

We, the undersigned academic scholars of Tibetan Studies, express our dismay over recent media coverage of an exchange between Tenzin Gyatso, exiled fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet, and a young boy in India at a public event. This included an edited video of the exchange that was created to give the impression of sexual misconduct on the part of the Dalai Lama, cynically misusing the momentum of the #metoo movement for its own ends. But we have studied the fuller video of the event, along with the representation of what happened by the boy himself as well as by his mother. We are not seeing here an incident of sexual misconduct.

We urge news reporters to consider context carefully before projecting a highly charged interpretation onto something about which they have little knowledge. It is well known that the current Dalai Lama is physically playful with many of the people he meets, of all statuses and ages and genders, including when he embraced and tickled Bishop Desmond Tutu under the chin with humor and in friendship. We would also add that we have heard from a wide range of Tibetan specialists, colleagues, and friends that it is far from unusual for old folks in Tibetan societies to interact with children in many commonly-recognized joking ways, including as the Dalai Lama did. These are not incidents of sexual abuse.

Indeed there *have* been recent, and very troubling and painful, cases of Tibetan lamas committing sexual abuse, as has also occurred in other world religions repeatedly and for decades. We adamantly support the important work for justice and healing for children and other people who are the survivors of such abuse. But the current incident with the Dalai Lama is not an instance of sexual abuse, and it is harmful to everyone to claim that it is. Among many other things, to do so diminishes the voices of survivors who have courageously shared their stories and shined a light on systemic abuse, both in religious and many other contexts.

The Dalai Lama has been a dedicated leader for his people and his nation over many decades of hardship and struggle. He has been an inspiring teacher of Buddhist compassion and an advocate for world peace, recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize. It is possible for anyone to act inappropriately or out of character. But in this instance, knowing the context of the particular incident, the personality of the Dalai Lama, his commitment to his monastic vows, and the many aspects of Tibetan culture at work in the event, we view that as highly unlikely. Instead we understand the manipulated video and its dissemination to be an ill-intentioned attack on the authority of the Dalai Lama in his old age. Indeed, it is an attack on the global Tibetan and Himalayan community as a whole, and on the international standing of Tibetan Buddhism.

We stand with the Tibetan community both inside and outside China today, who have been demonstrating with dignity and restraint, but still in anger and deep sadness, about what they see as a deliberate and strategic effort to tarnish the institution of the Dalai Lama. With them, we urge global news networks to be cautious before making snap judgements, bowing to prejudice and buying into salacious stories, and to make the careful investigation of the sources of their information on such sensitive matters their highest priority.

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