

Teachings on Compassion
from
The Dalai Lama

A Digital Collection from the Editors of

Lion's Roar

Finding Heart

The Dalai Lama has a prescription for a world in need, and it's something everyone can give.

IF YOU HAD TO SUM UP the Dalai Lama in a single word, “heart” fits nicely. Few others have been so successful in their work to promote the values of compassion and kindness around the world. He is said to be an emanation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. As Pico Iyer describes in his profile of the Dalai Lama, presented in this collection, those who meet the Dalai Lama report that he embodies generosity in his every action. In doing so, he helps others discover generosity in themselves.

The teachings in this collection represent the Dalai Lama's prescription for a world in need: compassion.

In the first, “Living the Compassionate Life,” the Dalai Lama explains how a good heart is the most basic building block of a fulfilling life. “By remembering the suffering of others, by feeling compassion,” says His Holiness, “our own suffering becomes manageable.”

In the second, “The Heart of the Buddha,” the Dalai Lama explains the concept of bodhichitta, “awakened heart,” which he says is “the altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.” Even if we don't fully uncover our own awakened heart (“I cannot claim to,” he humbly admits) we can find a wealth of compassion and courage by simply aspiring to do so.

In his teaching and in his life, the Dalai Lama is a beacon of compassion for others to follow. By following his example, we can all learn the lesson of generosity.



The Heart of the Buddha

Forget all the fancy meditation practices, says His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the real heart of Buddhism is complete commitment to others. In this commentary on *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, he describes the awakened heart of the Buddha, which is his vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

By the Dalai Lama

In his famed text *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva states that all happiness and joy are the consequences of cherishing the well-being of other sentient beings, while all problems, tragedies and disasters are the consequences of self-cherishing attitudes. What further need is there, he asks, to talk about this when we can see the qualities of the Buddha, who cherishes the welfare of other sentient beings, and the fate of ourselves, who are in this current state? We can easily be convinced of this by comparing the shortcomings of ordinary sentient beings with the enlightened qualities and wisdom of the buddhas. On the basis of this



comparison, we are able to see the benefits and merits of the aspiration to cherish the welfare of other sentient beings and the faults and disadvantages of a self-cherishing and self-centered attitude.

Shantideva states that since self and others are equal in having the innate desire to be happy and to overcome suffering, why do we seek our own self-interest at the expense of others—even to the extent of being totally oblivious to them? I think this points to something very true. Like oneself, all other sentient beings are equal in having this wish to be happy and to overcome suffering. Each of us individually is not satisfied with any level of pleasure and happiness, and this is true of all sentient beings. Just as I, as an individual, have the natural right to fulfill this basic aspiration, so do all other sentient beings. It is crucial to recognize this fundamental equality.

What then is the difference between self and others?

No matter how important and precious each person is, we are only talking about the well-being of one person. No matter how acute their suffering may be, we are still concerned here with the interest of one single person. In contrast, when we speak about the well-being of other sentient beings, this word other refers to limitless, countless sentient beings. In the case of this other, even if we are dealing with slight degrees of suffering, when aggregated, we are talking about the sufferings of an infinite number of beings. Therefore, from the point of view of quantity, the welfare of other sentient beings becomes far more important than that of oneself.

Even from the point of view of our own self-interest, if others are happy and satisfied, then we ourselves can also be happy. On the other hand, if others are in a perpetual state of suffering, then we too will suffer from the same fate. The interest of others is intimately linked with our own self-interest; this is very true. Furthermore, based on our own personal experience, we can observe that the more we hold on to a strong sense of self—cherishing our own self-interest—the greater our own emotional and psychological problems.

What better way to make our human existence meaningful than by meditating on bodhichitta—the altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

Of course the pursuit of our own self-interest is very important. However, we need a more realistic approach, that is, not to take self-interest too seriously but spend more time thinking about the well-being of other sentient beings. Being more altruistic and taking into account the feelings and well-being of other sentient beings is, in actual fact, a much more healthy approach in pursuing our own interests. If we do that, we will see a marked change, a feeling of relaxation. We will no longer be easily provoked by petty circumstances, thinking that everything is at stake, and acting as if our whole image, identity and existence is being threatened. On the other hand, if we constantly think of our own self-interest—totally oblivious to the well-being of other sentient beings—then even the tiniest circumstances can provoke deep feelings of hurt and disturbance. The truth of this is something we can judge from our own experience.

In the long run, generating a good heart will benefit both ourselves and others. In contrast, allowing our minds to remain enslaved by self-centeredness will only perpetuate our feelings of dissatisfaction, frustration and unhappiness, both in temporary terms and in the long term as well. We will waste this wonderful opportunity we have now—of being born as a human, of being equipped with this wonderful human faculty of intelligence, which can be utilized for higher purposes. So it is important to be able to weigh these long-term and short-term consequences. What better way to make our human existence meaningful than by meditating on bodhichitta—the altruistic aspiration to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

Generating Bodhichitta

On my part, I cannot claim to have realized bodhichitta. However, I have a deep admiration for bodhichitta. I feel that the admiration I have

On my part, I cannot claim to have realized bodhichitta. However, I have a deep admiration for bodhichitta. I feel that the admiration I have for bodhichitta is my wealth and a source of my courage.

for bodhichitta is my wealth and a source of my courage. This is also the basis of my happiness; it is what enables me to make others happy, and it is the factor that makes me feel satisfied and content. I am thoroughly dedicated and committed to this altruistic ideal. Whether sick or well, growing old, or even at the point of death, I shall remain committed to this ideal. I am convinced that I will always maintain my deep admiration for this ideal of generating the altruistic mind of bodhichitta. On your part too, my friends, I would like to appeal to you to try to become as familiar as possible with bodhichitta. Strive, if you can, to generate such an altruistic and compassionate state of mind.

