



A VOICE OF COMPASSION

Why the Dalai Lama believes happiness, love and compassion go hand in hand.

by Alice Daniel

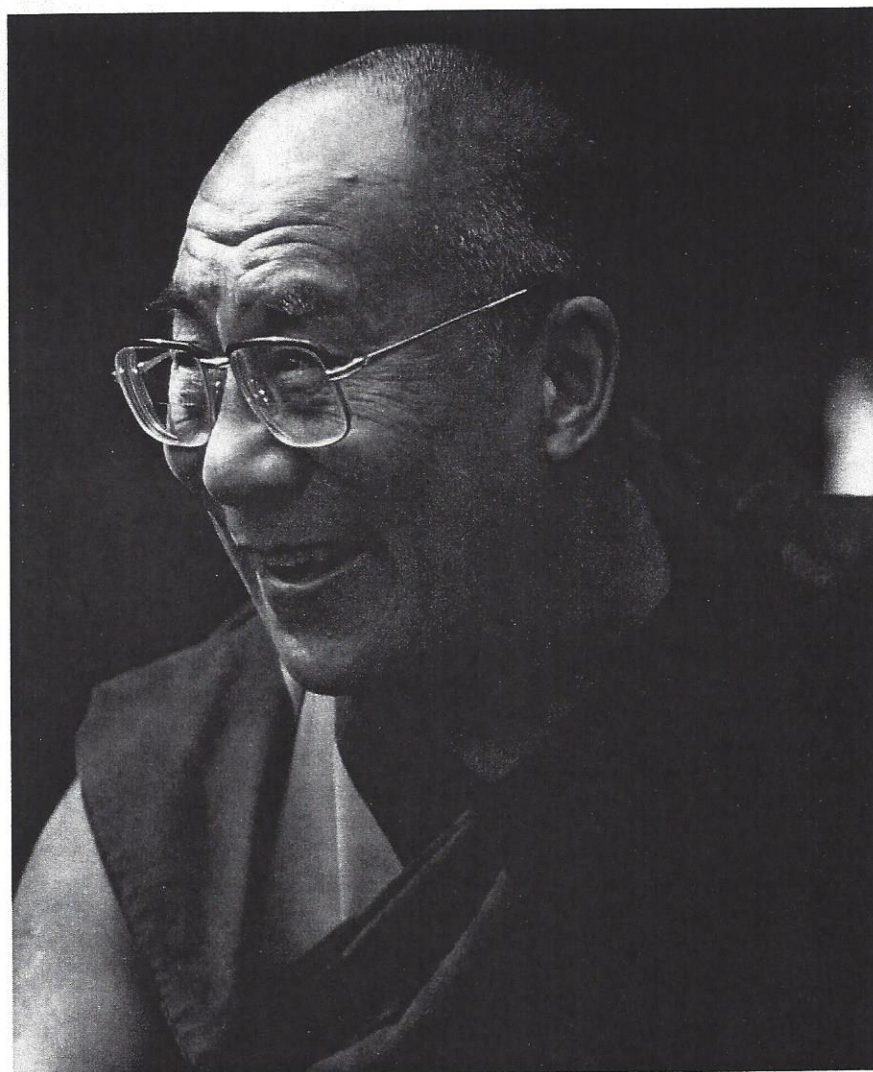
the purpose of life is to be happy, the Dalai Lama says. The key to happiness is compassion.

"If you wish to be happy, demonstrate compassion. If you want others to be happy, demonstrate compassion," the 78-year-old Tibetan spiritual leader tells a packed audience at Santa Clara University in the heart of California's Silicon Valley. On this day in late February, he recounts a story from his early childhood in Tibet. He lived in a farming community and his mother would carry him on her back as she went about her work. But he, too, had places he wanted to go and he would try to manipulate her movements by pulling on one of her ears to turn right, the other to turn left. The memory leaves the recipient of the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize laughing out loud. His mother's love, he says, was the seed from which his own compassion grew.

We are all born with that seed of compassion, he says, but in a world where too many people are self-centered and materialistic, focused on their own immediate gratification, true concern for the wellbeing of others often fails to take root.

GROWING THE SEED

Only recently, he says, he was in a car passing through a neighborhood in Delhi, India. People were hurrying from one place to another, and through the swarm of moving figures, he caught sight of a disabled girl trying to walk, not with crutches, but with two large sticks she had found. He noticed her sunken eyes, two orbs full of hopelessness. No



one was paying any attention to her, just sidestepping her briskly. It made him sad, he says, and it supported his sincere belief that compassion must be taught in society, must be part of the educational curriculum.

