



The Dharamsala Conference

Sensei Bodhin recently attended a conference of twenty-two Western Buddhist meditation teachers in Dharamsala, India, that included four days of meetings with the Dalai Lama. The participants were all raised in North America and Europe, but many have spent large portions of their adult lives practicing Buddhism in Asia. Almost three-quarters of the teachers were of the Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhist) tradition. There were only a half-dozen monks and nuns and only five women, though five others had been invited. Most of the teachers had about twenty years of practice behind them, some in more than one of the Buddhist traditions.

In addition to the teacher-participants, there were some Western observers, including Sante Poromaa, leader of our Stockholm Zen Center. Two generous Sangha patrons, concerned with the toll that two months of sesshin and heavy travel might have on Sensei, sought out someone who could accompany and assist him. The day before his departure, they found Sante available and eager to go.

What follow are some of Sensei's most memorable impressions and reflections on the conference, focusing on the four days with the Dalai Lama.

Following Sensei's article, we are publishing an open letter which arrived recently from The Network For Western Buddhist Teachers, formed by the participants at the conference. It summarizes the major points of agreement on matters covered in the conference.

The Dharamsala Conference

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The invitation to participate in the Western Buddhist Meditation Teachers' Conference came too late to consider re-scheduling the March seven-day sesshin, with which it unfortunately overlapped. The call came, in fact, while I was in Mexico, with almost five weeks of travel and sesshin ahead of me there and in Europe. The prospect of meeting with a relatively small group of Western Buddhist teachers, and with the Dalai Lama for four days, was appealing, but at what cost in money, health, and unknowns?

The more I learned of the conference, however, the more my concerns receded and my interest grew. A good many of the other participants were familiar names, teachers I respected through their writings. Most enticing of all were the topics to be discussed, including "The Role of the Teacher in the West," "Adaptation and Authority in Teaching," "Psychology and Dharma," "Institutional Issues," "Sexism and Sectarianism," and "Dharma Politics." Some of these issues had come up with koan-like persistence over the years in our meetings of second-generation Zen teachers. All of them are of vital significance to Western Buddhism, and will need to be worked on for decades to come. The Dharamsala conference would be a chance to do so with other teachers obviously grappling with the same issues. The fact that most of them were not in Zen promised to provide me with fresh perspectives, yet still within a Buddhist understanding. I would have to join sesshin a day late, even with leaving the conference three days early, but, encouraged from all sides, I accepted the invitation.

On the day of departure for India, the whole trip fell into jeopardy when I missed my flight out of Rochester and, as a result, my connection out of New York. All onward arrangements now void, I could not expect to reach Dharamsala until well into the conference, which I had to leave early as it was. What's more, there had been riots and bombings in India recently, prompting at least two of the conferees to cancel. Was I being given signs to abort the trip?

I emerged from twenty-four hours in a smoky

hotel room in Queens all but convinced to return home, and called Sante in Sweden to tell him. "Oh, really," he grinned through the phone. "I was just getting excited about going. You know what they say—on the most important pilgrimages, the obstructions will be many...." It was the final nudge I needed—and the karmic turning point of the trip. Unbooked connections fell fortuitously into place, and thirty hours later we straggled into Dharamsala's Natraj Hotel in time for lunch the first day.

Two overriding impressions persist from that dream-like week in Dharamsala: the other teachers and the Dalai Lama. Half of the teachers were North American and half European (from England, Holland, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy). Most were in the Vajrayana tradition, and a fair number of them had practiced together for various periods in their careers. Many had lived in Dharamsala for periods ranging from months to decades, and had practiced under the Dalai Lama and/or other rinpoches and lamas. Several had themselves completed one or more of the three-year, three-month, three-week, three-day retreats required to be designated "lama." On the whole I felt a great deal of affinity with the group, a heart connection, increasingly as the days went on.

The first day and a half of the conference was spent warming up: introducing ourselves, saying what had brought us to the conference, and sharing our visions of a flourishing Western Buddhism of the future. Over the next day and a half, we organized our four days of presentations to the Dalai Lama. Using a chalkboard, we brainstormed, listing points of discussion and questions regarding the many issues facing Western Buddhists, in Asia as well as in the West. Dividing the four days into morning and evening segments of two hours each, we selected four of us for each segment to present material on that topic. These presenters then met to organize and prepare their respective material.