Actual realization of bodhichitta requires years of meditative practice. In some cases, it may take eons to have this realization. It is not adequate simply to have an intellectual understanding of what bodhichitta is. Nor is it sufficient to have an intuitive feeling like, “May all sentient beings attain the fully enlightened state.” These are not realizations of bodhichitta. Even so, I think it is worth it, for what more profound practice of dharma is there? As Shantideva states:

For like the supreme substance of the alchemists,
It takes the impure form of human flesh
And makes of it the priceless body of a buddha.
Such is bodhichitta: we should grasp it firmly!

When we think of bodhichitta superficially, it may seem quite simple; it may not even appear all that compelling. In contrast, the tantric meditations on mandalas and deities might seem mysterious, and we may find them more appealing. However, when we actually engage in the practice, bodhichitta is inexhaustible. There is also no danger of becoming disillusioned or disheartened as a result of practicing bodhi-

chitta, whereas in meditations on deity yoga, reciting mantras and so on, there is a danger of becoming disillusioned, because we often enter into such practices with too high an expectation. After many years, we might think, “Although I have done deity yoga meditation and recited all these mantras, there is no noticeable change; I haven’t had any mystical experiences.” This type of disillusionment is not the case with the practice of bodhichitta.

Since the realization of bodhichitta requires a long period of practice, once you have slight experience, it is vital that you affirm your cultivation of bodhichitta through aspirational prayers. This can be done in the



presence of a guru or in the presence of a representation of a buddha. Such a practice can further enhance your capacity for generating bodhichitta. By taking the bodhisattva vow in a special ceremony, you affirm your generation of bodhichitta in the presence of a teacher.

The first part of this type of ceremony is the generation of aspirational bodhichitta. What is involved here is that by generating this altruistic aspiration to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all beings, you pledge that you will not give it up or let it degenerate, not only in this lifetime, but also in future lives. As a commitment, there are certain precepts to be observed. The second part is the ceremony for taking the bodhisattva vows. This should be done by someone who has already prepared them-

selves by going through the first stage.

Having developed enthusiasm for engaging in the bodhisattva's deeds, you then take the bodhisattva vows. Once you have taken bodhisattva vows, whether you like it or not, whether it is pleasurable or not, what is required is a commitment to keep the vows as precious as your own life. To make that pledge, you must have determination as solid as a mountain; you are making a pledge that from now on you will follow the precepts of the bodhisattva and lead your life according to the bodhisattva training.

Of course some readers are not practicing Buddhists, and even among practicing Buddhists, some may not feel committed to taking the bodhisattva vows, especially the second part. If you feel hesitant about being able to observe the bodhisattva vows, then it is best not to make the pledge; you can still generate an altruistic mind and wish that all sentient beings may be happy and pray that you may be able to attain full enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. This should be sufficient; you will gain the merit of generating bodhichitta, but you do not have to follow the precepts. Also, there is less danger of breaking the vows. So if you do not take any vows, you simply develop aspirational bodhichitta. You can be your own judge.

With the wish to free all beings
I shall always go for refuge
To the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha,
Until I reach full enlightenment.

Enthused by wisdom and compassion
Today in the Buddha's presence
I generate the mind for full awakening
For the benefit of all sentient beings.

As long as space remains,
As long as sentient beings remain,
Until then, may I too remain
and dispel the miseries of the world.

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Living the Compassionate Life

This teaching by the Dalai Lama explains how the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and compassion lead inevitably to feelings of self-confidence and kindness.

By The Dalai Lama

As human beings we all have the potential to be happy and compassionate people, and we also have the potential to be miserable and harmful to others. The potential for all these things is present within each of us.

If we want to be happy, then the important thing is to try to promote the positive and useful aspects in each of us and to try to reduce the negative. Doing negative things, such as stealing and lying, may occasionally seem to bring some short-term satisfaction, but in the long term they will always bring us misery. Positive acts always bring us inner strength. With inner strength we have less fear and more self-confidence, and it becomes much easier to extend our sense of caring to others without any barriers, whether religious, cultural, or otherwise. It is thus very im-

portant to recognize our potential for both good and bad, and then to observe and analyze it carefully.

This is what I call the promotion of human value. My main concern is always how to promote an understanding of deeper human value. This deeper human value is compassion, a sense of caring, and commitment. No matter what your religion, and whether you are a believer or a non-



believer, without them you cannot be happy.

Kindness and a good heart form the underlying foundation for our success in this life, our progress on the spiritual path, and our fulfillment of our ultimate aspiration: the attainment of full enlightenment. Hence, compassion and a good heart are not only important at the beginning but also in the middle and at the end. Their necessity and value are not limited to any specific time, place, society or culture.

Thus, we need compassion and human affection not only to survive; they are the ultimate sources of success in life. Selfish ways of thinking not only harm others, they prevent the very happiness we ourselves desire. The time has come to think more wisely, hasn't it? This is my belief.

We all share an identical need for love, and on the basis of this commonality, it is possible to feel that anybody we meet, in whatever circumstances, is a brother or sister.

Developing Compassion

Before we can generate compassion and love, it is important to have a clear understanding of what we understand compassion and love to be. In simple terms, compassion and love can be defined as positive thoughts and feelings that give rise to such essential things in life as hope, courage, determination and inner strength. In the Buddhist tradition, compassion and love are seen as two aspects of the same thing: compassion is the wish for another being to be free from suffering; love is wanting them to have happiness.

The next matter to be understood is whether it is possible to enhance compassion and love. In other words, is there a means by which these qualities of mind can be increased, and anger, hatred, and jealousy reduced? My answer to this is an emphatic, “Yes!” Even if you do not agree with me right now, let yourself be open to the possibility of such a development. Let us carry out some experiments together; perhaps we may then find some answers.

