



The ART of
HAPPINESS

A Handbook for Living



HIS HOLINESS
THE DALAI LAMA

and

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Riverhead Books

a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

New York 1998

Chapter 7

THE VALUE AND BENEFITS
OF COMPASSION



DEFINING COMPASSION

As our conversations progressed, I discovered that the development of compassion plays a far greater role in the Dalai Lama's life than simply a means to cultivating a feeling of warmth and affection, a means of improving our relationship with others. It became clear, in fact, that as a practicing Buddhist, the development of compassion was an integral part of his spiritual path.

"Given the importance that Buddhism places on compassion as an essential part of one's spiritual development," I asked, "can you more clearly define what you mean by 'compassion'?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Compassion can be roughly defined in terms of a state of mind that is nonviolent, nonharming, and nonaggressive. It is a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of their suffering and is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility, and respect towards the other."

"In discussing the definition of compassion, the Tibetan word *Tse-wa*, there is also a sense to the word of its being a state of mind that can include a wish for good things for oneself. In developing compassion, perhaps one could begin with the wish that oneself be free of suffering, and then take that natural feeling towards oneself and cultivate it, enhance it, and extend it out to include and embrace others."

"Now, when people speak of compassion, I think that there is often a danger of confusing compassion with attachment. So when we discuss compassion, we must first make a distinction between two types of love or compassion. One kind of compassion is tinged with attachment—the feeling of controlling someone, or loving someone so that person will love you back. This ordinary type of love or compassion is quite partial and biased. And a relationship based on that alone is unstable. That kind of partial relationship, based on perceiving and identifying the person as a friend, may lead to a certain emotional attachment and feeling of closeness. But if there is a slight change in the situation, a disagreement perhaps, or if your friend does something to make you angry, then all of a sudden your mental projection changes, the concept of 'my friend' is no longer there. Then you'll find the emotional attachment evaporating, and instead of that feeling of love and concern, you may have a feeling of hatred. So, that kind of love, based on attachment, can be closely linked with hatred."

"But there is a second type of compassion that is free from such attachment. That is genuine compassion. That kind of compassion isn't so much based on the fact that this person or that person is dear to me. Rather, genuine compassion is based on the rationale that all human beings have an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering, just like myself. And, just like myself, they have the natural right to fulfill this fundamental aspiration. On the basis of the recognition of this equality and commonality, you develop a sense of affinity and closeness with others. With this as a foundation, you can feel compassion regardless of whether you view the other person as a friend or an enemy. It is based on the other's fundamental rights rather than your own mental projection. Upon this basis, then, you will generate love and compassion. That's genuine compassion.

"So, one can see how making the distinction between these two kinds of compassion and cultivating genuine compassion can be quite important in our day-to-day life. For instance, in marriage there is generally a component of emotional attachment. But I think that if there is a component of genuine compassion as well, based on mutual respect as two human beings, the marriage tends to last a long time. In the case of emotional attachment without compassion, the marriage is more unstable and tends to end more quickly."

The idea of developing a different kind of compassion, a more universal compassion, a kind of generic compassion divorced from personal feeling, seemed like a tall order. Turning it over in my mind, as if thinking aloud, I asked, "But love or compassion is a subjective feeling. It seems that the emotional tone or *feeling* of love or compassion would be the same whether

it was 'tinged with attachment' or 'genuine.' So if the person would experience the same emotion or feeling in both types, why is it important to distinguish between the two?"

With a decisive tone, the Dalai Lama answered, "First, I think that there is a different quality between the feeling of genuine love, or compassion, and love based on attachment. It's not the same feeling. The feeling of genuine compassion is much stronger, much wider; it has a very profound quality. Also, genuine love and compassion are much more stable, more reliable. For example, if you see an animal intensely suffering, like a fish writhing with a hook in its mouth, you might spontaneously experience a feeling of not being able to bear its pain. That feeling isn't based on a special connection with that particular animal, a feeling of 'Oh, that animal is my friend.' In that case you're basing your compassion simply on the fact that that being also has feeling, can experience pain, and has a right not to experience such pain. So, that type of compassion, not mixed with desire or attachment, is much more sound, and more durable in the long run."

Moving deeper into the subject of compassion, I continued, "Now in your example of seeing a fish intensely suffering with a hook in its mouth, you bring up a vital point—that it is associated with a feeling of not being able to bear its pain."

"Yes," said the Dalai Lama. "In fact, in one sense one could define compassion as the feeling of unbearableness at the sight of other people's suffering, other sentient beings' suffering. And in order to generate that feeling one must first have an appreciation of the seriousness or intensity of another's suffering. So, I think that the more fully one understands suffering, and the var-

ious kinds of suffering that we are subject to, the deeper will be one's level of compassion."

I raised the question, "Well, I appreciate the fact that greater awareness of other's suffering can enhance our capacity for compassion. In fact, by definition, compassion involves opening oneself to another's suffering. Sharing another's suffering. But there's a more basic question: Why would we want to take on another's suffering when we don't even want our own? I mean, most of us go to great lengths to avoid our own pain and suffering, even to the point of taking drugs and so on. Why would we then deliberately take on someone else's suffering?"

Without hesitation the Dalai Lama responded, "I feel that there is a significant difference between your own suffering and the suffering you might experience in a compassionate state in which you take upon yourself and share other people's suffering—a qualitative difference." He paused, and then as if effortlessly targeting my own feelings at the moment, he continued, "When you think about your own suffering, there is a feeling of being totally overwhelmed. There is a sense of being burdened, of being pressed under something—a feeling of helplessness. There's a dullness, almost as if your faculties have become numb.

