



We Are All Brothers and Sisters: Platform for a Human Future

It's easy to focus on the Dalai Lama's engaging personality, but we have to listen to what he's actually telling us. Buddhist scholar **JAN WILLIS** teases out the key points of His Holiness' message to the world. Our future depends on it.

I FIRST MET THE DALAI LAMA in 1970, in Dharamsala, India. Along with two friends, I was privileged to have an audience with him that lasted well over two hours. In those days, it was quite easy to arrange such a thing: we simply stopped His Holiness' assistant, Tenzin, on the street and asked if we could make an appointment. Tenzin took a notebook from his shirt pocket and asked, "Can you come tomorrow at three o'clock?" "Yes! Yes, we can. We'll be there!" was our gleeful response.

The three of us were college students from the States, happy for the freedom to meet the Tibetans and study with them. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, on the other hand, lived under a serious burden: he and almost one hundred thousand other Tibetans had been forced to flee their homeland and become refugees in India after the final Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1959. The leader-in-exile of the Tibetan nation and people, he was concerned with the survival of their religious and cultural heritage. He was only thirty-five years old then—but he evidenced to us no indications of his burden.

His Holiness was much taller than I had thought him to be, his voice and laughter deep and rippling. When we began to do prostrations, he quickly put an end to that formality: "All right, stop that. None of that is necessary. Please, come and sit down."

He wanted to speak with us, he said, about the situation of young people in the U.S., with their protests and peace movements. We talked at length about the events at Kent State, where four students protesting the Vietnam War were shot dead by the National Guard, and the necessity of patience and clarity in determining the most appropriate response to such events.

"You should *not* believe that the Mahayana asks you to think of beings' welfare only in some future time," he reminded us. "You should try as much as possible to help in the here and now." His Holiness was so open and frank that he seemed like an old friend and wise counselor all rolled into one—a true flesh-and-bones Buddha.

I have seen His Holiness in many different venues since then. He remains open, energetic, curious, thoughtful, pragmatic, and, above all, joyous as ever. On stages large and small over the decades of his exile, he has offered us a consistent and transformative message:

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THE GIFT OF HIS PRESENCE

I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF MEETING HIS HOLINESS

at the cancer center where I work with a palliative care team. He was in town for a speaking engagement at our university.

I'm not sure how to describe the moment when His Holiness walked into the room to meet our small group. All I remember is physically feeling his presence and how time stopped for a bit in order to encompass his essence. I remember the sound of his melodious voice and his joyful laughter. And I remember his smile that radiated such warmth.

What I still feel in my bones was his ability to focus his attention on the members of our group and our patients. Even though he had a small amount of time for each of us, I still think about the way he was present for whoever was in his attention field. He had the ability to connect with others—he was really there with us—and engage in conversation while listening intently.

What inspired me most, and continues to impact the work I do every day, is the example he personifies of what it means to find joy in the midst of suffering. In my job, where death is a daily reality, it is this quality I try to bring to my work with cancer patients. Embodied presence, open-hearted listening, joyful curiosity, optimism, humility, and compassion. These are all traits personified by His Holiness in the short time I had the gift of being in his presence.

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ALIAS GROUCHO MARX

MY FRIEND SID ONCE STRATEGICALLY PLACED

Groucho glasses—complete with nose, bushy eyebrows—in a hotel room where the Dalai Lama would be staying during a visit to Cornell University. In a way, it was a gesture of friendliness, because His Holiness had once told Sid that always having to be the Dalai Lama didn't give him much freedom.

Sid, being a compassionate man, wanted to help. A disguise—humorous and absurd—he thought, would be just the thing.

As one of the organizers for His Holiness's visit to the campus, Sid was in charge of making sure that the spiritual leader's suite was suitably equipped. Thoughtfully he placed an antique Buddhist statue next to the bed and Groucho on the bathroom counter.

Imagine this: a cascade of university bureaucrats arrayed in the Dalai Lama's suite, waiting to meet the great man. They're keyed up by the barricade of media flacks and state department security men surrounding the hotel. And they, like all humans, harbor the deep longing to be knocked back, up, and out by an influx of spirit and greatness.