On the opening day of our meetings with the Dalai Lama, we gathered for breakfast at our conference center, where throughout the week we shared three meals a day served buffet style

in a dining room. In high spirits we walked together the half-mile to the Dalai Lama's residential compound, which faced a flourishing Tibetan Buddhist temple across an open square. The compound was surrounded by walls, and at the iron gateway security guards carefully checked our conference badges, passports, and registration forms. Such security measures, we were told, were insisted upon by the Indian government, which would suffer the consequences of any harm done to the Dalai Lama or to this seat of Tibet's government-in-exile.

The conference was to be in the audience chamber of what someone said had once been the Dalai Lama's residence. (In keeping with his preference for monastic simplicity, he has lived for years now in a small cottage elsewhere in the compound.) We were seated in a large, square room where he not only receives groups but conducts ordinations. It was a stately, high-ceilinged room, bathed in natural light from many windows and tall glass doors. The furnishings were elegant but simple: beautiful oriental rugs, about forty identical maroon, cushioned armchairs, and some end tables.

On the front wall, above the ordination platform (now draped), was a large *thangka* [Tibetan scroll] showing Shakyamuni Buddha. Other colorful thankas of the same size were hanging high on the walls, running in both directions from the central *thangka* to the back wall. There were sixteen in all, each with a different arhat. The room had a celestial yet grounded quality, noble and hushed.

Each morning and evening session began the same way: Upon hearing the smart step of the Dalai Lama's approach through the corridor we would all rise, hands palm-to-palm, for his entrance. Always beaming, he would briskly whoosh to his chair at the head of the room and be seated, sometimes with legs crossed and other times not. His eyes dancing with excitement and delight, he would look from face to face for a few moments before giving a brief prayer and then signaling for the first presentation to begin.

The conference was videotaped. A video of its highlights is expected within a few months, and a written account will be published at length in a book later this year. But the following beam of memories will reveal some of the dust we raised.

Several of our presentations addressed the grave

problem of ethical misconduct on the part of Buddhist teachers. Many of us, including the Dalai Lama, have grown increasingly alarmed in recent years at the abuse of alcohol, sex, power, and money by roshis, senseis, lamas, rinpoches, and tulkus as well as some teachers in the Vipassana and other Theravadan traditions. These are weaknesses that have bedeviled religious leaders throughout world history, but all too many Buddhist teachers are now trying to justify such behavior as "skillful means," or a form of "compassion." The term sometimes used is "crazy wisdom," or the liberated functioning of enlightened masters unconstrained by conventional morality. When the Dalai Lama first heard "crazy wisdom" mentioned that day, he whirled to his interpreter in confusion, provoking a burst of laughter from us. Generally, his understanding of English appeared to be very good, and only occasionally did he turn to his interpreter for clarification. His spoken English was much more limited, and he often spoke through the young, Cambridge-educated Tibetan monk Thubten Jimpa.

The Dalai Lama's exchange with his interpreter over the meaning of "crazy wisdom" left him puzzled. He giggled in a couple of short bursts, cocked his head from side to side in the Indian style that he has assimilated in his thirty-four years living there, and mused, "Crazy wisdom ... very strange idea....," adding a final chuckle.

In my first presentation I sketched out the wanton behavior of Zen teachers that has affected some centers in the West. I then described unsuccessful attempts by our second-generation teachers' group to unseat and rehabilitate a teacher who, through a history of sexual involvements with his students, has left a small population of women hurt, openly angry, and with their faith in Buddhism shaken. I also mentioned that this Zen teacher, in justifying his right to ignore the Buddhist precept on not engaging in improper sexuality, had cited as his model Chogyam Trungpa, who, despite his undeniable contributions to Western Buddhism, had openly had sex with many of his students for years. Although I did not mention Trungpa by name, the Dalai Lama asked whether it was he to whom I was referring, obviously well aware of this controversial rinpoche.

