

**Learning from the Dalai Lama**  
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**Meditation**

The words of His Holiness the Dalai Lama:

May I become at all times, both now and forever  
A protector for those without protection  
A guide for those who have lost their way  
A ship for those with oceans to cross  
A bridge for those with rivers to cross  
A sanctuary for those in danger  
A lamp for those without light  
A place of refuge for those who lack shelter  
And a servant to all in need.

**Readings**

From *The Art of Happiness*, by the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler, M.D.

“I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we all are seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness.”

With these words... the Dalai Lama cut to the heart of his message...

“But is happiness a reasonable goal for most of us?” I asked. “Is it really possible?”

“Yes, I believe that happiness can be achieved through training the mind...”

To my Western mind, it didn't seem the sort of thing that one could develop, and sustain, simply by “training the mind.”

When I raised that objection, the Dalai Lama was quick to explain. “When I say ‘training the mind,’ in this context I’m not referring to ‘mind’ merely as one’s cognitive ability or intellect. Rather, I’m using the term in the sense of the Tibetan word *Sem*, which has a much broader meaning, closer to ‘psyche’ or ‘spirit’; it includes intellect and feeling, heart and mind. By bringing about a certain inner discipline, we can undergo a transformation of our attitude, our entire outlook and approach to living.

“When we speak of this inner discipline, it can of course involve many things, many methods. But generally speaking, one begins by identifying those factors which lead to happiness and those factors which lead to suffering. Having done this, one then sets about gradually eliminating those factors which lead to suffering and cultivating those which lead to happiness. That is the way.”

From *Ethics for the New Millenium*, by the Dalai Lama

Compassion is what makes our lives meaningful. It is the source of all lasting happiness and joy. And it is the foundation of the good heart, the heart of one who acts out of a desire to help others. Through kindness, through affection, through honesty,

through truth and justice toward all others we ensure our own benefit. This is not a matter for complicated theorizing. It is a matter of common sense. There is no denying that consideration of others is worthwhile. There is no denying that our happiness is inextricably bound up with the happiness of others. There is no denying that if society suffers we ourselves suffer. Nor is there any denying that the more our hearts and minds are afflicted with ill-will, the more miserable we become. Thus we can reject everything else: religion, ideology, all received wisdom. But we cannot escape the necessity of love and compassion.

## Sermon

I'm guessing it's not so easy being the Dalai Lama. Even though he may seem to make it look easy.

Think of the arc of his life. Born in 1935 to a farming family, at age two little Tenzin Gyatso was identified by a traditional search party, according to a variety of signs and portents as the reincarnation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, who had died two years earlier. This means that this little boy was the 14th manifestation of Avalokiteshvara, or Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

Well, there's a weight and responsibility for a two-year-old to carry.

Needless to say, his life changed dramatically. His training began before long, and at age four he moved to Lhasa formally beginning his monastic education at age six, embarking on a lifetime of spiritual practice, study, and leadership both spiritual and political.

And though the Dalai Lama, like the rest of us, has a family – most of whom were moved to Lhasa with him – he also belongs to all of Tibet; for though Tibetans may and do have differing opinions concerning the Dalai Lama's political positions, he is universally loved and respected by them.

Over the course of his lifetime, the Dalai Lama has also come to belong increasingly to all of humanity. Paradoxically and ironically a more expansive identity and renown made possible by the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, and the eventual escape of the Dalai Lama into exile in India in 1959.

Yes, we can guess that it is not easy being the Dalai Lama.

Imagine – at age 15 this boy had to deal not only with his extraordinarily intensive Buddhist studies and practice, but with the realities of Chinese occupation and duplicity. Interestingly, at first he was guardedly optimistic about working with the Chinese. He was intrigued by the ideals of Marxism (and still believes that as an ideal, there is much to be said for Marxism). Yet time and again his confidence both in the local Chinese officials and in the national leaders, such as Mao Tse Tung, was betrayed.

So, at age 24, with the grip of the Chinese inexorably tightening, he and an entourage made a dramatic, secret nighttime escape from Lhasa, eventually making their way across the border to India over a long and treacherous route through the mountains – a route taken to this day by refugees.

