

A Conversation with the Dalai Lama

by Neil Douglas-Klotz

(Editor's note: The following article, first published in the Sufi magazine **Bismillah** in 1980, arose from a meeting in March 1979 between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and members of a group of pilgrims from the Sufi Islamia Ruhaniat Society visiting Turkey, Pakistan and India, led by Sheikh Vasheest Davenport and Murshida Fatima Lassar. The meeting took place at the Dalai Lama's residence in Dharmasala, Northern India. At that time, the Dalai Lama was relatively unknown in the West and we did not find it difficult to obtain an interview with him.)

Arriving in a pouring drizzle that turned at times to snow and then back to rain, our group huddled under the awning that protected the porch of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's residence. Far from the magnificence of the porches of the Potala, the traditional palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Tibet, this porch led to the entrance of a home that seemed more like a glorified army officer's barracks--no more or less prestigious than many large buildings in India.

Yet, there were differences. Although usually unobtrusive, Indian soldiers carefully patrolled the grounds and the Indian army made its presence felt by searching each member of our group as we waited to see His Holiness. They had obviously done it many times before. For the Dalai Lama is more than just a spiritual leader; he is the political leader of 6 million people whose entire country had been invaded and annexed by its neighbor China, despite the carefully-worded resolutions of condemnation of the United Nations. There was no doubt that the Indians did not want any international incidents within their borders nor did they want any foreign conspiracies to weaken their already tenuous grip on diplomatic relations with China.

When the Dalai Lama fled from Tibet to India in 1959 following the Chinese takeover, many Tibetans were able to follow him. but many more were caught behind and now cannot leave. In McCleod Ganj on the outskirts of Dharmasala, surrounded by snowy, 10,000-foot peaks, those who left found new homes and started businesses. The Tibetans we met were overjoyed that we had come to see the Dalai Lama and opened their hearts to us. In a climate that ranges from frigid to cold, the Tibetans seem able to substitute a sunny disposition for modern space heating.

The Dalai Lama met us in a large, comfortably-furnished room with his secretary and translator Tenzin Geyche in attendance. After greetings were exchanged, the Dalai Lama immediately launched into an enthusiastic barrage of questions concerning where we had been, what places in India we had visited, which ones were important for our spiritual path, what practices and prayers we did and from which branch our order of Sufism we stemmed. What impressed me most was his clear, piercing intelligence, warmth and sense of humor. Struggling at times to express everything he wished to us in English, he often bubbled over in Tibetan, turned to his translator for help and then chimed in with an energetic

counterpoint to make sure his meaning was clear.

In response we explained how our teacher, Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, had been confirmed both as a Sufi Murshid and as a Zen Master and how his teacher Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan had brought Sufism to the West in 1910. We also gave him a copy of the prayers of Hazrat Inayat Khan and sung the Universal Worship round, which uses sacred phrases from six major world religions. Soon he was quoting our own prayers back to us in response to our questions, as the following exchange shows.

Q: *Over the ages Sufism has tended in most societies to be secret and as much underground possible, with some few notable exceptions. I know that in your tradition--when you were in Tibet--you took care of the religious needs of the people but you also interacted socially and politically with them. Our teacher, Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, felt very strongly that we should affect the society in which we live and bring mystical practice into manifestation for the service of others, to extend the Sanga in that way without putting a particular name on it. So my main question is: how can one bring the fruit of spiritual practice into the world via social means or political reform or other means?*

A: (Leafing through the booklet of Sufi prayers and reading): "Most Merciful and Compassionate God, give us thy Great Goodness..." We'll! That's the answer! To spread this quality of God in some way--not power, not wealth, but mercy and compassion. "Give us Thy great goodness." It means, I think, that we ourselves must follow this goodness, mercy, compassion, as much as we can. We sometimes say that the Buddhists do not accept a God, do not accept a creator, but whether you accept God or not, it doesn't matter. The important thing is that we must follow the right path, that is, compassion, mercy, love, respect for others, concern to relieve the suffering of others. So now, the matter of the way: with these good motives, work as a politician, as an engineer, as an administrator, as a teacher, as lawyer, as a scientist, as a doctor and so forth. The aim is welfare for mankind. If you help in society with this motive, that's the greatest service for God.