"Now, in generating compassion, when you are taking on another's suffering, you may also initially experience a certain degree of discomfort, a sense of uncomfortableness or unbearableness. But in the case of compassion, the feeling is much different; underlying the uncomfortable feeling is a very high level of alertness and determination because you are voluntarily and deliberately accepting another's suffering for a higher purpose. There is a feeling of connectedness and commitment, a willing-

ness to reach out to others, a feeling of freshness rather than dullness. This is similar to the case of an athlete. While undergoing rigorous training, an athlete may suffer a lot—working out, sweating, straining. I think it can be quite a painful and exhausting experience. But the athlete doesn't see it as a painful experience. The athlete would take it as a great accomplishment, an experience associated with a sense of joy. But if the same person were subject to some other physical work that was not part of his athletic training, then the athlete would think, 'Oh, why have I been subjected to this terrible ordeal?' So the mental attitude makes a tremendous difference."

These few words, spoken with such conviction, lifted me from an oppressed feeling to one of a feeling of the possibility of the resolution of suffering, of transcending suffering.

"You mention that the first step in generating that kind of compassion is an appreciation of suffering. But are there any other specific Buddhist techniques used to enhance one's compassion?"

"Yes. For example in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism we find two principal techniques for cultivating compassion. These are known as the 'seven-point cause-and-effect' method and the 'exchange and equality of oneself with others.' The 'exchange-and-equality' method is the technique that you'll find in the eighth chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. But," he said, glancing at his watch and realizing that our time was running out, "I think that we will practice some exercises or meditations on compassion during the public talks later this week."

With this, he smiled warmly and rose to end our session.

THE REAL VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE

Continuing our discussion of compassion in our next conversation, I began, "Now, we've been speaking about the importance of compassion, about your belief that human affection, warmth, friendship, and so on are conditions absolutely necessary for happiness. But I'm just wondering—suppose, let's say, a wealthy businessman came to you and said, 'Your Holiness, you say that warmth and compassion are crucial for one to be happy. But by nature I'm just not a very warm or affectionate person. To be honest I really don't feel particularly compassionate or altruistic. I tend to be a rather rational, practical, and perhaps intellectual person, and I just don't feel those kinds of emotions. Yet, I feel good about my life, I feel happy with my life the way it is. I have a very successful business, friends, and I provide for my wife and children and seem to have a good relationship with them. I just don't feel that anything is missing. Developing compassion, altruism, warmth, and so on sounds nice, but for me, what's the point? It just seems so sentimental . . .'"

"First of all," the Dalai Lama replied, "if a person said that, I would still have doubts whether that person was really happy deep down. I truly believe that compassion provides the basis of human survival, the real value of human life, and without that there is a basic piece missing. A deep sensitivity to other's feelings is an element of love and compassion, and without that, for example, I think there would be problems in the man's ability to relate with his wife. If the person really had that attitude of indif-

ference to other's suffering and feelings, then even if he was a billionaire, had a good education, had no problems with his family or children, and was surrounded with friends, other rich businesspeople, politicians, and leaders of nations, I think that in spite of all these things that the effect of all these positive things would just remain on the surface.

"But if he continued to maintain that he didn't feel compassion, yet he didn't feel anything missing . . . then it might be a little bit difficult to help him understand the importance of compassion . . ."

The Dalai Lama stopped speaking for a moment to reflect. His intermittent pauses, which occurred throughout our conversations, did not seem to create an awkward silence; rather, they were like a gravitational force, gathering greater weight and meaning to his words when the conversation resumed.

Finally, he continued, "Still, even if that was the case, there are several things that I could point out. First, I might suggest that he reflect on his own experience. He can see that if someone treats him with compassion and affection, then it makes him feel happy. So, on the basis of that experience, it would help him realize that other people also feel good when they are shown warmth and compassion. Therefore, recognizing this fact might make him more respectful of other people's emotional sensitivity and make him more inclined to give them compassion and warmth. At the same time he would discover that the more you give others warmth, the more warmth you receive. I don't think that it would take him very long to realize that. And as a result, this becomes the basis of mutual trust and friendship.

"Now suppose this man had all these material facilities, was

successful in life, surrounded by friends, financially secure, and so on. I think it is even possible that his family and children might relate to him and experience a kind of contentment because the man is successful and they have plenty of money and a comfortable life. I think that it is conceivable that up to a certain point, even without feeling human warmth and affection, he may not experience a feeling of lacking something. But if he felt that everything was OK, that there was no real requirement for developing compassion, I would suggest that this view is due to ignorance and shortsightedness. Even if it appeared that others were relating to him quite fully, in reality what is happening is that much of the people's relationship or interaction with him is based on their perception of him as a successful, wealthy resource. They may be influenced by his wealth and power and relate to that rather than to the person himself. So in some sense, although they may not receive human warmth and affection from him, they may be contented, they may not expect more. But what happens is if his fortune declined, then that basis of the relationship would weaken. Then he would begin to see the effect of not having warmth and immediately begin to suffer.

"However, if people have compassion, naturally that's something they can count on; even if they have economic problems and their fortune declines, they still have something to share with fellow human beings. World economies are always so tenuous and we are subject to so many losses in life, but a compassionate attitude is something that we can always carry with us."

A maroon-robed attendant entered the room and silently poured tea, as the Dalai Lama continued, "Of course, in attempting to explain to someone the importance of compas-