THE OPEN ROAD

THE GLOBAL JOURNEY OF THE FOURTEENTH DALAI LAMA

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IN PUBLIC

All this is a dream. Still, examine it by a few experiments. Nothing is too wonderful to be true, if it be consistent with the laws of nature.

—Michael Faraday, 1849

The Conundrum

The two young men had many things in common as they settled into the room under the snowcaps, bright Tibetan scrolls on the walls, pine-covered slopes all around. Both of them were travelers—exiles—who had left their homes behind and so were in a position to think about home in a new way, without the limitations of nationality or race. Both were philosophers, too, but philosophers with a keen interest in the real world and the ways in which politics and society could be transformed by being seen in a different light. Both were coming of age at a time when cultures could reach one another as never before, thanks to jet planes and television screens, and the first question before them, perhaps, was how to turn this global reality into a fresh opportunity.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama was only twenty-four at the time, having come into India barely a year before, in March 1959, when Chinese troops had threatened to bring war to his capital of Lhasa and he had been forced to flee his native Tibet. Now, for the first time in his adult life, he was sharing a house with his mother and some siblings, relishing the chance to talk to strangers and come down from his throne as he could never have done in his old home. He loved to take walks in the high mountains in those early days, to picnic in meadows; he even started a garden as he had done in Lhasa. But every time he did, he later confessed,

one of India's notorious monsoons would sweep through, reducing all his efforts to nothing, and a part of him would miss the high, dry plateaus of Tibet.

My father, when he came into the room, was moving in the opposite direction. He had been born five years before the Dalai Lama, to Hindu parents, and had grown up in a tiny apartment in Bombay, shared with six siblings, some cousins, even the occasional neighbor. He had been trained in British Catholic schools and had so mastered the Shakespeare and Augustine they had taught him that he had won a scholarship to Oxford and now (like my Hindu, Bombay-raised mother, too) was teaching political philosophy in the ancient university. He had a rare chance, he knew, to bring the great Western tradition of Plato and Plotinus and Kant together with the Hinduism and Buddhism he had absorbed as a boy.

At the time he sailed back to India and requested a meeting with the newly arrived Dalai Lama, my father was deep in research on Mohandas Gandhi. The Tibetan leader had himself been thinking intensely about Gandhi, of course, as he tried to see how he could lead a nonviolent struggle against an occupying power and summon political sophistication in a transpolitical cause; by chance, the house in which he was staying had been lent him by the same wealthy Indian family that had lent Gandhi his final home, in Delhi, and pictures of the Indian activist of just a generation before filled the building in which the young men met. The subtitle Gandhi had chosen for his autobiography—*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*—might have applied to the Dalai Lama's story, too (he was a practical and lifelong lover of experiments), as he tried to construct a new, more durable Tibet outside Tibet and to see how he could protect the rights of his people without denying the legitimate rights of their 'great neighbor,' as he called it, Communist China.

Five years after that first meeting, my father brought out a book, *The Glass Curtain,* about the centuries of delusion and

projection that had separated Asia from Europe. Its foreword was contributed by his new friend, the Dalai Lama, for whom cutting through differences to a deeper commonness was always a central goal. The book was dedicated—though it would take me decades to notice it—to a little boy called Pico and to 'those of his generation for whom there will be no curtain.'

Forty-three years after that propitious encounter, one of its beneficiaries woke up in his two-room apartment in suburban Japan on a brilliant autumn morning, at the dawn of a new millennium, to spend a day with the Dalai Lama. I'd been visiting him in his exile home for almost thirty years at that point, and had been following him on his global travels for almost as long. But still I was intrigued by the quiet revolution he was promulgating, challenging us to see politics, globalism, celebrity itself, in a larger and more spacious light, and I was interested to examine all the challenges and questions his experiments entailed.

He had been taking to the road more and more often in recent years, partly, as always, to speak for the six million Tibetans more or less imprisoned in Chinese-occupied Tibet, but also, increasingly, to speak on behalf of what he now called 'global ethics,' those basic principles of kindness and responsibility that anyone could implement in her life, whether or not she was committed to any religion. In my many years of traveling as a journalist, I couldn't remember any Tibetan—or exile—I had met who spent no time mourning the past he had lost but concentrated his energies on how he could construct a more useful and inclusive future across the globe.

Japan in November is a blaze of radiance and impermanence. The sky this day, as on most such days, dawned a startling blue, the temperature in the seventies, even as the leaves all around the town of Nara began to turn ocher, lemon-yellow, the russet of a

Tibetan monk's robes. The very heart of Nara, the first Buddhist capital of Japan, thirteen centuries before, is a deer park that brings to mind the park in which the Buddha delivered his first discourse, in India. Everything changes, falls away, dies, the leaves in the Japanese autumn say, and yet everything comes back again, and change itself is a kind of constancy. Life, as some Buddhists have it, is a 'joyful participation in a world of sorrows.'

