*Dalai Lama*

*Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*

Chapter 7

Ethics in Our Shared World

### Our Global Challenges

 At my residence in Dharamsala, the hill station in northern India which has been my home since the early 1960s, it is my daily habit to rise early, normally at around 3:30 A.M. After some hours of mental exercises and contemplation, I generally listen to the world news on the radio. Most often, I tune in to the BBC World Service. It is a routine I have followed for many years, as a way of staying in touch with events around the world.

As I listen to the constant stream of reports about money and finance, about crises, conflicts, and war, it often strikes me that the complex problems we face in the world-problems of corruption, environment, politics, and so on-almost always indicate a failure of moral ethics and inner values. At every level we see a lack of self-discipline. Many problems are also due to failures of discernment, of shortsightedness or narrow-mindedness.

Of course the causes and conditions of particular problems can be immensely complex. The seeds of ethnic violence, rebellion, and war, for example, almost invariably date back decades or even centuries. But still, if we are really interested in tackling our problems at their roots-whether we are talking about human conflict, poverty, or environmental destruction -we have to recognize that they are ultimately related to issues of ethics. Our shared problems do not fall from the sky, nor are they created by some higher force. For the most part, they are products of human action and human error. If human action can create these problems in the first place, then surely we humans must have the capacity as well as the responsibility to find their solutions. The only way we can put them right is by changing our outlook and our ways, and by taking action.

### Global Responsibility

Occasionally I notice that people are making a convenient distinction between ethics on the personal level and ethics on the wider social level. To me, such attitudes are fundamentally flawed, as they overlook the interdependence of our world.

That individual ethics-or rather their absence-can have an impact on the lives of many is powerfully demonstrated by the global financial crisis that began in 2008, the repercussions of which are still being felt around the world. It revealed the way unbridled greed on the part of a few can adversely affect the lives of millions. So, just as in the wake of the 9/11 attacks we started to take the dangers of religious extremism and intolerance seriously, so too, in the wake of the financial crisis, should we take the dangers of greed and dishonesty seriously. When greed is seen as acceptable, even praiseworthy, there is clearly something wrong with our collective value system.

In this age of globalization, the time has come for us to acknowledge that our lives are deeply interconnected and to recognize that our behavior has a global dimension. When we do so, we will see that our own interests are best served by what is in the best interests of the wider human community. By contrast, if we concentrate exclusively on our inner development and neglect the wider problems of the world, or if, having recognized these, we are apathetic about trying to solve them, then we have overlooked something fundamental. Apathy, in my view, is itself a form of selfishness. For our approach to ethics to be truly meaningful, we must of course care about the world. This is what I mean by the principle of global responsibility, which is a key part of my approach to secular ethics.

### The Challenge of Technological Progress

With the colossal scientific and technological advances-military, medical, and agricultural-of the past two centuries, humans now have unprecedented knowledge of, and power over, the world. Never before have we known so much, or been in such a position of control over so many aspects of our planet. This situation raises a very serious concern: Is it possible that our responsibilities are now growing too fast for our natural capacity for moral discernment to keep pace? Can we trust ourselves with the power that science and technology have brought us? While our brains have not changed appreciably in the past five thousand years, the world around us has changed to an extraordinary degree.

Despite today's global challenges, I remain broadly optimistic. Time and again, we humans have risen to the challenges we have faced. We have successfully navigated many transitions in the course of our evolution from communities of hunter-gatherers to high-tech urban societies. This in itself is powerful testimony to our resilience and resourcefulness as social and moral creatures. In fact, despite all the wars, disasters, and diseases we have encountered, the human race not only survives but thrives. Far from destroying ourselves, we have in fact created an opposite problem - a human population rising at an unprecedented and alarming rate.

Our success as a species has been made possible by our ability, particularly when our vital interests are threatened, to cooperate. And at the very heart of cooperation is the principle of taking into account the interests and welfare of others. I am therefore confident that we humans will once again find ways, through cooperation, to overcome our current ecological and technological challenges. But there can be no room for complacency.

### The Futility of War

The twentieth century was one of intense human conflict on a scale never seen before. It is estimated that more than two hundred million people were killed in wars, revolutions, and genocides. From the Nazi holocaust to the mass murder by despots such as Stalin and Mao (in the later part of his career); from the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge to the attempts at ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and the genocide in Rwanda, the suffering that humanity has inflicted upon itself is truly hard to bear.

