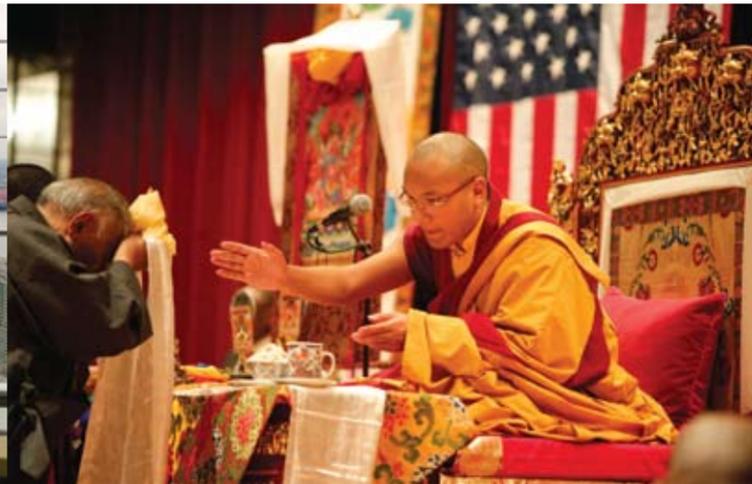


# “Kindness Is the Most Important Thing”

*The 17th Karmapa concludes his first visit to America*



*Viewing the Seattle skyline from the top of the Space Needle; offering blessings to the Tibetan community of New York and New Jersey. PHOTOS BY JAMES GRITZ*

THE 17TH KARMAPA, reincarnate leader of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, made international headlines when he was fourteen years old with his dramatic and dangerous escape from Tibet. This May, now twenty-two, he made his first-ever trip to the United States, teaching dharma in New York, Seattle, and Boulder, Colorado, and expressing a deep sense of connection with Americans that was reciprocated by the thousands who came to hear him. At a news conference at the conclusion of his two-week tour, he spoke of how it had transformed and inspired him. I had the honor of asking the opening questions. —MELVIN MCLEOD

*You've spoken about the freedom of Americans and how much that has impressed you. What were you referring to specifically?*

In general Westerners are very spacious and open-minded. I have seen this in my meetings with Westerners who come to see me in India. I really admire their directness, their forthrightness, their freedom. They say things to you directly and frankly, instead of holding back. There's a feeling of openness that I like very much, and I feel even more kinship with that spirit now that I have come to America.

*When I interviewed you last year in New Delhi for the Shambhala Sun's sister publication, Buddhadharma, you talked about the evo-*

*lution taking place in your life from your previous secular identity to becoming the Karmapa. How has this visit to the West changed your understanding of what it means to be the Karmapa?*

I think my appreciation for what it means to be the Karmapa has deepened since I have come to the United States. Previously, I had met Westerners in India and Tibet, but it's different to come here and see with my own eyes that there are thousands of people who are looking to me with hope. I have the sense that I have to stretch my arms out even further than I have stretched them before, that I have to widen my perspective even more than it had been before, keeping in mind all of the people throughout the world who have faith and hope toward the Karmapa. I'm encouraged to think in an even vaster way about all the people who live in different places and have different habits, and try to benefit them in accordance with their specific situations.

*Many people have been inspired by your song, "Aspiration for the World." Is the Buddhist approach to the environment different from the conventional way of thinking about it?*

The teachings of the Buddha are a source of benefit and happiness for all sentient beings. For people who follow the tradition of buddhadharma, this is a truth that we have great confidence in.

The strongest tradition of ethics in Buddhism is found in the monastic traditions, and there are very specific rules that ordained monks and nuns follow in order to protect and respect the environment. For example, monks and nuns are prohibited from cutting down trees. That's just one example of how respect for the environment is embedded in the ethical codes of Buddhism.

