Ancient Wisdom; Modern World

Dalai Lama

ANCIENT WISDOM, MODERN WORLD

Ethics for a
New Millennium

Tenzin Gyatso

His Holiness the Dalai Lama

LITTLE, BROWN

www.littlebrown.co.uk

Published by Hachette Digital 2010

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780748116546

This ebook produced by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire.

Hachette Digital
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk
www.littlebrown.co.uk

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Having lost my country at the age of sixteen and become a refugee at twenty-four, I have faced a great many difficulties during the course of my life. When I consider them, I see that many were insurmountable. Not only were they unavoidable, but they were incapable of favourable resolution. Nonetheless, in terms of my own peace of mind and physical health, I can claim to have coped reasonably well. As a result I have been able to meet adversity with all my resources – mental, physical and spiritual. I could not have done so if I had been overwhelmed by anxiety and despair. My health would have been harmed. I would also have been constrained in my actions.

Yet as I look around, I see that it is not only we Tibetan refugees and members of other displaced communities who face difficulties. Everywhere and in every society, people endure suffering and adversity – even those who enjoy freedom and material prosperity. Moreover, it occurs to me that much of the unhappiness we humans endure is actually of our own making. In principle, therefore, this at least is avoidable. I also see that, generally, those individuals whose conduct is ethically positive are happier and find more meaning in life than those who neglect ethics. This confirms my belief that if we can re-orientate our thoughts and emotions, and reorder our behaviour, not only can we learn to cope with suffering more easily, but we can prevent a great deal of it from arising in the first place.

What I mean by the term positive ethical conduct I shall try to show in this book. In doing so, I acknowledge that it is very difficult either to generalize successfully or to be absolutely precise about ethics and morality. Rarely, if ever, is any situation totally black and white. The same act will have different shades and degrees of moral value under different circumstances. At the same time, it is essential that we reach a consensus in respect of what constitutes positive conduct and what constitutes negative conduct, what is right and what is wrong, what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. In the past, the respect people had for religion meant that ethical practice was maintained through a majority following one religion or another. But this is no longer the case. We must therefore find some other way of establishing basic ethical principles.

Not that the reader should suppose that, as Dalai Lama, I have any special solution to offer. There is nothing in these pages which has not been said before. Indeed, I feel that the concerns and ideas expressed here are shared by many of those who think about and attempt to find solutions to the problems and suffering we humans face. In responding to the suggestion of some of my friends and offering this book to the public, my hope is to give voice to those millions who, not having an opportunity to articulate their views in public, remain members of what I take to be a silent majority.

The reader should, however, bear in mind that my formal learning has been of an entirely religious and spiritual character. Since my youth, my chief (and continuing) field of study has been Buddhist philosophy and psychology. In particular, I have studied the works of the religious philosophers of the Geluk school to which the Dalai Lamas have traditionally belonged. Being a firm believer in religious pluralism, I have also studied the principal works of other Buddhist traditions. I have had comparatively little exposure to modern, secular, thought. Yet this is not a religious book. Still less is it a book about Buddhism. My aim has been to appeal for an approach to ethics based on universal rather than religious principles.

As a result, producing a work for a general audience has not been without challenges and it is the result of teamwork. One particular difficulty arose from the fact that it is difficult to render into modern language a number of the Tibetan terms it seemed essential to use. I have tried to explain these in such a way that they could be understood readily by a non-specialist readership and also rendered clearly into other languages. But in doing so, and in trying to communicate unambiguously with readers whose language and culture may be quite different from my own, it is possible that some shades of meaning in the Tibetan have been lost and others have been added unintentionally. I trust that careful editing has minimized this. Where any such distortions come to light, I would hope to correct them in a subsequent edition. In the meantime, for his assistance in this area, for his translation into English and for innumerable suggestions, I wish to thank Dr TJ Langri. I wish also to thank Mr AR Norman for his work of redaction. This has been invaluable. Finally, I would like to record my thanks to those others who have helped bring this work to fruition.

Dharamsala, February 1999

PART ONE

The Foundations of Ethics

CHAPTER ONE

MODERN SOCIETY AND THE QUEST FOR HUMAN HAPPINESS

I am a comparative newcomer to the modern world. Although I fled my homeland as long ago as 1959, and although my life since then as a refugee in India has brought me into much closer contact with contemporary society, my formative years were spent largely cut off from the realities of the twentieth century. This was partly due to my appointment as Dalai Lama: I became a monk at a very early age. It also reflects the fact that we Tibetans had chosen – mistakenly in my view – to remain isolated behind the high mountain ranges which separate our country from the rest of the world. Today, however, I travel a great deal, both at home and abroad, and it is my good fortune to be meeting new people continually.