Referring to the Zen teachers, he asked what attainments they might have. Unsure myself, yet giving them the benefit of the doubt, I replied that some of them had probably had a degree of

spiritual insight. I then suggested, only by way of explaining the considerable popularity enjoyed by some of them, that they probably had some charisma. "Charisma is not spiritual attainment," he growled, misinterpreting my remark but making an important point.

He then offered unequivocal advice that seemed to come from years of painful reflection on this problem: "Publish their names!" He then added, "You can write me a confidential letter. I will shout, I'm ready. If other teachers will listen I don't know. But if countermeasures are too gentle, it won't work." This was reassuring to those of us who knew of his exemplary commitment to the Sixth Precept, "I resolve not to speak of the faults of others, but to be understanding and sympathetic." Obviously he believes that the potential harm done to unsuspecting students outweighs any literal compliance with the Sixth Precept, and furthermore that it is our responsibility, when in possession of irrefutable evidence of a pattern of ethical misconduct, to publicly warn prospective students.

Later in the week this issue returned in a discussion of misconduct by certain lamas. Someone asked whether in criticizing one's teacher one wouldn't be showing disloyalty toward him, and the Dalai Lama elaborated:

As very few lamas have realized "crazy wisdom," you can criticize bad behavior of a lama. If he is your teacher, you can praise him privately and respect him, but publicly you can speak up and state his faults. The aim is to purify Dharma, and the interest of Buddha-dharma is much bigger than the interest of one lama. Through stating his faults you can save many disciples. This is the proper way. You can go to the lama and tell him, 'I did criticize you publicly, I apologize.' If he then gets angry with you, it's another indication of his faults.

The Dalai Lama then proceeded to muddy the waters by saying that in ancient times there were a few cases of great lamas who engaged in sex with their disciples (or otherwise violated the precepts), but only to help them spiritually. For such acts to be truly selfless and compassionate, he declared, deep realization was required—and complete freedom from attachment to sensual pleasure. Quoting a Buddhist text, he insisted that such detachment from the body was possible only in one who could, with indif-

ference, "drink his own urine or eat his own stool." (One of the participants, a longtime student of the Dalai Lama, then cried out that this could become "the taste test" for modern-day teachers—a crack that drew gales of laughter from everyone—including the Dalai Lama.)

No matter how exceptional such teachers were, even in ancient times, pointing to them provided a loophole that modern teachers could use to exploit their students sexually. Recognizing this, someone asked how rare was the occurrence of such Bodhisattvas. "Very, very rare," the Dalai Lama warned. "How many are there today?" someone pressed. "Zero ... almost zero..." he said softly. He then elaborated on the "almost": "I personally know of two hermits, living in these mountains, who may have such depth of enlightenment. They live according to the monastic precepts. They are high, high up," he said, speaking metaphorically, and then added, "Me, I am only here," and then meekly pawed the air with his hands, in a sort of dog paddle, to mime a lowly climber struggling for every inch of ascent. This drew more laughter, but it showed the inspiring humility that is the mark of any great person.

If these hermits were two of the very few human beings deeply enlightened enough to have legitimately transcended the precepts, the implications were staring us in the face: as hermits, their having chosen to lead the simplest and arguably purest of all lives suggests that once attaining to the highest, one would no longer *want* to violate the precepts.

One of the participants, an American Zen teacher and a Dharma-heir of a Japanese roshi, asked the Dalai Lama how his Japanese teacher—a "deeply realized" man, he suggested—could have spent the past twenty years seducing his female students. The Dalai Lama hastened to disabuse the questioner of his false assumption, quietly but firmly pointing out that a teacher with such a pattern of compulsive sexual exploitation could not be "deeply realized." Genuine realization, he went on, meant the realization of *sunyata*, or emptiness: that nothing has any substantial existence apart from any other thing. All things, that is, all beings, are interdependent. Such an understanding, he reminded us, would be accompanied by purification of mind and the elimination of greed, anger, and delusion. A deeply realized person, then, would lead a life of pure conduct, in accordance with the precepts.

