

THE DALAI LAMA



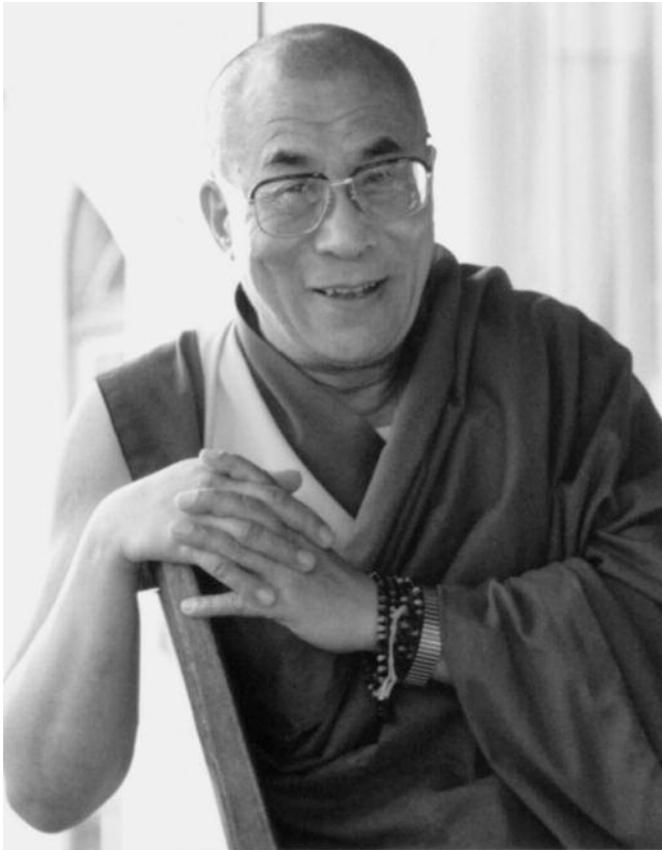
THE
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The Compassionate Life



The Compassionate Life

TENZIN GYATSO

THE FOURTEENTH DALAI LAMA



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Editor's Preface

IN HIS NUMEROUS PUBLIC APPEARANCES, His Holiness the Dalai Lama always returns to the topic of compassion. Compassion, or the desire to remove the suffering of another, is of course a central ideal for the practicing Buddhist. But one does not need to spend much time observing His Holiness to realize that his commitment to this virtue goes far beyond mere religious obligation. In his simple yet inimitable way, the Dalai Lama displays a profound recognition of the power of human affection in addressing the world's most urgent and complex problems.

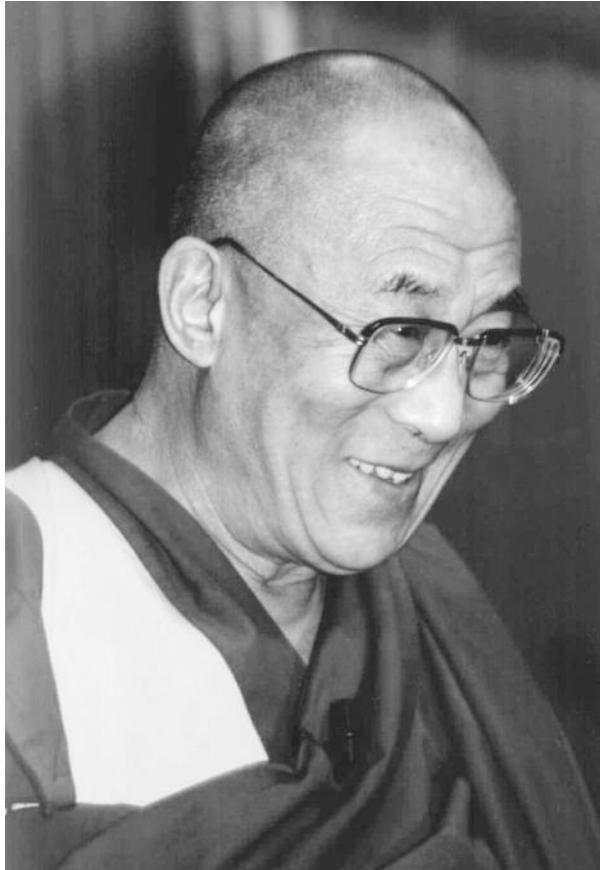
At first glance, the Dalai Lama's rhetoric may seem almost naive, uninformed by a grasp of real-world politics and the subtleties of the human heart. Upon deeper inspection, however, it becomes clear that His Holiness speaks from a deep well of experience, grounded in his systematic training as a Buddhist monk and his personal experiences