Many people, especially those who make the effort to travel to the Indian hill-station at Dharamsala where I live in exile, come to me seeking something. Amongst them are some who have suffered greatly. There are those who have lost parents and children. There are those with friends or family who have committed suicide. There are those who are sick with cancer and with AIDS related illnesses. Then, of course, there are fellow Tibetans with their own tragedies of hardship and suffering. Some of these people have unrealistic expectations. They assume that I have healing powers or that I can give some sort of blessing. But I am only an ordinary human being. The best I can do is try to help them by sharing in their suffering.

For my own part, meeting innumerable people from all over the world and from every walk of life reminds me of our basic sameness as human beings. Indeed, the more I see of the world, the clearer it becomes that, no matter what our situation, whether we are rich or poor, educated or not, of one race, gender, religion or another, we all desire to be happy and to avoid suffering. Our every intended action, in a sense our whole life – how we choose to live it within the context of the limitations imposed by our circumstances – can be

seen as our answer to the great question which confronts us all: 'How am I to be happy?'

We are sustained in our quest for happiness, it seems to me, by hope. We know, even if we do not admit it, that there can be no guarantee of a better, happier life than the one we are leading today. As an old Tibetan proverb puts it, 'the next life or tomorrow – we can never be certain which will come first.' But we hope to go on living. We hope that through this or that action we can bring about happiness. Everything we do, not only as individuals but also at the level of society, can be seen in terms of this fundamental aspiration. Indeed, it is one shared by all sentient beings. As such it needs no justification. The desire or inclination to be happy and to avoid suffering knows no boundaries. It is in our nature.

And this is precisely what we see in countries both rich and poor. Everywhere, by all means imaginable, people are striving to improve their lives. Yet strangely, my impression is that those living in the materially developed countries are in some ways less satisfied despite their industry. They are less happy and to some extent suffer more than those living in the least developed countries. Indeed, if we compare the rich with those who are poor, it often seems that those with nothing are in fact those with the least anxiety, though they may be plagued with physical pains and suffering. As for the rich, whilst a few know how to use their wealth intelligently – that is to say not in luxurious living but sharing it with the needy – most do not. Many are so caught up with the idea of acquiring still more that they make no room for anything else in their lives. In their absorption they actually lose the dream of happiness which riches were to have provided. As a result, they are constantly torn between doubt about what might happen and the hope of gaining more. They are plagued with mental and emotional suffering – even though they may outwardly appear to be leading entirely successful and comfortable lives. This is evident in the disturbing prevalence of anxiety, discontent, frustration, uncertainty, doubt and depression amongst the populations of the materially developed countries. To my mind, such inner suffering clearly reflects a growing confusion in respect of what morality consists in and what its foundations are.

I am often put in mind of this paradox when I go abroad. It frequently happens when I arrive in a new country that at first everything seems very pleasant, very beautiful. Everybody I meet is very friendly. There is nothing to complain about. But then, day by day, I begin to hear about people's problems,

their concerns and worries. Below the surface, so many feel uneasy and dissatisfied with their lives. They experience feelings of isolation; then depression follows. The result is the troubled atmosphere which is such a feature of the developed world.

At first this surprised me. Although I never imagined that material wealth alone could overcome suffering, still, looking towards the developed world from Tibet, a country then as now very poor in this respect, I must admit that I thought it must go further towards doing so than is the case. I expected that, with physical suffering much reduced, as it is for the majority living in the industrially developed countries, happiness would be much easier to achieve than for those living under more severe conditions.

Instead, the extraordinary advancements of science and technology seem to have achieved little more than linear improvement. In many cases, progress has meant little more than greater numbers of opulent houses in more cities with more cars driving between them. Certainly there has been a reduction in some types of suffering especially certain illnesses. But there has been no overall reduction.

Saying this, I remember well an occasion on one of my early trips to the West. I was the guest of a very wealthy family which lived in a large, well-appointed house. Everyone was very charming and polite. There were servants to cater to one's every need and I began to think that here, perhaps, was proof positive that wealth could be a source of happiness. My hosts definitely had an air of relaxed confidence. When I subsequently saw an array of tranquillizers and sleeping pills in the bathroom, through a cupboard door which was slightly open, I was forcefully reminded that there is often a big gap between outward appearances and inner reality.

