

Reflections on Tradition and Modernity

by His Holiness The Dalai Lama

I grew up in a country largely cut off from the realities of the twentieth century. Today, I travel a great deal and am fortunate to be meeting new people continuously. Besides, people from all walks of life also come to see me. And whomever I meet, I am constantly reminded 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 rid of suffering. Our whole life, and how we choose to live it, can be seen as our answer to the great question that confronts us all: “How am I to be happy?”

We are sustained in this great 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.

Everywhere, in countries both rich and poor, by all means imaginable, people are striving to improve their lives. Yet strangely, my impression is that those living in the materially developed countries, for all their industry, are in some ways less satisfied, are less happy, and to some extent suffer more than those living in the least developed countries. Indeed, if we compare the rich with the poor, it often seems that those with less are often less anxious. As for the rich, while a few know

how to use their wealth intelligently—that is to say, not in luxurious living but by sharing it with the needy—many do not. They are so caught up with the idea of acquiring still more that they make no room for anything else in their lives. As a result, they are constantly plagued by mental and emotional suffering—even though outwardly they may appear to be leading entirely successful and comfortable lives. This is suggested by the disturbing prevalence among the populations of the materially developed countries of anxiety, discontent, frustration, uncertainty, and depression.

This paradox whereby inner suffering is so often found amid material wealth is readily apparent throughout much of the modern world. 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. 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 organized so that it demands the least possible direct dependence on others. There has arisen a sense that my future is not dependent on my neighbour but rather on my job or, at most, my employer. This in turn encourages us to suppose that because others are not important for my happiness, their happiness is not important to me. This may sound like a very gloomy assessment. But unless we acknowledge the extent and character of our problems, we will not be able even to begin to deal with them.

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. 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. But the fact is, knowledge alone cannot provide the happiness that springs from inner development. Indeed, though our very detailed and specific knowledge of external phenomena are an immense achievement, the urge to reduce, to narrow down in pursuit of it, 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.

When we rely too much on the external achievements of science, influence of religion declines, and there is mounting confusion with re-

spect to the problem of how best we are to conduct ourselves in life. In the past, religion and ethics were closely intertwined. Now, many people, believing that science has disproved religion, make the further assumption that morality itself must be a matter of individual preference. But we are apt to overlook science's clear limitations. In replacing religion as the final source of knowledge in popular estimation, science begins to look a bit like another religion itself. Should we, therefore, abandon scientific inquiry on the grounds that it has failed us? Certainly not. Nor do I mean to suggest that the goal of prosperity for all is invalid. Because of our nature, bodily and physical experience play 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 many of the advances of modern medicine? 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 Himalayan regions of northern India, it remains the custom for locals not to lock their houses when they go out. It is expected that a visitor who finds the house empty would go in and help himself or herself to a meal while waiting for the family to return. The same was true in Tibet in former times.

However, we must also be careful not to idealize old ways of life. The high level of co-operation we find in undeveloped rural communities may be based more on necessity than on goodwill. People recognize it as an alternative to greater hardship. They may simply not realize 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 therefore to find some means of enjoying the same degree of harmony and tranquillity as those more traditional communities while benefitting fully from the material developments of the world as we find it at the dawn of a new millennium.

To say otherwise is to imply that these communities should not even try to improve their standard of living. To suppose that merely by abandoning material progress we could overcome all our problems would be shortsighted. That would be to ignore their underlying causes. Besides, there is still much in the modern world to be optimistic about.

There are countless people in the most developed countries who are

active in their concern for others. There is a growing appreciation of fundamental human rights all over the world. This represents a very positive development in my view. The way in which the international community generally responds to natural disasters with immediate aid is also a wonderful feature of the modern world. Increasing recognition that we cannot forever continue to mistreat our natural environment without facing serious consequences is likewise a cause for hope. Moreover, I believe that, thanks largely to modern communications, people are probably more accepting of diversity now. And standards of literacy and education throughout the world are in general higher than ever before. Such positive developments I take to be an indication of what we humans are capable of.

Unlike the sufferings of sickness, old age, and death, few of the problems that beset our modern societies are by nature inevitable. Nor are they due to any lack of knowledge. When we think carefully, we see that they are all ethical problems. They each reflect our understanding of what is right and wrong, of what is positive and what is negative, of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. Our problems, both those we experience externally—such as wars, crime, and violence—and those we experience internally—our emotional and psychological sufferings—cannot be solved until we address our underlying neglect of the inner dimension.

That is why the great movements of the last hundred years and more—democracy, liberalism, socialism—have all failed to deliver the universal benefits they were supposed to provide, despite many wonderful ideas. A transformation is called for, certainly. But not a political, an economic, or even a technical revolution. We have had enough experience of these during the past century to know that a purely external approach will not suffice. What I propose is a spiritual transformation.

I believe there are indeed some universal ethical principles that could help everyone to achieve the happiness we all aspire to. That we do not need to turn to any formal religion to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which bring happiness to both self and others. There is thus no reason why the individual should not develop them, even to a high degree, without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system. This is

why I sometimes say that religion is something we can perhaps do without, but what we cannot do without are these basic spiritual qualities.

In the past, families and small communities could exist more or less independently of one another. If they took into account their neighbours' well being, so much the better. Yet they could survive quite well without this kind of perspective. Such is no longer the case. Today's reality is so complex and, on the material level at least, so clearly interconnected that a different outlook is needed. Modern economics is a case in point. A stock market crash on one side of the globe can have a direct effect on the economies of countries on the other. Similarly, our technological achievements are now such that our activities have an unambiguous effect on the natural environment.

And the very size of our population means that we cannot any longer afford to ignore others' interests. Indeed, we find that these are often so intertwined that serving our own interest benefits others, even though this may not be our explicit intention. For example, when two families share a single water source, ensuring that it is not polluted benefits both.

In view of this, I am convinced that it is essential that we cultivate a sense of what I call universal responsibility. What is entailed, is a reorientation of our heart and mind away from self and toward others. To develop a sense of universal responsibility is to develop an attitude of mind whereby, when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests. An important benefit of developing such a sense of universal responsibility is that it helps us become sensitive to all others—not just those closest to us. We come to see the need to care especially for those members of the human family who suffer most. We recognize the need to avoid causing divisiveness among our fellow human beings. And we become aware of the overwhelming importance of contentment.

Therefore, I would like to make a call for a radical reorientation away from our habitual preoccupation with self toward the wider community of beings with whom we are connected, and for conduct which recognizes others' interests alongside our own. If we really want the next millennium to be happier, more peaceful and more harmonious for humankind we will have to make the effort to make it so.