as the political and religious leader of the Tibetan people. His compassion is not timid or vague; it is solid, resolute, and above all wise. The difference is that His Holiness understands the mind—the power of our thoughts and emotions in shaping reality. He sees the precise relationship between the motivation we have and the results we get, and his life exemplifies the depth of his recognition.

It is our hope at Wisdom Publications that the teachings we have woven together to make this book will help advance His Holiness' own goals for world peace, religious tolerance, and spiritual development, while providing effective tools for those interested in cultivating lives of greater compassion.

David Kittelstrom

The Compassionate Life



1

The Benefits of Compassion

MY EXPERIENCES are nothing special, just ordinary human ones. Through my Buddhist training, however, I have learned something about compassion and developing a good heart, and that experience has proved very helpful in my day-to-day life. For example, the region of Tibet I come from is called Amdo, and people usually regard people who come from Amdo as short-tempered. So in Tibet, when someone would lose his or her temper, people would often take it as a sign that the person was from Amdo! However, when I compare my temperament now to the way it was when I was between the ages of fifteen and twenty, I see a noticeable difference. These days, I hardly find myself being irritated at all, and even when I am, it doesn't last long. This is a marvelous benefit of my own practice and training—now I am always quite cheerful!

In my lifetime, I have lost my country and have been reduced to being totally dependent on the goodwill of others. I have also lost my mother, and most of my tutors and lamas have passed away. Of course, these are tragic incidents, and I feel sad when I think about them. However, I don't feel overwhelmed by sadness. Old, familiar faces disappear and new faces appear, but I still maintain my happiness and peace of mind. This capacity to relate to events from a broader perspective is, for me, one of the marvels of human nature, and I believe it is rooted in our capacity for compassion and kindness toward others.

✧ OUR FUNDAMENTAL NATURE

Some of my friends have told me that while love and compassion are marvelous and good, they are not really very relevant. Our world, they say, is not a place where such virtues have much influence or power. They claim that anger and hatred are so much a part of human nature that humanity will always be dominated by them. I do not agree.

We humans have existed in our present form for about a hundred thousand years. I believe that if during this time the human mind had been primarily controlled by anger and hatred, our population would have decreased. But today, despite all our wars, we find that the human population is greater than ever. This clearly indicates to

me that while anger and aggression are surely present, love and compassion predominate in the world. This is why what we call “news” is composed of mostly unpleasant or tragic events; compassionate activities are so much a part of daily life that they are taken for granted and therefore are largely ignored.

If we look at basic human nature, we can see that it is more gentle than aggressive. For example, if we examine various animals, we notice that animals of a more peaceful nature have a corresponding body structure, whereas predatory animals have a body structure that has developed according to their nature. Compare the tiger and the deer: there are great differences in their physical structures. When we compare our own body structure to theirs, we see that we resemble deer and rabbits more than tigers. Even our teeth are more like a rabbit's, are they not? They are not like a tiger's. Our fingernails are another good example—I cannot even harm a rat with a swipe of my fingernails alone. Of course, because of human intelligence, we are able to devise and use various tools and methods to accomplish things that would be difficult to accomplish without them. But because of our physical situation we belong to the gentle-animal category.