We got up early, my longtime companion Hiroko and myself, the morning light throwing pools of gold across our ceiling, and traveled by bus and train out to the musty Nara Hotel, a ninety-year-old hunting lodge of a place that sits at one corner of the deer park like a keepsake that has fallen out of some absentminded visitor's pocket. Just before nine a.m., we were ushered into a small conference room, where ten local academics and monks—all men, most of them in formal black—were seated around a table, trying to stifle their yawns, and sitting upright and a little stiffly in the Japanese way. We took up folding chairs against the wall, observers, and I thought of how the Dalai Lama himself had already been up for more than five hours, awakening, as he always does, at three-thirty a.m., to spend his first four hours of the day meditating on the roots of compassion and what he can do for his people, the 'Chinese brothers and sisters' who are holding his people hostage, and the rest of us, while also preparing himself for his death.

When he came into the room, accompanied by a group of aides and hosts, his stooped figure pressing forward—'He looks like a middle linebacker,' his old friend and admirer Abe Rosenthal, longtime managing editor of the *New York Times,* had once said to me—there was a sense of sharpened attention in our midst. He was looking around him as ever, picking out familiar faces, making eye contact with strangers, taking his new surroundings in (when I went to see him in Dharamsala, eighteen months later, many of the examples he would use would come from this brief trip to Japan). His hands were joined before him,

in a gesture of respect, and his bearing, the opposite of remote, was aimed, I thought, to try to dissolve all borders and get formality out of the way. We're all in this together, his body might have been saying; let's see if we can use this session for some good.

Taking his seat at one end of the table, he looked around the room with frank, unembarrassed curiosity, and at the translator chosen for this meeting—a local American hippie, by the looks of him, with a thick gray ponytail and a Gypsy vest. (The Dalai Lama can rarely catch sight of a beard or a male ponytail without wanting to tug at it.) As the Tibetan offered a few words of introduction, I noticed, as I had not quite seen before, that he was coming into the room, essentially, as a spokesman for 'potential,' to use one of his favorite words. A team of scientists in Wisconsin, complemented by researchers at Princeton and Berkeley, he said, in his measured, deliberate way, passing in and out of English and Tibetan, had been conducting a series of experiments on monks and practiced meditators to measure the effect such training can have upon the mind.

So far they had found that those who had meditated for years could lower their heartbeats by three or four beats a minute (even, in a few exceptional cases, more), could alter their brain scans, could even boost their entire immune systems. Conclusive results had yet to be firmed up, but the research suggested that just as so many of us these days had taken to training and strengthening our bodies, perhaps we could do the same with our minds?

And if we could control our heartbeats, our theta waves, even the heat of our bodies, perhaps we could also do more to control our thought patterns, our anger, our perceptions? Certainly, the new neurological idea of 'brain plasticity' suggested that we had much more potential for change than had previously been imagined. The mind was something we had the potential to transform. So, too, therefore, was the world that the mind created.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was, first and foremost,

an empiricist, a scientist of self; what he learned he learned by conducting experiments on the closest specimen to hand, himself. First he walked out of his gilded palace at the age of twenty-nine, in order to see firsthand the realities his father had tried to screen from him, the abiding truths of old age and suffering and death. Then he traveled and traveled, consulting teachers, practicing austerities, and, finally, sitting down under a pipal tree and vowing not to get up again until he'd come to some understanding of the nature of suffering and, further, of how we could come to a liberation from suffering. Then he traveled for the rest of his life, extending and sharing the understandings he'd gained.

He always took pains to tell people he was no more than an experimenter, doing nothing that the rest of us could not do; his aim was simply that of a doctor at a sickbed, eager to find an immediate solution to the problem at hand, without claiming his was the only or even the best solution. By speaking, as he often did, of a 'path,' he was saying, in effect, that we could always go further, that everything was in a constant state of flux and that all he was doing was showing the way so that others could take it in new directions.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama had been pushing along the same road for several decades now, turning around corners to meet a world in which almost every culture could access every other, and a single image had the power to reach the entire planet; he had traveled out of the mud-and-stone village in which he was born to the center of a kingdom that had no roads linking it to the outside world even in the 1950s, and then right into the heart of the twenty-first-century whirlwind. But he always stressed that, like the 'scientist of mind' who was his root teacher, he had no wish to claim final authority.

'Our master gave us liberty to investigate even his own word,' I would hear him say two years later in Zurich, of the Buddha, 'so I take this liberty fully!' As a boy he early showed a fascination

with all things scientific, fixing the old generator in the Potala Palace in Lhasa, using a telescope left to him by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and seeing that—contrary to Tibetan teaching—the moon did not generate its own light; delighting (as the Thirteenth Dalai Lama did) in taking watches apart and then trying to put them together again. Even now he kept a plastic model of the brain with labeled, detachable parts on his desk at home and loved to meet scientists who could improve his understanding of the world and mind, in part by disproving his assumptions about them.