On the struggle to lead and maintain a life of purity and self-restraint, the Dalai Lama offered sound, practical advice from Buddhist texts: “eliminate negativities,” or obstructive karma, by 1) avoiding situations and circumstances conducive to afflictive emotions (for example, stay out of bars), or 2) if you are already in such a situation, avoid succumbing to temptations. It is also helpful, he said, to possess a sense of “shamefulness” and “conscience” by considering one’s responsibilities and the long-term negative consequences of violating the precepts. This is common sense, perhaps, even child stuff — but as a Chinese Zen master once noted, “Though any three-year-old child may know it, even a person of eighty years finds it difficult to practice.”

What is required is will, and the strength to actually “avoid evil, do good, and liberate all sentient beings” (the General Resolutions, three of the sixteen precepts taken to formally become a Buddhist in the Zen tradition). Zen meditation develops, more than anything, the concentration that empowers will. But even after many years of zazen or other Buddhist practice, and the opening of the Mind’s eye to a degree, without deep realization some psychological problems may remain stubbornly unresolved. Increasing numbers of Western Buddhist teachers now recognize that psychotherapy of one kind or another can take up the slack in this area. It was no surprise, then, to hear the Dalai Lama agree that there need be no conflict between Buddhist practice and psychotherapy.

The Dalai Lama made clear his conviction that, today as much as ever, the viability of the Buddha’s teaching rests on three essentials: *śīla* (morality), *dhyāna* (meditation), and *prajñā* (wisdom, or realization). Throughout the conference he emphasized the importance of ethical study and understanding and its integration into one’s life, and that this is the foundation of practice. In fact, he left little doubt in anyone’s mind that—while he is a monarch and statesman, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and a prolific author—first and foremost he is a Buddhist monk who models his conduct on the Vinaya, the ancient code of monastic discipline formulated by the Buddha. In answering questions and offering comments he often referred to the Vinaya as well as the sutras (the purported words of the Buddha) and the *śāstras*, or commentaries on the sutras. These are the “three baskets” (*Tripiṭaka*) that comprise the Buddhist canon, and he showed ample evidence

of his long and thorough study of it.

In a discussion of authenticity, the Dalai Lama referred to various criteria, from canonical sources, for what constitutes a “central land,” a traditional sutra term for a country in which Buddhism is truly established: 1) where four (or five, or seven) Vinaya monks live; 2) where one monk (*bhikṣu*), one nun (*bhikṣuṇī*), one layman (*upasaka*), and one laywoman (*upasika*) live, or 3) where reside any people who live by a) the first five precepts or b) the Three Refuges. But then, in a manner that seemed typical for him after citing the “party line,” he stepped back and offered a broader and more encompassing perspective: “But since the Buddha himself said that he never really could leave any country, ultimately every place is a ‘Buddhist country.’”

Applying the first criterion might leave even Japan out as a Buddhist country, since, as our group noted, Vinaya standards are practically (if not completely) absent there today. Becoming ordained as a Zen or other Buddhist priest does not require celibacy, and these days most priests do marry and raise families. They can, through upholding these householder commitments, develop themselves in ways that true monks do not, and as teachers they can minister to lay people out of a shared experience of family life. We agreed, however, that confusion can arise when lay priests keep their heads shaved and wear the traditional Buddhist robe, or *kesa*. These are two signs, dating back to the Buddha’s time, of a Vinaya monk’s renunciation of the world.

Referring to married Buddhist priests, the Dalai Lama wondered aloud, “Why don’t they let their hair grow? They’re not monks.” This is not to suggest that lay priests shouldn’t adopt visible signs that distinguish them as ordained; clerics of every religion adhere to such customs. But perhaps the future will find more married priests willing to forego the traditional signs of celibate monkhood. In so doing they would avoid charges by Vinaya monks of misrepresenting themselves, and at the same time demonstrate a full acceptance of their life as lay priests.