We are, after all, social animals. Without human friendship, without the human smile, our lives become miserable. The loneliness becomes unbearable. Such human interdependence is a natural law—that is to say, according to natural law, we depend on others to live.

If, under certain circumstances, because something is wrong inside us, our attitude toward our fellow human beings on whom we depend becomes hostile, how can we hope to attain peace of mind or a happy life? According to basic human nature or natural law, interdependence—giving and receiving affection—is the key to happiness.

This fact may become more evident if we reflect on the basic pattern of our existence. In order to do more than just barely survive, we need shelter, food, companions, friends, the esteem of others, resources, and so on; these things do not come about from ourselves alone but are all dependent on others. Suppose one single person were to live alone in a remote and uninhabited place. No matter how strong, healthy, or educated this person were, there would be no possibility of his or her leading a happy and fulfilling existence. If a person is living, for example, somewhere deep in the African jungle and is the only human being in an animal sanctuary, given that person's intelligence and cunning, the best he or she can do is to become, perhaps, king of the jungle. Can such a person have friends? Acquire renown? Can this person become a hero if he or she wishes to become one? I think the answer to all these questions is a definite no, for all these factors come about only in relation to other fellow humans.

When you are young, healthy, and strong, you sometimes can get the feeling that you are totally independent and do not need anyone else. But this is an illusion. Even at that prime age of your life,

simply because you are a human being, you need friends, don't you? This is especially true when we become old. For example, in my own case, the Dalai Lama, who is now in his sixties, is beginning to show various signs of approaching old age. I can see the appearance of more white hair on my head, and I am also starting to experience problems sometimes with the knees when getting up or sitting down. As we grow old, we need to rely more and more on the help of others: this is the nature of our lives as human beings.

In at least one sense, we can say that other people are really the principal source of all our experiences of joy, happiness, and prosperity, and not only in terms of our day-to-day dealings with people. We can see that all the desirable experiences that we cherish or aspire to attain are dependent upon cooperation and interaction with others. It is an obvious fact. Similarly, from the point of view of a Buddhist practitioner, many of the high levels of realization that you gain and the progress that you make on your spiritual journey are dependent upon cooperation and interaction with others. Furthermore, at the stage of complete enlightenment, the compassionate activities of a buddha can come about spontaneously only in relation to other beings, for those beings are the recipients and beneficiaries of those enlightened activities.

Even from a totally selfish perspective—wanting only our own happiness, comfort, and satisfaction in life, with no consideration of

others' welfare—I would still argue that the fulfillment of our aspirations depends upon others. Even the committing of harmful actions depends on the existence of others. For example, in order to cheat, you need someone as the object of your act.

All events and incidents in life are so intimately linked with the fate of others that a single person on his or her own cannot even begin to act. Many ordinary human activities, both positive and negative, cannot even be conceived of apart from the existence of other people. Because of others, we have the opportunity to earn money if that is what we desire in life. Similarly, in reliance upon the existence of others it becomes possible for the media to create fame or disrepute for someone. On your own you cannot create any fame or disrepute no matter how loud you might shout. The closest you can get is to create an echo of your own voice.

Thus interdependence is a fundamental law of nature. Not only higher forms of life but also many of the smallest insects are social beings who, without any religion, law, or education, survive by mutual cooperation based on an innate recognition of their interconnect-edness. The most subtle level of material phenomena is also governed by interdependence. All phenomena, from the planet we inhabit to the oceans, clouds, forests, and flowers that surround us, arise in dependence upon subtle patterns of energy. Without their proper interaction, they dissolve and decay.

 OUR NEED FOR LOVE

One great question underlies our experience, whether we think about it consciously or not: What is the purpose of life? I believe that our life's purpose is to be happy. From the moment of birth, every human being wants happiness and does not want suffering. Neither social conditioning, nor education, nor ideology affect this. From the very core of our being, we simply desire contentment. I don't know whether the universe, with its countless galaxies, stars, and planets, has a deeper meaning or not, but at the very least, it is clear that we humans who live on this earth face the task of making a happy life for ourselves.