This paradox whereby inner – or we could say psychological and emotional – suffering is so often to be found amidst material wealth is readily apparent throughout much of the West. Indeed, it is so pervasive that we might wonder whether there is something in Western culture which predisposes people living there to such kinds of suffering? This I doubt. So many factors are involved. Clearly material development itself has a role to play. But we can also cite the increasing urbanization of modern society where high concentrations of people live in close proximity to one another. In this context, consider that in place of our dependence on one another for support, today wherever possible, we tend to rely on machines and services. Whereas formerly, farmers would call in all their family members to help with the harvest, today they simply telephone a

contractor. We find modern living so organized as to demand the least possible practical dependence on others. The more or less universal ambition seems to be for everyone to own his or her own house, their own car, their own computer and so on in order to be as independent as possible. We can also point to the increasing autonomy that people enjoy as a result of advances in science and technology. It is possible today to be far more independent of others than ever before. There has arisen a sense that our future is not dependent on our neighbours but rather on our jobs, or on our employers. This in turn encourages us to assume that others are not important for our happiness, therefore, their happiness is unimportant.

As a result, we have created a society in which people find it harder and harder to show one another basic affection. In place of the sense of community and belonging, which we find such a reassuring feature of less wealthy and generally rural societies, we find a high degree of loneliness and alienation. Despite the fact that millions live in close proximity to one another, it seems that many people, especially the old, have no one to talk to but their pets. I often think of modern industrial society in terms of a huge self-propelled machine. Instead of human beings in charge, each individual is a tiny, insignificant component with no choice but to move when the machine moves.

All this is compounded by the contemporary rhetoric of growth and economic development. This often reinforces the tendency towards competitiveness and envy. And with this comes the perceived need to keep up appearances – itself a major source of problems, tension and unhappiness. The psychological and emotional suffering we find so prevalent in the West is therefore less likely to reflect a cultural shortcoming than an underlying human tendency. Actually, I have noticed that this inner suffering is beginning to manifest outside the West. In some parts of South-East Asia, it is observable that traditional belief systems have begun to lose their influence over people as affluence increases. The result is that we find a broadly similar manifestation of unease as that established in the West. This suggests that the potential exists in us all, and in the same way that physical disease reflects its environment, so it is with psychological and emotional suffering. It arises within the context of particular circumstances. Thus, in the Southern, undeveloped countries we find ailments, such as those arising from poor sanitation, broadly confined to that part of the world. In urban industrial societies, illness also manifests itself in ways that are consistent with the environment. Instead of water-borne diseases, we find stress-related illness. All this implies that there are strong reasons to

assume a link exists between our disproportionate emphasis on external progress and the unhappiness, the anxiety, and the lack of contentment in modern society.

This may sound a very gloomy assessment. But unless we acknowledge the extent and character of our problems, we will not be able even to begin to overcome them. Nor will we be able to resolve them until we address their underlying causes and seek their origin. Clearly a major reason for modern society's devotion to material progress is the very success of science and technology. Now the wonderful thing about these forms of human endeavour is that they bring immediate satisfaction. They're unlike prayer, the results of which are for the most part invisible – if indeed it works at all. And we are impressed by results. What could be more normal? Unfortunately, this devotion encourages us to suppose that the keys to happiness are material well-being on the one hand and the power conferred by knowledge on the other. Whilst it is obvious to anyone who gives this mature thought that material well-being cannot bring us happiness by itself, it may be less apparent that knowledge cannot. But mere knowledge cannot provide the happiness that springs from inner development. Indeed, though our very detailed and specific knowledge of external phenomena is an immense achievement, the urge to reduce, to narrow down in pursuit of them, far from bringing us happiness can actually be dangerous. It can cause us to lose touch with the wider reality of human experience and in particular our dependence on others.

We need also to recognize what happens when we rely too much on the external achievements of science. For example, as the influence of religion declines, confusion mounts with respect to the problem of how best to conduct ourselves in life. In the past, religion and ethics were closely intertwined. Now many people believe that science has 'disproven' religion. They make the further assumption that, because there is no final evidence for any spiritual authority, morality itself must be a matter of individual preference. It seems that in the past scientists and philosophers felt a pressing need to find solid foundations on which to establish immutable laws and absolute truths. Nowadays, this kind of research is held to be futile. As a result, we see a complete reversal, heading off towards another extreme in which reality itself is called into question. This can only lead to chaos.

