

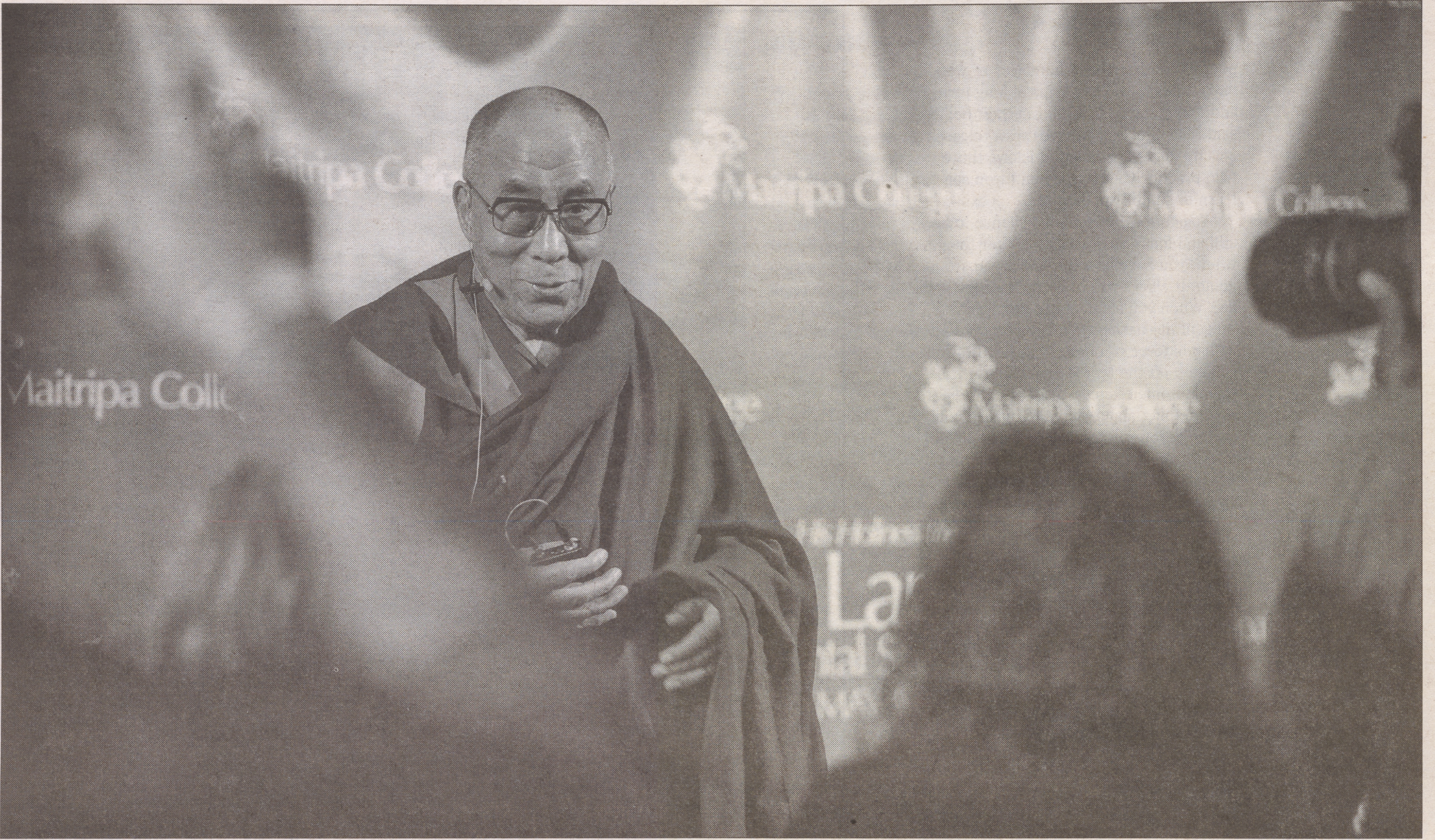


PHOTO BY LEAH NASH

His Holiness, the 14th Dalai Lama, gives one of several lectures in the Portland area earlier this month as part of the Environmental Summit sponsored by Maitripa Collage

Dalai Lama's teachings resonate with Street Roots vendor

BY HOBO JOHN
STREET ROOTS VENDOR



John Michael Christian, or "Hobo John," is a regular Street Roots vendor.

I was a little manic several springs back on the streets of a small Texas town called Mansfield. The police and I had been through several run-ins, which resulted in me landing in a Fort Worth mental hospital. Being a ward of the state scared me a bit, because they were in charge of when I got out. Also, at the point in my life I didn't trust much of anything or anybody.