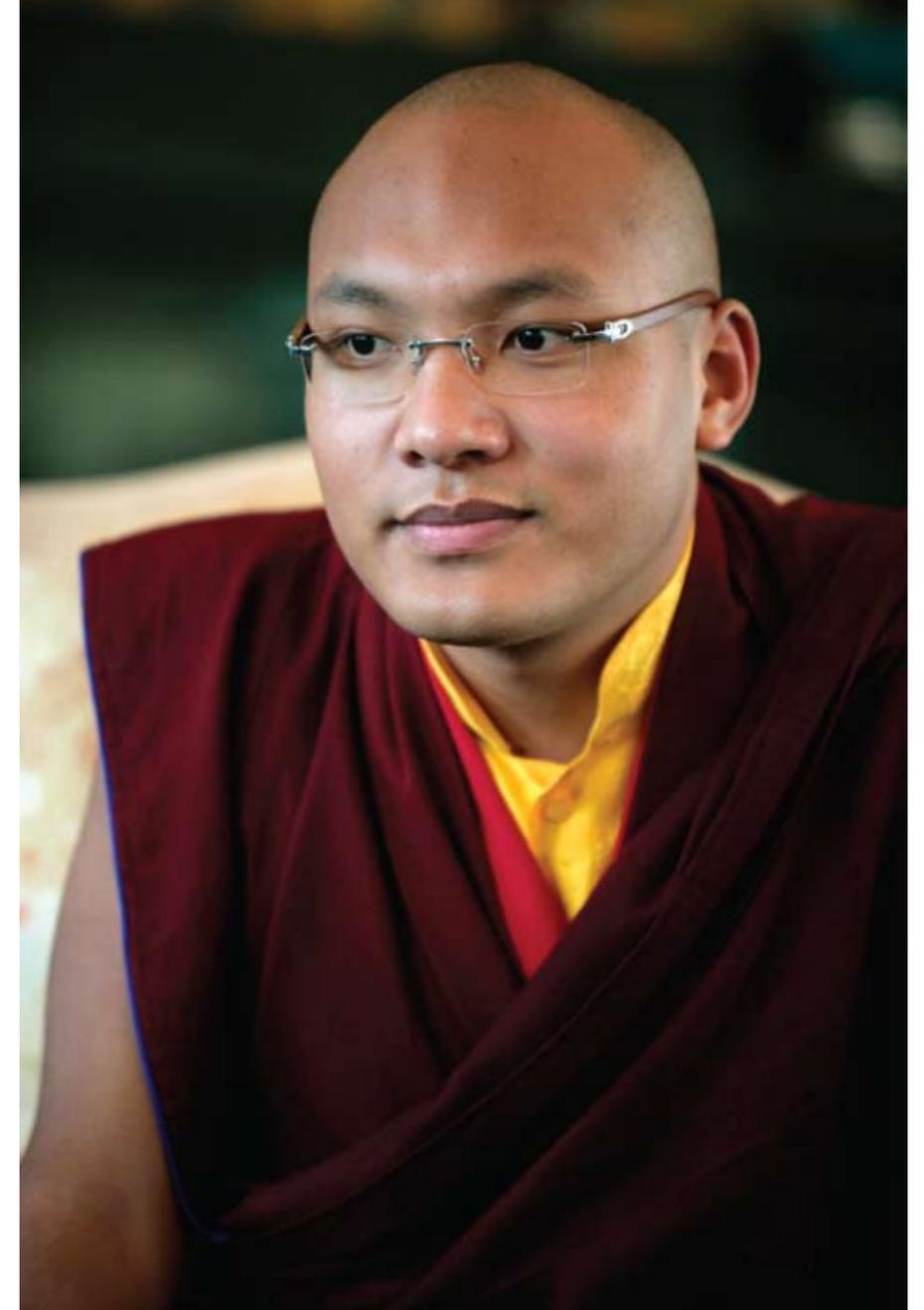
However, the main endeavor of Buddhists is to tame the mind in order to bring peace and well-being into the hearts of oneself and all sentient beings. This is a very important way to protect the environment. If we focus only on changing the external circumstances, we will never be able to fully succeed in saving and protecting the world. Because no matter how many changes we make on the outside, if our minds are not at peace, if they are disturbed and governed by self-centeredness, then that is always going to produce external disturbance in the world.

So the primary focus of people who follow the dharma is to bring peace and well-being into their own hearts and into the hearts of all sentient beings, transcending self-centeredness. This is the most important point for Buddhists and for all spiritual practitioners.

*There is a lot of speculation that you are being groomed to succeed the Dalai Lama as the leading face of Tibetan Buddhism in the world. What are your thoughts about that?*

The activity of His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been tremendously beneficial not only for the people of Tibet but for the entire world. His Holiness has been a source of inspiration and guidance in terms of how we may accomplish genuine peace and happiness. Therefore, it is important for us to continue the vision he has set forth.

