

Bhanté meeting HH the Dalai Lama on Capitol Hill

Among the more memorable moments was when the 14th Dalai Lama was invited to Capitol Hill for the first time to speak about the plight of the Tibetans. Charlie Rose, a congressman from the Carolinas, and Milton Friedman, his chief of staff, provided the formal invitation.

When we arrived on Capitol Hill for the event, as we got out of the car, camera people ran over and started to take pictures of Bhanté. I whispered to him, “perhaps they think you are HH.” He whispered back, “I know, and they will figure it out.”

His Holiness’ remarks were succinct and heartfelt. As he came off the dais, he noticed Bhanté in the far corner, along with Jim Turner and me. HH proceeds to put his forehead on Bhanté’s toes as a sign of reverence and respect. They spoke briefly in Pali. HH then proceeded to the receiving line where Senators, Congresspeople and staff were lined up in protocol order.

I pulled on Bhanté’s elbow and asked why HH had shown such respect. Bhanté responded that ‘he is permitted to do this’. Asking if I should do the same, he asked if I wanted to. As a formal show of respect, Bhanté was disinterested. But, as a genuine, spontaneous sign of respect, it is permitted.

As you can read in other episodes, Bhanté had been instrumental in securing Daramsala as a government in exile for the Tibetans. He had also spent a year teaching protocol to the young Dalai Lama from about 1959-1960. Bhanté had also spent a year, at the request of the US State Department, to brief them after the French withdrew from Cambodia. Bhanté advocated to John Foster, Alan Dulles, and President Eisenhower to keep America out of IndoChina. Indeed, Bhanté served as personal liaison to Norodom Sihanook, the King of Cambodia at that time.