For a start, it is possible to divide every kind of happiness and suffering into two main categories: mental and physical. Of the two, it is the mind that exerts the greatest influence on most of us. Unless we are either gravely ill or deprived of basic necessities, our physical condition plays a secondary role in life. If the body is content, we virtually ignore it. The mind, however, registers every event, no matter how small. Hence we should devote our most serious efforts to bringing about mental peace rather than physical comfort.

The Mind Can Be Changed

From my own limited experience, I am convinced that through constant training we can indeed develop our minds. Our positive attitudes,



thoughts, and outlook can be enhanced, and their negative counterparts can be reduced. Even a single moment of consciousness depends on so many factors, and when we change these various factors, the mind also changes. This is a simple truth about the nature of mind.

The thing that we call “mind” is quite peculiar. Sometimes it is very stubborn and very resistant to change. With continuous effort, however, and with conviction based on reason, our minds are sometimes quite honest and flexible. When we truly recognize that there is some need to change, then our minds can change. Wishing and praying alone will not transform your mind; you also need reason—reason ultimately grounded in your own experience. And you won’t be able to transform your mind overnight; old habits, especially mental ones, resist quick solutions. But with effort over time and conviction grounded in reason, you can definitely achieve profound changes in your mental attitudes.

As a basis for change, we need to recognize that as long as we live in this world we will encounter problems, things that obstruct the fulfillment of our goals. If, when these happen, we lose hope and become discouraged, we diminish our ability to face these difficulties. If, on the other hand, we remember that not just we but everyone has to undergo suffering, this more realistic perspective will increase our determination and our capacity to overcome troubles. By remembering the suffering of others, by feeling compassion for others, our own suffering becomes

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manageable. Indeed, with this attitude, each new obstacle can be seen as yet another valuable opportunity to improve our mind, another opportunity for deepening our compassion! With each new experience, we can strive gradually to become more compassionate; that is, we can develop both genuine sympathy for others' suffering and the will to help remove their pain. As a result, our own serenity and inner strength will increase.

How to Develop Compassion

Self-centeredness inhibits our love for others, and we are all afflicted by it to one degree or another. For true happiness to come about, we need a calm mind, and such peace of mind is brought about only by a compassionate attitude. How can we develop this attitude? Obviously, it is not enough for us simply to believe that compassion is important and to think about how nice it is! We need to make a concerted effort to develop it; we must use all the events of our daily life to transform our thoughts and behavior.

First of all, we must be clear about what we mean by compassion. Many forms of compassionate feeling are mixed with desire and attachment. For instance, the love parents feel for their child is often strongly associated with their own emotional needs, so it is not fully compassionate. Usually when we are concerned about a close friend, we call this compassion, but it too is usually attachment. Even in marriage, the love between husband and wife—particularly at the beginning, when each partner still may not know the other's deeper character very well—depends more on attachment than genuine love. Marriages that last only a short time do so because they lack compassion; they are produced by emotional attachment based on projection and expectation, and as soon as the projections change, the attachment disappears. Our desire can be so strong that the person to whom we are attached appears to be flaw-

less, when in fact he or she has many faults. In addition, attachment makes us exaggerate small, positive qualities. When this happens, it indicates that our love is motivated more by personal need than by genuine care for another.

Compassion without attachment is possible. Therefore, we need to clarify the distinctions between compassion and attachment. True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Because of this firm foundation, a truly compassionate attitude toward others does not change even if they behave negatively. Genuine compassion is based not on our own projections and expectations, but rather on the needs of the other: irrespective of whether another person is a close friend or an enemy, as long as that person wishes for peace and happiness and wishes to overcome suffering, then on that basis we develop genuine concern for their problem. This is genuine compassion. For a Buddhist practitioner, the goal is to develop this genuine compassion, this genuine wish for the well-being of another, in fact for every living being throughout the universe. Of course, developing this kind of compassion is not at all easy! Let us consider this point more closely.

Whether people are beautiful or plain, friendly or cruel, ultimately they are human beings, just like oneself. Like oneself, they want happiness and do not want suffering. Furthermore, their right to overcome suffering and to be happy is equal to one's own. Now, when you recognize that all beings are equal in both their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it, you automatically feel empathy and closeness for them. Through accustoming your mind to this sense of universal altru-



Compassion, loving-kindness, altruism, and a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood are the keys not only to human development, but to planetary survival.

ism, you develop a feeling of responsibility for others; you wish to help them actively overcome their problems. This wish is not selective; it applies equally to all beings. As long as they experience pleasure and pain just as you do, there is no logical basis to discriminate between them or to alter your concern for them if they behave negatively.

One point I should make here is that some people, especially those who see themselves as very realistic and practical, are sometimes too realistic and obsessed with practicality. They may think, “The idea of wishing for the happiness of all beings, of wanting what is best for every single one, is unrealistic and too idealistic. Such an unrealistic idea cannot contribute in any way to transforming the mind or to attaining some kind of mental discipline because it is completely unachievable.”

A more effective approach, they may think, would be to begin with a close circle of people with whom one has direct interaction. Later one can expand and increase the parameters of that circle. They feel there is simply no point in thinking about all beings, since there is an infinite number of them. They may conceivably be able to feel some kind of connection with some fellow human beings on this planet, but they feel that the infinite number of beings throughout the universe have nothing to do with their own experience as individuals. They may ask, “What point is there in trying to cultivate the mind that tries to include within its sphere every living being?”

In other contexts, that may be a valid objection. What is important here, however, is to grasp the impact of cultivating such altruistic sentiments. The point is to try to develop the scope of our empathy in such a way that we can extend it to any form of life with the capacity to feel pain and experience happiness. It is a matter of recognizing living organisms as sentient, and therefore subject to pain and capable of happiness.

Such a universal sentiment of compassion is very powerful, and there

is no need to be able to identify, in specific terms, with every single living being in order for it to be effective. In this regard it is similar to recognizing the universal nature of impermanence: when we cultivate the recognition that all things and events are impermanent, we do not need to consider individually every single thing that exists in the universe in order to be convinced of it. That is not how the mind works. It is important to appreciate this point.



