

George Mason University

From the Selected Works of Lester R. Kurtz

September, 2005

Dalai Lama Darshan

Lester R. Kurtz, *George Mason University*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lester_kurtz/41/

Dalai Lama *Darshan*
Lester R. Kurtz
University of Texas at Austin
Ahimsa Nonviolence 1 (September-October 2005):

On The 21st of October 2005, I encountered the Dalai Lama, along with 11,000 other people, mostly university students, deep in the heart of Texas. For about an hour and a half, a basketball court full of people, some of whom had waited several early morning hours for free tickets to the event, sat enraptured as he spoke. Some strained to understand as a little man in monk's robes and a large-brimmed cap to shade against the bright lights, spoke in less-than-perfect English of the importance of internal and external disarmament, of compassion for others and one's personal responsibility for bringing about peace.

As one of my students later observed, the huge crowd filing out of the stadium was unusually polite, motioning others to go in front of them, smiling at and greeting strangers. They were glowing from the encounter, because they had experienced what Asians call a *darshan* – a glimpse of the sacred, or what comparative religions scholars call a *theophany*, an encounter with the sacred.

The idea is widespread, even in modern secular cultures, where young people pay large sums of money and time to see rock stars and celebrities, and the wealthy pay \$1,000 a plate for tasteless food at a dinner with the president or some other major political figure. Being in the presence of someone important is somehow empowering; the presence of someone holy is both empowering and inspiring.

That is why it is important for us to lift up the peaceful heroes of human history, to tell the stories that should be retold again and again, the history that should be repeated. Women and men of courage stand up for what is right and fight without rancor or violence to promote justice and peace, to stem the tides of destruction. Remembering their example, reliving their stories, makes us better people and the world a better place.

My first *darshan* of the Dalai Lama was in

1990 when I traveled to Dharamsala, the Tibetan exile capital, to interview him as part of my research on Gandhi's legacies. I went with an attitude of respect, but did not feel compelled to follow the protocols of calling him "Your Holiness" and so forth, but then I am not Buddhist so was not required to do so. By the end of my time together with him, some forty-five minutes in his office, I was in awe. He clearly lives on a different plane than I do, and I was touched by his presence. I had not expected to be so impressed, but his demeanor is infectious. Now I would be comfortable calling him "Your Holiness," because I recognize that he is holy.

What is remarkable is not only his holiness, but also his humility as well as his ability to connect with common people from all walks of life, nationalities, cultures, and creeds. When I walked from the waiting room into the hallway leading to his office, he met me just inside the door, rather than greeting me from behind an imposing desk. He smiled, squeezed my arm, and thanked me for coming all that way to spend time with him. It was hardly the reception I had expected from someone routinely acknowledged as holy, when greeting a simple sociologist with no claims to special insight, let alone respect beyond that of another human being.

Later I was part of a group of about two hundred scholars at the Buddhist-Christian Studies Association meeting in Chicago where he remarked "I should be more mindful," when he was so far away from the microphone that some people could not hear him well. Then, I was one of 5,000 whom he led through a series of reflections for three days on peace, from the internal to the global, at a Tibet House-organized conference on "The Power of Nonviolence" held in San Francisco.

In each of these occasions, I witnessed a broad spectrum of people being touched personally and persuasively by his presence even more than his

words. His message is relatively clear and simple, his demeanor humble, and his impact profound. It is not possible, of course, to represent the experience accurately in prose, but I do have a transcript of the interview that I have not yet shared with a broader public (although my students have been reading it for the past several years). Here are some excerpts from the interview.

Dalai Lama: I think, from my childhood, due to my previous karmic form or previous practice, that much I can say; I have a fairly good heart. Passion, compassion, these things, always I can say, were part of my nature. Then, I think more about compassion: war or violence means hurting someone. So, in principle, that's always bad.

Then, for practical reasons, the problem, I think for the human being, is something different than the problem with an animal. [For] animals, who have less intelligence ... force may be acceptable, or may be suitable. ... Unless you change the other's mind, you see: simple physical change through bullying will not work. Even if you achieve something through force, physical force ... very often it creates a situation, because of the other party, you see, mentally, they're not happy. ... So, therefore, as soon as another opportunity happens, then they'll take retaliation.