Minutes pass and then a door flings open. Unaccountably, Groucho Marx—wearing maroon robes and serious lace-up shoes—emerges, chuckling loudly. Laughing so hard that tears come to his bespectacled eyes.

Would most politicians or religious leaders meet foreign dignitaries wearing something that suggests that really, when it comes down to it, we're all a bit of a joke? Not likely.

But Buddhism's bottom line is to be free of the domination of the ego—the need to affirm it, plump it up with collagen. It's to be unconcerned about whether or not you're seen as a hot-shot Dalai Lama or a hot-shot worker or even a half-way decent anything.

Back then, in the suite, the Dalai Lama didn't care about positioning his Dalai Lama image. He saw a chance for fun, for deflating others' expectations, and he took it. And he just somehow knew whom to thank. Wagging his finger at Sid, he took off the mask, still laughing.

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- to do our best to be kind (and if not kind, then at least not harmful);
- to recognize, through reasoning, that we are all basically the same, because we each seek to have happiness and avoid suffering;
- and to take responsibility for each other, regardless of outward differences, and for this planet we all share.

The Dalai Lama's message of openness and nonharm is, of course, compelling—but built into it are several equally compelling components.

PEACE AND NONVIOLENCE

In verse 183, the *Dhammapada* says:

Do no harm.

Practice what is good.

Discipline the mind.

This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.

In every conceivable way, the Dalai Lama exemplifies these teachings. Some thirty years into his life in exile, in 1989, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It honored his efforts in “the struggle of the liberation of Tibet and the efforts for a peaceful resolution instead of using violence.” He had never referred to the Chinese as enemies; instead, he calls them his “brothers and sisters.”

Adopting a term favored by Gandhi, one of his early proposals called for Tibet to become a “Zone of *Ahimsa*,” a sanctuary of peace, nonviolence, and respect for life. Throughout the years, his main teaching has been that only peace can lead to peace.

TRUE HAPPINESS

One of His Holiness' favorite Buddhist texts is undoubtedly Shantideva's eighth-century verse treatise, *The Way of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhicaryavatara*), which he quotes frequently. As Shantideva writes:

All the joy the world contains

Has come through wishing happiness for others.

While all the misery the world contains

Has come through wanting happiness for oneself alone.

A profoundly deep and boundless joy comes from cultivating compassion and from the conviction that one is doing one's best to help alleviate the suffering of others. Our choice is simple, His Holiness comments: “If one wishes others to

be happy, serve and have compassion for others. And if one wishes *oneself* to be happy, then serve and have compassion for others.” He sometimes adds, with a chuckle, “I call this selfish wisdom; selfish compassion.”

In a wonderful conversation chronicled in *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu asks His Holiness, “Why are you not morose?”

“One of my practices comes from an ancient Indian teacher,” the Dalai Lama responds. “He taught that when you experience some tragic situation, think about it. If there’s no way to overcome the tragedy, then there is no use worrying too much. So I practice that.”

As Shantideva wrote, “If something can be done about the situation, what need is there for dejection? And if nothing can be done about it, what use is there for being dejected?”

WE ARE ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS

The Dalai Lama sees no reason to single himself out from the billions of other human beings who inhabit our small planet. He has said that whenever he meets another person, from the very beginning, he does not think of himself as anyone special—not the Dalai Lama, not a Buddhist monk, but simply as another human being. This gives him, he says, an immediate sense of comradeship and closeness with that person.

This is further proof of the Dalai Lama’s belief that we are all fundamentally the same. By extension, he contends, being in the same boat compels us to love and to care for each other. From His Holiness’ 1989 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech:

We all seek happiness and want to avoid suffering. We all have essentially the same needs and similar concerns. As human beings, we all want to be free, to have the right to decide our own destiny as individuals as well as the destiny of our people. This is human nature.

The problems that confront us today are created by man, whether they are violent conflicts, destruction of the environment, poverty, or hunger. These problems can be resolved thanks to human efforts, by understanding that we are brothers and sisters.

