

The Dalai Lama addresses Vietnamese Buddhists in Dharamsala

Tâm Diệu

It was a great joy and an especially fortunate encounter for our group of pilgrims visiting the holy sites of Buddhism to have the honor of meeting the Dalai Lama and receiving a wonderful teaching from him. We were happy to hear these nourishing words of Dharma, and fortunate because, without an appointment, we were able to meet him when he was extremely busy with both religious and political responsibilities.

The Vietnamese Buddhist group was led by Venerable Thích Thông Hạnh, deputy abbot of Trúc Lâm Thường Chiếu Meditation Monastery in Đồng Nai Province, accompanied by Venerable Thích Trúc Thông Phổ, deputy abbot of Trúc Lâm Tây Thiên Meditation Monastery in Vĩnh Phúc Province, together with monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists from Vietnam, Australia, Canada, and the United States.

Because the pilgrimage organizer had not applied for an appointment four months in advance, our unexpected arrival was turned down three times by the scheduling officer at the Dalai Lama's office. However, thanks to the tact and persistence of the nun Thích nữ Liên Quý, a doctoral student in Buddhist studies at Delhi University and the group's Vietnamese-speaking guide, his office finally agreed that he would receive us at noon.

Besides being the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama was also a head of state. Visitors seeking to meet him in his private residence therefore had to undergo very strict security checks by the federal police of the Republic of India, with a lengthy wait. Nevertheless, our yellow-robed monks and nuns and gray-clad lay Buddhists happily stood in single file, passing one by one through security screening and searches of their persons and belongings, as at the residences of other heads of state or at international airports in the United States.

At around noon, he came out in front of his residence to welcome us and personally gave each person a picture of the Buddha statue enshrined in the great temple at Bodh Gaya. As our group was very large, he then posed for photographs with us in several smaller groups. Finally, he gave a short Dharma teaching lasting about five minutes.

After briefly welcoming the Vietnamese Buddhists, he immediately said: "The Buddha is not a creator. He was an ordinary human being who practiced and attained perfect awakening. In Buddhism, all things and phenomena arise through causes and conditions, through the operation of the law of cause and effect."



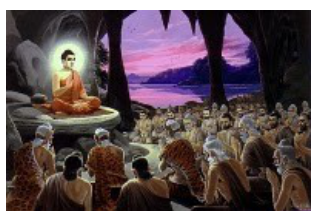
He continued: “To achieve true happiness, we need a peaceful mind. To have a peaceful mind, we need love and compassion. How can we develop love and compassion? Simply thinking about them is not enough. We must transform our thoughts and actions in everyday life. The key to a peaceful world, and to personal happiness and inner peace, is the development of love and compassion.” He also reminded us that “each of us has Buddha-nature and must make an effort to practice so as to become awakened, as the Buddha did.” Nor did he forget to encourage Vietnamese Buddhists “to read and practice the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra, the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra, especially the sections on compassion, wisdom, the perfections or pāramitās, and emptiness.”

I have attended several of his teachings for Vietnamese Buddhists in the United States. He always began by advising them to preserve their own existing tradition of practice rather than pursue another tradition. On this particular occasion, however, he did not say this. Instead, he repeated twice within his short teaching: “The Buddha is not a creator.”

Perhaps this was an important message. He may simply have wished to remind Vietnamese Buddhists not to regard the Buddha as an all-powerful divine creator who can bestow blessings or inflict misfortune on living beings. Rather than merely imploring and bowing before him, we must strive diligently in our own practice. I do not know whether the Dalai Lama has the ability to read minds, but he seemed to understand the minds of Vietnamese Buddhists, most of whom place great emphasis on faith, devotion, prostrations, ritual repentance, and prayer.

In this brief, unprepared teaching, he repeated the words “creator,” “cause and effect,” and “practice” twice each, and “compassion” several times. He also reminded Vietnamese Buddhists to read and practice compassion, wisdom, the perfections, and emptiness as taught in the Great Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra. He did not elaborate, but the content of his teaching seemed to convey three reminders:

1. Do not regard the Buddha as a creator with the power to grant blessings or bring misfortune.
2. Have deep, enduring, and firm confidence in Buddha-nature, in everyone’s capacity for awakening and Buddhahood, and in cause and effect. Only diligent personal practice can transform karmic results.
3. Strive to practice the Buddha’s teachings in everyday life by developing love and compassion and practicing the perfections.



In just five minutes, he had outlined a path of practice for Buddhists, especially Vietnamese Buddhists who emphasize faith, devotion, worship, and prayer. When he finished speaking, he shook hands in farewell with several people standing nearby. His bodyguards escorted him back into his residence, leaving our group wishing we could

have stayed longer. Those of us at the back of the group slowly made our way down the gentle slope toward the gate.

My wristwatch showed 12:30 p.m. on March 11, 2011. Traveling five hundred kilometers from Delhi and waiting more than four hours simply to meet him and hear him speak for five minutes was an extraordinary experience, difficult to imagine in ordinary life. What a pity it would be to let his words pass like a fleeting breeze instead of putting them into daily practice.

Along both sides of the slope, yellow and red flowers competed in color, announcing the return of spring to the heights of Dharamsala. Spring returned with Losar, the Tibetan New Year festival, and with the fifty-second anniversary of exile. Happy Losar to our relatives and brothers living far from home, waiting for the day they can return to their native land.



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Written in Dharamsala on March 12, 2011