Science, he said to the Japanese intellectuals, 'mainly deals with matter; faith mainly deals with the observer itself.' Both, however, tell us 'there is no independent objectivity.' And both, he said, are concerned with 'reducing the gap between reality and perception.' Recent research, he might have added, soon to be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine, suggested that those who score high on tests for happiness live longer than others, in part because happiness is a function not so much of our circumstances as of our perceptions. People who win the lottery often profess themselves no better off than before—they don't know who their friends are, they feel uncomfortable in their posh new neighborhoods, they spend all their time with lawyers; yet others, who are suddenly rendered paraplegic, after roughly a year of adjustment confess themselves really no worse off than before. The mind, as Milton puts it at the beginning of *Paradise Lost,* 'can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.'

The idea, I think, is to explore the world closely, so as to make out its laws, and then to see what can and cannot be done within those laws; the Dalai Lama's favorite words, I notice more and more this morning, are 'investigate' and 'analyze' and 'explore.' He does not mention Buddhism, if only because the people assembled around the table are here as scholars and, besides, some of them (like myself) may not even be Buddhists. The more important part is what anyone can do, whether she is

a Christian or a Marxist or even an enemy to Buddhism. A scientist's religious views are beside the point; what matters is what his experiments have disclosed, and that he be aware, as when doing nuclear research, of the real-world consequences of what his mind is discovering.

As the session goes on, I—and perhaps not just I—feel that at times the visitor sounds too optimistic, too ready to bring realism and confidence together. The recent demonstrations against the American invasion of Iraq, he says (referring to the military action begun eight months before), are something positive, 'encouraging,' even though there has been no sign of a non-governmental alternative to implement that longing for peace. Many others, I suspect, might suggest that the fact that so many people are out on the streets today could mean only that too many people have something to complain about. Yet still the principle remains: if we believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then maybe strength and possibility and neighborliness are, too?

The other banner under which he clearly walks is reason, and a refusal, as the Buddha said, to take anything on blind faith or because we want it to be true. 'At that time,' he says, of the outbreak of the war, and speaking with his characteristic matter-of-factness, 'some people asked me, "Go to Baghdad!" But then I thought: that's senseless. That's unrealistic. I have no friends in Baghdad. I am Buddhist monk—even I may not find the road!'

On the walls of the temple next to his home in India, I recall, there are only two quotations from the Buddha. One of them reads, 'As one assays gold by rubbing, cutting, and melting, so examine well my words and accept them, but not because you respect me.'

'At that point,' the Dalai Lama goes on, 'I strongly felt that some individual, like President Havel, whom the world knows, and some Nobel laureate, like Jimmy Carter or Archbishop Tutu, some individual like that should go there, talk with Saddam

Hussein and talk with his advisers.' That anything would come of it, he concedes, is 'a remote possibility.' But there would be nothing lost in trying. 'Because usually even representatives of the United Nations, people not much trust. Always suspicion.'

As the local translator renders the words into Japanese, the Tibetan visitor looks around the room with the interest of a newcomer. He pulls out a silver pen from within his capacious robes at one point, and makes a note. He sits in front of the scientists as unself-consciously as if sitting alone in his room at home. People always talk about his smile and his almost palpable charm; but if his ideas are really going to have some effect, I think, they must arise from acuity and alertness.

'The great home of the Soul,' D. H. Lawrence once wrote, in a typically pinwheeling account of Walt Whitman, 'is the open road. Not heaven, not paradise. Not "above."' The soul, in Lawrence's vision, is 'a wayfarer down the open road,' and 'true democracy' flowers in that place 'where soul meets soul, in the open road.' In that sense, the road also seems the natural home of someone who is visibly pressing along a path, to talk to anyone he meets along the way and to see how foreigners, specialists, fellow travelers can instruct him.

As soon as the Dalai Lama has finished speaking, the experts around the table, one after another, offer responses, generally in the form of dry and somewhat formal readings of prepared statements. Then, however, one man—the youngest in attendance, perhaps in his late thirties—suddenly addresses the Dalai Lama directly. 'I am a realist,' he says. 'All this talk of *ahimsa* and nonviolence, it's all well and good, but how has it really helped the world?' People are dying in Iraq, in Afghanistan, all over, he hardly needs to add. Instantly, the Dalai Lama comes to life, as in one of the debates that his school of Tibetan Buddhism cherishes as a way to sharpen the mind and cut through fixed assumptions. Governments are slow to catch up with the possibilities that individuals discern, he says; and in any case, it

takes time to change and slough off the habits of old. The answer comes with such assurance that I begin to wonder if this, too, isn't one of the many questions the Dalai Lama asks himself every day.

A religious teacher who is telling people not to get entangled or distracted by religion; a Tibetan who is suggesting that Tibet does not have all the answers; a Buddhist who, more and more, is urging foreigners not to take up Buddhism but to study within their own traditions, where their roots are deepest: at the very least, something quite radical is being advanced, it seems. The world at the beginning of the new century is more divided than I have ever seen it, and its strongest power is fractured by loud disputes; in the middle of this, the head of Tibetan Buddhism is urging people not to listen to doctrine, which can so often be a source of divisions of its own, but to push behind it to something human, in which ideas of 'clashing civilizations' can seem remote.

