

BUDDHIST UDATES: May 2010: 7 updates

By CHRIS HERLINGER RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

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NEW YORK — In a city tired and edgy from a sagging economy, terrorist threats and a cold and wet spring comes the Dalai Lama with a sunny message of hope.

Despite a seemingly endless supply of disasters and global woe, humanity is generally doing a better job of things than it used to, the Tibetan spiritual leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate told followers as he began four days of public appearances at Radio City Music Hall.

There are numerous “signs of humans becoming mature,” the Buddhist leader said at a news conference. After the New York stop, he was to visit other U.S. cities for lectures and appearances and to promote his new book, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*.

The Dalai Lama, 74, spent most of his New York visit in sold-out teaching sessions on several Buddhist commentaries and texts, and a public talk on the theme of “awakening the heart of selflessness.”

When asked the source of his hope, the Dalai Lama took a long view, noting that when he was born in 1935, the world had just emerged from one global conflict and was just years away from a second; in subsequent years the threat of a nuclear war was real and palpable.

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But look at the world today, he said, marveling at an increased global hunger for peace and environmental protections; better relations between the superpowers; and the quick and massive global response to events such as the devastating Jan. 12 Haitian earthquake.

All of these changes, he noted, occurred in the course of a century.

“Such a response (in the early 20th century) would not have been possible,” the Tibetan leader said of massive humanitarian efforts in Haiti.

He also cited the absence of lingering ill will between the U.S. and its World War II enemies, Japan and Germany, as another source of accomplishment.

“These are the sources of my optimism,” the Dalai Lama said. “If these forces are wrong, please let me know.”

Part of the Dalai Lama's sense of hope is also borne from optimism over the long-term prospects for autonomy for Tibet, which has been occupied by China since 1959, with an exiled Tibetan government based in northern India.

Despite the unresolved status of Tibet and ongoing violence, the Dalai Lama said the long-term prospect for autonomy for Tibet is good because of increased desire within China for “transparency, rule of law, democracy and an independent judiciary.”

“Our faith in the Chinese people has never been shaken,” he said, adding he still considers himself a Marxist because of Marxism's belief in fair income distribution, though he also champions liberalizing market-driven reform in China.

The Buddhist leader spoke of a theme from his new book about the need for the world's religions to find common ground, and cited the example of India as a nation that can claim some success for its religious pluralism.

When challenged about the history of tension between India and predominately Muslim Pakistan, and ongoing religious tensions within India, the Dalai Lama said, to laughter, “Your understanding of India is limited.”

“We have to look (at it) holistically,” he said, citing the example of prominent Muslim, Sikh and Christian political figures within the predominately Hindu country.

Before he was done, the Dalai Lama had one last reminder, for journalists and their role in promoting understanding and harmony.

Gently wagging his finger, he told them, “You must be honest, unbiased and truthful”

AsiaNews - www.asianews.it

05/25/2010 14:32

CHINA – TIBET

Direct, uncensored dialogue between the Dalai Lama and Chinese netizens

The dialogue on dissident writer Wang Lixiong's Twitter page was a great success. For an hour, the Dalai Lama answered questions sent by Chinese netizens, his first direct contact with the Chinese people after decades of censorship. Netizens were eager to share.

Hong Kong (AsiaNews/Agencies) – Thousands of Chinese netizens put questions online to exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama in an unprecedented dialogue on Twitter last Friday. US-based Chinese dissident writer Wang Lixiong moderated the dialogue from New York.

In mainland China, Twitter is blocked but every day tens of thousands of Chinese netizens skirt the government's firewall and link up to the micro-blogging service.

This is the first time that the Dalai Lama was able to speak directly to ordinary Chinese citizens, bypassing the authorities who describe him as a dangerous terrorist, responsible for social unrest. Indeed, anything he says or does is censored.

“Unfortunately, in the past years, our relationship with the Chinese government has not achieved a substantial improvement,” the Dalai Lama said. “But I still feel quite confident of the Chinese people.”

He received 289 questions submitted voted on by netizens, which shows a desire to know and understand uncensored.

A question that came up frequently was about the succession issue. Beijing abducted the real Panchen Lama and wants to replace him with its own appointee. “I do not place much importance on the issue” of succession, the Dalai Lama said. “I will do whatever I can while I am alive. I do not have any other consideration or responsibility.” However, “It looks like the Chinese Communist Party seems to be more concerned about the institution of the Dalai Lama than I am.”