"Education, from kindergarten up to the university level, must include the teaching of compassion, the teaching of warmheartedness," he says.

And how do you teach someone to have more regard for others?

Just as one can develop a strong physical constitution, he says, one can also train one's mind and heart to be more aware of others.

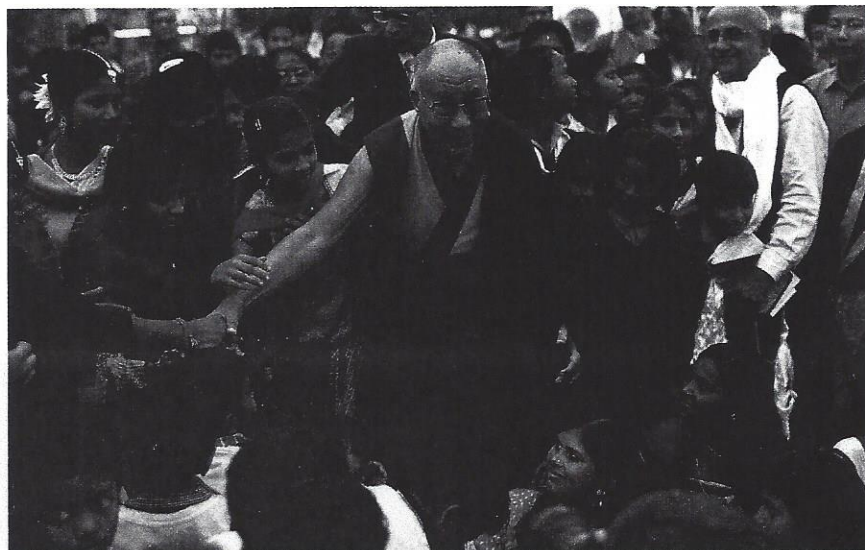
It's a topic he addresses in *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*. He writes, "Initially, the positive emotions derived from cultivating our higher natures may be weak, but we can enhance them through constant familiarity, making our experiences of happiness and inner contentment far more powerful than a life abandoned to purely impulsive emotions."

People typically think of the compassion they feel or act on as something that is good for the recipient, not necessarily something that benefits them. But being compassionate is actually good for the giver, both physically and mentally. "Compassion brings mental peace, mental comfort," the Dalai Lama says. "If you just tend to oneself, you suffer more." A more self-centered attitude leads to more anxiety, more stress, he adds.

In his 2007 book, *How to See Yourself as You Really Are*, the Dalai Lama writes that the compassionate person is the "one who benefits most directly since compassion immediately instills in you a sense of calm inner strength, and a deep confidence and satisfaction....Love and compassion open our own inner life, reducing stress, distrust and loneliness."

POSITIVE ATTRACTION

As long as we live in this world, he says, we are bound to encounter difficulties,



but we can use these as opportunities to grow and improve our minds. How? By realizing our own suffering and pain don't make us different or set us apart from others. Everyone suffers and faces problems; everyone wants happiness and contentment. The understanding that we are all in this together can help us develop empathy for others and a desire to remove their pain. The result, he says, is an increase in our own serenity and inner strength.

That sort of compassion takes a firm commitment, he says. It means being compassionate toward people, even if they behave in ways that are negative or disruptive. Whether people are rich or poor, mean or nice, ultimately, they are all human beings who have a right to overcome

suffering and be happy. Having this universal sense of altruism is not easy, but by recognizing we are all equal in our desires, we can begin to feel responsibility for others and help them actively overcome their problems, he says.

When we engage in ordinary conversations in our daily lives, we have a tendency to steer away from those who speak harshly or without empathy, he says. But if a person speaks with affection and respect, we are drawn to him or her, even if the topic is unimportant.

"We are living beings. Some people say even flowers grow better under positive words," he says with a smile. "That I don't know!"

In *The Art of Happiness*, the Dalai Lama writes that the best use of our limited time here on this planet is to serve other people and if not, to at least refrain from harming them.

"The purpose of our life needs to be positive," he writes. "We weren't born with the purpose of causing trouble, harming others. For our life to be of value, I think we must develop basic good human qualities—warmth, kindness, compassion. Then our life becomes meaningful and more peaceful—happier." 

"The Tibetan word for compassion, 'tse-wa,' refers to an attitude or state of mind that includes not only a wish for the welfare of others, a wish for others to be free of their suffering, but also a wish for good things for oneself."

—From *The Essence of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama and Dr. Howard C. Cutler