As the burly Tibetan walks out into the broad sunlight—people are holding up signs saying FREE TIBET along his path and waving the Tibetan flag, now banned in Tibet—I realize there's something incongruous about this skeptical journalist and nonbelonger (myself) devoting so much of my time to trying to figure out what this man is saying.

But the Dalai Lama impresses, or disarms, me by doing away with many of the categories with which we imprison ourselves. The only truths that can possibly make sense to us, he suggests, apply to all human beings, as much as Pythagoras's theorem or the laws of thermodynamics do; if they pertain only to a specific tradition or culture, they're not human truths at all. And the only thing that an Easterner—or Westerner—can offer is an angle on these truths that allows the rest of us to see them more clearly than we have done before. To someone like me, who's grown up

in many cultures but refused to believe that lacking a physical home means lacking an inner center, this is all as encouraging to hear as the idea that we don't have to define ourselves by differences.

I follow along as he moves down the white-gravel paths of central Nara and notice, as people reach toward him to try to get a blessing or a handshake, how he is switching, as always, at lightning speed from monk to head of state to philosopher-scientist to regular man. But what is more striking, I realize, is that he's pushing all these roles together, as if they were all intertwined, to see how one might throw light on the others. I don't know many monks who are so keen to affirm only what stands up to scientific testing. And there are even fewer politicians who try to speak from the collected stillness and attention of a monk. Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama's good friend, is also traveling more and more in the global order, using planes and cars to take him everywhere; but when he travels, he tends to visit fellow Catholics, to proclaim his faith and to offer doctrinal guidance. The Dalai Lama, by comparison, seems to exult in meeting people from traditions other than his own—Catholics, neuroscientists, even Maoists—and seeing what they have in common beneath their designations.

I can't help but think this is an interesting response to an age in which some kill others in the name of Allah, some in the name of the Christian God. But just as I am thinking all this, I see the tanks that surrounded me in Ethiopia not long ago, the armed soldiers I met in Arabia who were scrambling after pennies. I remember the guerrillas who came into the room where I was sitting in El Salvador, during its civil war, the shacks I saw in Soweto where philosophical ideas seemed unlikely to bring any food to the table. I can't say, after twenty years of covering wars and revolutions as a journalist, that any one man is likely to have all the answers (and the Dalai Lama, I know, would not say that either); it's the questions he puts into play that invigorate.

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After a quick lunch break at the Nara Hotel, his home for the day, the Dalai Lama comes out again into the bright afternoon, for what will surely be the high point of his visit: a trip to Todaiji, in the deer park, the great temple that is often described as the largest wooden building in the world. It was from here that the Japanese monk later known as Kobo Daishi traveled to China twelve centuries before, and brought back a form of Buddhism—Shingon—that might be a rough translation of the Tibetan kind; and for more than a millennium, a great Buddha, more than fifty feet tall, has sat at the heart of the prayer hall.

The place is always crowded with sightseers from around the globe, trying to catch the giant Buddha on their cell-phone cameras or posing for pictures within its enormous courtyard, but on this day I realize that for a Buddhist its meaning may be something deeper. Two times the great structure has burned to the ground, and two times it has come up again. The Buddha's hands date from the sixteenth century, its head from a later period, and other parts of the body have been here ever since the first construction. In that way, it's not so different from the Dalai Lama: the vehicle, the physical vessel, is clearly very perishable. But the message it speaks for goes on and on.

When the Dalai Lama gets out of his car at the outermost gateway to the compound—usually closed but thrown open today—Hiroko and I follow him up the short flight of stone steps that lead to the formal entrance, and for a moment I am involuntarily silenced. Everywhere across the great expanse of the courtyard there are people: mothers holding up their toddlers so they can catch a glimpse of the famous visitor; Tibetans from across Japan extending ceremonial white silk scarves; foreigners in tribal hippie gear; and high-heeled girls with Vuitton bags asked to postpone their visits for a few minutes. I come here often as a resident of Nara, but never have I seen it turned, as today, into a global throne room in the sun.

The Dalai Lama moves along the path, stopping often to ask a question of some Westerners, to bless a baby, to chat with local kids; as someone who individually blessed seventy thousand people when he arrived in Lhasa at the age of four, he's never felt out of place in crowds. After going into the temple and sitting quietly before the Buddha, then peppering his hosts (through a translator) with questions, he comes out again and offers a few words of thanks and greeting to the assembled, in an English as reassuringly ragged as their own.