“It should be good if he turns out to be someone who embodies both the knowledge of the scriptures and the realization based on it, and upholds the teaching and practice of the Buddha's doctrine,” he added.

In the end though, the Dalai Lama is critical of the Chinese government, which “seems to be adopting an approach of force to establish stability while we feel that stability should come from mental satisfaction and trust.”

On ethnic tensions between Han settlers in Tibet, who are taking on positions of power and increasingly marginalising Tibetans in their native land, he said, “If we are clear and establish equal relationship, all problems will be resolved.”

The Dalai Lama said he was confident that Beijing's policy towards Tibet would change because “Some Party members who have worked in Tibet in the past and who are now retired, as also many Chinese scholars, have been saying that the present nationality policy is not appropriate and have suggested that it needs to be reviewed. Therefore, I believe that there will be a change and a decision in the not too distant future.”

Links to the transcript of the dialogue were passed around by Twitter users in their hundreds over the weekend with many positive comments and calls for an open and uncensored dialogue.

Some comments were nevertheless pro-Chinese government, criticising Twitter for supporting “the Dalai Lama's attempts to split the motherland.”

Wang, who organised the event, said he hoped that the Twitter dialogue would just be the beginning for the Dalai Lama and that this method of interaction could be used more and more.

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05/21/2010 14:57

CHINA – TIBET

Dalai Lama using Twitter to skirt censorship and talk to the Chinese

Today, Tibet’s spiritual leader goes on Twitter for an hour with a dissident Chinese writer. He will answer some 260 questions to tell his side of the Tibet story. In China, the authorities have blocked the social networking and micro-blogging service; however, about 80,000 Chinese internet users have been able to get around it.

Dharamsala (AsiaNews) – The Dalai Lama, Tibet’s exiled spiritual leader, will hold his first online chat today with Chinese web users via Twitter, bypassing Chinese censorship to explain his views.

He will hold an hour-long session between 8 and 9 am (EST) in New York on the Twitter account of Chinese writer Wang Lixiong, who has long been a critic of Beijing’s policies in Tibet.

This is the first time that the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize laureate takes part in an event of this length of time by way of a tool also used by US President Barack Obama for his online town-hall meetings.

Mainland authorities blocked Twitter in mid-2009, but some 80,000 mainlanders have managed to circumvent the ‘Great Firewall of China’ and skirt government internet censorship.

In the meantime, the Dalai Lama recently got his own Twitter account. And by yesterday afternoon, Google Moderator had selected more than 260 questions—mostly in Chinese and submitted from the mainland—from nearly 12,000 people.

During the chat, Wang will ask the spiritual leader some of the most frequently asked questions that are of interest to the Chinese. Among them are those about Tibet's future and the Dalai Lama’s reincarnation.

The latter is important because Chinese authorities have taken into custody the real Panchen Lama, whose function is to choose the Dalai Lama’s successor. Presently, his whereabouts remain unknown.

In China, the Dalai Lama is described as a dangerous separatist and terrorist, and his statements are routinely censored. Hence, he is hopeful that Twitter will enable him to explain his points of view directly to the Chinese.

"Over the years, only the official scenario of the Tibet problem exists inside China, and this unquestionably makes it difficult [for the Chinese people] to know the truth of the issue," Wang wrote in the letter, which was posted on his blog.

In fact, some of the questions are basic; for instance, one person asked, "The dialogues between the Tibetan government-in-exile and the Chinese Communist Party have been going on for ten years without yielding any result. What are the major sources of divergence?"

The Tibet question became front-page news in March 2008 when the Chinese cracked down on Tibetan protesters, killing more than 200 people.

At the time, Chinese repression led to worldwide protests in conjunction with the passage of the Olympic torch on its way to Beijing.

In order to undermine the criticism and prevent a boycott of the Games, the Chinese government said it would engage in a dialogue with representatives of the Dalai Lama.

As soon as the Olympics ended, so did the dialogue.

China targets Tibet artists, intellectuals: report

12:57am EDT - 17 May 2010

By Emma Graham-Harrison

BEIJING (Reuters) - China is cracking down on Tibetan intellectuals and artists who have sought to open up discussion of the future of their region after unrest that spread across the area in Spring 2008, an overseas activist group said on Tuesday.

More than 30 men and women, including writers, bloggers, singers and environmentalists, have been detained or are imprisoned, mostly after sharing views or information about conditions in ethnic Tibetan areas, the International Campaign for Tibet said in a new report.