Possibly the strongest impression the Dalai Lama left on me was his bedrock faith in monasticism as the purest and simplest way of following the Buddha’s Way. To be sure, his faith in the Buddha nature of all beings transcended any distinctions between lay and monastic, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. In fact,

he suggested that it would be better to have a smaller monastic order of more serious monks than the current 13,000 Tibetan monks (living outside Tibet), of which he said maybe only ten percent were "good monks." Nonetheless, he made no attempt to conceal his highest esteem for those who sincerely take monastic vows and uphold them. Moreover, he implied that a life of renunciation was the first step in an evolutionary process. At one point he said that if people begin with an appreciation of basic Buddhist doctrines such as impermanence, emptiness, and interdependence, and then go on to investigating the mind, this would in time bring them naturally to renounce worldly attachments and follow the Vinaya. In case any doubt was left as to which kind of life he recommended, he reminded us more than once that the Buddha himself was a Vinaya monk. What stronger endorsement for monasticism could our founder have made?

Probably the most moving moment of the conference occurred during the presentation on monasticism by our two Vajrayana nuns. First an English nun in her fifties spoke of the growing sense of isolation and abandonment she has felt in her twenty years since taking bhikshuni [i.e., nuns] ordination. If there was disappointment, even bitterness, in her words, it was understandable, given what she described as the problems of monks and nuns living in the West. Most debilitating over the long run, it seemed, has been the complete lack of support from society as a whole, from the lay Sangha, and even from lay Buddhist teachers. Even worse, she continued, was that what used to be just a painful indifference toward monks and nuns by Western Buddhists has in recent years degenerated to a crippling disrespect for them. This would be understandable enough coming from worldly people outside the Sangha, she allowed, but now even the lay Sangha has gone from defense to offense. It has become common, apparently, to hear monks and nuns disparaged as misfits, or people unable to form intimate relationships, or those who shrink from the challenges of the "real" world and seek to escape it via a regressive and anachronistic path. All of this would be less trying, she pointed out, if one lived in the fellowship of a monastic community, but such Sanghas are virtually non-existent in the West—and hardly more so, she implied, in Asian countries where Vajrayana Buddhism remains viable.

Her indictment lasted about fifteen minutes.

Throughout it she spoke patiently, deliberately, and with deep feeling that was barely controlled by a character forged through decades of self-denial (including twelve years living alone in a cave). It was obviously a relief for her finally to spill her frustration to this great elder, her most widely respected brother-monk in the world. The Dalai Lama listened raptly, impassively, revealing none of the grief that was soon to emerge. Instead he just murmured sympathetically and turned to the next presenter.

The second Vajrayana bhikshuni was an American of some eighteen years practice, now teaching in Seattle. She picked up where her sister had left off, cataloguing more trials that Western nuns must endure, including a lack of monastic preparation and teacher training, and the humiliation of having seen the indiscriminate ordination of emotionally disturbed men who as monks then brought dishonor on the monastic order. She, too, spoke from the heart, with a mixture of aching vulnerability and tender forbearance that can only arise from deep faith. It was too much for the Dalai Lama, who may still have been absorbing the pain of the first nun's presentation. He took off his glasses. She paused. A brief, choked laugh issued from him, and he said, "It makes me...tears..." Then he placed his face down in his palm and wept.

What else could he have done? Rage against the injustice of a world in which those who take the highest spiritual vows are neglected, at best, and often shown contempt? Demand respect for this calling which only rare individuals can understand enough to respect? Among Tibetan Buddhists, each Dalai Lama is seen as a reincarnation of Chenrezig, or Avalokita, Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Whether this is understood literally or not, in the room in which we were gathered at that moment Kannon appeared and her heart opened in all of us.

After his tears were spent the Dalai Lama laughed, composed himself, and agreed that what can be done, at least, is improve on the selection and preparation of *bhikshus* and *bhikshunis*. He then turned to the next presenter, an American monk (from Buffalo) and another twenty-year Vajrayoner who addressed a feature of the Vinaya that has caused embarrassment, and now growing dismay, to many Western Buddhists: the inequality between monks and nuns. In particular, he decried the institutionalized ranking of all nuns beneath all monks, as shown in seating arrangements,

specified by the Vinaya, in which a nun of, say, thirty years would be seated behind a monk of one day. The Dalai Lama's response was immediate: "You are right. Even I find it embarrassing when I come to this section of the ordination text. This should be changed."