COMPASSION

“It is my fundamental conviction,” His Holiness wrote, “that compassion—the natural capacity of the human heart to feel concern for and connection with another being—constitutes a basic aspect of our nature shared by all human beings, as well as being the foundation of our happiness.”

In his dialogue with Archbishop Tutu, His Holiness talked about the perspective that is the key to his worldview. “When I look at the world, there are a lot of problems, even within the People’s Republic of China. When we see these things, we realize that not only do we suffer, but so do many of our human brothers and sisters. So when we look at the same event from a wider perspective, we will reduce the worrying and our own suffering.”

Recognizing that others suffer also lets us know, simultaneously, that we are not alone and that we are all connected. This knowledge is the birth of empathy, which is the doorway of compassion.

In the Black community from which I come, this ability to touch joy even while in the midst of suffering is shown through the musical art form known as the “blues.” Though in different cultures in different parts of the world, both His Holiness and Archbishop Tutu have known personally the heart-wrenching sufferings of an entire people. And having been *there*, having touched *that depth of suffering*, their joy emanates from the very depths of their spiritual being.

UNIVERSAL RESPONSIBILITY

From the time he first set foot on Indian soil after his escape from Tibet, His Holiness has espoused the notion of “universal responsibility.” There are now more than seven billion human beings on earth. They all wish, and deserve, to live a life of peace and nonscarcity, and the freedom to determine their own destiny. To the extent that we are able, it is our responsibility, as human beings, to help them achieve these things.

A NEW ETHICS OF KINDNESS

To make this sense of universal responsibility a reality, His Holiness has long advocated a new ethical model that transcends religious creeds and gets to the heart of who we truly are as human beings.

He calls this an “ethics for the new millennium.” This would transcend our outer, temporary differences and reflect our innermost nature, which is love and compassion. “At the simple human level,” he explains, “we all have the capacity to empathize with one another ... and to arrive at the inability to bear the sight of another’s suffering.”

“In this respect,” he says, “there is not an iota of difference between a believer and a nonbeliever, nor between people of one race or another. All ethical teachings, whether religious or nonreligious, aim to nurture this innate and precious quality, to develop it and to perfect it.

WOMEN ARE THE LEADERS OF THE FUTURE

WHEN I WAS ABOUT TO TURN THIRTY, I was given an opportunity to have a private audience with His Holiness. “Hey kid,” my boss said, “I’ve got us a meeting with the Dalai Lama at his place in India.” I was already packed.

In Dharamsala, five of us waited like groupies before a big show. His Holiness burst in, robust and radiant. “So sorry to keep you waiting!” he said.

We spoke of universal consciousness, military actions, and politics. We laughed. We mostly laughed at his bellowing laughs. He abruptly turned to me with a penetrating gaze. Fuzzy eyebrows raised. “You have a question.”

“My generation is at a crossroads,” I said. “And I wonder what message you have for Gen Xers?”

“In the West, you have education. This is good. You have technology. This is good. But you do not educate your people in values of the heart, of compassion. This you must do,” the Dalai Lama said. “It does not matter whether you are Buddhist or Christian. Compassion lives in the heart, beyond religion. Even me, a Buddhist, can say that you do not need Buddhism. All you need is the compassion of the heart. Women know this because peace is implicit in women. You put boys together, they make war. You put women together, they make peace. Women are the leaders of the future.” And then he laughed.

After an hour, his secretary insisted we wrap up. The Dalai Lama moved to the doorway and then hugged each of us gently, like he had all the time in the world. When I pulled back from this holy bear hug, he looked me in the eyes and nodded, as if to say, “I see you, and I’ve got you.” I had never felt so seen and so loved.

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A TRUE KINSHIP OF FAITHS

Never seeking to convert others to Buddhism, His Holiness has remained open and willing both to share his insights about Buddhism with others and to listen to them as they shared their insights regarding their own faith traditions.

In the autumn of 1994, the Dalai Lama traveled to London to lead the tenth annual John Main Seminar, which brought together Christian and Buddhist meditators for a dialogue on the Christian Gospel. His Holiness opened the seminar by reading from the Beatitudes.