A brief word about the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet. The Dalai Lama and most Tibetans believe that Tibet had been independent for most of its history prior to the Chinese invasion. And though historians note the complexity of that history, the invasion and occupation was extraordinarily brutal, particularly in the early years. In his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, the Dalai Lama refers to the 1959 report of the International Commission of Jurists, which had documented that “crucifixion, vivisection, disemboweling and dismemberment of victims was commonplace. So too were beheading, burning, beating to death and burying alive.” On it goes. “And, in order to prevent [prisoners] shouting out, ‘Long live the Dalai Lama,’ on the way to execution, [the Chinese] tore out their tongues with meat hooks.”

Overall, it is thought that about one million Tibetans lost their lives during those early years, either from direct military or police action, or from starvation and disease. This from a population of just six million.

This is the context for what would become most of a lifetime in exile.  
It cannot be easy to be the Dalai Lama.

And so, a democratic government in exile was formed in Dharamsala – democratic because the Dalai Lama believes that democracy well reflects the teaching of the Buddha, who asserted that we human beings should have the freedom to question everything, to question even the teachings of the Buddha, and to discover and prove things for ourselves.

And over all of these years of exile the Dalai Lama has found himself in the middle politically, affirming over and over that he simply wants greater autonomy for Tibet, not outright independence, even as the Chinese accuse him of being a separatist and a tool of the West. And some of his own people wish for more forceful means to be used against the Chinese.

And over all of these years the Dalai Lama has also found himself in the middle spiritually, affirming his compassion for the Chinese people, including Chinese leaders, while at the same time not hesitating to speak the truth about Chinese abuses of power and human rights violations and atrocities.

It cannot be easy to be the Dalai Lama.

Yet we look at him and we see serenity and wisdom. We see what seems to be a happy man, a content man.

What can we learn... what *must* we learn from the Dalai Lama about how he has achieved this measure of serenity and wisdom in the midst of such challenges as those he and his people have faced? What can we and must we learn about how we might live our lives, about how we all must live on this planet we share?

Well, it seems to me that the key to understanding the Dalai Lama (not a God-King, not a Living Buddha, rather a dedicated monk who is also a spiritual and political leader)... the key to understanding this man as much as a Westerner can understand someone who comes from such a different culture and tradition as compared to ours – is I believe to be found in the first four hours of his day. For him, these are the hours from four in the morning until eight, hours he spends in meditation, chanting, and study. Four hours at the beginning of each day. And then at least another hour in the evening.

So we see that this is a man as deeply rooted in his religious tradition and in his spiritual practice as one can imagine, a man who at the same time is a 21<sup>st</sup> century human being, a citizen of the world with a scientific world view almost as deeply rooted as his religious world view.

Which is deeply rooted indeed. So there is much about the Dalai Lama and about Tibetan Buddhism that I will simply never know; hundreds of scriptures, complex and mysterious rituals. So much about which the Dalai Lama rarely speaks to a Western audience; for his intent when talking to us is not to teach us about Tibetan Buddhism, but to communicate in accessible ways to non-Buddhists the essence of Buddhist teachings, teachings which he believes are themselves universal: compassion, kindness, peace, universal teachings which he has so deeply integrated into his life, beginning at four o'clock each morning.

Indeed, he has gone so far as to say “In the future I think people will follow the principles laid down by a man called Guatama. But the word ‘Buddhism’ may disappear. Which is fine: we don’t need the name.”

So then – what we can learn from the Dalai Lama which is deeper than a simple, what may sometimes seem even simple-minded, encouragement to be nice to each other?

Back to that four hours every morning. That four hours is about *training* the mind and spirit and heart. Yet it is not about *forcing* mind and spirit and heart to be something that isn't naturally already present. For the Dalai Lama believes, as Buddhist teaching affirms, that our essential nature is to be compassionate and peaceful. So in turn the Dalai Lama affirms that our task is simply to return to that essential nature, to root ourselves in that essential nature, to unlearn our conditioning as separate egos, and relearn the reality of interdependence, the truth that we are not separate selves, the truth of what Buddhists call "dependent origination": everything and everyone dependent on everything and everyone else... and so... *of course compassion*. For if we really get the nature of interdependent reality, experience it as more than an intellectual abstract idea... *of course compassion*.

And after all, if the Dalai Lama can maintain deep compassion for the oppressors of his people, for his "enemies"... ought not we be able to develop a little more compassion in our own lives? For the driver who cuts us off... for a co-worker who has spoke a word in anger... for our political leaders with whom we disagree... for ourselves?