This means we should all pray for the long life of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, but we must also prepare for the time after His Holiness passes away to ensure that his death does not mean



*The 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje*

the cessation of the vision that he has set into motion for the world. Therefore, everyone who is a student and a friend of the Dalai Lama has the responsibility to sustain his vision into the future. Since I have been recognized as an important spiritual teacher within Tibetan Buddhism, I'm kind of an obvious suspect for people to look to and say, "Well, we think he's going to be the successor," and so forth. But I can tell you that His Holiness is not looking only to me with hope for the future; he's looking to everyone with hope.

I am a student of His Holiness, and from that perspective, of course I'm going to do everything I can to preserve his spiritual legacy and continue his vision of peace and well-being in the world. But that's something that everyone has the responsibility to do; it's not something His Holiness is giving me alone.



The Karmapa conferring an Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig) initiation in Seattle

*This morning you taught on the ngondro, the traditional preliminary practices of Vajrayana Buddhism. Yet even then you said you wanted to make the teachings accessible. Where is the balance for you between Buddhist tradition and the need to communicate with contemporary Western audiences?*

There is no single, definitive tradition in the buddhadharma, because there are all kinds of sentient beings who have their own interests and dispositions. For that reason, there has to be a wide variety in methods for traversing the path. Mind is not a definite, concrete thing. For that reason, the methods for relating to the mind also cannot be concrete and universal.

The main objective of the dharma is to tame our minds—to bring peace and happiness to our minds—but there needs to be a wide variety of methods available for different sentient beings. For example, some beings might give rise to bodhichitta, the wish to attain enlightenment, through meditating on emptiness. The meditation on emptiness might be an avenue for them to connect with the altruistic heart of bodhichitta. On the other hand, other beings might not be able to connect with bodhichitta through contemplating emptiness. So there's no universal

rule, no definitive set of methods. Again, it leads back to the state of mind: since there's no definitive, universal state of mind, there can never be any definitive, universal set of methods.

At the same time, there are traditions within Buddhism that are very beneficial and carry great blessings, because they are the traditions of highly accomplished spiritual beings. These blessings are special and should be seen as sacred and beneficial. That's why we respect the teaching styles and methods of the great spiritual masters of the past. They don't have to be regarded as concrete rules, but at the same time they do carry supreme blessings.

*You said as you began your tour that you came here to learn from Americans. Now, at the end of the two weeks, what have you learned?*

Since I've come to America I've had a lot of new experiences. It's difficult for me to say right away what message I've received from Americans, but I would say it's been wonderful to come directly into contact with the technological and other advancements in the West. Living in the East, we always see images of the advanced things happening in the West, but it's a different feeling to come here and personally witness them. Some of this experience has

been almost illusory for me. So it's been a good introduction to what living an illusion is like!

*One of the places you visited here was Disneyland. Was that something you particularly wanted to do?*

The people hosting my visit of the U.S. were interested in showing me the neatest places to go in terms of recreation and leisure. I was really happy to have the opportunity to go to Disneyland. I've been familiar with Mickey Mouse since I was young, so it was a great experience to go to Mickey Mouse's hometown. I was really delighted with my experience at Disneyland—I saw so much in just a couple of hours. The density of the experience was wonderful.

*In your talk earlier today, you mentioned that you used to read X-Men and other comics. Is that something you still do?*

I would continue reading comic books, but not many people give them to me anymore! When I was young, all kinds of people would give me comic books, but now they don't. As you know, they made a movie of the X-Men, and I enjoyed that very much. When I went to Universal Studios, I thought about buying some X-Men comics while

I was there. But it was very crowded and I thought, "Well, maybe it wouldn't be so appropriate for an adult to purchase such things."

*These are things that many 22-year-olds would be interested in. It makes me wonder whether there are times when you think about what you missed not growing up in a secular environment.*

As you know, I was recognized as the Karmapa when I was eight years old. So I had the life of a normal child up until that point, and even after I was recognized, I was still a kid and still thought like a kid. Actually, when I was first recognized as the Karmapa, I kind of viewed it as another game to play. I thought that being the Karmapa would be a fun thing to do, like a game. But as time went on I discovered all the things expected of me as the Karmapa, and that I had all these rules I had to follow. I do remember having thoughts like, "Oh, those children are playing games and I'd like to do that too, but I'm not allowed." But at the same time, I don't really feel that I lost anything. I don't have a sense that I missed out on any aspect of childhood.

