

ETHICS FOR THE
NEW MILLENNIUM

HIS HOLINESS
THE DALAI LAMA

Riverhead Books

A member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

New York 1999

Chapter Four

REDEFINING THE GOAL

∞ I HAVE OBSERVED THAT WE ALL NATURALLY desire happiness and not to suffer. I have suggested, furthermore, that these are rights, from which in my opinion we can infer that an ethical act is one which does not harm others' experience or expectation of happiness. And I have described an understanding of reality which points to a commonality of interest in respect to self and others.

Let us now consider the nature of happiness. The first thing to note is that it is a relative quality. We experience it differently according to our circumstances. What makes one person glad may be a source of suffering to another. Most of us would be extremely sorry to be sent to prison for life. Yet a criminal under threat of the death penalty would likely be very happy to be reprieved with a sentence of life imprisonment. Second, it is important to recognize that we use the same word "happiness" to describe very different states, although this is more

happiness/pleasure

obvious in Tibetan where the same word, *de wa*, is also used for "pleasure." We speak of happiness in connection with bathing in cool water on a hot day. We speak of it in connection with certain ideal states, such as when we say, "I would be so happy to win the lottery." We also speak of happiness in relation to the simple joys of family life.

In this last case, happiness is more of a state that persists in spite of ups and downs and occasional intermissions. But in the case of bathing in cool water on a hot day, because it is the consequence of activities which seek to please the senses, it is necessarily transient. If we remain in the water too long, we start to feel cold. Indeed, the happiness we derive from such activities depends on their being short-lived. In the case of winning a large sum of money, the question of whether it would confer lasting happiness or merely the sort that is soon overwhelmed by problems and difficulties that cannot be solved by wealth alone depends on the one who wins it. But generally speaking, even if money brings us happiness, it tends to be of the kind which money can buy: material things and sensory experiences. And these, we discover, become a source of suffering themselves. So far as actual possessions are concerned, for example, we must admit that often they cause us more, not less, difficulties in life. The car breaks down, we lose our money, our most precious belongings are stolen, our house is damaged by fire. Either that or we suffer because we worry about these things happening.

If this were not the case—if in fact such actions and circumstances did not contain within them the seed of suffer-

ing—the more we indulged in them, the greater our happiness would be, just as pain increases the more we endure the causes of pain. But such is not the case. In fact, while occasionally we may feel we have found perfect happiness of this sort, this seeming perfection turns out to be as ephemeral as a drop of dew on a leaf, shining brilliantly one moment, gone the next.

This explains why placing too much hope in material development is a mistake. The problem is not materialism as such. Rather it is the underlying assumption that full satisfaction can arise from gratifying the senses alone. Unlike animals, whose quest for happiness is restricted to survival and to the immediate gratification of sensory desires, we human beings have the capacity to experience happiness at a deeper level, which, when achieved, has the capacity to overwhelm contrary experiences. Consider the case of a soldier who fights in a battle. He is wounded, but the battle is won. The satisfaction he experiences in victory means that his experience of suffering on account of his wounds will likely be far less than that of a soldier with the same wounds on the losing side.

This human capacity for experiencing deeper levels of happiness also explains why such things as music and the arts offer a greater degree of happiness and satisfaction than merely acquiring material objects. However, even though aesthetic experiences are a source of happiness, they still have a strong sensory component. Music depends on the ears, art on the eyes, dance on the body. As with the satisfactions we derive from work or career, they are in general acquired through the senses. By themselves, these cannot offer the happiness we dream of.

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Senses

Now, it could be argued that while it is all very well to distinguish happiness that is transient from that which is lasting, between ephemeral and genuine happiness, the only happiness it is meaningful to speak of when a person is dying from thirst is access to water. This is unarguable. When it comes to the question of survival, naturally our needs become so urgent that the majority of our effort will go toward fulfilling them. Yet because the urge to survival comes out of physical need, it follows that bodily satisfaction is invariably limited to what the senses can provide. So to conclude that we should seek immediate gratification of the senses in all circumstances would hardly be justified. Actually, when we think carefully, we see that the brief elation we experience when appeasing sensual impulses may not be very different from what the drug addict feels when indulging his or her habit. Temporary relief is soon followed by a craving for more. And in just the same way that taking drugs in the end only causes trouble, so, too, does much of what we undertake to fulfill our immediate sensory desires. This is not to say that the pleasure we take in certain activities is somehow mistaken. But we must acknowledge that there can be no hope of gratifying the senses permanently. At best, the happiness we derive from eating a good meal can only last until the next time we are hungry. As one ancient Indian writer remarked: Indulging our senses and drinking salt water are alike: the more we partake, the more our desire and thirst grow.