As one participant noted, “Tibet’s agony, which he carries constantly with him, has elevated him to a global spiritual role in which the universal religious values of peace, justice, tolerance, and nonviolence find a joyful and yet profoundly serious embodiment. This was evident the moment His Holiness read aloud the Beatitudes at the first session of the seminar. Everyone felt they were more than words in his case; they were insights he had personally experienced.”

In *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*, His Holiness states: “The challenge before us—much more urgent than in the past—in this era of nuclear weapons, international terrorism, financial uncertainty, and ecological crisis, is simply peaceful coexistence.”

Noting that “one area where peaceful coexistence has been hugely problematic ... is in the relations between the world’s religions,” His Holiness offers that “the challenge before religious believers is to genuinely accept the full worth of faith traditions other than their own ... to embrace the spirit of religious pluralism.” Ultimately, he envisions a “true kinship of faiths,” in which each faith tradition shows respect for the others, recognizing the compassion and love that is at their cores.

RESPECT FOR SCIENCE

His Holiness has always been curious. We learn from his autobiography, *My Land and My People*, that he was fascinated by science even as a little boy. Sheltered in the enormous Potala Palace, he secretly, gleefully, took apart and reassembled clocks and pocket watches, a hand-cranked movie projector owned by the previous Dalai Lama, and whatever other mechanical instruments he could find.

Since becoming a refugee in the larger world, His Holiness has enjoyed numerous conversations with scientists of all sorts, as well as with other spiritual teachers seeking the integration of science and spirituality. He has explained that “The main reason for my confidence in engaging with scientists rests in the Buddha’s statement:

*Monks and scholars, just as you test gold
By burning, cutting and polishing it,
So too well examine my speech.
Do not accept it merely out of respect.*

It is little wonder then that in 1987, when asked by Chilean neuroscientist Francisco Varela and American businessman Adam Engle to host a week-long, open-ended private discussion with scientists from around the world, His Holiness “leapt at this idea,” as he says.

The first meeting, in Dharamsala, marked the beginning of the biannual meetings of the Mind and Life Institute. These have continued, and many illuminating essays and scientific papers have come out of these gatherings, on physics, philosophy of science, neuroscience, biology, and genetics.

His Holiness has continued to maintain his love of modern science and to see its benefits for informing religious faith. He has stood by his earlier claim that, “If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview.”

A BODHISATTVA FOR OUR TIME

His Holiness often concludes his talks with another passage from Shantideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara*, solemnly praying:

And now, as long as space endures
As long as there are beings to be found,
May I continue likewise to remain
To drive away the sorrows of the world.

His words are often simple and pragmatic, and always kind and sincere. But the Dalai Lama is far more, even, than his most skillful words. He exhibits a kind of constancy that assures us that his intentions are good and true. His Holiness demonstrates how we should live—with kindness to all beings, taking responsibility for their well-being. In his tireless efforts to serve all sentient beings, we see the joyful work of a true bodhisattva—which gives us a glimpse of our own innate potential. ♦

BRAVE, HUMBLE, HONEST

THE FIRST TIME I WAS IN THE PRESENCE of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama was in 2009 at a public teaching in Switzerland. I had recently taken refuge vows and was very new to Buddhism.

I remember being incredibly impressed when His Holiness began to take questions from members of the audience. These were not questions and answers prepared in advance; it was simply people raising their hands and asking anything they wanted of His Holiness, one of the world’s most well-known religious leaders. The courage, honesty, and willingness to be utterly transparent is something I will never forget. I don’t think there are many in his position who would be brave enough to do the same.

What also struck me was His Holiness’ humility. During that session, a woman in the audience asked him what she should do about the difficulties she was having in raising her teenage daughter. His Holiness was quiet for a long while and then simply said: “I don’t know.” Finally, at the end of the day’s teaching he opened the floor to questions once again and an individual suggested to His Holiness he should end the day by leading everyone in a round of chanting the mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum.” His Holiness thought for a moment and then said, “Better if we sit in silence for a few minutes.”

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