Then he is bustled toward the next stop on his itinerary, a meeting with the abbot of Todaiji at a subtemple around the corner, and he begins to move away, surrounded by forty or so bodyguards and secretaries and anxious hosts and hangers-on, such as Hiroko and myself. As he is heading away from the public space, suddenly, he sees something and veers off. The rest of us struggle to keep up. Alone at the far end of an empty colonnade, two Japanese women are standing above a girl of ten or so with a mop of black hair and thick glasses; her legs, in bright, striped socks, barely reach the ground from the wheelchair in which she is sitting.

Within seconds, the Dalai Lama is by the girl's side and leaning down to talk to her.

'What is her problem?' he asks the women—a mother and a friend, I assume—and is told that her eyes are fine, but that the use of her legs is gone.

For a long, long moment he looks into the little girl's eyes. Then he leans forward and places his head against her cheek. Then, looking at her again, he says something else and tweaks her affectionately, before heading back toward his schedule.

The mother of the girl, as he turns around, is dabbing at her cheeks with a tissue, saying, 'Thank you. I'm so sorry. Thank you.' The woman beside her looks as if her face is about to crumple. The little girl is swinging her legs back and forth as if the day is just beginning.

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, when he is asked who he is, usually says (in exactly the same words deployed by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama) that he's a 'simple Buddhist monk.' This does not do justice to the fact that he's the temporal leader of the Tibetans, organizing fifty exile communities around the world, dealing almost every day with the two great powers of the day, Beijing and Washington, while living in the third, India, making statements and decisions every hour, as every head of state must do. It does not really take in his practical obligations as head of one of the major schools of Buddhism, scholar and administrator and teacher, who has to deliver lectures, write books, and organize a highly complex hierarchy, now scattered around the globe. It does not even take into account the everyday person he is, worried constantly about his people, angry (he confesses to interviewers) if his time is not well used, moved to tears, he's told me, when he hears the stories his people bring to him.

And yet the answer is, as far as it goes, as precise as most of the other things he says. He really does live simply, decorating his bedroom when he travels with just a few pictures of his teachers and his family and a portable radio. He really is a full-time, lifelong student of the Buddha, who taught him that everything is illusory and passing, not least that being who declares that everything is illusory and passing. And he really does aspire, as every monk does, to a simplicity that lies not before complexity but on the far side of it, having not dodged experience but subsumed it. Even the name by which he goes—Tenzin Gyatso—is not his own.

This Dalai Lama has, in only a few years, and unexpectedly, become one of the most visible figures on the planet. And yet, I sometimes think, that very visibility often gets in the way of the ideas he's speaking for or the people on whose behalf he's talking. His very warmth and charisma are so strong that those who listen to him sometimes don't see behind them to what is really lasting and has little to do with his particular being. In that

sense, he may be one of the least-seen figures on the planet.

The Buddha, whenever his followers tried to create a religion or a doctrine around him—a cult of personality, even, around a figure who was speaking for the flimsiness of personality—always stressed that he was just a human being, doing what any one of us could do if we resolved to sit still and see through the delusions of the mind. He was nothing special in himself, he always said; he was just a signpost, akin to what Zen monks call a finger pointing at the moon. The most prominent Buddhist in the world today, I think, would likely say that this is even truer in his case: he is just a finger pointing at a finger pointing at the moon.

As night begins to fall over the deer park and the first pinch of winter comes to the day, the Dalai Lama heads to his last engagement of this visit, in a modern theater not so far from Todaiji, and for most of the people in the city, this general address is what he will ultimately leave behind him. He gives such talks at almost every place he visits nowadays, usually on some general principle of how our lives are intertwined and what that means in terms of possibility and transformation. By now he has given them so often that he can deliver them even when unwell and in his improving English, the way a politician might deliver a campaign speech (though this is a campaign less for self-advancement than its opposite).

'We are not talking about God,' he explains to the two thousand people who've poured into the place (a group of Raelians, meanwhile, stands up with a sign reminding us that our hope lies in outer space). 'We are not talking about Nirvana. We are only talking about how to become a more compassionate human being.' The very words 'Tibetan' or 'Buddhist' or 'monk' can only come between people; his interest, clearly, is in what someone can do who has no interest in terms or theories.

'I am sixty-eight years old,' he goes on, 'and yet I am striving, day after day.' (The Buddhists in attendance no doubt notice how close this is to the Buddha's final words before he died: 'Work out your own salvation with diligence.') I think of how Tibetans generally draw a distinction between suffering and unhappiness: suffering is the state of the world, they say, but unhappiness is just the position we choose (or cannot choose) to bring to it.

His energy is discernibly lower as the day nears its end, and the Dalai Lama often talks about sleep as one of the most important activities of the day, even calling on old texts to suggest how sleep can in fact be positively used, as almost anything can, for the clarification of the mind. It appeals to him, I think, because it is one activity that every member of humanity has in common, and the nature of our sleep plays a large part in how clearly we see the world. Yet the minute a chic woman steps onto the stage, stands at a podium on one side, and offers to read questions collected from the audience, the Dalai Lama comes to life. 'This is my chance to learn from you,' he says, with evident sincerity (through a Japanese woman from Dharamsala whom he's using to translate for this public address). 'Please don't be shy. Ask anything. Don't hold back or be too formal. We're all just human beings.'