Indeed, we find that a great deal of what I have called internal suffering can be attributed to our impulsive approach to happiness. We do not stop to consider the complexity of a

given situation. Our tendency is to rush in and do what seems to promise the shortest route to satisfaction. But in doing so, all too frequently we deprive ourselves of the opportunity for a greater degree of fulfillment. This is actually quite strange. Usually we do not allow our children to do whatever they want. We realize that if given their freedom, they would probably spend their time playing rather than studying. So instead we make them sacrifice the immediate pleasure of play and compel them to study. Our strategy is more long term. And while this may be less fun for them, it confers a solid foundation for their future. But as adults, we often neglect this principle. We overlook the fact that if, for example, one partner in a marriage devotes all their time to their own narrow interests, it is sure that the other partner will suffer. And when that happens, it is inevitable the marriage will become harder and harder to sustain. Similarly, we fail to recognize that when the parents are interested only in each other and neglect their children, there are sure to be negative consequences.

When we act to fulfill our immediate desires without taking into account others' interests, we undermine the possibility of lasting happiness. Consider that if we live in a neighborhood with ten other families and yet we never give a thought to their well-being, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to benefit from their society. On the other hand, if we make the effort to be friendly and have regard for their well-being, we provide for our own happiness as well as theirs. Or again, imagine an instance where we meet somebody new. Perhaps we go for a meal together. Now this may cost us some money. But as a re-

children

marriage

parents

neighborhood

impulsive sense gratification → false happiness →

sult, there is a good chance of founding a relationship, which brings many benefits over the years to come. Conversely, if on meeting someone we see a chance to defraud them, and we take it, though we have gained a sum of money instantly, the likelihood is that we have completely destroyed the possibility of a long-term benefit from interaction with them.

Let us now consider the nature of what I have characterized as genuine happiness. Here my own experience might serve to illustrate the state to which I refer. As a Buddhist monk, I have been trained in the practice, the philosophy, and the principles of Buddhism. But as to any sort of practical education to cope with the demands of modern living, I have received almost none. During the course of my life, I have had to handle enormous responsibilities and difficulties. At sixteen, I lost my freedom when Tibet was occupied. At twenty-four, I lost my country itself when I came into exile. For forty years now I have lived as a refugee in a foreign country, albeit the one that it is my spiritual home. Throughout this time, I have been trying to serve my fellow refugees and, to the extent possible, the Tibetans who remain in Tibet. Meanwhile, our homeland has known immeasurable destruction and suffering. And, of course, I have lost not only my mother and other close family members but also dear friends. Yet for all this, although I certainly feel sad when I think about these losses, still so far as my basic serenity is concerned, on most days I am calm and contented. Even when difficulties arise, as they must, I am usually not much bothered by them. I have no hesitation in saying that I am happy.

According to my experience, the principal characteristic of genuine happiness is peace, inner peace. By this I do not mean some kind of feeling of being "spaced out." Nor am I speaking of an absence of feeling. On the contrary, the peace I am describing is rooted in concern for others and involves a high degree of sensitivity and feeling, although I cannot claim personally to have succeeded very far in this. Rather, I attribute my sense of peace to the effort to develop concern for others.

This fact, that inner peace is the principal characteristic of happiness, explains the paradox that while we can all think of people who remain dissatisfied, despite having every material advantage, there are others who remain happy, notwithstanding the most difficult circumstances. Consider the example of those eighty thousand Tibetans who, during the months following my escape into exile, left Tibet for the sanctuary offered them by the Indian government. The conditions they faced were hard in the extreme. There was little food available and even less medicine. The refugee camps could offer no better accommodation than canvas tents. Most people had few possessions beyond the clothes they had left home in. They wore heavy *chubas* (the traditional Tibetan dress) appropriate to our harsh winters, when what they really needed in India was the lightest cotton. And there was terrible sickness from diseases unknown in Tibet. Yet for all their hardship, today the survivors exhibit few signs of trauma. Even then, few entirely lost confidence. Fewer still gave into their feelings of sorrow and despair. I would even say that once the initial shock had passed, the majority remained quite optimistic and, yes, happy.

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inner peace

The indication here is that if we can develop this quality of inner peace, no matter what difficulties we meet with in life, our basic sense of well-being will not be undermined. It also follows that though there is no denying the importance of external factors in bringing this about, we are mistaken if we suppose that they can ever make us completely happy.