We are not like machine-made objects. We are more than just matter; we have feelings and experiences. If we were merely mechanical entities, then machines themselves could alleviate all of our suffering and fulfill all our needs. But material comfort alone is not enough. No material object, however beautiful or valuable, can make us feel loved. We need something deeper, what I usually refer to as human affection. With human affection, or compassion, all the material advantages that we have at our disposal can be very constructive and can produce good results. Without human affection, however, material advantages alone will not satisfy us, nor will they produce in us any measure of mental peace or happiness. In fact,

material advantages without human affection may even create additional problems. So when we consider our origins and our nature we discover that no one is born free from the need for love. And although some modern schools of thought seek to do so, human beings cannot be defined as solely physical.

Ultimately, the reason why love and compassion bring the greatest happiness is simply that our nature cherishes them above all else. However capable and skillful an individual may be, left alone, he or she will not survive. However vigorous and independent we may feel during the most prosperous periods of life, when we are sick, or very young or very old, we depend on the support of others. Let's look more closely at the ways that affection and compassion help us throughout our lives.

Our beliefs may differ when it comes to questions of the creation and evolution of our universe, but we can at least agree that each of us is the product of our own parents. In general, our conception took place not just in the context of sexual desire but also from our parents' decision to have a child. Such decisions are founded on responsibility and altruism—the parents' compassionate commitment to care for their child until it is able to take care of itself. Thus, from the very moment of our conception, our parents' love is directly involved in our creation.

I learned from meeting with some scientists, especially those

working in the field of neurobiology, that there is strong scientific evidence to suggest that even in pregnancy a mother's state of mind, be it calm or agitated, has a great effect on the physical and mental well-being of the unborn child. It seems vital for the mother to maintain a calm and relaxed state of mind. After birth, the first few weeks are the most crucial period for the healthy development of the child. During this time, I was told, one of the most important factors for ensuring rapid and healthy growth of the baby's brain is the mother's constant physical touch. If the child is left unattended and uncared for during this critical period, although the effects on the child's mental well-being may not be immediately obvious, physical damage can result from this that will later become quite noticeable.

The central importance of love and caring continues throughout childhood. When a child sees someone with an open and affectionate demeanor, someone who is smiling or has a loving and caring expression, the child naturally feels happy and protected. On the other hand, if someone tries to hurt the child, it becomes gripped by fear, which leads to harmful consequences in terms of the child's development. Nowadays, many children grow up in unhappy homes. If they do not receive proper affection, in later life they will rarely love their parents and, not infrequently, will find it hard to love others. This is of course very sad.

As children grow older and enter school, their need for support

must be met by their teachers. If a teacher not only imparts academic education but also assumes responsibility for preparing students for life, his or her pupils will feel trust and respect, and what has been taught will leave an indelible impression on their minds. On the other hand, subjects taught by a teacher who does not show true concern for students' overall well-being will be regarded as temporary and will not be retained for long.

Similarly, if one is sick and being treated in hospital by a doctor who evinces a warm human feeling, one feels at ease, and the doctor's desire to give the best possible care is itself curative, irrespective of the degree of his or her technical skill. On the other hand, if one's doctor lacks human feeling and displays an unfriendly expression, impatience, or casual disregard, one will feel anxious, even if the person is the most highly qualified doctor and the disease has been correctly diagnosed and the right medication prescribed. Inevitably, patients' feelings make a difference to the quality and completeness of their recovery.

Even in ordinary conversation in everyday life, when someone speaks with warm human feeling, we enjoy listening and respond accordingly; the whole conversation becomes interesting, however unimportant the topic may be. On the other hand, if a person speaks coldly or harshly, we feel uneasy and wish for a quick end to the interaction. From the least important to the most important event, the affection and respect of others are vital for our happiness.