To my surprise, the Japanese, though generally hesitant or reserved, don't seem shy at all. They don't hold back, and do seem ready to ask anything. Most of the questions come from women, identified only by age and gender, and with each one the Dalai Lama seems to enter another mood or voice. (Paul Ekman, the world's leading scientist of the emotions, has said that the Fourteenth Dalai Lama uses his facial muscles more vigorously and with greater precision than anyone he has studied in forty years; every feeling—mirth, sharpness, solicitude, reflectiveness—is fully inhabited for a moment, and then gone.)

Someone asks a question about Tibet, and the man onstage,

seated cross-legged in a chair under a large golden banner, turns solemn, even grave. Someone asks him about how she can get on better with her boss, and he breaks into hearty laughter— 'Maybe you can join with others in your company and form a circle. Or if that doesn't work, just go on strike!'

Someone asks about Buddhism in Japan, and he becomes a diplomat. Someone asks about daily Buddhist practice, and he turns into a practical instructor, counting off points on his fingers, breaking down every point into clear and logical steps, moving his sturdy, elegant hands up and down as he outlines certain effective techniques. His voice, famously, goes up and down, from the depths of a basso profundo, ideal for muttering Tibetan chants at dawn, to a young boy's high-pitched squeal of incredulity or delight. He speaks largely with his body, leaning into things, moving with all of himself, rocking back and forth on his raised chair, eye clearly alert to pick out salient details.

The question period after the forty-five-minute talk is scheduled to last only fifteen minutes, but the Dalai Lama goes on and on, as if this is his chance to impart something useful. Every time the mistress of ceremonies looks to him, seeing if he is ready to call a halt, he says, in English, 'Next question! Next!' (She, in turn, answers with a formal, almost military *'Hai! Arigato gozaimashita!'*—meaning 'Yes, sir. Thank you very much!'—and at one point, mischievous, he briefly mimics the *'Hai!'*) For almost an hour he continues, using the moments when his answers are translated into Japanese to look up and take in the banner above him, to pick out a friend in the audience and offer a cheerful wave, to sit alone, eyes closed, for all the world as if he were meditating in his room at dawn. At times he pulls out a piece of tissue from his shoulder bag and polishes his glasses—which might, I realize, be a metaphor for what he's encouraging all of us to do.

At another point, clearly curious himself, he asks for a show of hands of those under twenty-five, and then of those under

thirty (they are the ones who will make the future, he is evidently thinking). He even asks who in the audience doesn't have a religion (quite a few hands pop up) and who doesn't drink. At the beginning of the talk, as at every such event, he has taken off his watch, with its sturdy stainless-steel band, and the *mala* beads he wears around his wrist. Know exactly how much time you have, he might be saying to himself, and use that time for some good.

As the Dalai Lama moves off toward the next stop on his global itinerary—getting up while it is still dark to complete his four hours of meditation—people around me say, as they often seem to do after such a visit, that it feels as if a light has come on in the city. For a brief moment, friends and neighbors seem a little more hopeful, as if given heart by a wandering uncle. Yet I, ever the journalist, am keen to see how much of what he's said and done remains, and what effect it would have, if any, on someone who'd never seen him. The overall impression I come away with from the visit is one of efficiency and speed, the way a doctor on call in a hospital will not let a second go wasted (especially, perhaps, if he is also here to talk about others in desperate need far away).

When Hiroko and I step into the dusty old room in the Nara Hotel he's been given to receive visitors, we find him standing at the window, looking out at the deer. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, known in Beijing as a 'wolf in monk's clothing,' is famous for his love of animals.

'You're lucky to be in a place where the deer are effectively the bosses,' I say. 'They've been ruling Nara, in their way, for thirteen hundred years.'

'Perhaps you will be a deer in your next life,' he says, breaking into laughter. 'A deer who writes!'

'How do you say?' he goes on, turning to a private secretary. 'With hoof! A deer who writes with his hoof!'

'No,' says Hiroko, always quick with her perceptions. 'With his head.' She mimics a deer writing on the ground with its antlers, and the Dalai Lama, now sitting down, claps his hands with delight and falls about laughing.

'You see,' he explains, 'some people tell me that because I like animals I will come back in my next life as an animal.' He has a German shepherd at home, he says, and she is so compassionate, she has even adopted a rabbit from his garden. ('Even the rabbit is trying to suck at the dog's teats. Of course, a little disturbing for the dog!') Whereas the dog of his other private secretary, now minding the store in Dharamsala—'famous for his fierce nature!'

This is not, I'll realize later, just idle chitchat. In his public address, he stresses the phrase 'social animals,' if only to remind us that nurturing is as much an instinct with us as being predatory. And when he talks about how the Nara deer, lacking sharp claws, were clearly meant by nature to be vegetarians, I will see—though only much later—that he's making a point about humans, too, likewise lacking sharp claws.