Of course, human history has always been interrupted by war. So long as there are humans, I think there will always be some conflict-but the scale of destruction in the past hundred years has been unprecedented.

Even during times of peace, human technologies of destruction have been developed, enhanced, and traded without pause. Today there is no place on the face of the earth unthreatened by these arsenals of destruction. When approaching the problem of violence in the world and thinking about how we can create a safer world for future generations, we must do more than just appeal to politicians and their adversaries to exercise restraint. The threats we live with also stem from the weapons industry itself, from the arms trade, and indeed from the culture of violence-often perpetuated by the media-which encourages the delusion that violence is a viable approach to resolving human conflict. Really what we need is a fundamental shift in human awareness. For in all but the most exceptional circumstances, violence only begets further violence. To suppose that we can achieve peace through violence is therefore altogether misguided.

In the contemporary, deeply interdependent world, war is outdated and illogical. When, in the distant past, the interests of two groups were entirely separate, violence as a last resort may have had some justification. But this is not the case today. All regions and all peoples are connected environmentally, economically, and politically. War, oppression, or civil strife in one area inevitably affects people in other parts of the world. The problem of terrorism is an extreme example. When people are powerfully motivated toward destruction, no policing or security system will ever be adequate to prevent them.

A further factor which makes violence an unrealistic means for resolving conflict is the unpredictability of its outcomes. The recent war in Iraq is a good example. Though the initial intention was to conduct a limited campaign, the result was a protracted and as yet unresolved conflict which has devastated the lives of millions of innocent people.

In the remaining years of the twenty-first century, we must ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. The only way to reduce the level of violence in our world is for more and more people across the globe to consciously adopt a stance of disarmament. Disarmament is compassion in practice. What is required, therefore, is both inner disarmament, at the level of our individual hatred, prejudice, and intolerance and outer disarmament, at the level of nations and states. Rather than pouring salt on the wounds we have inherited from earlier generations, we must start to heal our divisions by committing ourselves to dialogue, cooperation, and understanding. As the population of the globe continues to grow, and as large nations like China, India, and Brazil race ahead with rapid economic expansion, global competition for natural resources-not just fossil fuels but also basic necessities like water, food, and land - will inevitably intensify. So it is vital that our younger generations, the guardians of our future, develop strong awareness of the futility of war. We can learn from the great achievements of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. to recognize that nonviolence is the best long-term approach to redressing injustice. If the twentieth century was a century of violence, let us make the twenty-first a century of dialogue.

### The Environment

For several decades I have emphasized the importance of environmental awareness to our future well-being. It is most encouraging that in recent years such awareness has been increasing, especially among the young, and that politicians are now having to take these issues seriously.

In the past, when industrialization began in Europe and gradually spread to other parts of the globe, the complex interrelationships of the natural world were poorly understood. In the name of progress, animals were hunted to extinction, forests were cut down, and waterways were polluted by factories and industrial plants. But as science has advanced and our understanding of the delicate balance of the natural world has grown, the excuse of ignorance is no longer available.

Today, we must face the reality that our excessively materialistic lifestyles are wasteful and come at a considerable environmental cost. It is only natural for people in the developing world to aspire to the same level of comfort enjoyed by those in the developed world. But with the global population rising rapidly, it is clear that if we do not change the patterns of consumption we consider "advanced," humanity's thirst for natural resources will be unsustainable. Already we are seeing the results: overexploitation and the corresponding degradation of the natural environment are generating environmental crises at local and global levels. It is very important, therefore, that the nations which are pursuing such rapid economic growth do not blindly follow the models of development they see in the more affluent countries. Instead, countries such as China, India, and Brazil should take the lead in finding new, more sustainable avenues of development. In this regard I consider the economic model of microfinance, which can be flexible and sensitive to local and environmental issues, to be very forward-thinking.

The challenges posed by the environment require cooperation at a global level. Climate change is a clear example. In Tibet, which some environmentalists call the "Third Pole" because its glaciers are so important in the weather systems of Asia, deglaciation is already being observed, and the temperature on the Tibetan plateau is reportedly increasing at a considerably faster rate than that in adjacent lowland areas. Many of Asia's most important rivers-the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, the Mekong, the Salween, the Brahmaputra, and the Indus, for example-rise in Tibet. As the glaciers recede, all the areas downstream will become more vulnerable to drought. This will come in addition to the effects of deforestation, which is already taking its toll in greater levels of flooding. In the long run, deglaciation in Tibet could contribute to drastic climate change and severe water shortages and desertification in China, India, Pakistan, and Southeast Asia. This would be catastrophic for the whole world.