To grasp the revolutionary significance of this moment, one must know how profoundly the Dalai Lama venerates the Vinaya as a moral code. At another point in the conference he had gently chided one of the Vajrayana monks for not having his right arm bared, as prescribed by the Vinaya, even though the room was cold enough to cause many of us to wear three layers of clothing. The Dalai Lama makes no apologies for his orthodox tendencies. Indeed, Buddhist lineage holders and abbots of every religion tend to be conservative.

If this dialogue in fact turns out to have been a turning point in the status of Buddhist nuns, it may be regarded as the proverbial half-filled cup. Seen as half-empty, we can ask why the Dalai Lama had not sought to purge the Vinaya of this sexist rule earlier. To be sure, he has worked hard on behalf of Buddhist nuns in recent years, especially by introducing new study programs for them in India. He must have known of the traditional seating order. Was it just unreflective orthodoxy? Cultural conditioning? Regarding the cup as half-full, however, we can admire the alacrity with which he called for change, revealing as it did his inspiring lack of defensiveness toward a system in which he is thoroughly imbedded. In any case, he hastened to add, "I cannot change the Vinaya on my own, you understand. But I will organize a conference of elder bhikshus and bhikshunis to make the change."

"When?" pressed one of our group.

"Within six months," he replied without hesitation.

In a discussion of sexism earlier, an outspoken and assertive German woman teacher had boldly opened her presentation as follows: "Your Holiness, I would like to lead you in a visualization exercise. Imagine that you go to a Buddhist center. You notice that all the people in positions of authority are women. The principal figure on the altar is female, and surrounded by female deities—except for their consorts. Elsewhere in the center, too, the images are all female. Browsing through texts in the library,

you can't help but notice that all the ancient masters are women, and all the accounts of great spiritual experiences are those of women." She went on in this manner, speaking earnestly, until finally resting her case. The Dalai Lama replied flatly: "The main thing for women is to make sure they have equal opportunities, and if they don't, obstacles must be removed." The woman made another comment (unprovocative, as I remember it), only to have the interpreter make an extraordinary departure from his role. Speaking his own mind before the Dalai Lama had a chance, he said something to the effect that women, too, must be sure to keep their own egos in check. Perhaps at a future time we will find new ways to respond to calls for equality.

As the conference progressed, what seemed to be a secondary, unspoken agenda slowly came to light. Part of this agenda, from what I could piece together inferentially, involved politics in the Vajrayana sect based on East-West and other communication problems. Apparently there were Western teachers who felt that the Dalai Lama needed to be better informed of what was happening in Vajrayana communities. Like all powerful people in positions of high authority, he is no doubt somewhat insulated by his Tibetan advisors and government officials. This conference, organized by an American Vajrayana teacher who persuaded the Dalai Lama to serve as its Spiritual Advisor, was a way for Western teachers to speak to the Dalai Lama directly and frankly.

Obviously the Dalai Lama had not been fully aware of the morale and other problems of the Western monastic Sangha, nor of the blatant sexism that has troubled so many Western practitioners. Neither did he seem to know about some Tibetan lamas and rinpoches who have succumbed to sexual and other misconduct. In fact, the Dalai Lama had inadvertently endorsed one of them, in effect, by appearing with him last year in a large public ceremony in the United States. Having then accepted an invitation to another such event with him this year, he needed to be informed of the character of the lama. When he came to sense the hesitation of the participants to speak openly in our daily sessions, he urged us not to hold back, and even to speak with him privately if necessary. I never learned of the denouement of this sub-plot to the conference.