Given patience and time, it is within our power to develop this kind of universal compassion. Of course our self-centeredness, our distinctive attachment to the feeling of a solid “I,” works fundamentally to inhibit our compassion. Indeed, true compassion can be experienced only when this type of self-grasping is eliminated. But this does not mean that we cannot start to cultivate compassion and begin to make progress right away.

Since compassion and a good heart are developed through constant and conscious effort, it is important for us first to identify the favorable conditions that give rise to our own qualities of kindness, and then to identify the adverse circumstances that obstruct our cultivation of these positive states of mind. It is therefore important for us to lead a life of constant mindfulness and mental alertness. Our mastery of mindfulness should be such that whenever a new situation arises, we are able to rec-

ognize immediately whether the circumstances are favorable or adverse to the development of compassion and a good heart. By pursuing the practice of compassion in such a manner, we will gradually be able to alleviate the effects of the obstructive forces and enhance the conditions that favor the development of compassion and a good heart.

Global Compassion

I believe that at every level of society—familial, national and international—the key to a happier and more successful world is the growth of compassion. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in a particular ideology. All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities. I believe that the cultivation of individual happiness can contribute in a profound and effective way to the overall improvement of the entire human community.

We all share an identical need for love, and on the basis of this commonality, it is possible to feel that anybody we meet, in whatever circumstances, is a brother or sister. No matter how new the face or how different the dress or behavior, there is no significant division between us and other people. It is foolish to dwell on external differences because our basic natures are the same.

The benefits of transcending such superficial differences become clear when we look at our global situation. Ultimately, humanity is one and this small planet is our only home. If we are to protect this home of ours, each of us needs to experience a vivid sense of universal altruism and compassion. It is only this feeling that can remove the self-centered motives that cause people to deceive and misuse one another. If you have a sincere and open heart, you naturally feel self-worth and confidence, and there is no need to be fearful of others.

The need for an atmosphere of openness and cooperation at the global level is becoming more urgent. In this modern age, when it comes to dealing with economic situations there are no longer familial or even national boundaries. From country to country and continent to continent, the world is inextricably interconnected. Each country depends heavily

on the others. In order for a country to develop its own economy, it is forced to take seriously into account the economic conditions of other countries as well. In fact, economic improvement in other countries ultimately results in economic improvement in one's own country.

In view of these facts about our modern world, we need a total revolution in our thinking and our habits. It is becoming clearer every day that a viable economic system must be based on a true sense of universal responsibility. In other words, what we need is a genuine commitment to the principles of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. This much is clear, isn't it? This is not just a holy, moral or religious ideal. Rather, it is the reality of our modern human existence.

If you reflect deeply enough, it becomes obvious that we need more compassion and altruism everywhere. This critical point can be appreciated by observing the current state of affairs in the world, whether in the fields of modern economics and health care, or in political and military situations. In addition to the multitude of social and political crises, the world is also facing an ever-increasing cycle of natural calamities. Year after year, we have witnessed a radical shifting of global climatic patterns that has led to grave consequences: excessive rain in some countries that has brought serious flooding, a shortage of precipitation in other countries that has resulted in devastating droughts. Fortunately, concern for ecology and the environment is rapidly growing everywhere. We are now beginning to appreciate that the question of environmental protection is ultimately a question of our very survival on this planet. As human beings, we must also respect our fellow members of the human family: our neighbors, our friends, and so forth. Compassion, loving-kindness, altruism, and a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood are the keys not only to human development, but to planetary survival.

The success or failure of humanity in the future depends primarily upon the will and determination of the present generation. If we ourselves do not utilize our faculties of will and intelligence, there is no one else who can guarantee our future and that of the next generation. This is an indisputable fact. We cannot place the entire blame on politicians

or those people who are seen as directly responsible for various situations; we too must bear some responsibility personally. It is only when the individual accepts personal responsibility that he or she begins to take some initiative. Just shouting and complaining is not good enough. A genuine change must first come from within the individual, then he or she can attempt to make significant contributions to humanity. Altruism is not merely a religious ideal; it is an indispensable requirement for humanity at large. ♦

Adapted from The Compassionate Life, by the Dalai Lama. © 2001 Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Available from Wisdom Publications.



A Day in the Life

If you were the Dalai Lama, how would you spend a day? In a classic Pico Iyer interview with the Dalai Lama from the turn of the century, His Holiness shared an intimate glimpse of a day in the life of a global religious leader.

By The Dalai Lama

Each time I receive some new teaching, that adds something to my daily practice. So nowadays, my daily recitation, compulsory, normally takes about four hours.

Usually I wake up at 3:30 in the morning. Then immediately I do some meditation, some exercise—prostrations—then bathe. Then a little walking outside. All this time I am reciting some mantra or doing some meditation. Then at 5:15, I breakfast and at 5:30 listen to the Voice of America Tibetan language broadcast. The BBC East Asia broadcast often mentions something about Tibet or China, so I usually listen to that.

After breakfast, I do some more meditation and then usually study some Tibetan philosophy or important texts. If there's some urgent business I come here to my office, and sometimes before lunch I read newspapers and magazines—Newsweek, Time, Far Eastern Economic Review, some Indian newspapers.

Oh, yes. At 7:30 I always listen to the BBC world news. Always. I am addicted. When I visit some foreign country and I can't listen to it because of the time change, or not having enough time, I really feel something is missing that day. I feel I don't know what's happened in the world. The BBC is always very good, and, I really feel, unbiased.