"Raging Storm: The crackdown on Tibetan writers and artists after Tibet's Spring 2008 protests" details scores of arrests and long jail sentences for many intellectuals.

Protests led by Buddhist monks against Chinese rule in March 2008 gave way to deadly violence, with rioters torching shops and turning on residents, especially Han Chinese.

At least 19 people died in the 2008 unrest, which sparked waves of protests across Tibetan areas. Pro-Tibet groups overseas say more than 200 people were killed in a subsequent crackdown.

China's Communist Party-run government says that Tibet has historically belonged to China, and it is spending generously there to develop a poor remote area. Officials accuse the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled leader, of fanning separatism.

A new generation of young, often bilingual and tech-savvy, ethnic Tibetans have been exploring their ethnic identity in the wake of the 2008 protests, the report says.

"These (writings) have been published in blogs, articles in one-off or unauthorized literary magazines, in books published and distributed privately, and also in the lyrics of songs sung in public places, uploaded onto Youtube or as cellphone ringtones," the report said.

Their efforts, which challenge the official account of the events of 2008 as a conspiracy mounted by outside forces, have prompted the most wide-ranging suppression of Tibetan artists and intellectuals since the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, it said.

"For the first time since the Cultural Revolution, singers, artists and writers have been the target of a drive against Tibetan culture in which almost any expression of Tibetan identity not validated by the state can be branded 'splittist'."

Lhasa, the regional capital of Tibet, is introducing rules to restrict access to printing and photocopying services, state media reported, in what officials said was an effort to stop "illegal activities."

Under the rules, operators of printing and copying businesses in Lhasa must be cleared by the police, and must collect the names, addresses and identity card numbers of anyone using their services, said a report in the Lhasa Evening News last week.

"TORTURE WITHOUT TRACE"

Among the Tibetans under pressure is civil servant, essayist and editor Shogdung, who before 2008 had been considered a radical critic of Tibetan traditions and close to the Chinese state after he authored an article denouncing Buddhism.

However his latest book, "The line between Sky and Earth," is an exploration of the 2008 protests and their impact on Tibetan identity, and argues for the right to civil disobedience.

It includes a section apologizing for earlier views and a discussion of the pressures and discriminations Tibetans face.

"They have made everyone, be they close or distant, powerless, helpless and desperate," the report quotes it saying.

He was detained on April 23 this year, and his whereabouts and welfare have been unknown since.

Two Tibetans who worked for Western NGOs received sentences of 14 years and life, apparently for attempting to pass on information about the situation in Tibet, the report said.

Singer Tashi Dhondup, who performed songs with lyrics mourning the dead and ongoing repression, including one with the title 'Torture Without Trace' was also detained in December and sentenced to 15 months of "re-education through labor."

The Qinghai provincial government's media department declined comment on Shogdung, Tashi Dhondup and other Tibetans detained there. The Tibetan government could not be reached for comment.

(Editing by Alex Richardson)

Vatican Information Service

VESAKH: CHRISTIANS, BUDDHISTS AND RESPECT FOR ENVIRONMENT

VATICAN CITY, 17 MAY 2010 (VIS) - Made public today was the annual Message to Buddhists for the Feast of Vesakh, issued by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and signed by Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the council.

Vesakh, the main Buddhist festivity, marks three fundamental moments in the life of Gautama Buddha. It is held during the full moon of the month of May because, according to tradition, the Buddha was born, achieved enlightenment, and passed away in that period.

This year's message is entitled "Christians and Buddhists Respect Human Life as the Basis of Respect for all Beings".

"Let us take this opportunity", the message reads, "to reflect together on a theme of particular relevance today, namely, the environmental crisis that has already caused notable hardship and suffering throughout the world. The efforts of both of our communities to engage in inter-religious dialogue have brought about a new awareness of the social and spiritual importance of our respective religious traditions in this area. We recognise that we hold in common a regard for values like respect for the nature of all things, contemplation, humility, simplicity, compassion, and generosity. These values contribute to a life of non-violence, equilibrium, and contentment with sufficiency".

"The Catholic Church considers the protection of the environment as intimately linked to the theme of integral human development; and for her part, she is committed not only to promoting the protection of land, water and air as gifts destined for everyone, but also to encouraging others to join the efforts to protect mankind from self-destruction. Our responsibility to protect nature springs, in fact, from our respect for one another; it comes from the law inscribed in the hearts of all men and women".

