

SECULAR ETHICS

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I am an old man now. I was born in 1935, in a small village in northeastern Tibet. For reasons beyond my control, I have spent most of my adult life in India, which has been my second home for over half a century. I often joke that I can be called the most sedentary guest. Like other people my age, I have witnessed many dramatic events that have shaped the modern world. Since the late 1960s, I have traveled extensively and had the honor of meeting many people: not only presidents, prime ministers, kings, queens, and leaders of major religious traditions, but above all ordinary people.

Looking forward, I see many reasons to be happy. Thanks to the development of medical science, many dangerous diseases have been overcome. Millions of people have ceased to live in poverty and have gained access to modern education and healthcare. We have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and a growing awareness of their importance. Around the world, there is a growing number of supporters of freedom and democracy, as well as a belief in the unity of the human race and the importance of the natural environment. In many respects, the last half century has been a time of progress and change for the better.

Nevertheless, we still suffer and struggle with great problems. While consumerism reigns in rich countries, elsewhere millions barely make ends meet. With the end of the Cold War, the risk of nuclear catastrophe has diminished, yet many armed conflicts continue, causing pain. The devastation of the natural environment threatens health and life. Inequalities, corruption, and injustice are also sources of suffering.

Problems do not only affect developing countries. In rich countries, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, and family crisis are rampant. Many people worry about their children, their education, and their future. There is also the danger that we will reach a point where we can no longer repair the damage we are doing to our planet, which is another source of anxiety. The pressure that is an integral part of the modern lifestyle brings stress, anxiety, depression, and increasingly painful loneliness. Everywhere I hear this complaint. And I catch myself doing it too!

There is no doubt that we are doing something wrong. But what? In my opinion, our fundamental problem – at every level – is attaching too much importance to the material aspects of life at the expense of ethics and inner values.

By inner values, I mean the qualities that we all value in others and to which we are naturally inclined as animals, by virtue of biology, needing an environment full of care, tenderness, and warmth – in a word: compassion. Its essence is the desire to alleviate the suffering of others and to give others happiness. It is a spiritual principle from which other

inner values grow. We like it when our fellow human beings are kind, patient, tolerant, understanding, and generous, while other people's greed, meanness, hatred, and malice repel us. Everyone should therefore appreciate the active promotion of the qualities of the heart that arise from a natural inclination towards compassion, and methods of controlling destructive inclinations. The first beneficiaries of such exercises will undoubtedly be ourselves. By forgetting about our inner lives, we also harm ourselves the most. This neglect is the source of many of the biggest problems the world faces today.

So what should we do? Where can we seek help? Science, although it has done so much good for the material world, has not developed methods for developing individual righteousness – the basic human values that we appreciate in others and would like to see in ourselves. So perhaps we should look for them in religion, as has been done for thousands of years? Without a doubt, faith has helped, is helping, and will continue to help millions of people. By pointing out a moral direction and meaning of life, it is no longer, however, a sufficient foundation for ethics in the modern secular world. This is because many people today do not profess any faith. Moreover, in the age of globalization and increasingly interconnected multicultural societies, morality based on religion would only appeal to some and would not matter to others. In the past, when we lived in relative isolation – like the Tibetans, for example, who for centuries were happy behind the walls of their mountains – the division into groups with ethical systems based on their own faith was not a problem. Now, however, any attempt to remedy the deficit of spiritual values based solely on religion is bound to fail as non-universal. Today we need a solution that both believers and non-believers can accept: **secular ethics**.

Such a position may sound strange coming from someone who has worn a monk's robes since childhood. I see no contradiction here, however. My tradition obliges me to work for the benefit of all sentient beings, including those who profess other religions or who do not feel connected to any.

I am convinced that we can and should seek a new, secular vision of universal ethics. My certainty comes from the belief that all people naturally want to be good. If we do something, it is because it seems to us that it will be beneficial. Everyone also appreciates the kindness shown to them. They prefer to be loved, not hated. To encounter generosity, not stinginess. After all, who prefers contempt, hostility, and malice to tolerance, respect, and forgiveness of one's own mistakes?

I am therefore sure that we can and are able to articulate inner values without contradicting any religion or, more importantly, without referring to it.

I must point out here that I do not intend to dictate moral values. Nothing good would come of it. Imposing rules from the outside, forcing them or decreeing them simply cannot be effective. I only ask that each of us personally become convinced of the importance of inner values, for it is they that are the source of both an ethical world and – individually – peace of mind, self-confidence, and happiness, which we all desire. Religious traditions that preach love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness can, of course, promote inner

values, but basing ethics on faith has ceased to be adequate. In my opinion, in this situation, we should start looking for a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics outside the context of religion.

My generation belongs to the 20th century, which has already passed. In that century, humanity experimented with many things, including world wars. It seems to me that through these terrible sufferings we have become a little more mature and wiser. It was also a time of extraordinary material development. However, it brought social inequality and environmental devastation, which we must now address. The new generation will have to create a world better than the one they inherited. This is a great burden.

Since social change can only be achieved through individual efforts, educating the next generation must be a key element of our strategy. That is why, during my travels, I always try to meet and talk to young people. I hope that one day the education system will become interested in and include in its curricula what I call education of the heart. I hope that instilling in children the indispensability of the inner values of love, compassion, justice, and forgiveness will then be as obvious as teaching them school subjects today.

I cannot wait for the day when, thanks to learning the principles of nonviolence and peaceful conflict resolution, children will become more aware of their own emotions and feel more responsible for themselves and the world around them. If it is to be better, I ask that all of us, young and old - not as representatives of this or that nation or religion, but as members of one big human family - work together with vision, courage, and optimism.

Compared to the age of the cosmos, human life is just a fleeting moment. Each of us is a guest on this planet. And only for a short time. It is hard to imagine a greater folly than spending this short time alone, unhappy, in conflict with other guests. Undoubtedly, it is much better to live with meaning, with a sense of connection to the environment, serving others.

We have only a decade of the new century behind us - the rest is still ahead of us. I believe that it will be a century of peace and dialogue, from which a more caring, compassionate, responsible, and compassionate humanity will emerge. And I pray for that.

Jego Świątobliwości XIV Dalajlama