After my lunch I come here to my office until about 5:30. Then at 6:00 I have my evening tea—as a Buddhist monk, no dinner, sometimes just a few biscuits or some bread. At that time I always watch BBC television. Then evening meditation for about one hour and at 8:30, sleep. Most important meditation! Sleep is the common meditation for everyone—even for birds. The most important meditation. Not for nirvana, but for survival! ♦



Heart of the Dalai Lama

For thirty-five years Pico Iyer has been a friend, observer, and student of the Dalai Lama. In this exclusive and heartfelt essay, he reveals the simple human secret that makes His Holiness the most beloved spiritual figure in the world.

By Pico Iyer

“When I was your age,” the Fourteenth Dalai Lama is telling a group of six hundred or so young female students at Chikushi Jagakoen school in Fukuoka, Japan, “I was a quite lazy student. I didn’t have much enthusiasm for studying.” Though sitting politely, their hands in their laps, the girls almost visibly come to attention, drawing closer as he says this (they weren’t expecting such words from a celebrated visitor). “So my tutor always kept a whip,” he goes on, as naturally as if he were talking to his oldest friend. “I was studying with my elder brother, so the tutor



kept two whips. One was yellow—a ‘Holy Whip!’ But I think if you use the ‘Holy Whip,’ the effect is the same as from the other one. ‘Holy Pain.’”

Even the girls, trained to be reserved and demure since birth, cannot contain their laughter—and delight, perhaps, and relief. Even this man regarded as an incarnation of a god by his followers is, at some level, just like them. Even he has been in need of discipline at times, and is in the lifelong business of finding an answer to suffering, or “Holy Pain,” as it might be. I scribble down his every word and notice how seamlessly he’s transmitting certain fundamental truths of Buddhism. Don’t be distracted by externals, or signs of ceremony—a yellow whip hurts just the same as any other whip. Don’t think of holiness as something separate from the realm of suffering—if anything, our most sacred duty comes in our response to the realm of suffering, which evolves through a change in perception. Don’t think of people as unequal—everyone has to go through the same lessons, and the Buddha himself, master democrat, gave us a sense of power and potential by always reminding us that he

was no different from us.

And yet, as ever, the Dalai Lama conveys all this without using the word “don’t” at all. “But,” he tells the young students, “I believe some years I lost” through not paying attention. “Please pay attention to your studies.” It’s a tonic and liberating idea: excitement is in the eye of the beholder, a reflection of the choices that we make. He’s already told the girls, at the beginning of his lecture, that he’s “nothing special,” no different from

It’s almost impossible not to be inspired by him, to be warmed, to be clarified, to feel that you’ve come into a presence of rare goodness and uncanny, omnidirectional compassion.



any one of them, in his human challenges (or his human potential). So if they are impressed by the sense of presence, alertness, and kindness they see before them, embodied in one being, they’re essentially impressed by an image of what they can be, too, if they so choose. Indeed, by learning from his mistakes, they can go beyond him in certain respects, and pay attention to the possibilities around them from a younger age. At some point, he assures them, he realized that his studies were in fact the most exciting adventure around; it wasn’t necessarily that the difficult Buddhist texts changed, but that his way of seeing them did.

He doesn’t tell them, I have noticed, that whenever he has a spare

When he's dreaming, he says, he usually sees himself as a monk, but almost never as the Dalai Lama.

moment on the road he turns to a copy of some Buddhist teaching, his greatest joy whenever he isn't inspecting the world around him (to get a deeper, more detailed and empirical sense of what reality looks like). In Yokohama he'll ask an engineer, backstage, before a large lecture, how the soundboard works. When we have lunch with an ambassador from Bahrain, he'll try to learn more about the history of Islam and Arabic culture. When old friends come to meet him in his hotel room, he asks them how things are going in Japan, and listens to their answers closely, like a doctor hearing a list of symptoms. One reason he's in this little girls' school in Fukuoka this morning is that so many Japanese mothers, on recent trips, have told him of their urgent concern about alienation among the young in their country, children who shut themselves in their rooms and never have contact with the world, teenage suicides.

The other reason he's here is no less practical: these students, some barely out of kindergarten, are the ones who will make the world we live in thirty years from now, the real power brokers in the larger view of things. On his previous trip to Japan, one year before, the Dalai Lama had spent his one day in Tokyo not visiting politicians or cultivating the media or talking to movers and shakers; he'd spent the entire day visiting two boys' high schools associated with temples, offering them lectures like this one and sitting in meditation with the boys in a school zendo. Children are not only more open to transformation and more in need of positive direction than their elders are; they're also potential more or less incarnate. Two months after this meeting, I'll meet one of Britain's leading young writers, who has worked hard for Tibet, turning a rigorous, scrupulous eye on the events of the day, and becoming one of the leading modern historians of India.

"The Dalai Lama came to my school when I was very young," he told me. "I was just in my teens. And it was a school run by Benedictine monks. But somehow it made an incredible impression on me." As soon

as he finished his studies, he went to Dharamsala to study in the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. Later he would spend two months on a punishing trip across Tibet, recording what's really happening there.

It's so easy not to listen to the Dalai Lama, I've found over the decades I've been traveling with him. It's almost impossible not to be inspired by him, to be warmed, to be clarified, to feel that you've come into a pres-

The press inevitably makes a big deal out of whether he meets a president or prime minister. But for him the much more important thing is just meeting a single soul.



ence of rare goodness and uncanny, omnidirectional compassion. I've been lucky enough to know him for thirty-five years now, since I was a teenager, and every November, when he comes to Japan, I travel by his side every day from around 7:30 every morning, when his working day begins, to around 5 p.m., when it concludes. I sit in on his closed-door meetings with parliamentarians, his audiences with old friends, his chats with ceremonial hosts, his discussions with leaders of all Japan's religious groups. It's exhausting even watching him go through his day. He comes



down to the hotel lobby for his first event, after four hours of meditation, and finds five Tibetans who have traveled across the island to see him. He stops to receive and bless the ceremonial silk scarves they've brought to him, and as they sob with emotion and gratitude, he gives them heart and tells them not to give up sustaining their culture and their confidence in its survival. And then he goes and does the same thing for the next ten hours, as he's done every day for seventy years.