It is no longer realistic for states to think only of their narrow national self-interest. Developed nations, which enjoy so many benefits, must act in cooperation with developing nations, which naturally want to share those benefits. Genuine cooperation cannot, however, be imposed by force; it can only emerge from mutual trust and respect among the parties involved, and trust comes only with transparency. The failure of the 2009 Copenhagen Summit on the global environment was, sadly, an example of how, when parties fail to look beyond their own narrow self-interest, cooperation becomes impossible.

### The Problem of Greed Versus the Joys of Philanthropy

In today's materialistic world there is a trend of people becoming slaves to money, as though they are parts of a huge moneymaking machine. This does nothing for human dignity, freedom, and genuine well-being. Wealth should serve humanity, and not vice versa. The massive disparities of wealth now apparent in the world, disparities that are more extreme than ever before and are still growing, are very distressing. The stark economic inequalities of today's world, not just between the global north and the global south, but between rich and poor within individual nations, are not only morally wrong but sources of many practical problems, including war, sectarian violence, and the social tensions created by large-scale economic migration. On the issue of economic inequality, I consider myself at least half Marxist. When it comes to creating wealth and thereby improving people's material conditions, capitalism is without doubt very effective, but capitalism is clearly inadequate as any kind of social ideal, since it is only motivated by profit, without any ethical principle guiding it. Unbridled capitalism can involve terrible exploitation of the weak. Thus we need to adopt an approach to economic justice which respects the dynamism of capitalism while combining it with a concern for the less fortunate. Once again, I think micro finance offers a sustainable and responsive line of approach to issues of poverty alleviation and development, an approach which could avoid the excesses of capitalism on the one hand and the inefficiency of excessive state control on the other.

Some time ago, a very wealthy Indian couple from Mumbai came to see me. They asked for my blessings. I told them, as I tell so many others, that the only real blessings will come from themselves. To find blessings in their lives, I suggested, they should use their wealth to benefit the poor. After all, Mumbai has many slums where even basic necessities such as clean water are hard to come by. So, I told them, having made your money as capitalists, you should spend it as socialists!

In this connection I should mention that I am deeply impressed by philanthropists such as Bill and Melinda Gates and increasing numbers of others who share their resources with the global community on a massive scale. This is wonderful, and I appeal to others who have achieved a high degree of material success to become part of this noble trend.

### New Challenges from Science

Recent years have seen rapid advances in fields such as genetics and biotechnology. In the fields of therapeutic and reproductive cloning, we are now gaining unprecedented power over the creation and manipulation of life itself. And the sequencing of the human genome, I am told, is also bringing about a revolution in medical science, shifting it from a biochemical to a genetically based model of therapy. Increasingly, scientists are able to do genetic forecasting, by which they can predict the likely course of a person's health. These advances raise many difficult choices, not only for doctors and parents, but also for employers and institutions. Some respond to the challenges presented by these new technologies with blanket condemnations-saying, for example, that all genetic modification is wrong-but I do not think these issues are so easy to dismiss. It is important that we meet our new areas of responsibility with sound motivation and critical discernment. I have discussed some of the issues related to new developments in biogenetics in an earlier book, The Universe in a Single Atom.

All the major challenges we face in the world call for an approach based on ethical awareness and inner values. Safeguarding the future is not just a matter of laws and government regulations; it also requires individual initiative. We need to change our way of thinking and to close the gap between perception and reality. For this reason, and in order to meet these challenges, education is crucial.

### Educating Future Generations

When modern education began, religion was still an influential force in society, so the inculcation of virtues such as restraint, modesty, and service was part of family upbringing and participation in a religious community, and could therefore largely be taken for granted in an educational context. The main priority of modern universal education was therefore seen as imparting literary and technical knowledge. Today, however, the assumption that children will automatically be educated in ethics no longer seems realistic. Religion no longer has the influence it once had in society, and strong family values - which in the past were often grounded in religious faith and nurtured within strong community identities-have also been eroded, often by materialistic values and economic pressures. As a result, the inculcation of inner values in the young is no longer something we can take for granted. If we cannot assume that people learn spiritual and ethical values at home or through religious institutions, then it seems clear that the responsibility of schools in this area -spiritual and moral education - has greatly increased.