Certainly our constitution, our upbringing, and our circumstances all contribute to our experience of happiness. And we can all agree that the lack of certain things makes its attainment all the harder. So let us consider these in turn. Good health, friends, freedom, and a degree of prosperity are all valuable and helpful. Good health speaks for itself. We all desire it. Similarly, we all need and want friends, no matter what our situation or how successful we become. I have always been fascinated by watches, but although I am particularly fond of the one I generally wear, it never shows me any affection. In order to attain the satisfaction of love, we need friends who can return our affection. Of course, there are different kinds of friends. There are those who are really the friend of status, money, and fame, and not friends of the person who possess these things. But I refer to those who are there to help us when we encounter a difficult stage in life and not those who base their relationship with us on superficial attributes.

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Freedom, in the sense of liberty to pursue happiness and to hold and express personal views, likewise contributes to our sense of inner peace. In societies where this is not permitted, we find spies who pry into the lives of every community, even the family itself. The inevitable result is that people start to lose confidence in one another. They become suspicious and doubt

others' motives. Once a person's basic sense of trust is destroyed, how can we expect them to be happy?

Prosperity too—not so much in the sense of having an abundance of material wealth but more in the sense of flourishing mentally and emotionally—makes a significant contribution to our sense of inner peace. Here again we might think of the example of the Tibetan refugees who prospered in spite of their lack of resources.

Indeed, each of these factors plays an important part in establishing a sense of individual well-being. Yet without a basic feeling of inner peace and security, they are of no avail. Why? Because, as we saw, our possessions are themselves a source of anxiety. So are our jobs insofar as we worry about losing them. Even our friends and relatives can become a source of trouble. They may get sick and need our attention when we are busy with important business. They may even turn against us and cheat us. Similarly, our bodies, however fit and beautiful they may be at present, must eventually give in to old age. Nor are we ever invulnerable to sickness and pain. Thus there is no hope of attaining lasting happiness if we lack inner peace.

Where, then, are we to find inner peace? There is no single answer. But one thing is for sure. No external factor can create it. Nor would it be any use asking for inner peace from a doctor. The best he or she could do is offer us an antidepressant or a sleeping pill. Similarly, no machine or computer, however sophisticated and powerful, could give us this vital quality. In my view, developing inner peace, on which lasting—and therefore—meaningful happiness is dependent, is like any other task in life: we have to identify its causes and conditions and then

inner peace

Attitude

diligently set about cultivating them. This, we find, entails a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, we need to guard against those factors which obstruct it. On the other, we need to cultivate those which are conducive to it.

So far as the conditions of inner peace are concerned, one of the most important is our basic attitude. Let me explain this by giving another personal example. Despite my habitual serenity today, I used to be somewhat hot-tempered and prone to fits of impatience and sometimes anger. Even today, there are, of course, times when I lose my composure. When this happens, the least annoyance can take on undue proportions and upset me considerably. I may, for example, wake up in the morning and feel agitated for no particular reason. In this state, I find that even what ordinarily pleases me may irritate me. Just looking at my watch can give rise to feelings of annoyance. I see it as nothing but a source of attachment and, through this, of further suffering. But then on other days I will wake up and see it as something beautiful, so intricate and delicate. Yet, of course, it is the same watch. What has changed? Are my feelings of revulsion one day and satisfaction the next purely the result of chance? Or is some neurological mechanism over which I have no control at work here? Although of course our constitution must have something to do with it, the governing factor is surely my mental attitude. Our basic attitude—how we relate to external circumstances—is thus the first consideration in any discussion on developing inner peace. In this context, the great Indian scholar-practitioner Shantideva once observed that while we have no hope of finding enough

leather to cover the earth so that we never prick our feet on a thorn, actually we do not need to. As he went on to observe, enough to cover the soles of our feet will suffice. In other words, while we cannot always change our external situation to suit us, we can change our attitude.

The other major source of inner peace, and thus of genuine happiness, is, of course, the actions we undertake in our pursuit of happiness. We can classify these in terms of those which make a positive contribution toward it, those whose effect is neutral, and those which have a negative effect on it. By considering what differentiates those acts which make for lasting happiness from those which offer only a transient sense of well-being, we see that in the latter case the activities themselves have no positive value. We have a desire for something sweet, perhaps, or for some fashionable item of clothing, or to experience something new. We have no real need of it. We simply want that thing or to enjoy that experience or sensation, and we set about satisfying our craving without much thought. Now I am not suggesting there is necessarily anything wrong in this. An appetite for the concrete is part of human nature: we want to see, we want to touch, we want to possess. But, as I suggested earlier, it is essential we recognize that when we desire things for no real reason beyond the enjoyment they give us, ultimately they tend to bring us more problems. Moreover, we find that like the happiness which gratifying such perceived needs brings, they are themselves in fact transient.