"Both Christians and Buddhists have a profound respect for human life", the document goes on. "It is crucial therefore that we encourage efforts to create a sense of ecological responsibility, while at the same time reaffirming our shared convictions about the inviolability of human life at every stage and in every condition, the dignity of the person and the unique mission of the family, where one learns to love one's neighbour and to respect nature.

"May we together promote a healthy relationship between human beings and the environment", the message adds in conclusion. "By enhancing our efforts to promote ecological consciousness for serenity and peaceful coexistence, we can give witness to a respectful way of life that finds meaning not in having more, but in being more. By sharing the insights and commitments of our respective religious traditions, we can contribute to the well-being of our world".

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**-Courier-Journal
Louisville, KY, USA**

'Common Ground' brings Dalai Lama, Islamic leaders together in Bloomington, Ind.

By Peter Smith • psmith@courier-journal.com • May 12, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ind. — The Dalai Lama's entourage stood ready to whisk him across the Indiana University campus on Wednesday afternoon to a waiting audience of thousands at its main auditorium, where he was overdue to resume a daylong series of teachings.

But he wasn't rushing. He lingered patiently with several prominent American Muslims at a table, admiring a book newly published in Louisville that formed the basis for their short but momentous meeting in a nearby campus building.

And he left only after standing and blessing each one, draping prayer scarves across their shoulders.

One by one, he and several Muslim leaders had issued statements recognizing each other's religions as valid spiritual paths, which participants described as a potential breakthrough in relations between the two religions that encompass much of Asia and count nearly 2 billion people as followers worldwide.

"All major religious traditions (are seeking) something beyond words," said the Dalai Lama, the 74-year-old spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists and for many the most recognizable face of Buddhism in the world. He said it's "very unfair" to paint all Muslims as terrorists for the actions of some.

“All have some ability to bring holiness to all of humanity,” he said.

Ingrid Mattson, president of the Indiana-based Islamic Society of North America, praised the Dalai Lama for “remaining dignified in the face of persecution” from Chinese authorities and thanked him for defending Muslims from accusations their religion is inherently violent.

And Plemon T. El-Amin, imam of a large Atlanta mosque, said the Quran calls on Muslims to “relate to those who believe and practice righteousness,” which he said includes devout Buddhists.

The meeting followed years of dialogue between Buddhists and Muslims and was timed to coincide with teachings the Dalai Lama is giving this week at IU, hosted by the Tibetan Mongolian Buddhist Cultural Center in Bloomington, which was founded by his late brother.

The leaders were drawing on a new book of scholarly essays, “Common Ground Between Islam & Buddhism,” published by Fons Vitae of Louisville. In addition to the Dalai Lama, several prominent Buddhists also have endorsed the book.

Essays in the book candidly acknowledge “unbridgeable” gaps in the two religions' doctrines and views of the world and the afterlife. But they also cite deep theological, social, historical and ethical ties.

“Clearly, compassion lies at the heart of the teachings of both Islam and Buddhism, as it also lies at the heart of other great religious traditions,” the Dalai Lama wrote in a foreword. This, he wrote, should “be grounds for Muslims and Buddhists to overcome any sense of wariness they may feel about each other and develop a fruitful, trusting friendship.”

Added lead author and British Muslim scholar Reza Shah Kazemi: “We are aiming here at commonalities on the level of the spirit,” rather than dogma.

Mattson said she would use her organization's convention and magazine to spread word of the “Common Ground” project.

“It can be very helpful, particularly in Asia, but also in America,” Mattson said in an interview. Book follows other calls for unity

She said the latest effort follows the Amman Message of 2004, a call for Muslim unity across Sunni, Shia and other lines, and the 2007 document “A Common Word,” an open letter from Muslim leaders and scholars to their Christian counterparts following Muslim protests — some violent — over Pope Benedict XVI's quotation of a medieval emperor's harsh criticism of Islam.

“A Common Word” says Christians and Muslims can cooperate around their shared values of love for God and neighbor. Some say this oversimplifies their profound differences, but many Christians and Muslims worldwide continue to use it as a study guide, Mattson said.

Among those attending Wednesday's gathering was Eboo Patel of Chicago, the Muslim founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, which organizes public-service projects for young people of different religions.

Patel, who in 2009 was named the first Muslim winner of the Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion, said in an interview that "Common Ground" provides the "theological architecture" for Muslims and Buddhists to cooperate in spite of major differences.

