

# TIBET'S VOICE OF REALISM

The Practical Teachings of a Spiritual Man

*By Pico Iyer*

China needs Japan, Japan needs China,” the 14th Dalai Lama declared, with immovable conviction, as I listened to him in a sunlit conference room in Yokohama last November, a great Ferris wheel turning outside and a jungle of high-rising grey skyscrapers presiding over the blue bay. “Every nation on this planet needs others. So a small disagreement or division of interests should not affect basic relations. Of course Chinese people must love their nation, their culture: that is good! But it’s too extreme. It’s almost as if they’re suggesting that, across the planet, Chinese culture is the best. When we were in Tibet, we had some of that same kind of view: ‘Tibet is the best!’ That’s wrong! Too much emotion involved. Too short-sighted.

“In the past, I was sometimes telling people Buddhism was best. But after meeting with different people, from other traditions, now I feel you cannot say one religion is best. It’s like with medicine. In order to administer medicine, you have to look at the individual illness. For each body, according to its circumstances and natural conditions, a different system of medicine may be best.”

The absolute insistence on reason—which is unwavering as the laws of gravity and lasting and objective, as emotions are not—and the readiness to stress his own mistakes and those of his culture, while acknowledging the strengths of its longtime oppressor, the People’s Republic of China, reminded me that I was in the company of an unusual presence who thinks in unexpected ways, and all but remakes the political domain by rewriting its assumptions. For years now, the world has, understandably, concentrated on the Tibetan leader’s belly laughs, his warm charisma, his humanity,

and all are compelling indeed, and inspiring; even when I ride with him in an elevator in a shopping-mall in Yokohama, he clutches the elbow of the beaming elevator operator, to give something personal to their brief interaction. Yet all the emphasis

▷ The Dalai Lama consoling tsunami orphans, Ishinomaki, Japan, Nov. 5, 2011. *Mariko Ishizuka/Jiji Press/PANA*



on his undeniably kind and tolerant heart often obscures what is to me his most singular quality, especially in the context of history and geopolitics: the clarity of his mind, and his unswerving emphasis on realism.

For each of the past seven Novembers, I've spent several days traveling across my adopted home of Japan with the Dalai Lama as the lone journalist in his small entourage. We've ended up at roadside convenience-stores where the disarming monk in red robes stands at the door with a can of "hot milk tea" and greets every surprised truck-driver with a smile and an outstretched hand. We've gone from fishing villages laid waste in the wake of the 2011 tsunami, where he consoled the recently orphaned, to lunches in central Tokyo filled with figures from the world of fashion; from the tropical graveyards of Okinawa to ninth century temples not far from the Peace Park in Hiroshima.

Almost as soon as the Tibetan leader came into exile in India in 1959, my father, a professional philosopher, sailed back from Oxford to meet him, and so I've been visiting the Tibetan leader in his home in Dharamsala since 1974, when I was in my teens. Now, as he goes through his working day in Japan, at once sharing Buddhist teachings with what remains the world's most powerful Buddhist nation, and speaking for those in Tibet who can't speak much for themselves, I sit in on almost every one of his private audiences—with politicians, with regular Tibetans, with friends of the Emperor and with long-haired Japanese heavy-metal musicians, who have somehow decided that they want to make Buddhism their message. The more I've watched him, the more I've come to see that his sovereign qualities are often the ones you don't see on CNN or in newspapers, which concentrate on his contagious smile: a razor-sharp memory, a deeply practical commitment to something deeper than gestures or words, and a much more rigorous and tough-minded approach to the world than many might expect. As he said at a peace conference in Hiroshima, in 2010, "I don't believe peace will come through prayer. Peace must come through our actions."

## **Beyond Religion**

The story of how a small boy born to a farmer's family in a cowshed was discovered to be the fourteenth Dalai Lama at the age of two, enthroned in Lhasa at the age of four and then given full political leadership over his people as the troops of Mao Zedong flooded into Tibet when he was fifteen, is so colorful and exotic that it's easy to overlook its hard-core heart: the fact that, from the time he was in kindergarten, the Dalai Lama was put through a grueling, eighteen-year doctoral course specializing in logic and dialectics. And even more than most monks who emerge from that training, he likes to stress that the Buddha—his "boss," as he calls him—was a scientist, a physician (of the mind), and a regular human being who relied only on empirical data.