Yet the main thing he's keen to talk about, as always, is what he's learned from his current tour, and particularly from his meetings with physicists in Tokyo. In old Tibet, he says, mandalas showed the sun and moon as being of equal size, as if equidistant from the earth. That is wrong, he declares, with the vigor that he increasingly often calls upon; nothing can be maintained once disproved by science. 'The Four Noble Truths, *shunyata*'—the doctrine of emptiness, or interdependence—'those we Buddhists need.' Everything else, goes the implication, is autumn leaves.

I remember how he had lit up when challenged by the young Japanese philosopher around the conference table; Buddhism itself, he now says, can only gain from being debated, just as Hinduism did before it. Whole kingdoms used to be at stake, he

declares, with evident excitement, when Buddhism debated its positions against Hinduism, and people watched the clash of ideas as later they watched the struggle of armed men.

And whole kingdoms are at stake now, I think, as I remember all the Tibetans who are urging the Dalai Lama to be more decisive in his opposition to Chinese oppression, to accept no compromise, to speak for action and full independence and not just the religious principles of forbearance and turning the other cheek.

This is, in fact, the most agonizing and mounting of all the conundrums he travels with. For even as he has charmed this small corner of Japan and begun to pass on some confidence, the country that he was born to rule is slipping ever closer to extinction. In the course of his life, and thanks in part to him, Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have become a living and liberating part of the global neighborhood; and yet at the same time, on his watch, his own people have lost most of their contact with their leaders, their loved ones, and their culture, and one of the great centers of Buddhism, five times as large as Britain, has been all but wiped off the map. The leader of the Tibetans finds himself carrying an entire culture on his shoulders; and even as he's trying to support six million people he hasn't seen in half a century, he is obliged to create a new Tibet among those who have seldom or never seen Tibet.

One evening in Dharamsala, I notice clouds beginning to gather above the Kangra Valley below. The little town in northern India where the Dalai Lama and his government have made their home for more than forty years now is a bedraggled and makeshift place, but if you catch it at the right angle, as in the little guesthouse where I stay, it can give off something of the light of fairy tale. From the garden where I sit, all I can hear are the sounds of chants and gongs from the temple across the way, set

next to the Dalai Lama's home; if I sit on the sunlit terrace outside my room, all I can see are young monks racing along the whitewashed terraces of a monastery, their red robes laid out under the snowcaps to dry.

This little corner of the hill station is a perfect symbol of how Tibet is being rebuilt, in compact, more conscious form, outside the borders of Tibet. On this day, however, as I watch a storm building in the valley, it begins to rain furiously, and the wind starts to shake the solid three stories of the building, the trees outside beginning to shiver and crack. Then there is a crash from somewhere down below, and electricity across the settlement is gone.

Looking outside, I see nothing but dark. Shouts rise up from the road down below, and I can hear the people who live along the road scrambling for shelter. It seems madness to go out into the elements, but if Hiroko and I do not honor tonight's engagement, I'm not sure when, or whether, it will come again.

We struggle out together into the rain, our umbrella tearing as we slip and slither down an unpaved slope, every attempt at respectability suitably mocked, and, after many minutes, find a minivan that is not taken. As it wends its way down the precipitous mountain road, we see occasional figures sheltering under trees, beggars huddled together under stoops.

When, finally, we arrive at our destination, our host comes up to us with a typically urbane, unflustered 'Come. Are you sure you're okay?' and we step into the shelter of Ngari Rinpoche's home. The younger brother of the Dalai Lama—more than a decade younger—Ngari Rinpoche was discovered to be a *rinpoche,* or high incarnate lama, when he was a boy and trained as a monk, in charge of large numbers of monks in the Indian areas of Zanskar and Ladakh. Early on, however, he shed his robes and recast himself as something of the loyal opposition to institutional Tibet. Of course I was declared to be a rinpoche, he more or less said; I was the younger brother of the Dalai

Lama. (In fact, their eldest brother had also been taken to be a high lama even before the Dalai Lama was born, but still the point remained: Tibet's system of incarnations has always left room for manipulation.)

In the years that followed, the Dalai Lama's youngest sibling became a paratrooper in the Indian army; he smoked and devoured steaks; and to this day he loves to shock those he meets with his equal-opportunity irreverence: say something positive about Tibet, and he's likely to reply, 'You're just a susceptible Westerner, a groupie.' More and more, as the years go on, he asks me, when he meets me, if I'm preparing to be a monk by losing my hair.

He leads us now into his spare, elegant living room, which looks out over the huge valley below. Lightning breaks across the expanse, and the electricity flickers on again, then dies. On one table I see the new English translation of a three-volume Tibetan text from the fifteenth century that Ngari Rinpoche is studying in his evenings (his written English is in places more confident than his Tibetan, since he left Tibet when he was barely thirteen).