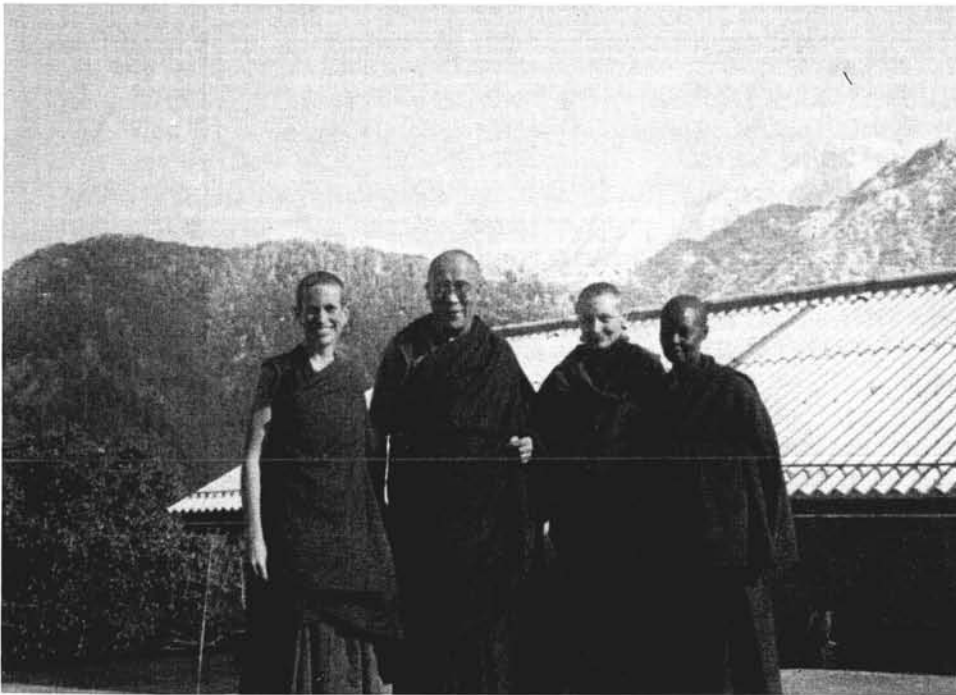
My Vajrayana colleagues suggested, convincingly, that the Dalai Lama's presence may have

been indispensable to the success of this pan-Buddhist meeting. Few if any other Buddhists alive could bring together teachers from not only the different Vajrayana lineages, but the Zen and Theravada as well. He is worshipped by millions of Tibetans, and commands the respect of Buddhists and non-Buddhists the world over for his non-sectarian, meta-religious teaching of universal responsibility, love, compassion, and kindness. But far more important—and rare—he embodies these qualities, demonstrating each day, as he has for years, the great strength of compassion rooted in wisdom. Like Kannon herself, he hears the cries of the world and reaches out tirelessly to help and serve.

On the title page of the booklet each of us had been provided on arrival in Dharamsala, a short quote of the Dalai Lama suggested the purpose of our meeting: "The Dharma needs to adapt to the West." A self-evident statement, it would seem, and one that left the question of how. But for anyone who might also ask who is to guide this process, the Dalai Lama offered his own answer unequivocally: "It must be Westerners." Here again was the wisdom to recognize that, global though his perspective may be, as a Tibetan he cannot teach Westerners how to adapt the Buddha's timeless truth to their

countries. That work will have to fall to those of us native to North and South America, Europe, and other countries in which Buddhism is struggling to take root.

As Buddhism spread through Asia over the course of twenty-five centuries, it assumed widely different forms from country to country. In each case, this was the result of a long, often painful process of trial and error, proving, as T. S. Eliot said, that "Tradition...cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour." Now with its great leap to the West, Buddhism faces its greatest-ever test: finding its own, occidental shape—without being misshapen in the process. This may be a task too perilous for any individual working in isolation. When I bade farewell to my twenty-one newfound Dharma sisters and brothers, after seven days together, I told them, in all sincerity, that I hoped to stay in touch with them for the next four decades at least. This was said not just out of my respect and affection for them, but out of the recognition that gathering in non-sectarian meetings such as these to work together through our shared experience may come to be seen as one of the West's main contributions to the Dharma.



His Holiness the Dalai Lama, with three Tibetan Buddhist nuns who attended the Dharamsala conference. The nun to his right is Ven. Thubten Chodron, an American currently residing and teaching in Seattle. To his left are Ven. Anila Tenzin Palmo, and Ven. Tenzin Yonten.