"The Buddha himself told us we should not accept his word on faith, or through devotion," I heard the Tibetan say in November. "We should investigate even his own words and come to an independent conclusion." Like a Harvard philosopher, the Dalai Lama takes words apart and demands absolute precision: for a teaching in Yokohama on an eight-verse poem, he spent an hour on two words at its beginning, "May I," to see what the "I" really is. And over and over, ever more as the years go on, he stresses "secular ethics based on scientific findings." If his most evident passion is the lab research he's been following and encouraging at M.I.T., Stanford, Emory University, the University of Wisconsin, and many other major universities, it's because it offers a verifiable, universal measure of how much meditation, say, can lead to happiness, health, and peace of mind. The most recent book by one of the world's most visible religious figures is called *Beyond Religion*, and argues that religion is a useful luxury in life, like tea, but what all of us most need is an everyday sense of kindness and responsibility, which lies outside the domain of religion, but remains as indispensable as water.

In the realm of politics, this means that the Dalai Lama is always taking seemingly counter-intuitive positions, based not on ideology but logic, and refuses to toe the line of his more woolly-minded admirers or even the most well-intentioned idealists. When he lived in Lhasa, he's been telling me (and the world) for more than thirty years, he and his culture were too isolated; exile has, if nothing else, forced him and his people to shed certain illusions and "be more realistic." People from other traditions should not become Buddhists, he said again in Tokyo last November; they may have much to learn from Buddhism—from everyone—as Buddhists and everyone can learn from them, but it's "much better, much safer" to keep to their own traditions. As he delivered a talk on an eleventh century Tibetan Buddhist text (and urged those followers in the audience to be "twenty-first century Buddhists"), he said, "Now is the time for scientists to take the lead. Not people like me in robes."

The essential feature of the Dalai Lama's life, I often think, is the one fact that so many of us, won over by his charm and unpretentious humility, overlook: he was a full-fledged political leader, in one of the most difficult situations in the world, for 60 years until he effectively deposed himself, and passed all formal political leadership of his people to a democratically elected leadership, in 2011. Opposed and derided by the largest nation on earth, outnumbered by 200 to 1, and unable to visit his homeland or most of his people for more than half a century, he's never been in a position to entertain romantic or wishy-washy or abstract "spiritual" answers. Pragmatism, what works in the here-and-now, is all that matters for him, as for the Buddha.

When I saw him in November, many were eager to ask him, inevitably, about the tragic rash of self-immolations that had left more than 50 Tibetans dead in recent months; even as he spoke, four more were taking their own lives, some of them as

young as fifteen. True to his emphasis on realism, and his commitment to his monastic vows, the Dalai Lama could not endorse suicide even as he pointed out that people would act so desperately only if there was a serious problem in their lives. “Whether the Chinese government admits it or not,” he said, “there is a problem in Tibet. That is good for neither Tibet nor the Chinese government.” Force would only aggravate the problem and, he pointed out, since the self-immolators had not gone the way of suicide bombers or tried to take Chinese lives, they were clearly devoted to non-violence, yet ready to do anything to convey their hopelessness to the world.

In Okinawa, when locals came up to him and asked how he could help them get rid of U.S. bases on their soil, confident they’d find a supporter in a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, he (subtly and sympathetically) pointed out that without the bases, Okinawans might face even more violence. In the world we live in, systems of defense and even weapons can be instruments of peace more than of war. The important thing was to take a wider perspective—see the larger, global picture—and not look for short-term solutions. When the results of the American election came through while we were in Tokyo, he declined to say anything himself, but asked an American nearby what he thought, and said, “That is the most informed response. For an American election, we should ask an American elector.”