In saying this, I do not mean to criticize scientific endeavour. I have learned a great deal from my encounters with scientists and I see no obstacle to engaging in dialogue with them even when their perspective is one of radical

materialism. Indeed, for as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the insights of science. As a boy there was a time when I was rather more interested in learning about the mechanics of an old film projector I found in the storerooms of the Norbulingka, the summer residence of the Dalai Lama, than in my religious and scholastic studies. My concern is rather that we are apt to overlook the limitations of science narrowly defined. By replacing religion as the final source of knowledge in popular estimation, science begins to look a bit like another religion itself. With this comes the danger of blind faith in its principles and a corresponding intolerance of alternate views on the part of some of its adherents. That this supplanting of religion has taken place is not surprising given the extraordinary achievements of science. Who could fail to be impressed at our ability to land people on the moon? Yet the fact remains that if we were to go to, a nuclear physicist and say: 'I am facing a moral dilemma, what should I do?' He or she could only suggest we look elsewhere for an answer.

Generally speaking, a scientist is in no better a position than a lawyer in this respect. Whilst both science and the law can help us forecast the likely consequence of our actions, neither can tell us how we ought to act in a moral sense. Moreover, we need to recognize the limits of scientific enquiry itself with respect to human consciousness. For example, though we have been aware of consciousness throughout history, scientists still do not understand what it actually is, nor why it exists, how it functions or what its essential nature is though it has been the subject of investigation for millennia. Science can neither tell us what the substantial cause of consciousness is, nor what its effects are. Of course, consciousness belongs to that category of phenomena without form, substance or colour. It is not susceptible to investigation by external means. But this does not mean such things do not exist, merely that science cannot find them.

Should we, therefore, abandon scientific enquiry on the grounds that it has failed us? Certainly not. Nor do I believe that the goal of prosperity for all is not entirely valid. Because of our nature, bodily and physical experience plays a dominant role in our lives. The achievements of science and technology clearly reflect our desire to attain a better, more comfortable existence. This is very good. Who could fail to applaud the eradication of certain diseases? At the same time, I think it is genuinely true that members of certain traditional, rural communities do enjoy greater harmony and tranquillity than those settled in our modern cities. For example, in the Spiti area of northern India, it remains

the custom for locals not to lock their houses when they go out. It is expected that a visitor finding the house empty would go in and help themselves to a meal whilst waiting for the family to return. The same custom obtained in Tibet in former times. This is not to say that there is no crime in such places. In Tibet such things did happen occasionally of course. But when they did people raised their eyebrows in surprise. It was a rare and unusual event. By contrast, in some modern cities, it is a remarkable event if a day goes by when there is not a murder.

We must be careful not to idealize old ways of life, however. The high level of cooperation we find in undeveloped rural communities may be based more on necessity than on good will. People recognize it as an alternative to greater hardship. And the contentment we perceive may actually have more to do with ignorance. These people may not realise or imagine that any other way of life is possible. If they did, very likely they would embrace it eagerly. The challenge we face is to find a means of enjoying the same degree of harmony and tranquillity as those more traditional communities whilst participating fully in the realities of the world as we find it at the dawn of a new millennium. To say otherwise is to say that these communities should not even try to improve their standard of living. Yet, I am quite certain that, the majority of Tibet's nomads would be very glad of: the latest thermal clothing for winter; smokeless fuel to cook with; the benefits of modern medicine and a portable television in their tents. And I, for one, would not wish to deny them these things.

Modern society, with all its benefits and defects has emerged within the context of innumerable causes and conditions. To assume that merely by abandoning material progress we would overcome all our problems is shortsighted. It ignores their underlying causes. Besides, there is still much in the modern world to be optimistic about.

There are countless people even in the most developed countries who are active in their concern for others. Nearer home, I think of the enormous kindness we Tibetan refugees have been shown by those whose personal resources were also quite limited. For example, our children have benefited immeasurably from the selfless contribution of their Indian teachers, many of whom have been compelled to live under difficult conditions far away from their homes. On a wider scale, we might also consider the growing appreciation of fundamental human rights. This represents a very positive development. Generally, the way in which the international community responds to natural disasters with immediate aid is a wonderful feature of the modern world. The