Conference participants and observers, outside the Dalai Lama's audience chamber.



The town of Dharamsala. The building to the right is a Tibetan Buddhist temple adjacent to the Dalai Lama's compound.

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AN OPEN LETTER

On March 16-19, 1993, a meeting was held in Dharamsala, India, between His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and a group of twenty-two Western Dharma teachers from the major Buddhist traditions in Europe and America. Also present were the Tibetan lamas Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche, Panchen Otrul Rinpoche and Amchok Rinpoche. The aim of the meeting was to discuss openly a wide range of issues concerning the transmission of the Buddhadharma to Western lands.

After four days of presentations and discussions we agreed on the following points:

1. Our first responsibility as Buddhists is to work towards creating a better world for all forms of life. The promotion of Buddhism as a religion is a secondary concern. Kindness and compassion, the furthering of peace and harmony, as well as tolerance and respect for other religions, should be the three guiding principles of our actions.
2. In the West, where so many different Buddhist traditions exist side by side, one needs to be constantly on one's guard against the danger of sectarianism. Such a divisive attitude is often the result of failing to understand or appreciate anything outside one's own tradition. Teachers from all schools would therefore benefit greatly from studying and gaining some practical experience of the teachings of other traditions.
3. Teachers should also be open to beneficial influences from secular and other religious traditions. For example, the insights and techniques of contemporary psychotherapy can often be of great value in reducing suffering experienced by students. At the same time, efforts to develop psychologically oriented practices from within the existing Buddhist traditions should be encouraged.
4. An individual's position as a teacher arises in dependence on the request of his or her students, not simply on being appointed as such by a higher authority. Great care must therefore be exercised by the student in selecting an appropriate teacher. Sufficient time must be given to making this choice, which should be based on personal investigation, reason and experience. Students should be warned against the dangers of falling prey to charisma, charlatanism or exoticism.
5. Particular concern was expressed about unethical conduct among teachers. In recent years both Asian and Western teachers have been involved in scandals concerning sexual misconduct with their students, abuse of alcohol and drugs, misappropriation of funds, and misuse of power. This has resulted in widespread damage both to the Buddhist community and the individuals involved. Each student must be encouraged to take responsible measures to confront teachers with unethical aspects of their conduct. If the teacher shows no sign of reform, students should not hesitate to publicize any unethical behaviour of which there is irrefutable

evidence. This should be done irrespective of other beneficial aspects of his or her work and of one's spiritual commitment to that teacher. It should also be made clear in any publicity that such conduct is not in conformity with Buddhist teachings. No matter what level of spiritual attainment a teacher has, or claims to have, reached, no person can stand above the norms of ethical conduct. In order for the Buddhadharma not to be brought into disrepute and to avoid harm to students and teachers, it is necessary that all teachers at least live by the five lay precepts. In cases where ethical standards have been infringed, compassion and care should be shown towards both teacher and student.

6. Just as the Dharma has adapted itself to many different cultures throughout its history in Asia, so is it bound to be transformed according to conditions in the West. Although the principles of the Dharma are timeless, we need to exercise careful discrimination in distinguishing between essential teachings and cultural trappings. However, confusion may arise due to various reasons. There may be a conflict in loyalty between commitment to one's Asian teachers and responsibility to one's Western students. Likewise, one may encounter disagreement about the respective value of monastic and lay practice. Furthermore, we affirm the need for equality between the sexes in all aspects of Buddhist theory and practice.

The Western teachers were encouraged by His Holiness to take greater responsibility in creatively resolving the issues that were raised. For many, His Holiness's advice served as a profound confirmation of their own feelings, concerns and actions.

In addition to being able to discuss issues frankly with His Holiness, the conference served as a valuable forum for teachers from different traditions to exchange views. We are already planning future meetings with His Holiness and will invite other colleagues who were not present in Dharamsala to participate in the on-going process. His Holiness intends to invite more heads of different Asian Buddhist traditions to attend future meetings.

The proceedings of the meeting will be disseminated to the wider public by means of articles, a report, a book, as well as audio and video recordings.

For further information and comments, please write to the above address.

Signed:

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