And then, basically, I've always believed violence is against human nature. Human nature, I believe, is closer to compassion, affection. My reason is this: this body, the human body, well appreciates others' affection. You see, for example, it's quite clear that when we're born, our first act ... is sucking milk, mother's milk. So, milk, I think, is a symbol of affection. Without milk, the child cannot survive. And already, according to scientists think now, after birth the next two weeks are the most crucial in the development of the child's brain. During that period, the most important factor is the mother's physical touch. By that time, the child distinguishes his or her own

mother, has begun to recognize her. But the body itself, the substance of this body itself, appreciates the others' physical affection.

Then again, you see, while we are talking, if we discuss with a smile, a friendly attitude, I think our conversation will go in a deeper way. If our conversation has some elements of suspicion, a little uneasiness, our conversation may not go well. So you see, I think the atmosphere of this room, if we remain friendly, without any fear or suspicion – just open, as if we're old friends.... The atmosphere itself is something calm, something good, something soft. If we argue, shout, then if some person is coming, that person is immediately feeling tense.

That is the way of human nature, I feel. Now, the earliest example I always see: just at this moment, I think of the world. Perhaps at just this moment, perhaps 100,000 people are being killed, for a maximum, I think of 100,000.... Killing is out of anger; a maximum of 100,000 may take place at this moment. That is out of anger, out of fear. ... At the same time, at this moment, several hundred thousand are under the care of affection.

Several millions of children and several millions of patients, several millions of aged people are taken care of by affection, or are living under affection. So, therefore, you see, make the comparison. Of course, when we look at the newspaper or radio, the striking news is someone is killed here or there. So, ... We think "Oh, the world at large is violent; murder is something dominant." We get that impression. But if we calculate, ... I think the dominant force is compassion, affection. So, therefore, I feel that violence, bloodshed, is something essentially against human nature. And furthermore, if that action brings us such certain results, that even if it's against human nature, it's all right [if] it brings us something good. But that's the very question. Through

violence, you may achieve something, my may solve some problem, but that is not the proper solution. Like the Kashmir problem: the first method or way to solve the Kashmir problem was through war. So, this is mentally not solved. So, after forty years still, the problem remains very alive. If, 40 years ago the Kashmir problem had been solved through dialogue, through human understanding, through human way or approach, I think today there would be no more problem. Even if there were some problems, it might not be so serious. This I think.

And also, say like the Romanian ... democratic movement. Because of ... its having very difficult circumstances, some blood shed happens. So, when we think about the democracy movement in Romania, we feel not so much has opened up; [there is] not so much to rejoice in. ... The freedom movement, when we think about the Yugoslavian democratic movement, about Hungary, about Poland, essentially the same movement, the same aim. But in the Romanian case, the movement involved much bloodshed. So, you see, we feel slightly less happy. So, ... because the method used more violence, therefore, we get that kind of impression or that kind of feeling. Therefore, although from the Buddhist viewpoint the method is not so important, the result or end, and motivation – these two things are the major factor.... However, if we follow the violence method, then that method spoils the beautiful aim. So, therefore, I always feel in the human business, nonviolence is the appropriate or proper way. But that's my feeling.

LK: if you had a large enough army, would you take back Tibet from the Chinese?

Dalai Lama: as I said earlier, if I were on the stronger side, I may not have these feelings. I don't know. Nobody knows; even myself I don't know. [Laughs] No, I say, now, after so many years of experience, today if I have ... a strong army and weapons, which can challenge Chinese forces, I think most probably I would

not do it. I hope [not] [He laughs and takes hold of my arm]. A difficult temptation [laughs]. After all, I achieved the Nobel Peace Prize, so if I do something different, then that award will not be there [laughs]. I've never heard of anyone having to return it.

...

LK: some peace activists argue that *Satyagraha* provides a moral equivalent of war... and that someday nonviolence campaigns, *Satyagraha*, may be able to replace war, that people can use them instead of war, instead of military campaigns. What is your impression?

Dalai Lama: I think that's right, that's the right thing. I feel again, it's in human nature, and especially in certain individual cases, we may not appreciate it. In that case, some kind of pressure is necessary. Then, bloodshed is too much. Then, although it is not good essentially, ... when you need some kind of pressure, then the best thing is civil disobedience, the strike.

