

**Welcome Statement on the Occasion of the Visit by His Holiness the Dalai Lama
and the Inaugural Conversation of the Dalai Lama Centre for Peace and Education**

Coast Salish Territory, September 9, 2006

Good morning. I am Dene zah Akile Ch'oh, Edward John.

I come with good feelings in my heart; I wish to acknowledge our relatives and friends the Coast Salish peoples, in whose ancestral lands we gather and where we begin this important Conversation about who we are and our connections and relationships to and with each other.

And I wish to thank the organizers of this Conversation for the opportunity to offer a few words of welcome to each of you on behalf of the First Peoples – the Indigenous Peoples of this great and beautiful land. I am deeply honoured and humbled.

As the Dalai Lama Centre for Peace and Education commences this inaugural Conversation here on Coast Salish Territory and looks to you for recommendations as to its possible roles, I wish to welcome your presence and offer a constructive connection and relationship with us – with Indigenous Peoples.

One of the great teachings of the Coast Salish people is to always acknowledge and hold up for celebration the goodness in every person. And in saying this, I wish to acknowledge and celebrate the goodness in each and every one of you.

I share with you some of our teachings – of our “interconnectedness” and our “interdependence”. Indigenous peoples across this land often use the phrase “all my

relations” to remind each other of our humble teaching: we are connected, like a spider’s web, to everyone and to everything in this world. No matter what words we may choose to use or what language we say it in, it is our fundamental reality.

As signposts to guide our lives, our Elders remind us constantly of some fundamental values:

- Each day, acknowledge Yoodughi, our Creator;
- Each day as we look to our past, acknowledge, honour and thank our parents and grandparents and, through them, the countless generations of our ancestors for their teachings, which ensured their and our survival; and, as you look into our future, acknowledge and pass on our love to our children and grandchildren and to the many generations yet to be born; and in doing so, remind ourselves of our responsibilities today to our ancestors, to our descendants, and to each other – for what we do today will affect all of us, through the generations;
- Each day, take good care of the children and young ones, the Elders and the sick and disabled; and
- Each day, remember to take care of our Mother, the earth and it will take care of us.

These humble teachings form a cradle for the survival of our peoples, our cultures, our dignity and well-being. These are the timeless bonds of the sacred trust between all peoples, all generations and all that is a part of us, and of which we are a part of.

In life though, many things blind us, many things distract us, and yet others which betray us. But always, our Elders remind us, that after our passing into the spirit world, only our ideas and our words continue. Recently, an Elder in my community put it this way:

In my life, I have stood at the bedside of many of our respected Elders as they prepared for, and passed into, the spirit world; and in every instance, I saw prayers on their lips and prayer beads in their hands; but in no instance did I see one of them holding a dollar bill...”

It was his gentle reminder that things of this world – yunk’anakat – have their place.

When we are born, we come with many different gifts – but the greatest of these is our humble breath. It is that which we first take as it brings us to full life and it is the last thing which we take in the moment of our passing. And so we are always mindful of our words and treasure our gifts.

What, you may wonder, is the point of all this? The point is to understand those moral underpinnings of what drives our political, economic and business decisions. They didn’t teach this at the Business Schools at UBC or Harvard. The corporate world may be driven by economic and business systems, but always at the helm of these decisions are people – individuals like you. These decisions will be driven by your values, your beliefs, and your teachings. And many times, this is where the conflicts and the clashes happen. How you view the land or the resources on it will shape the human relationships.

Decisions in the past in support of political and economic interests have dispossessed our peoples of our ancestral lands and marginalized our peoples to the fringes of the economic, business and political worlds. We view ourselves very much as “exiles” in our own lands. When our people stand up for ourselves or challenge governmental authorities or corporate leaders we are told, in no uncertain terms, that we do not exist

and that we have no rights; until we can go to the courts of this land and prove it. And the courts, together with their virtual inaccessibility due to high costs, establish standards of proof which no one else has to meet.

The final point I want to make is reflected in the theme of this Conversation – “connecting for change”. What change? Whose change? In whose interests? In which direction will the change be? What tone will underlie the mood of the change? What will the connections be and how sincere will they be?

Constructive changes mean constructive relationships. For Indigenous Peoples, strong, constructive and lasting relationships cannot happen based on the continued denial of the existence of our Peoples or of our ancestral rights to our lands. Societies with integrity cannot be built where the development and progress of those societies are on the backs of other peoples. This has been our history; it should not continue.

At the outset, I offered a constructive connection and relationship with Indigenous People and shared with you the humble teachings from my people as some of the guides to our shared existence with all that is around us. This is what I offer in these “connections” and “conversations” for change.

Thank you.