The Dalai Lama would remind us that it is not magic.

Back to that four hours every morning. Four hours which include the conscious training of mind and heart in the direction of ever greater compassion. Reciting texts over and over which enjoin us to have compassion for all sentient beings – since we are identified in a real sense with all sentient beings in this world of dependent origination. Then focusing on this truth in order to experience it as ground and reality, so that compassion might indeed begin to come as naturally as breathing.

Now, we may not each have four hours. The Dalai Lama would understand this. But he would also say that it is not beyond any one of us to take some time to train our minds and hearts in the direction of greater compassion. We need not be at the mercy of mere emotion, of impulsive reactions to one another in the moment. We can pause for a time each day, remind ourselves of the reality of our interdependent lives, feel the suffering of others, nurture qualities of patience and kindness... and compassion; we can direct positive and healing thoughts or prayers to others, to all...

Compassion. Such a rich word, and even richer in Tibetan. The Tibetan word "nying je," the Dalai Lama tells us (in *Ethics for the New Millenium*), is not a word of pity or condescension, but a word which includes "love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit, warm-heartedness... connection."

Further, compassion is, the Dalai Lama teaches, also essential to our happiness. We all want to be happy, he notes, yet all too often we seek happiness driven by craving for an ever greater accumulation of material things, far beyond our needs, or for position or power or influence or acclaim... rather than realizing that our happiness, our contentment, our well-being grows directly from compassion and kindness, from connecting to others, from opening our hearts to others. And so, the Dalai Lama teaches, the more compassion we develop the happier we will be. (Paradoxically, this means, it is actually in our self-interest to be compassionate!)

Now, it is not as if compassion by itself will solve all of our problems. The Dalai Lama is well aware of the complexities of the ethical decisions we human beings have to make, well aware that a fundamental attitude of compassion doesn't always give us a straightforward answer to a particular ethical decision. But compassion *is* firm ground on which to stand in the midst of our complex, hurried, sometimes difficult lives.

Finally, all of this is of course not just about our individual lives.

As the Dalai Lama asserts: "Compassion and love are not mere luxuries. As the source both of inner and external peace, they are fundamental to the continued survival of our species."

"The fact of human interdependence is so explicit now," he writes, that "the only peace it is meaningful to speak of is world peace." And "Peace in the world... depends on peace in the

hearts of individuals.” And peace in our hearts, as we have just heard, grows as we grow in compassion, learn compassion, practice compassion in thought, word, and deed.

So the Dalai Lama does not hesitate to talk about world peace.

Yes, he knows well all the arguments, sometimes from his own people, about the need for violence and war in some circumstances – war for a just cause, limited war, preemptive war... - yet in the face of this, he affirms what we also know, that “The only certainty is that where there is violence, there is always and inevitably suffering.”

He knows too, as well as anyone, that disarmament and the end of war and organized violence will not come quickly or easily, but he believes it must be our goal.

As I would put it, in a world still organized in far too many ways on the basis of violence and the threat of violence, there *must* be those who stand up and say that there *is* another way, that there must be another way, and that we human beings are capable of finding and creating that other way of compassion and peace. It is a long term project, to be sure. All the more reason, we might say, to begin now! Otherwise we will be doomed to ever more destructive spirals of violence and war.

Who is the Dalai Lama? What can we – must we – learn from him?

He is the once little boy Tenzin Gyatso become a monk – who still describes himself as a simple monk – deeply immersed in his own Tibetan tradition and culture. Yet he is also a world figure, influenced by Gandhi, friends with Vaclav Havel, Desmond Tutu, and other icons of peace, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, teacher of us all – would we but listen.

May we, then, apply even a fraction of the discipline this man has developed in his life within our own lives, in order to become ever more deeply compassionate, ever more thoroughly realizing that our destinies are intertwined with the destinies of all beings, knowing in our bones that our heart’s peace is not fully possible without peace for all, and that peace for all is not possible without our peaceful and compassionate hearts.

I conclude with the words of an ancient Buddhist text, a text meant to be repeated as a way of training our minds and hearts toward ever greater compassion and peace:

May all beings be well.  
May all beings be at ease.  
May all beings be happy.  
May all being be at peace.

And may the work of our hands followings these leadings of our hearts.

So may it be.