... [Take] my own case, the Tibetan case. The moment China's government is ready to accept our complaint, then there is no need to issue demonstrations. ... We explain the true situation, and all complain. ... The Chinese ... only lecture to us.... We know better than the Chinese, but suppose they know better than us and ... they say, all these complaints are expressed by the Tibetan people; they say, these are some harmful reactionaries. There is no other alternative other than to express to the Chinese government, to let them know about the true situation about Tibet. The only thing is, the people themselves must show, express, their deep sorrow. So, under these circumstances, the only proper thing is to raise their ... concerns to the outside world.

...

LK: In what kinds of actions would you be prepared to participate for world peace?

Dalai Lama: sometimes I feel the peace movement is getting more hostile, more negative, more emotional. So, that ... I don't think is the proper way. The proper way is first [to have] peace of mind. Through peace of mind, then there is a movement for world peace. So, ... more people who are concerned about world peace; it seems not sufficient. ... First, [our concern should be about] mental peace and how to get mental peace. We have to realize that men destroy mental peace. ... Peace means disarmament or no war; peace means not a mere absence of war, but no more danger, no threat. For the last forty years, Europe had technical peace, but not proper peace, because with every nuclear weapon people would not get security. Therefore, peace means not the mere absence of war. It means no bloodshed of war and [also] happiness and satisfaction. Therefore, disarmament is very important for world peace and for that – without mental peace – world peace cannot be achieved. Therefore, for mental peace [we need] mental disarmament. Usually people [think] anger is something good for us. I think this is [wrong] we can develop certain techniques to reduce anger. So, ... I feel world peace very much lies with education, proper education. So, I prefer to work for proper education: how to make the human mind, to shape the human mind in [the proper way]....

LK: What is the role of religion in politics?

Dalai Lama: I think the politician should be more religious minded. For those people who make hermitage, it doesn't matter. That person is not doing much wrong to society but those politicians who are involved in public lie, ... many people suffer. They are telling lies, then people [are] deceived.

LK: Many people say that Gandhi's ideas are good in the abstract, but don't work in the world of practical politics. What do you think?

Dalai Lama: If we leave the concept of nonviolence as the mere absence of violence, ...

but that's not the case. I think Gandhi was no doubt a very practical person. True nonviolence, he pushed something. He adopted certain methods; ... he created some disturbance for the British. And finally, the British withdrew. This is nonviolence: simply not harming the British and shouting independence? Not that way. Although I don't know much, I think that giving independence to India by the British [was] not by mercy, ... not by compassionate attitude – I think they were compelled to do it. That means, Gandhi created some problems for them, and finally they decided it is better to hand over the power to India's hands. So that means, nonviolence is not merely the absence of violence, but a productive force.

LK: Wasn't Gandhi showing his anger at the British?

Dalai Lama: ... I saw the [Attenborough film "Gandhi"; in his] contact with the British people, British authorities, he was very friendly. ... [Also, there was a scene with a journalist] and with [a] big smile, he closed the journalist's mouth with his own hand [laughs]. You see, a very friendly manner, but also very effective = not shouting, but simply in a very friendly manner, closed it just like that.

LK: what is the role of religious leaders in bringing about world peace?

Dalai Lama: I don't know. But, what I'm doing, either I can contribute in a small way. That's my responsibility, my duty. I'm not thinking that I'm the leader or something. ... Every individual has responsibility for a better world, a happier world, because this is our world, isn't it? ... So, the world is our world; we are here. If something happens, some unpleasant things happen on this planet, we will suffer. So, in that sense, I try always as much as I can.

Much of what His Holiness said in his office in the Indian Himalayas he repeated fifteen years later in a stadium in Austin, Texas. What he had to say

coincided with how he said it. His simple and profound ideas of inner and outer disarmament, of gentle struggle, reflect in his own demeanor. His Buddhist mindfulness of the suffering of the cosmos appears in the intimately personal way he encounters an individual in his office or 11,000

people gathered to hear a celebrity speak. He comes across not as an important personage demanding recognition but a fellow human being requesting a moment of our time. This is the kind of leadership the world needs.