Recently I met another group of scientists in America who said that the rate of mental illness in their country was quite high, around 12 percent of the population. It became clear during our discussion that depression was caused not by a lack of material necessities but more likely by a difficulty in giving and receiving affection.

So, as you can see from all of this, whether or not we are consciously aware of it, from the day we are born, the need for human affection is in our very blood. Even if the affection comes from an animal or someone we would normally consider an enemy, both children and adults will naturally gravitate toward it.

❧ THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF SUCCESS

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 important 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 nonbeliever, without them you cannot be happy.

Let's examine the usefulness of compassion and a good heart in daily life. If we are in a good mood when we get up in the morning, if there is a warm-hearted feeling within, automatically our inner door is opened for that day. Even should an unfriendly person happen along, we would not experience much disturbance and might even manage to say something nice to that person. We could chat with the not-so-friendly person and perhaps even have a meaningful conversation. Once we create a friendly and positive atmosphere, it automatically helps to reduce fear and insecurity. In this way we can easily make more friends and create more smiles.

But on a day when our mood is less positive and we are feeling irritated, automatically our inner door closes. As a result, even if we encounter our best friend, we feel uncomfortable and strained. These instances show how our inner attitude makes a great difference in our

daily experiences. In order to create a pleasant atmosphere within ourselves, within our families, within our communities, we have to realize that the ultimate source of that pleasant atmosphere is within the individual, within each of us—a good heart, human compassion, love.

Compassion doesn't have only mental benefits, but it contributes to good physical health as well. According to contemporary medicine, as well as to my personal experience, mental stability and physical well-being are directly related. Without question, anger and agitation make us more susceptible to illness. On the other hand, if the mind is tranquil and occupied with positive thoughts, the body will not easily fall prey to disease. This shows that the physical body itself appreciates and responds to human affection, human peace of mind.

Another thing that is quite clear to me is that the moment you think only of yourself, the focus of your whole reality narrows, and because of this narrow focus, uncomfortable things can appear huge and bring you fear and discomfort and a sense of feeling overwhelmed by misery. The moment you think of others with a sense of caring, however, your view widens. Within that wider perspective, your own problems appear to be of little significance, and this makes a big difference.

If you have a sense of caring for others, you will manifest a kind of inner strength in spite of your own difficulties and problems. With

this strength, your own problems will seem less significant and bothersome to you. By going beyond your own problems and taking care of others, you gain inner strength, self-confidence, courage, and a greater sense of calm. This is a clear example of how one's way of thinking can really make a difference.

One's own self-interest and wishes are fulfilled as a byproduct of actually working for other sentient beings. As the well-known fifteenth-century master Tsongkhapa points out in his *Great Exposition of the Path to Enlightenment*, "The more the practitioner engages in activities and thoughts that are focused and directed toward the fulfillment of others' well-being, the fulfillment or realization of his or her own aspiration will come as a byproduct without having to make a separate effort." Some of you may have actually heard me remark, which I do quite often, that in some sense the bodhisattvas, the compassionate practitioners of the Buddhist path, are "wisely selfish" people, whereas people like us are the "foolishly selfish." We think of ourselves and disregard others, and the result is that we always remain unhappy and have a miserable time.

Other benefits of altruism and a good heart may not be so obvious to us. One aim of Buddhist practice is to achieve a favorable birth in our next life, a goal that can be attained only by restraining from actions that are harmful to others. Therefore, even in the context of such an aim, we find that altruism and a good heart are at the root. It

is also very clear that for a bodhisattva to be successful in accomplishing the practice of the six perfections—of generosity, ethical discipline, tolerance, joyous effort, concentration, and wisdom—cooperation with and kindness toward fellow beings are extremely important.

Thus we find that 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 not only need compassion and human affection to survive, but 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.