Again and again the leader of the Tibetans stresses that Tibetans are and should be grateful that the People’s Republic has brought them so much in the way of much-needed material and modern resources; but China, he says, may have something to learn from Tibet when it comes to more inner resources. China and Tibet will always be neighbors, dependent on one another, so whatever helps Tibet will help China, and whatever hurts China will hurt Tibet; to try to see them as opposed to one another makes about as much sense as telling your right hand to punch your left arm, or vice versa.

It reminded me of when Beijing was building a high-speed train to Lhasa a few years ago. Nearly every Han Chinese person I heard saw this as proof of the magnanimity of the People’s Republic as it “liberated” Tibet and brought the remote and impoverished area closer to the modern world; while nearly every Tibetan I knew saw this as part of the “destruction” of Tibet, a way of flooding it with Han Chinese. The Dalai Lama was the only one I met who said that, now the train was being built, it couldn’t be unbuilt; the only important thing to consider was not the vehicle, but the motivations behind it. If compassionate, it could indeed be a great blessing for Tibetans; and if exploitative, it would be unforgivable. But it made no sense to concentrate on just the external vessel.

As I travel with him, this commitment to realism and universal human logic, outside all ideologies and religions, often takes me aback. One day, as we were riding



a train towards Nagoya, I mentioned to him a book I'd just read about in which Mao Zedong had written, "I am the universe... small is big, the yang is the yin, up is down, dirty is clean." His word, in other words, was everything, and logic be damned! Instantly, the Dalai Lama grabbed my arm, and told me not to criticize the man, only his actions, even though Mao was the man who had worked so strenuously to obliterate Tibet. Actions, after all, are to be held against a universal standard of truth, and are behind us; actors—the people who commit actions—deserve our compassion as fellow human beings, and can always be turned towards more enlightened action.

In the political domain, where most leaders are thinking about the next election and are determined not to antagonize their core constituency, it's bracing to see someone bring such non-partisan openness and impartial analysis into the White House, the back-rooms of Beijing, and the European Parliament. Even in his teens, in 1954, the Dalai Lama decided to go to China, over the protests of his fearful people, in order to see the land first-hand, to meet in person Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and to observe objectively what was being achieved by the revolution; the many months he spent traveling across the People's Republic then have made him a much more precise and informed commentator on the subject than he would have been otherwise. And as he stressed again in November, "In terms of social or economic thinking, I am a Marxist. Lenin was too interested in power; but Marx, with his emphasis on equality and the rights of the people, was offering something wonderful." Sometimes, with his characteristic mischief, he even suggests that he is more of a socialist than the men in charge of Communist China.

### **A Doctor of the Mind**

This unbudging pragmatism is the reason the Dalai Lama has not much heeded the suggestions of well-wishers and agitators within the Tibetan community for purely physical ways to resolve the impasse between Tibet and China. Is a proud nation with a history of resisting suggestions from abroad really going to be turned around by a peace march or a petition, or even a handful of Tibetans knocking out a power station or a road? Such acts may win the world's headlines for a few days and then lose the world's good will forever. And they're likely only to harden Chinese oppression. The Dalai Lama always says that the resolution to this issue, and to many others, may not come in his lifetime, but will come in time, because circumstances always change: centuries ago, Tibet all but controlled China, and at other points in history, China has almost destroyed Tibet. All we can do is work hard so as to be ready for when an opportunity arises.

He says this, of course, as the only Dalai Lama in history to have traveled to Belfast and Jerusalem, to have been at the Berlin Wall at the time it was coming down and

to have followed the news with an acuity and attention that puts me and many of my fellow journalists to shame (seventeen years ago he told me he was “addicted” to the BBC World Service broadcast he listens to every morning at 5:30 a.m. during his first four hours of meditation; and it’s true that his talks are always spiced with references to the day’s news and the most current and topical issues). He’s seen his comrade and fellow cleric Desmond Tutu help bring an end to apartheid and build a free (though still troubled, of course) South Africa; he’s seen another close friend, Vaclav Havel, be unanimously voted to the presidency of Czechoslovakia eight weeks after he left prison.