We must also acknowledge that it is this very lack of concern for consequences that underlies extreme actions, like in-

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flicting pain on others, even killing itself—either of which can certainly satisfy a person's desires for a short time—though those desires are severely negative ones. Or again, in the field of economic activity, the pursuit of profit without consideration of potentially negative consequences can undoubtedly give rise to feelings of great joy when success comes. But in the end there is suffering: the environment is polluted, our unscrupulous methods drive others out of business, the bombs we manufacture cause death and injury.

As to those activities which can lead to a sense of peace and lasting happiness, consider what happens when we do something we believe to be worthwhile. Perhaps we conceive of a plan to cultivate some bare land and, eventually, after much effort, bring it to fruition. When we analyze activities of this sort, we find they involve discernment. They entail weighing different factors, including both the likely and the possible consequences for ourselves and for others. In this process of evaluation, the question of morality, of whether our intended actions are ethical, arises automatically. So while the initial impulse might be to be deceitful in order to attain some end, we reason that although we may gain temporary happiness this way, actually the long-term consequences of behaving thus are likely to bring trouble. We therefore deliberately renounce one course of action in favor of another. And it is through achieving our aim by means of effort and self-sacrifice, through considering both the short-term benefit to us and the long-term effects on others' happiness, and sacrificing the former for the latter, that we attain the happiness which is characterized by

peace and by genuine satisfaction. Our differing responses to hardship confirm this. When we go on holiday, our basic motive is leisure. If, then, due to bad weather, due to clouds and rain, we are frustrated in our desire to spend time relaxing outside, our happiness is easily destroyed. On the other hand, when we seek not merely temporary satisfaction, when striving to achieve a goal the hunger, fatigue, or discomfort we may experience hardly bothers us. In other words, altruism is an essential component of those actions which lead to genuine happiness.

There is thus an important distinction to be made between what we might call ethical and spiritual acts. An ethical act is one where we refrain from causing harm to others' experience or expectation of happiness. Spiritual acts we can describe in terms of those qualities mentioned earlier of love, compassion, patience, forgiveness, humility, tolerance, and so on which presume some level of concern for others' well-being. We find that the spiritual actions we undertake which are motivated not by narrow self-interest but out of our concern for others actually benefit ourselves. And not only that, but they make our lives meaningful. At least this is my experience. Looking back over my life, I can say with full confidence that such things as the office of Dalai Lama, the political power it confers, even the comparative wealth it puts at my disposal, contribute not even a fraction to my feelings of happiness compared with the happiness I have felt on those occasions when I have been able to benefit others.

Does this proposition stand up to analysis? Is conduct

THESIS

Personal testimony

inspired by the wish to help others the most effective way to bring about genuine happiness? Consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others. Nor is it so remarkable that our greatest joy should come when we are motivated by concern for others. But that is not all. We find that not only do altruistic actions bring about happiness, but they also lessen our experience of suffering. Here I am not suggesting that the individual whose actions are motivated by the wish to bring others' happiness necessarily meets with less misfortune than the one who does not. Sickness, old age, and mishaps of one sort or another are the same for us all. But the sufferings which undermine our internal peace—*anxiety, frustration, disappointment*—are definitely less. In our concern for others, we worry less about ourselves. When we worry less about ourselves, the experience of our own suffering is less intense.

What does this tell us? Firstly, because our every action has a universal dimension, a potential impact on others' happiness, ethics are necessary as a means to ensure that we do not harm others. Secondly, it tells us that genuine happiness consists in those spiritual qualities of love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, humility, and so on. It is these which provide happiness both for ourselves and others.

Chapter Five

THE SUPREME EMOTION

ON A RECENT TRIP TO EUROPE, I TOOK THE opportunity to visit the site of the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. Even though I had heard and read a great deal about this place, I found myself completely unprepared for the experience. My initial reaction to the sight of the ovens in which hundreds of thousands of human beings were burned was one of total revulsion. I was dumbfounded at the sheer calculation and detachment from feeling to which they bore horrifying testimony. Then, in the museum which forms part of the visitor center, I saw a collection of shoes. A lot of them were patched or small, having obviously belonged to children and poor people. This saddened me particularly. What wrong could *they* possibly have done, what harm? I stopped and prayed—moved profoundly both for the victims and for the perpetrators of this iniquity—that such a thing would never happen again. And, in the knowledge that just as we all have