



The Dalai Lama in a eucalyptus smoke haze

A Journalist Undone

By Heather Kennedy

BEING publicly reprimanded in front of more than 2,000 people by the man one regards as a god in human form is a pretty devastating experience.

I can guarantee this because His Holiness the Dalai Lama did just that to me when he visited the Australian provincial city of Bendigo

on June 7 to bless the site of the Great Stupa of Universal Compassion [modeled on the Great Stupa of Gyantse in Tibet and, at 50-meters in height, designed to be the largest stupa in the Western world when it is completed.]

It was an episode I will not quickly forget.

Of course it may be that the other 2,000 or so did not all realize to whom the shattering rebuke was directed – indeed, some others present may have been under the absurd illusion that His Holiness was admonishing them.

But I know better.

First, a brief description of the circumstances leading up to this crushing incident ...

It is obvious, to even the dumbest bear, that mystery and magic surround the Dalai Lama. His physical presence is luminous. There is an incomparable, quite visible energy field around him. He literally glows. And the purity of his spirit changes the air.

All this is so manifestly self-evident it barely needs mention.

However, there are other aspects to His Holiness which are truly bewildering, and why I personally believe he is indeed a manifestation of a deity – and far, far from being just a human being, even if a totally enlightened one.

Small examples of the immediate, physical impact he had on me during two meetings in 1996 – one totally “lucky” and blessed and unexpected, the second a formal introduction: The first time was at Melbourne’s airport, when several of us went to greet him. Astonishingly – because even then security was heavy – I remember exactly the warmth of his hand and the texture of his skin when, behaving like an ageing groupie, I put my hand through his open car window and he briefly took it.

Now I probably have shaken literally thousands of hands in the eleven years since then – but I certainly do not remember any of them. Yet I still recall, with absolute clarity, the sensation of the Dalai Lama’s hand.

It was a similar experience when later that week I and twenty or thirty other fortunate people were invited to a private meeting with His Holiness. This time the feeling was less focused but more like being enveloped in an utterly benign, supremely kind cloud.

So when *Mandala* editor Nancy Patton asked me to accompany her to the blessing of the Great Stupa site this year, I was already vulnerable to the slightest breath His Holiness uttered.

We stood beside the red carpet where His Holiness, having been given a traditional Tibetan welcome by Geshe Konchok Tsering, was then greeted with a “smoking” ceremony by members of the local Jarra Aboriginal people.

His Holiness gently took the hand of Jarra elder Uncle Brian Nelson, and the two elderly men bent over the eucalypt fire so the smoke could clear their spirits.

While this was going on, I checked the other members of our usually cynical media. Without exception, they were all smiling like fools. Of course, I wasn’t exactly doing what was to be expected of an old crime reporter. The moment His Holiness had stepped from his helicopter I had fought not to burst into tears.

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His Holiness was briefly taken away to rest and meditate before returning to give a short teaching and to consecrate a four-meter-high gold-leafed Guru Rinpoche statue, created at the urging of Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

Referring to his welcome by the Jarra representatives, he spoke about the connection that indigenous people have with the land, and how it is possible for the more “sophisticated” to lose that connection – then he began speaking of the importance of selflessness, kindness, and compassion.

It was 'round about then that I started getting tetchy with an elderly man nearby who had started talking. When a couple of my best glares had no effect, I snapped, “Would you please keep quiet?”

We were standing on a ledge at the back wall of the enclosure, with an uninterrupted view of His Holiness, who was seated on a throne on the raised stage. The man's younger

companion came toward me. I bent down. He said, “My friend has some problems. He doesn't mean to talk. He can't help it.”

I glanced at the older man. He gave me a sweet beam. I felt the size of an ant.

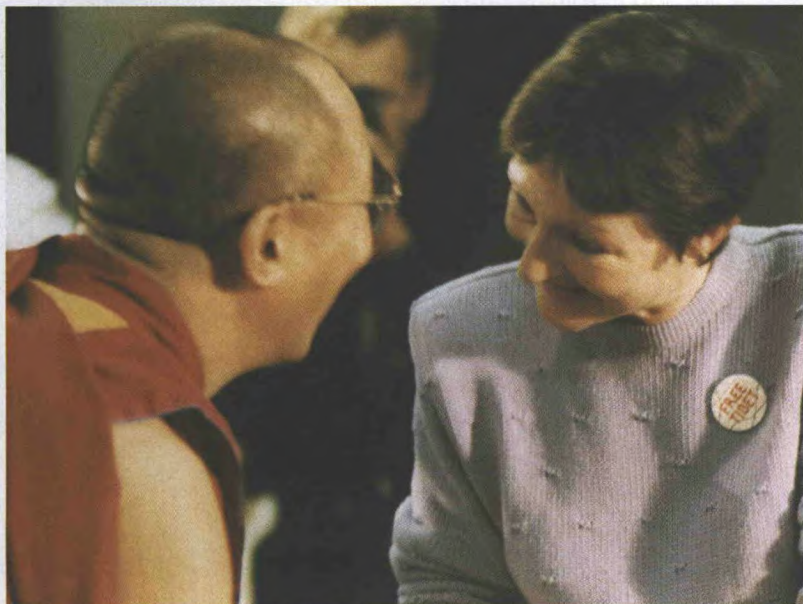
And then His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama looked straight at me – over the heads of 2,000 seated Australians – and delivered the rebuke.

“Self-cherishing is fine,” he said. “But not at the expense of others, not when you interfere with the rights of others, or remove their pleasures from them.” And he went on, “Acting and reacting on the basis of appearance is a mistake ... and often leads to disaster.”

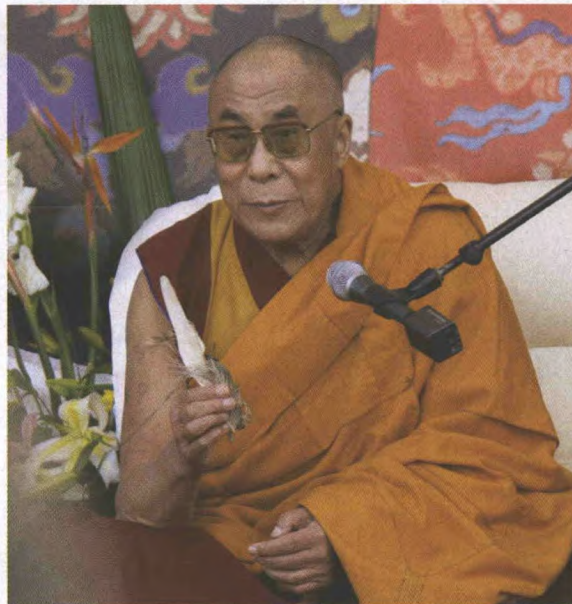
Afterward, all the people we spoke with swore blind that His Holiness had spoken directly to them during the teaching – and I am sure he did.

I am equally sure he didn't feel the need to tell me to pull my socks up, to be more compassionate and generous – and not to be so very, very selfish. ☸

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The Dalai Lama with Heather Kennedy, September 1996



On stage at the Great Stupa