Yet so often, even as we're being moved by the way he instinctively knows how to see past divisions, laughs to dissolve our tension, or manages somehow to make us feel we're meeting not just a great philosopher and global leader, but an old friend, we come away—at least I do—with our head in the clouds, unstopably grinning and with tears in the corners of our eyes. We talk about all that he's given us and all that we've learned from his being—what a great sense of humor!—and we (or at least I) grow wild with our own ideas of him, instead of the ideas he's come to offer to us. Thirteen years ago, I heard from a writer in Hawaii (skeptical, non-Buddhist, famously unimpressionable) that when the Dalai Lama came to his city, he went to the lecture, took down every word he said, and then kept the transcript by his bed, so he could read it



again and again.

Now I do the same. It's not hard to transcribe every word, since the Dalai Lama speaks slowly and very deliberately in English and, when he's speaking in Tibetan, his words come to us through a translator. I get a lot of instruction from them as I write. But I get even more when I go back to my desk and read the words over and over, and copy them out again and again, as if they were (and why should they not be?) a text I am studying at college. Even in his second language, the Dalai Lama speaks with meticulous precision, and a quarter of a century of traveling has allowed him to hone his words down so that the simplest-sounding sentence in fact contains volumes of teaching.

"I am a simple Buddhist monk," he says, and once upon a time I'd have been warmed and disarmed by the comment, so modest and transparent. But now, as I listen to him, I hear him say that he's come to this formulation, as to everything he says, through an extended process of research, reflection, and analysis. When he's dreaming, he says, he usually sees himself as a monk, but almost never as the Dalai Lama. When, occasionally, he has faint memories of earlier incarnations, he generally sees himself in a monastic role, but only very rarely as the Dalai Lama.

More important, his monastic commitment is one that he has undertaken and that no one can strip from him but himself; the Dalai Lama is a title, a position—a set of rites—that could be taken from him at any moment. When the Thirteenth Dalai Lama was asked who he was, I found out when I researched it, he said, “A simple Buddhist monk.”

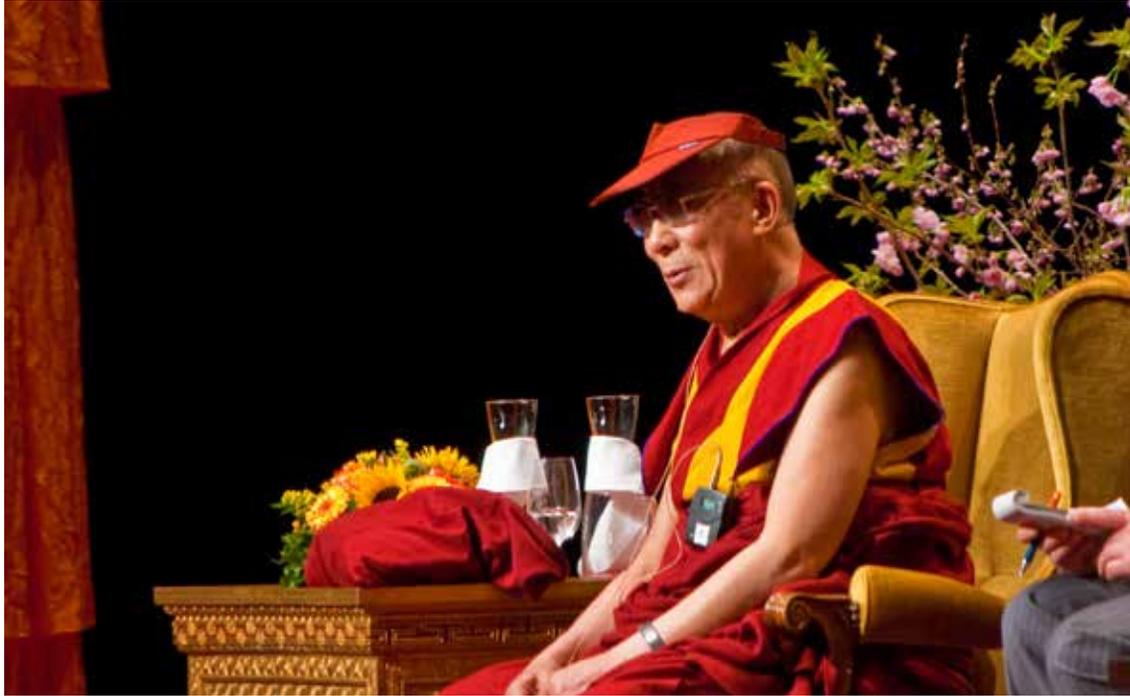
Listen to the doctor’s careful prescription instead of just raving about his bedside manner, I tell myself as he returns to Japan in the bright

He thinks of the Buddha as a scientist, whose main aim is to show us reality, objectively, empirically, precisely.

autumn days for another few days of engagements. It’s too easy to fly off into lofty theorizing about the man, into essays on him or abstractions, into comparisons and projections and all the kind of vagueness or myth-making that he would forcefully counsel me against. Maybe on this occasion I can just try to take down what he says—to listen—and to see how every sentence contains a teaching. How even a modest-seeming event at a girls’ school can offer as much as some of his most sonorous discourses.

There are rows and rows of six-year-olds, impeccable in their blue skirts and tops and bonnets, lined up in the brilliant sunshine as the Dalai Lama and a small group of secretaries, bodyguards, and attendants arrive (along with my wife and me) at Chikushi Jagakoen. High schoolers are standing, equally serious and attentive, at their side, and even some college students, in scrupulously quiet styles and pale colors. Fukuoka is a long way from Tokyo and Kyoto, on an island to the south, and not many dignitaries trouble to come here.