I have not seen Ngari Rinpoche—who now prefers to go by the secular name Tendzin Choegyal—for seven years, and the change in him is remarkable. He has always seemed to be the uncensored private side, the alter ego, of the Dalai Lama, having lived beside him in Dharamsala for more than forty years, working with him as translator, filter, even private secretary (their eldest brother moved to Bloomington, Indiana, to teach, in 1968; their second-eldest brother lives in Hong Kong and works as a businessman, going to and from Beijing as a kind of unofficial emissary; their sister oversees the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala; and their third-eldest brother, who had lived simply in New Jersey as a janitor called 'Sam' until his cover was blown by the *New York Times,* died in his early fifties).

Tonight, however, I notice how much Ngari Rinpoche is

coming to resemble his most celebrated sibling. The voice, low and deep, could be the Dalai Lama's, especially on a night like this when the room is almost dark. The laugh, sudden and wildly accelerating—all conversation stops with it—is identical. And of course what he's saying is often word for word what his brother would say, in part because they are brothers, but even more because they are both lifelong students of the same philosophy, and Ngari Rinpoche has spent his life studying under and talking to the Dalai Lama. When Hiroko begins telling a story of imagining she saw her estranged brother in a temple in Tibet, our host leans forward in the thin light, a single candle picking up his high cheekbones, his attentive eyes, the look of a doctor listening for symptoms, and it's impossible not to think we're up the hill in the Dalai Lama's house, though unofficially.

'You should tell His Holiness when you see him,' he says to Hiroko, and a part of me bridles at the romanticism of imputing too much to this disrobed monk—Tibet lends itself too easily to such ideas—while a part of me notices that she is in fact looking a lot better.

We go to sit at the dinner table—lightning breaking across the valley again, and every syllable intimate in the near dark—and I remember how, the last time I had seen him, the unorthodox lama had told me about what he called the 'Shangri-La syndrome,' whereby foreigners were much too ready to ascribe all kinds of wisdom to every Tibetan they met, and Tibetans much too ready to take advantage of that. Fluent in Chinese and English as well as Tibetan, having grown up for a year in Beijing and then in northern India as well as Lhasa, Ngari Rinpoche speaks for the part of Tibet that is both modern and global.

We retire, after dinner, to the living room for tea, and suddenly, with his characteristic directness, our host turns to me in the near dark.

'Do you think I've done anything for Tibet?'

'Of course,' I say, stumbling a little, because taken aback.

'You've been an intermediary between Tibetans and the Western world.'

'You're saying I'm just a Westerner.'

'No.' Less trained than he at ritual debating, I fumble for a second. 'But you can take information to His Holiness that he wouldn't hear otherwise.'

'He has other people who can do that for him. Take my word for it.'

I shuffle uneasily in my chair, hoping he'll change direction.

'You're being polite,' he goes on (and again I think of his brother's impatience with mere formality). 'Mine is a serious question. Do you think I've done anything to make Tibetan lives any better?'

'You have, by knowing the world outside Tibet.'

He laughs dismissively, as if I've hit an easy serve ten feet over the line. We go on talking for a while, and then Hiroko and I make our way back to our little room in the guesthouse up the hill. As we get there, I recall how I had heard almost exactly the same sentence fourteen years before, from the Dalai Lama, the day after his Nobel Prize had been announced. 'I really wonder if my efforts are enough,' he had said, at the very moment when he was being most feted by the world. All we can do, he had told me, is try, even though it sometimes seems to be in vain.

At the end of the evening, I pick up my pen. Of all the many books and films that have brought the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and his people to the world, I'm not sure any of them has addressed that most central of questions.

I and my four cameramen were rendered speechless by the emptiness of the landscape, the invisible wind that swept across the barren land, the high boundless sky, and the utter silence. My heart and soul felt clean and empty. I lost any sense of where I was or of the need to talk.

—The Beijing journalist Xinran Xue,
describing Tibet in her book *Sky Burial*

The Fairy Tale

When I was a little boy, barely old enough to know what the 'news' meant (small children live in a different sense of time), my father began telling me a story every night before I went to sleep. The stories he told me were often of angels and demons and many-headed gods, drawn from the ancient myths of the India where he grew up, or spiked with the Shakespeare and Dickens of the England where we were living. Down the road, a five-minute walk away, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien were gathering regularly at the Eagle and Child pub, and stories of magical wardrobes and hidden hollows, of minglings both evil and good, were developing. The story that my father told that especially transfixed me, though, was of a little boy born in a simple rural cowshed far from anywhere, and very high up, who was seen by some passing monks one day and declared to be a king.

The little boy, not much older than the wide-eyed kid listening to his father in Oxford, was taken to a faraway capital, after a long passage on horseback, and installed in a palace with a thousand rooms. He was instructed in all the philosophies and sciences of his ancient culture, by two strict tutors in red robes, while his family was sent to live in a summer palace, bright with flowers and animals and lakes. Only one elder brother kept him company in the cold, dark palace overlooking the city.

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