Q: *Maybe the question is, in addition, how to act both as a mystical organization and one that works in the world.*

A: For the purification of yourself and for spiritual development, you should follow the path in which you believe and this is the most effective method, since you accept it. But when you are dealing with society, what you believe in or what you practice may not be suitable for everyone. You must make an effort to take the broad view and simply try to open (gesturing from the heart). We must emphasize the search for truth rather than the method. Rather than Buddhist or non-Buddhist, Hindu or Christian or Muslim.

People who are following different sects are practicing their own methods, their own mysticism--by different yogic methods, by different philosophies, different theologies, different faiths, different prayers, different names of God--it doesn't matter. Now the question arises: how

does one talk to someone? You do not talk about these methods or structures, you talk about happiness. I think here it says (again searching the Sufi prayers), "the perfection of Love, Harmony and Beauty, All-powerful Creator, Sustainer, Judge and Forgiver of our shortcomings"--the sense of brotherhood and compassion. When we talk about these things, there is no conflict. Those who accept God as a creator believe that all sentient beings, all human beings come from one and are in the true sense brothers. Now the Buddhist or Jain does not accept God as a creator but equally he believes that all sentient beings, all human beings are equal, that there is no difference because of color or caste or because of a system--all are the same people who have equal rights. And in order to make a true common effort as a Buddhist you must profess to believe in any faith so that you can set an example for others.

Q: *You said Buddhists don't believe in God. We use the word God, as an English translation of the name Allah and Allah---the body of Allah---is all of the known and unknown universe. The emotions of Allah are all that is unseen, and the realization of Allah is that which is beyond comprehension. The Sufis don't really have a God as you may think of it, but...*

A: The ultimate truth rather than a being.

Q: *Ultimate truth--which can be experienced.*

A: One may have different interpretations, but there is no difference--ultimate truth or ultimate reality. In Buddhism there is something like ultimate reality, everything exists in that nature. They are in essence identical--Buddhist and Muslim. Certain interpretations give a wider perspective.

Q: *The man who wrote these prayers said a Sufi is one who can see from the point of view of another.*

A: When we talk about the essence of each religion, they are the same. When we talk about philosophy and these other things, then there are differences--there are many points to argue.

Q: *In the West, the question has been asked: What is the point of philosophy? Because ultimately, philosophy is just a set of words that distorts truth.*

A: I'm not sure of the English meaning of that word--philosophy.

Q: *Well, philosophy as it is practiced in the West assumes that one, in words, can say the truth.*

A: In Buddhism, philosophy is a term which explains the subtle meaning of nature. So if a philosophy is a true philosophy, then it must be proven, either by seeing or by experience. Then you can accept that that philosophy is something meaningful, something based on truth because you can experience truth because of it. Now in Buddhism we accept that,

there are many different philosophies and even amongst the Buddhist philosophies there are contradictions. Given two conflicting philosophies, both may have a quotation from Buddha's words to support them. Therefore, Buddha himself told us that you should not rely on my word, you should go investigate through your own being.

Q: *Do you see a time when you will re-enter Tibet?*

A: Yes. I always believe. As long as human beings' will power or mental determination is there, we will be there. For the last 20 years since we came here, it seems that from our side, from the Tibetan side, that we are just a handful of people--only 6 million. The other side is more than 800 million. The other side appears very powerful compared with us. Put in the past 20 years, they've been most unreliable. What they say is white today, they have to say is black tomorrow. What they've said is black, today, they'll have to say is white again the next time. We are more definite.

For about 20 years they have carried on with gun-power. Their whole practice comes from the philosophy that power comes from the barrel of a gun--the famous Mao Tse-tung quotation. But somehow I think it is still here (points to his heart). For the past 20 years we have not changed, we are just repeating one word, just one idea. The struggle for our freedom, for our rights, for a society based on justice--human justice-- and reason is more powerful than the power that comes from a gun. So I have great hope.

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