But as I walk behind the Tibetan leader on the warm November day, it’s clear that we could be walking around any school in Nova Scotia, or Indiana—or the Tibetan Children’s Village in Dharamsala. The Dalai Lama bends down to shake each little girl by the hand, sometimes affec-



tionately tweaking a cheek as if this Yuki or Sachi were his great-niece. He engages the high school girls in conversation, looking into their eyes and attending to their answers as if they were his guides to contemporary Japan. “How many of your students speak English?” he asks the teachers on arrival, so he can make best use of the hours. Given that most have at least studied it, he can speak to them directly, and not have to lose time on translations.

One day before, he had been addressing a group of 400 local Buddhists, from different sects, burying their differences to come together to listen to him direct them toward certain useful texts from Shantideva and Nagarjuna as an answer to loneliness and confusion. In the afternoon, he’d addressed thousands of regular folks in the Kita Kyushu Dome on his usual themes of compassion and responsibility. The previous weekend, in Tokyo, he’d spent a whole day speaking to Chinese individuals living in Japan—looking for common ground, as always—and then had devoted one and a half days to talking to the international media. But now he’s giving himself to the schoolgirls as attentively and enthusiastically as if he were visiting the White House or the Vatican.

Japan is the strongest Buddhist nation in the world, of course—until China comes around. More to the point, it's also one of the only ones that opens its doors to the Dalai Lama. Not the least of the ironies of his life is that the most visible and probably most respected Buddhist in the world is not invited to Buddhist Sri Lanka or Burma or Thailand or Vietnam, because they fear the consequences from China. Japan, however, is powerful enough to risk his presence, and the Dalai Lama, in turn, has long turned to Japan for instruction in mixing modern innovation with ancient tradition, and in blending efficiency with humility, hard work with a wish to do better. The previous spring I spent two days with him in Santa Barbara, and did an event with him at New York's Town Hall, but I see him most engaged in the Buddhist part of his public life as he travels around Japan and thinks about how to make strong and deep the future of Mahayana Buddhism.

Now, as the girls sit silently before him in the school auditorium, he offers something of a lesson in “skillful means.” With fellow monks and philosophers, I've seen, on this trip as on every other, he will quickly dive into texts and exchange ideas and explanations with the excitement of a lifelong scholar; but with these girls, he'll find the place of common experience between them and him—his life as a student, his life as a brother—and exchange certain basic human principles of attention and self-confidence to kids who may not know or care about the four noble truths. A large part of a doctor's skill comes not in making the diagnosis, but in explaining it in simple, everyday, human terms that any lay person can understand.

The fact that his own English is imperfect is itself a small reassurance—a reminder that he's on the same level as his listeners and is not an all-knowing sage laying down the law from a throne or a mountain-top. His voice goes up and down, never a monotone, and his sentences are as full of emphases and clarity as his famously articulate Tibetan. Yet at the same time, in its calligraphic directness, his solid and succinct English gets the point across with little room for ambiguity, or wild misinterpretations.

As he speaks about our “global family” and the “new reality” of a world without “them and us,” the Dalai Lama speaks always with his being, leaning in toward the students, rocking back and forth while sitting cross-legged on his chair, coming to the front of the stage when he arrives so he can make eye contact with as many people as possible. He waves to familiar faces. He looks up at the adornments of the stage. He conveys his humanity through pulling a tissue out of his robes. And when he asks for questions, to my astonishment a hundred hands shoot up, the generally reticent Japanese clearly so engaged by his presentation that their defenses are gone and they’re as eager to speak to him as to some respected classmate.



One girl after another stands up, and poses a question as direct and to the point as any the Dalai Lama could ask for: “How do I bring peace and love to the world—I’m only small?” “Do you get disappointed trying to protect Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism?” “What do you do if you’re losing hope?” Clearly, like most audiences he visits, they’ve been studying the Tibetan issue in preparation for his trip. But clearly, too, they’re posing the questions that are most urgent to them right now—the bullied girl or the scared one, the idealist and the one who is feeling isolated and frustrated. They all get up and find a way to frame question after question that comes from the heart.

The Dalai Lama listens to them as keenly as a physician listens to his patients, and, though he hears variations on the same questions several times a day, he responds to each one with unqualified vigor and intensi-

ty. “As soon as you feel some problem, some disappointment,” he tells the first questioner, “then you must look at the problem from a wider perspective, through different angles.” I realize, with a pang, how close this issue is to his own predicament, with the Chinese government cracking down on Tibetans in Tibet more unsparingly than ever. “Then you can



see there's a possibility of a compromise," he goes on. "If you look only in one way, you think, 'I can't accept this.'"

I recall too how on this trip he's been talking over and over about the challenge of forgiveness and how much he admires the way the Japanese, after seeing two of their biggest cities destroyed, did not express hatred toward their American antagonists in war but decided to learn from them. Over and over he's been saying that Japan, particularly as the world's only victim so far of atomic bombings, can both lead the world in the cause of nonviolence and serve as a model for combatants everywhere of how to break the cycle of vengeance. "You suffered," he says, "and yet you turned that experience into a determination to prevent war, not into a hatred of your oppressor." He's speaking to the Japanese girls, clearly, but it's not hard for the rest of us to hear how this might apply to our lives—we all face conflict—and, no less, to the lives of every Tibetan.

Again and again, as the questions continue, I see how compressed and practical his responses are. Asked about getting discouraged in his work for Tibet, he answers, without hesitation, “Here, one sense of hope is, I’m a Buddhist. Although a not very good practitioner. But still I try to be a practitioner. One of my main practices is to make one’s existence something useful and helpful to others. That’s my prayer.” (His prayer, I notice, is his practice. His practice is his prayer). “That really gives me inner strength. So, generally, when there is some challenge, there is better opportunity to make some contribution.” Again, it sounds so simple, but it is as real and complex an idea as his beloved Shantideva’s reminder that your seeming enemy is your best teacher, moving you to call upon your native clear-sightedness and patience and compassion.