*You have talked about practices that are appropriate to particular cultures, such as the Tibetan meditation on the mother as the symbol of*

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PHOTOS: JAMES GRITZ, © KARMAPA FOUNDATION

## Unbearable Compassion

*A teaching by His Holiness the 17th Karmapa*

OUR COMPASSION must have a broad focus, including not only ourselves and those close to us but all sentient beings. All beings want to be happy and free of suffering, yet most sentient beings experience only suffering and cannot obtain happiness. Just as we have a desire to clear away the suffering in our own experience and to enjoy happiness, we come to see through meditating on compassion that all other beings have this desire as well.

According to the Mahayana teachings, all sentient beings are

"our parents of the past, present, and future." This means that some have been our parents in the past, some are our current parents, and some will be our parents in the future. There are no beings who are not, in the end, our parents, and for this reason all sentient beings have a connection of affection and kindness toward us. Yet these affectionate and kind parents are trapped in a state of suffering, unable to actualize their desire for happiness. It is crucial for us to begin meditating on compassion for them in this very moment.

When we practice, we must bring our meditation on compassion to the deepest level possible. We must reflect on the intense suffering of sentient beings in all six realms of samsara, the same beings who are our kind parents of the past, present, and future. Reflecting

on our connection to these beings, we must engender a compassion that cannot bear their suffering any longer. This great, unbearable compassion is extremely important. Without it, we might feel a compassionate sensation in our minds from time to time, but this will not bring forth the full power of compassion.

Once unbearable compassion takes birth in our hearts, we are immediately compelled to take altruistic action. If we were to see someone trapped in a raging fire, we would not postpone our assistance to that person. Similarly, when we witness with unbearable compassion the suffering of all sentient beings of the six realms, we immediately seek out ways to free them from that suffering. We are unfazed by complications and doubts; our ac-

tions for the benefit of others are effortless and free from doubt.

To make our compassion strong, we need the path. We already have compassion, wisdom, and many other positive qualities, yet our mental afflictions are stronger than these most of the time. It is as if the afflictions have locked all of our positive qualities away in a box.

One day, when we open that box and all of our good qualities spring forth, we will not have to go looking for our compassion. We will discover that compassion is present in our minds spontaneously, and a wealth of excellent qualities will become available to us. ♦

*Adapted from Heart Advice of the Karmapa, published by Altruism Press. © 2008 The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje.*

# The 17th Karmapa

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*compassion. What do you think are the appropriate practices for American culture?*

Well, I'm still learning about American culture, but the best guess I can make at the present time is that recalling kindness is the most important thing. In order for us to have compassion toward all sentient beings, we need to remember their kindness. We need to reflect on how they have been kind to us.

We can do this by using the example of a mother, a father, a spouse, or anyone who has been kind to us. The main thing is to recall the immediate sources of kindness in our lives so that we come to the appreciation that, in the end, all sentient beings have been kind to us. Especially in this twenty-first century, we can see clearly how all beings depend on one another. Whether we're eating food or putting on clothing or building a home to live in, it's evident that many different beings participate in sustaining us. Through interdependence, everyone is kind to us. There is a vast network of interdependence through which we receive the kindness of all sentient beings.

Now, you could flip this and think only about suffering. You could think about the difficulties you go through in life and the interdependence of *that*. You could think to yourself, "Well, all sentient beings are involved in the causes of my suffering." Logically you might have a point, but we have to focus on where there is benefit. There's no benefit, personally, spiritually, or mentally, in obsessing about how others have caused you suffering. There *is* a benefit in reflecting on how other sentient beings have been kind to you. If you have that appreciation, your happiness will increase and your altruistic heart will become stronger. You will have a stronger desire to protect others, and you'll think more often about helping them. The way to do that is to think about the immediate sources of kindness to you, and then spread that appreciation out to all sentient beings. ♦

*His Holiness' translator for this news conference was Tyler Dewar.*