructive and suicidal,” “like cutting the branch upon which you are sitting.” The Dalai Lama exhorted that “there is no more ‘us and them’ because all the others are a part of us now. Their interest is *my* interest.”

The resulting wisdom that comes from understanding this, he explained, is that there is great benefit to us when *all* other parts of the world are happy and taken care of. The concept of war is obviously out-of-date then, because, from this perspective, the destruction of our neighbor is the destruction of ourselves too. The most important relational skills we need to learn, and quick? *Dialogue* and *compromise*.

An underlying current of the Dalai Lama’s talk, the buoyant sentiment upon which floated his main theme, was the repeated reminder that the values and ideals he spoke of transcended any one religion. “I’m not talking about Buddhist values or Tibetan values,” he explained, “I’m talking about human values”— or the art of being human, of being alive at this time, in this place. Our cultural identifications and religions *are* still important, he said, but they are only *one level* of who we are. In the 21st century, humans must reach further and grow into the next level, where we realize our commonalities rather than our differences. “Kindness is more fundamental than belief,” he once told the writer Iyer, and he is able to reach out to a much broader audience by emphasizing “spirituality without faith—simply being a good human being, a warm-hearted person with a sense of responsibility.”

Towards the end of his multi-layered talk, which appeared to hold 15,000 guests breathless and enthralled, the Dalai Lama answered questions from the audience, including “How can we break the habit of worry?”, “Are you afraid of dying?” and “Why hasn’t there ever been a female Dalai Lama?” the question of “How do you think terrorism should be dealt with differently?” arose. He promptly put the question to the Archbishop Tutu, citing his deep experience in the truth and reconciliation process. Without even a pause, Tutu replied, “I think you have to look at the root causes.”

“Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely,” the Dalai Lama responded, beaming over his friend with a mixture of love and awe.

“I think that all of us would agree that terrorism is something that has to be condemned unequivocally,” Tutu continued, “but terrorism from all kinds of sides. If you have conditions in the world that make people desperate, if you have poverty, disease, ignorance, then there is no way in which you are going to win the war

against terrorism until we deal with the root causes that make people so desperate that they act as terrorists.”

The crowd erupted into one of the loudest cheers of the day, a roar of solidarity that carried everybody up and out of the hockey stadium, and back into the world where bombs were falling on the cities and neighborhoods and homes of Iraq and Afghanistan, each of us carrying a glowing gift, a treasure map from Tibet.

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My story about the Dalai Lama's 2008 visit to Seattle is available for download at www.podcastcafe.org/blog/Dalai_Lama/Dalai_Lama_2008.pdf.

Podcasts of the Dalai Lama's talks in the Pacific Northwest are available for streaming or download at www.podcastcafe.org/radiofreefundi/MP3/HH_Vancouver04.mp3 and www.podcastcafe.org/radiofreefundi/MP3/HH_Seattle08.mp3