On meeting the Dalai Lama

Daniel Pauly

Sea Around Us, Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C, Canada
Email: d.pauly@oceans.ubc.ca

Abstract
A brief account is given of the participation by the author at a Buddhist conference held in Nalanda in March 2017, and of various personal experiences during and after this event. Jointly, they strengthen the view that India consists of two overlapping countries, one held backward by religion and elite corruption, the other a source of brilliant people and ideas that have conquered the world.

Introduction
On March 17, 2017, I met the Dalai Lama for a brief moment, following a long keynote speech he gave at a conference on ‘Buddhism in the 21st Century’, held in Nalanda, in the Indian State of Bihar. But I have no cellphone, so no photo to prove it.

It was not that I had suddenly given up on my freedom from religion. Rather, when I was invited to participate at this conference – along with a few ‘Western’ scientists involved in environmental conservation and animal welfare – I did not find any good reason why I should not accept, given that Buddhism appears to be the rare faith that does not require you to check your knowledge of physics, biology and history (as well common sense) at the door.

The Dalai Lama’s and the other speeches
And indeed, the Dalai Lama’s speech, sometimes interrupted by giggles (he giggles a lot), was about the need for Buddhists to love each other, across their own divisions, to love people of other faiths, or none (a nice touch), and especially to embrace secularism and modern science, and give less attention to holy books – the Buddhist ones included. The secularism bit was presented as a good thing in the article in The Times of India reproduced here, but in 2022, this probably would not have happened....

I cannot tell what the audience made of this. About one third consisted of Buddhist monks from Asia – including quite a few females – and other continents, most of the rest being, I guess, lay Buddhists. The conference also featured various speakers claiming, as seems to be the fashion in India these days, that the Ancient Indian had discovered quantum dynamics and space travel, and that the elephant-headed god Ganesha was evidence of Ancient Indian surgical skills...

As if such mendacious nonsense was required to demonstrate the scientific prowess to a people that invented a superior way of doing arithmetic (try to do it without the concept of zero...which came from India) and produced geniuses such as the physicists Satyendra Nath Bose or Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, or the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan!

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And yes, I presented what we do to the biodiversity of the oceans\(^2\) in a breakout session that also included Buddhist monks, of which one dragged the audience through an interminable account of how the holy scripture shows that Gautama Buddha loved trees and other plants, in flat contradiction to the admonition of the Dalai Lama.

Rajgir: Buddhist spiritual leader the Dalai Lama called India a truly secular country where every religious group lives in peace without fear. He said India should take the lead for global peace and harmony. While inaugurating the three-day International Buddhist Conclave (IBC) with Union minister of state for tourism and culture Dr Mahesh Sharma at Rajgir’s international convention centre on Friday, the Dalai Lama called himself the ‘son of India’.

“India preached non-violence for over 2,000 years and it is the only country where people of all faiths live in harmony and without fear,” he said and added, “I have been living in this country for the past 56 years and call myself the son of India”. On his association with Nalanda, he said, “All my knowledge comes from the Nalanda thoughts, The Tripitaka-Pali Canon, physically and mentally.”

On intercaste or interfaith conflicts, he said, “Despite philosophical differences, all religions preach peace and harmony, but the modern day education, which is based on consumerism, has made people devoid of love, affection, friendship and trust. The solution lies in controlling surge of emotion taught in great Indian traditional system of education which teaches tolerance, forgiveness and contentment.”

The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader said when he was in Tibet, his thoughts were confined to Tibet only. But, during his stay in India, his thoughts got broadened or globalized.

“Buddha cannot remove sufferings or the cause of sufferings. He only shows the path to control destructive emotions through meditation — Vipassana,” he said and added, “Buddha Dharma is relevant in the field of science. So, we say, Buddhism is relevant in the 21st century.”

The Union minister, who is also chancellor of Nav Nalanda Mahavihara (NNM), the co-sponsor of the event, praised the Dalai Lama not only for promoting Buddhist values but also for his contribution to world peace. He also assured the NNM to extend every possible cooperation it required for its growth and development.

NNM vice-chancellor M.L. Srivastava said, “Buddhism mitigated the cause of conflicts and promote interfaith harmony, globally.” He said the NNM was founded for the promotion of Pali which contributed a lot in understanding Buddhism since its inception in 1961.

Union secretary of culture department, N K Sinha, welcomed the guests and scholars from 30 countries.

The Dalai Lama also unveiled the new version of Tripitaka or Pali Canon and declared open the Buddhist Science department at NNM.
A nightly visit and a harrowing trip

While the trip to the conference site had been uneventful direct 14+ hour flight from Vancouver to Delhi, then a short flight to Patna, Bihar’s capital, followed by a 3 hours bus ride to Nalanda, a city near an ancient site of Buddhist learning, I made two noteworthy experiences the night before, and during my return trip to Patna.

The first experience was that, as I was trying to fall asleep, a half dozen Indian soldiers armed with submachine guns broke into my room with their commanding officer telling me that I should not move. I did not move. They went through my suitcase, my backpack and the pockets of my pant but clearly, didn’t find what they were after. So, they abruptly left, disappointed I presume. I concluded that my lifelong policy of not doing drugs (if this is what they were after) has been a wise choice. The other experience was the return trip, which I had to take before the conference organizers could hand me the long-promised cash refund of my travel cost (somebody else got that...). This road trip confronted me with the reality that escapes one when hopping from one conference to the next (this was pre-Covid).

Some trucks had caused an accident-induced traffic jam (Bihar’s roads appear to have far more old, dilapidated trucks than anything else, bicycles included), and the quick-witted driver of our jeep-like vehicle left the highway via a back road just in time, before our car became immobilized within an immobile mass of trucks. The harrowing back roads we then took went through numerous squalid villages of the State of Bihar, one of the poorest in India, where big landowners rule over millions of poor farmers, who have only religion (Hinduism, with its ubiquitous cows and castes) to transcend their misery – which it doesn’t.

Also prominent along the roads were monumental ruins of abandoned infrastructure development projects (half-constructed bridges, segments of incomplete pipelines, un-erected electric pylons, etc.) which I recognized from the Philippines, where I lived for a long time, as the concrete achievements of corrupt politicians.

The two Indias

I was shaken when we finally made it to the airport in Patna, even more than when I visited India for the first time in the 1980s. Then, in Delhi, before returning to Vancouver (via London this time) I met in a swanky neighborhood an old colleague and friend, Michael Vakily, whom I had previously visited in the Philippine countryside, in Sierra Leone and in Thailand, where he ran various field projects for the research center we both worked for. The 4-year, German-funded project in India that he was assigned to was meant to create biodiversity reserves, including marine protected areas. However, it took 3 years to get the clearances required for the project to officially start....

On the other hand, he had a brilliant Indian PhD as a counterpart, who was enthusiastic, and who seemed to know precisely what ought to be done to protect India’s biodiversity. He is India as well. I wonder which India will prevail.