

MAGAZINE

COLUMNSOCIETY & ENVIRONMENT

Consider Yourself a Tourist

Advice from the Dalai Lama on making our lives meaningful and dealing with our mortality.

By Dalai Lama WINTER 1999



Within less than fifty years, I, Tenzin Gyatso, the Buddhist monk, will be no more than a memory. Indeed, it is doubtful whether a single person reading these words will be alive a century from now. Time passes unhindered. When we make mistakes, we cannot turn the clock back and try again. All we can do is use the present well. Therefore, if when our final day comes we are able to look back and see that we have lived full, productive, and meaningful lives, that will at least be of some comfort. If we cannot, we may be very sad. But which of these we experience is up to us.

The best way to ensure that when we approach death we do so without remorse is to ensure that in the present moment we conduct ourselves responsibly and with compassion for others. Actually, this is in our own interest, and not just because it will benefit us in the future. As we have seen, compassion is one of the principal things that make our lives meaningful. It is the source of all lasting happiness and joy. And it is the foundation of a 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. This, then, is my true religion, my simple faith. In this sense, there is no need for temple or church, for mosque or synagogue, no need for complicated philosophy, doctrine, or dogma. Our own heart, our own mind, is the temple. The doctrine is compassion. Love for others and respect for their rights and dignity, no matter who or what they are: ultimately these are all we need. So long as we practice these in our daily lives, then no matter if we are learned or unlearned, whether we believe in Buddha or God, or follow some other religion or none at all, as long as we have compassion for others and conduct ourselves with restraint out of a sense of responsibility, there is no doubt we will be happy.

Why, then, if it is so simple to be happy, do we find it so hard? Unfortunately, though most of us think of ourselves as compassionate, we tend to ignore these commonsense truths. We neglect to confront our negative thoughts and emotions. Unlike the farmer who follows the seasons and does not hesitate to cultivate the land when the moment comes, we waste so much of our time in meaningless activity. We feel deep regret over trivial matters like losing money while keeping from doing what is genuinely important without the slightest feeling of remorse. Instead of rejoicing in the opportunity we

have to contribute to others' well-being, we merely take our pleasures where we can. We shrink from considering others on the grounds that we are too busy. We run right and left, making calculations and telephone calls and thinking that this would be better than that. We do one thing but worry that if something else comes along we had better do another. But in this we engage only in the coarsest and most elementary levels of the human spirit. Moreover, by being inattentive to the needs of others, inevitably we end up harming them. We think ourselves very clever, but how do we use our abilities? All too often we use them to deceive our neighbors, to take advantage of them and better ourselves at their expense. And when things do not work out, full of self-righteousness, we blame them for our difficulties.

This is my true religion, my simple faith. In this sense, there is no need for temple or church, for mosque or synagogue, no need for complicated philosophy, doctrine, or dogma. Our own heart, our own mind, is the temple. The doctrine is compassion.

Yet lasting satisfaction cannot be derived from the acquisition of objects. No matter how many friends we acquire, they cannot make us happy. And indulgence in sensual pleasure is nothing but a gateway to suffering. It is like honey smeared along the cutting edge of a sword. Of course, that is not to say that we should despise our bodies. On the contrary, we cannot be of help to others without a body. But we need to avoid the extremes which can lead to harm.

In focusing on the mundane, what is essential remains hidden from us. Of course, if we could be truly happy doing so, then it would be entirely reasonable to live like this. Yet we cannot. At best, we get through life without too much trouble. But then when problems assail us, as they must, we are unprepared. We find that we cannot cope. We are left despairing and unhappy.

Therefore, with my two hands joined, I appeal to you the reader to ensure that you make the rest of your life as meaningful as possible. Do this by engaging in spiritual practice if you can. As I hope I have made clear, there is nothing mysterious about this. It consists in nothing more than acting out of concern for others. And provided you undertake this practice sincerely and with persistence, little by little, step by step you will gradually be able to reorder your habits and attitudes so that you think less about your own narrow concerns and more of others'. In doing so, you will find that you enjoy peace and happiness yourself.

Consider yourself a tourist. Think of the world as it is seen from

space, so small and insignificant yet so beautiful. Could there really be anything to be gained from harming others during our stay here?

Relinquish your envy, let go your desire to triumph over others. Instead, try to benefit them. With kindness, with courage, and confident that in doing so you are sure to meet with success, welcome others with a smile. Be straightforward. And try to be impartial. Treat everyone as if they were a close friend. I say this neither as Dalai Lama nor as someone who has special powers or ability. Of these I have none. I speak as a human being: one who, like yourself, wishes to be happy and not to suffer. If you cannot, for whatever reason, be of help to others, at least don't harm them. Consider yourself a tourist. Think of the world as it is seen from space, so small and insignificant yet so beautiful. Could there really be anything to be gained from harming others during our stay here? Is it not preferable, and more reasonable, to relax and enjoy ourselves quietly, just as if we were visiting a different neighborhood? Therefore, if in the midst of your enjoyment of the world you have a moment, try to help in however small a way those who are downtrodden and those who, for whatever reason, cannot or do not help themselves. Try not to turn away from those whose appearance is disturbing, from the ragged and unwell. Try never to think of them as inferior

to yourself. If you can, try not even to think of yourself as better than the humblest beggar. You will look the same in your grave.

To close with, I would like to share a short prayer which gives me great inspiration in my quest to benefit others:

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.



This is an excerpt from *Ethics for the New Millennium* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. © 1999 His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Reprinted with permission from Riverhead Books and Gillon Aitken Associates Ltd.