Shortly after my arrival they took me to a wing that seemed to take forever to get to. My imagination was running pretty good; straight jackets, electric shock that type of thing. When we arrived someone in the lobby was reading a copy of a book written by the Dalai Lama. I consider myself a spiritual person and at that point I had read a couple of books by the Tibetan holy man. Seeing his picture calmed me and reminded me that God's love is everywhere and I would get through this.

Back in January, when I saw a billboard saying that the Dalai Lama would be in Portland, it created some anxiety. First of all, how would I afford a ticket, and then let's say I did get to see him, and God's ambassador of compassion didn't care much for my hobo ass. Eventually I checked the website for the event and saw that I could apply for press pass online, which I went ahead and did using Street Roots as the organization. Thing is, I didn't asked Streets Roots, kind of manipulative, I know, and one of the list of about a thousand things I am working on improving. Well they scolded me a little bit but said I could go.

My homeless adventure started about 10 years ago in the Florida Keys, I was working as a newspaper reporter for a small weekly called the Islamorada Free Press when a memory surfaced of being molested as a kid by my judo instructor. I had always remembered part of that night, but this repressed part was violent and in my mind disgusting. It created some posttraumatic stress disorder and severe panic attacks. In my mind at times, I was a 9-year-old kid again and this guy was after me. I was a

decent reporter and was able to stop a crooked sewer deal between a local politician and some bigwig lobbyists, but it caused me a lot of anxiety. I was also a complete ass to work with, and simply did not feel safe being in one spot where my attacker might find me again and eventually lost my job and found myself homeless, which allowed me to drift.

The Dalai Lama speaks, as I imagine Christ spoke, with authority. It was an environmental conference, and if you are alive you know that we have been poor stewards of the earth. I attended several events over two days at the University of Portland and Memorial Coliseum. Typical of His Holiness, he said little about the environment and focused on trying to get us to be better people. I like his approach, how can we expect to take care of nature when we don't take care of each other? However what he did say really struck me, "God created the earth, it too is one of his creations, if you respect and love God, you must respect the earth and take care of her."

Christ tells us to love our enemies and I take that seriously. However, I developed an aggressive sarcastic tongue over the first 40 years of my life and dismantling it hasn't been easy. Not that I have a lot of enemies, but on the streets you tend to get your fair share of scorn, and worse for me, people completely ignoring you when you are trying to talk to them. I even had my Street Roots badge yanked a couple of times, for giving people lip. So when the Dalai Lama said, "Do no harm," which is a beginning tenant in both Buddhism and Hinduism, I made a vow to double my effort in reining in my tongue. When you make an oath like that, God will sometimes ask, "really?"

The next day I was talking to a buddy standing next to my shopping cart. Every once in a while my shopping cart will set someone off, they may be have been on the streets themselves or are getting close to landing there. This guy I had never seen before starts yelling, "fuck you," at me from halfway down the street. He keeps yelling it

over and over until he is right in front of me with his middle finger right in my face. I just stood there smiling, this seemed to irritate him a little, and so he proceeded to stick that finger straight up my nose.

Unfortunately I did not turn the other nostril. I spun him around; bear hugged him a little, told him to never touch me again and shoved him on his way. I am not proud of that, but that is what forgiveness is for, that is also life, we live and learn.

I got another chance later that night. I was laying on my bag in a door way when this group of kids in a car sees me and start yelling, "You're a lazy bum, what a fucking bum," etc. Well I just laid there feeling peaceful and smiling at them. Turn the other cheek works, seeing no resistance, by the time the light turned green the wind had gone out of there and they sped off.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that compassion is the desire to relieve the suffering of another. What does compassion look like? Well according to the Dalai Lama compassion looks like affection. He used that word repeatedly throughout the conference and displayed it endlessly.

At the end, the key organizer of the event, Yangsi Rinpoche, president of Maitripa College here in Portland, was bowing at the Dalai Lama's feet, His Holiness was rubbing his head and telling the audience what a good boy he was and how much he loved him. Yangsi sat there soaking up the love, just like the rest of us. After that, the Red Hot Chili Peppers played for about an hour. I have always respected the Peppers while not being a huge fan; some of their music is too discordant for me, but I do love several songs, and they played like beasts. There third number was Scar Tissue, after the opening chords I was crying like a baby, grateful for the healing of my scars I guess, the shadowy figure from my past has been forgiven and is loved — by me, at least. I am at peace and happy on the streets. I am also incredibly grateful to encounter His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, a living embodiment of Christ's teachings here on earth.