However, in an age of globalization and diverse societies, how we can meet this responsibility is no simple matter. If children in a given school, for example, come from diverse religious or cultural backgrounds, on what basis should the school conduct ethical education? To use a single religious perspective would be inadequate. In some parts of the world, religion is even excluded from the school curriculum. So how can schools give their pupils an ethical education which is unbiased and inclusive?

Whenever I speak at schools and universities about the need for greater attention to ethics and inner values, I get a very positive response. This suggests that educators and students too share my concern. What is required is a way of promoting inner values which is genuinely universal-which can embrace, without prejudice, both agnostic humanist perspectives and religious perspectives of various kinds.

In Canada in the autumn of 2009, I took part in an interesting dialogue on this subject and met many trainee teachers from all over the province of Quebec. Until quite recently Quebec had a rather traditional and predominantly Roman Catholic society. In recent decades, though, like many other parts of the world, it has become increasingly secular and, with immigration, has also become multicultural and multireligious. To reflect these changes, the provincial authorities are seeking new ways of teaching ethics in schools, ways that are less reliant on traditional religious approaches.

On specific questions-how to develop a syllabus, how to teach different age groups - I had little to offer, as these are matters for specialists in education, developmental psychology, and related fields. But on the general approach, I shared my view that in a secular approach to ethics it is crucial that the basic principles' be genuinely universal.

I also shared my view that many people can benefit from formal exercises in attentiveness and the cultivation of inner values. It is with this in mind that I have elaborated some of these in the second part of this book.

On questions of pedagogy, my only suggestion was-and is-to remember that when teaching ethical awareness and inner values, providing information is never enough, and teaching by example is of paramount importance. If teachers talk about the value of kindness, elaborating its benefits, while failing to illustrate what they are saying through personal example, then students are unlikely to find their words compelling. If, on the other hand, teachers embody kindness in their own behavior by showing genuine concern for their students, they will make their point more effectively.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that teachers should be too soft! On the contrary, the best teachers are often quite strict. But for strictness to be effective, it must be grounded in concern for the welfare of the students. Saying this reminds me of my late senior tutor, who was very dear to me. In outward appearance, Ling Rinpoche was quite stern. When I was studying as a young monk in Tibet, he kept two whips next to him during classes. One was an ordinary brown leather whip, reserved for use on my elder brother, and the other was a special yellow whip, reserved for me. In fact, the yellow whip was never used, but had it been, I'm sure it would have been no less painful than the one used one or twice on my unfortunate brother! Joking aside, teachers have tremendous influence on the development of children, not just in academic matters, but also as people. Different students have different needs, and teachers must be sensitive to this. Firm discipline may be good for some while a gentle approach is more suitable for others. In my own case, to this day I feel deep gratitude toward my tutors. Despite Ling Rinpoche's stern exterior, in time I came to appreciate the profundity of his kindness. In traditional Tibetan monastic education, there are many qualities admired in teachers, such as patience, enthusiasm, the ability to inspire, being energetic, and being good at presenting lessons clearly. But above all, three qualities are regarded as the marks of a great teacher: academic excellence (khel, moral integrity (tsiin), and kindness (sang).

I am aware that teachers in modern societies often face tremendous challenges. Classes can be very large, the subjects taught can be very complex, and discipline can be difficult to maintain. Given the importance, and the difficulty, of teachers' jobs, I was surprised when I heard that in some western societies today teaching is regarded as a rather low-status profession. That is surely very muddled. Teachers must be applauded for choosing this career. They should congratulate themselves, particularly on days when they are exhausted and downhearted. They are engaged in work that will influence not just students' immediate level of knowledge but their entire lives, and thereby they have the potential to contribute to the future of humanity itself.

### The Need for Perseverance

In the face of all the challenges of today's interconnected world, is my optimism about the future of humanity idealistic? Perhaps it is. Is it unrealistic? Certainly not. To remain indifferent to the challenges we face is indefensible. If the goal is noble, whether or not it is realized within our lifetimes is largely irrelevant. What we must do, therefore, is to strive and persevere and never give up.