The heart of the Buddhist vision is two-fold: it suggests that everything is impermanent—and so we should always be ready to adapt, to work with, even to embrace change—and that everything is interdependent (a view that the global economy, the planetary environmental situation, and the so-called “butterfly effect” all bear out every day now: what happens in Beijing is felt in Washington within hours, and vice versa). I’m not a Buddhist myself, but in an accelerating and fast-globalizing order, these ideas grow ever harder to challenge; you don’t have to be a Tibetan wise man to see that what happens in the political hallways of Beijing will be felt in New York and Washington minutes later.

One byproduct of this thinking is, of course, that, far more than just China and Tibet, the Dalai Lama is trying to offer concrete suggestions that may be helpful across our divided world—in places like the Middle East (or his adopted home for fifty-four years, India), where violent religious differences go back centuries. For forty years now, he’s watched Japan, parts of Europe, even India develop more and more materially and then wonder why money and opportunity haven’t brought them happiness. It wasn’t surprising to me, the last time I flew to Tibet, to find that many of the passengers on the plane from Chengdu (90 percent of them Han Chinese) were traveling to the remote area not just as sightseers, but as pilgrims, eager to visit Tibetan temples, to seek out Tibetan lamas, to bow before the holy places. If Americans and French people and Australians have turned to Tibetan Buddhism for the sustenance they feel they can’t get at home, it’s hardly strange that Chinese people, denied any spiritual life for sixty years, are gratefully recalling that they have a rich and ancient tradition within their current borders.

Insofar as the Dalai Lama can be seen as a “doctor of the mind”—the Buddha, after all, stressed, like any physician, simply finding the source of our suffering and then coming up with a cure—the image explains many of the features of his thought. A doctor isn’t infallibly right, and he can never protect his patients forever; at some point, he’ll always lose them. He cannot judge his patient on the basis of her nationality or religion or position in the world; the diagnosis should be the same regardless of externals. His is not the only possible response to any situation; another doctor would

come up with a different prognosis. And ultimately, a doctor is dealing simply with universal, unvarying scientific laws; he is only as good as his ability to dispassionately assess conditions and then suggest a practical response.

The day after I heard the Dalai Lama address China's recent differences with Japan in Yokohama last November, I watched him devote two full days of discussions to scientists in Tokyo. Aware of the monastic nature of their visitor, many of the Japanese scientists, often from Tokyo University and the nation's leading institutes of higher learning, spoke about spiritual healing and ritual trances, about *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the worship of plants. Characteristically, the Dalai Lama seemed a bit put out by this, refusing to hold that plants have minds, and stressing that when some people come to see him because they think the Dalai Lama has "some kind of miraculous power, that's nonsense!" When people ascribe healing powers to him, he said, he asked them why, if that were the case, he could not heal the itch in his own neck, and the problems he's been having with his knee.

"Generally, I don't believe in healing powers and those kinds of things," he said, "though of course in special cases it may be possible." He also made clear that we shouldn't get caught up in talk and thought of spirits or oracles or the like; Buddhism is about analytical philosophy and working hard to transform the mind. When a scientist spoke about happiness during trances, the Dalai Lama responded that happiness based on "sensory consciousness" was as impermanent as everything; the only true happiness consisted in that peace of mind that is not dependent on circumstance.

At the end of the discussion, a Shinto priest—the vice-chief patriarch of a prominent shrine in Okayama who happened to be sitting next to me—leaned over, and, with a hearty laugh the Dalai Lama might have appreciated, pronounced, "The most scientific person on this panel of scientists is the one in monk's robes. The only one who isn't speaking about religion is the religious leader!" True enough. It only takes logic—and far-sightedness and empiricism—to see that Beijing has much to gain from loosening up on Tibet and everything to lose, world-wide, from pushing it down; and that whoever succeeds the Dalai Lama is likely to have less first-hand knowledge of China, less experience, and probably less forgiveness and sympathy in his heart than the Tibetan leader we've long known. "Once things are open and more information is available in the People's Republic," the Dalai Lama said in Yokohama, "these complicated matters can be solved more easily. In the meantime, frankly speaking, even if I make some comment, it's no use. Nobody listens."

Not "nobody," I thought, but perhaps what we were really listening to was something that had to do with something much larger than China or Tibet: the way each person and each nation might try to deal with opposition and suffering.