When asked what advice he can give to Japan, he stresses at the outset, “Of course I have no direct responsibility.” But then he responds with typical pragmatism. “But I feel—just one small gesture: you young Japanese have great potential to serve, to help humanity, particularly in Asia. Now, maybe here one obstacle is language. Perhaps learning English more widely may be one factor: you have the knowledge, you have the ability, but language sometimes becomes an obstacle. In order to utilize your abilities widely, perhaps more attention to learning English may be a good thing.”

I notice those favorite words of his—“utilize,” “widely,” “perhaps”—but I also notice how he’s speaking about communication, dialogue, the search for common ground, not in the lofty words of the Golden Rule, but in terms of concrete, everyday practices. “Even this poor English, broken English, quite useful in communicating with other people,” he says, and the girls relax and laugh again.

And so it goes. Someone asks him what has touched him most in his life, and he says, “I don’t know” (which always draws a laugh—of surprise blending into relief: he doesn’t claim to have all the answers). “Usually, one is Buddha’s teaching,” he goes on (as he did once in telling me how tears come to his eyes when thinking of the Buddha, or any act of kindness). “Infinite altruism. That shows us the purpose of our life.” That



applies even to the media, he goes on, as it can “make clear to the people what reality is” (and I recall how, the previous year, in Japan, he’d said that he thinks of the Buddha as a scientist, whose main aim is to show us reality, objectively, empirically, precisely). “The media should have a long nose, as long as an elephant’s nose. Smell, in front and behind, make clear what’s happening. Media people have great potential to help humanity.”

Throughout the trip, he’s been asking people—scientists, politicians, journalists, and now schoolgirls—to go to Tibet, if they have the chance, just to tell the world what’s happening there. Don’t listen to Tibetan propaganda, he says; don’t listen to Chinese. Just give us a neutral, factual account of how people are living there since the area was blocked from media investigation in March 2008. A doctor who can’t see his patients, or even hear what’s happening with them, is at a loss.

And asked once more what he does when he can’t succeed, he reminds his audience of some of the brighter sides of impermanence. “This pres-

ent situation has to change. Change will not come from the sky. We, as individuals, must make some effort, no matter one simple, insignificant case. One person leads, ten people join, a thousand people join, then the media...”

I hear, as I listen, the vision of incremental, soul-by-soul change he'd outlined to me the day after he'd been awarded the Nobel Prize. He really wondered if his efforts were enough, he'd told me on the very day when others were celebrating what they hoped would mark a new future for Tibet. But all one could do was try one's best, and know that the effort might reach to others, and then still others, and then more. Two days before Fukuoka, speaking to more than 300 journalists crammed into Tokyo's Foreign Correspondents' Club, he'd suddenly offered, “Blessings come from yourself,” in telling the story of a wealthy Indian family who had come to him to ask for his blessing. Your wealth is itself a blessing, he'd told them; don't ask me to give you anything. The kind acts you do, the way you share the blessing of your money, is what generates blessings for you. And don't just give it out, but use it wisely and practically, for education, hospitals, clinics.

And then, as the event begins to draw to a close, I notice, as listeners always do, how much of his instruction comes just in the way he walks through the world. He much appreciates the questions, he says; they were very good (practical, honest, unqualified). He asks all the young ladies brave enough to stand up in front of their classmates and ask him something to come up onstage, so he can greet them personally and be photographed with them. (I remember when my daughter, seeing him as a schoolgirl in Kyoto, was most moved after another girl asked him an anguished question about her life and he said, “I don't know the answer,” but asked her to come onstage so he could just hold her at least.)

Then one of the students, a smiling girl of about sixteen from Bangladesh, the winner of a contest, I'm assuming, is asked to deliver a short essay on behalf of the school to its visitor. As she stands on the stage and reads, in fluent Japanese (translated for the Dalai Lama by an assistant), about her feelings returning to her very poor home country and then

coming back to affluent Japan, where it's so easy to take everything for granted, the Dalai Lama watches her intently, never taking his eyes off her, as if he were listening to a teacher of his expound a lesson about the Buddha.

He embraces her and gives her a ceremonial white silk scarf. The next day, after we fly back to Tokyo, when he addresses a large audience in a sumo stadium, his biggest public event of the tour, equivalent to a talk in Madison Square Garden, he starts, to my surprise, speaking about the student from Bangladesh he'd just met and the story she'd shared with him. Lessons and precepts and stories and practical counsel are filling every moment of his day, as he stops to shake the hand of every waiter after lunch, or suddenly tells me, eyes moistening, how moved he is that Tibetans have brought something of Buddhism back to the country of its birth. I transcribe every moment. But from this particular morning, one thing I take away is how ready he is to learn from a teenage girl and to distill everything he knows for even the smallest and least elevated of settings.

When his talk is over and he's finished going down to shake hands with students in the front rows, posing for photographs with the questioners, draping the head teachers with silk scarves, he's asked if he'd like to take his lunch in peace, alone. Oh no, no, he says, with absolute conviction. We must all eat together.

We go back out into the bright November sunshine, after lunch is over, to the next appointment, and I suspect that this small event on his schedule is as important to him as any meeting with a head of state or billionaire. I remember, twelve years earlier, his telling me that the press inevitably makes a big deal out of whether he meets a president or prime minister. But for him the much more important thing is just meeting a single soul, sincere, who may look on her life with a little more confidence and clarity after their talk. That is where the possibility of transformation is most great. "Then I really feel I've made some contribution," he had said.

Change, again, comes not all at once, but with one turning heart and then another. All that's needed, he might be saying, is attention. ♦

For twenty-five years, P I C O I Y E R has covered His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan situation for Time, The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, and The New York Times Op-ed page. An author of ten books, Iyer has traveled from Jerusalem to Koyasan and from Tibet to Central Australia for his work.