For example, the book notes that for Muslims, the declaration of faith in one God is central, whereas Buddhism is silent whether there is a God. And whereas Muslims believe in heaven and hell, Buddhists speak of cycles of rebirth while souls aspire for peace in nirvana.

Yet both believe in an absolute truth, which for Muslims is part of the nature of God, and in people being held accountable after death for their good and evil deeds, writers in the book say.

Patel said tools for cooperation are urgently needed for Asia's bulging youth population.

"Bad people are after those kids, but they could be bridge-builders just as easily," he said.

Strains between Islam and Buddhism have emerged in recent bloody conflicts in Thailand and Malaysia and in the Taliban's destruction of giant Buddha statues in 2001 in Afghanistan.

Those conflicts have been overshadowed by better-known ones that have led some to describe a "clash of civilizations" between Muslim-majority nations and the predominately Christian and Jewish countries of the West, particularly the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States by Muslim terrorists.

Yet leaders of Islam and Buddhism cite Wednesday's gathering as evidence of tolerance among the mainstream members of theirs and other world religions.

Quran seen as open to Buddha

Attempts to repair relations between Christians, Jews and Muslims have often drawn on their strict monotheism and shared claim to the ancient patriarch Abraham and other biblical prophets. The Quran, the Islamic holy book, explicitly calls Jews and Christians "people of the book" who worship the same God.

Yet in "Common Ground," scholars write that Muslims also have recognized Buddhists at that level, both historically and theologically. The book says the Buddha, who founded the religion in India a millennium before Muhammad, can be honored among a series of unnamed prophets the Quran says God sent to other people.

"The Buddha, whose basic guidance one in ten people on earth have been in principle following for the last 2,500 years, was, in all likelihood — and God knows best — one of God's great Messengers," wrote Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, who has been developing a Muslim-Buddhist dialogue in recent years with the Dalai Lama.

The notion of “Abrahamic” religions helps make “Islam less alien to Christians and Jews, but at the same time, we don't want to limit Islam to the Abrahamic box,” added Mattson, who also is professor of Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, in an interview.

Islam and Buddhism's traditions of prayer, fasting and prostration show common ground of their own, she said.

Islam has an estimated 1.5 billion adherents, while Buddhists number close to 400 million, surveys say.

In the United States, each have at least tripled their populations to roughly 1.5 million since 1990, according to a 2008 survey by Trinity College of Connecticut.

Gray Henry, who directs Fons Vitae out of her Louisville home, said representatives of the Dalai Lama and Prince Muhammad of Jordan asked her to publish “Common Ground” based on her decades of experience publishing books on Islamic and other spirituality.

The effort marks “the beginning of the thin edge of a good wedge,” Henry said

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Dalai Lama tells AP: Exiles must press China talks

By TIM SULLIVAN, Fri May 7, 6:29 am ET

DHARMSALA, India – The Tibetan exile movement must press forward with its talks with the Chinese government despite almost no progress from years of negotiations, the Dalai Lama said Friday.

In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, the exiled spiritual leader warned that it could be decades before any benefits of such talks with China are obvious.

"So far, dialogue failed, but that does not mean in future no possibility," the Dalai Lama said in his private compound in this Indian hill town where he has lived since fleeing Tibet more than five decades ago.

He said that increasing sympathy for the Tibetan cause among Chinese intellectuals indicates that Beijing's policies could change. He also said there had been vague signs from Beijing that some of the top Chinese leadership might be ready to moderate its stand on Tibet.

Some Chinese leaders now believe that "policy regarding Tibet now should be more openly, more peacefully. I heard that. True or not? We'll have to wait."

Waiting, he added, is something the Tibetans understand.

"We wait 51 years, now another 10, 20 years we can wait," he said, breaking into laughter.

Talks between China and the Dalai Lama's envoys resumed in January for the first time in 15 months but made no apparent progress on the Tibetans' proposal for more autonomy in the region. Beijing refused to even talk about granting Tibet more latitude, limiting those discussions to the future of the exiled spiritual leader.

The Dalai Lama fled his homeland in 1959, nine years after Communist troops marched into the Himalayan region. Beijing claims Tibet has been a Chinese territory for centuries, but many Tibetans say they were effectively independent for most of that time and that migration to the region and restrictions on Buddhism are threatening their cultural heritage.

The Dalai Lama has said he hopes talks will bring some form of autonomy for Tibet within China that would allow the Tibetan way of life to thrive. But Beijing frequently demonizes the Nobel Peace laureate and accuses him of seeking independence for Tibet.