

## **New Millennium Ethics**

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*The following essay is essentially a review of my favorite Christmas present, a book given to me by my sister-in-law, entitled Ethics for the New Millennium by His Holiness The Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of the Tibetan people.*

The turn of a millennium is a good time to take stock of the human condition. How are we doing as a species? In what direction are we heading? What are the chief problems of our time and how can we solve them? As counselors, we have a special interest in answering these questions because we belong to a profession that is dedicated to the enhancement of human development.

How we size up the situation may be a matter of perspective. Environmentalists see our biggest problems as global warming and the degradation of natural resources. Medical experts think in terms of the problems of disability, disease, and resistant bacteria. Social Economists may see the biggest problem as the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Since we are human behavior specialists, it no surprise that we tend to view the big problems of our time as related to the way in which humans behave.

Despite the incredible technological advances of the post-modern age, there is scant evidence to suggest that humans have progressed very much socially or emotionally. Wars, crime, violence, epidemics of depression and drug and alcohol addiction are all reminders that the maturing of human nature is a painfully slow process. And, specific problems like school violence suggest that, as a society, we may be failing to help our children become fully human. While much of our time and energy is being devoted to economic and technological progress, I fear that the breakdown in

human relationships, most notably in our families and communities, is exacting a tremendous price.

Fortunately, every era has its prophets, visionaries and teachers that provide answers to some of life's most complicated problems and give us a sense of hope for the future. His Holiness The Dalai Lama is such a person. In his *Ethics for the New Millennium*, he provides an elegantly simple yet profound prescription for reorienting ourselves towards the things that really matter.

## **THE GOAL**

To the Dalai Lama, the goal of all behavior is to achieve happiness and avoid human suffering. Like Aristotle, he believes that true happiness cannot be achieved through the external accoutrements of modern technology, but rather through practicing the ethics of virtue. This comes from developing a sense of inner peace through cultivating the very best of human qualities and eliminating our negative thoughts and emotions. The virtuous person is said to possess *so pa*, a Tibetan word that denotes a core of inner strength and spiritual toughness: "...*so pa* is what provides us with the strength to resist suffering and protects us from losing compassion even for those who would harm us" (p. 102). *So pa* is developed through the practice of both ethical and spiritual discipline.

The Dalai Lama defines **ethical practice** as behaving in such a way to at least not interfere with another person's "experience or expectation of happiness" (p. 28) and at best to practice love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness, i.e., those qualities "which bring happiness to both self and others" (p. 22). It becomes obvious to the reader that the Dalai Lama has a systemic view of the world in which all things are

interconnected. This makes ethical practice a little more complicated. Since all people and things exist only in relation to each other, it is really not possible to behave without affecting others in some way. The Dalai Lama believes that everything we do has a universal dimension, and thus, to be truly ethical we need to develop a universal consciousness in which we identify with the entire human family. The farther reaches of human maturity will not be found in science and technology, but in the evolution in human awareness of the essential unity and interconnectedness of all life.

## **THE WAY**

*Kum long* is the Tibetan word that describes a person's state of heart and mind. According to the Dalai Lama it is *kum long* that serves as the motivation for all human behavior: "When the driving force of our actions is wholesome our actions will tend to contribute to others' well being. They will automatically be ethical" (p. 32). *Kum long* requires that we work for an attitude of "inner peace" that emphasizes our compassion and concern for others. The way to do this is by enhancing those conditions that contribute to inner peace and by eliminating the barriers to achieving inner peace.

It will not be a surprise to professional counselors to learn that empathy is at the core of the Dalai Lama's code for practicing right behavior. He defines empathy as "the inability to bear the sight of another's suffering"(64). To the Dalai Lama, the capacity for human empathy is what makes us uniquely human and humane. He believes that just as humans have a natural capacity toward health and growth, they also born with an innate capacity for empathy. However, just as our naturally healthy body is sometimes prone to disease, so is it also possible for our capacity for empathy to be overwhelmed by negativity, cruelty, and hatred: "... just as we have the capacity to act selflessly out

of concern for others' well being, so do we all have the potential to be murderers and torturers" (64). He points out that the loss of human feeling, the failure to connect emotionally with other human beings, has always been at the heart of the worst of humankind's acts of inhumanity. He described in horrific detail his visit to a Nazi death camp at Auschwitz in which he was "dumfounded at the sheer calculation and detachment from feeling to which they [the crematorium] bore horrifying testimony" (63)."

As I read the Dalai Lama's thoughts on empathy, it occurred to me, that, beyond all of our other problems, it is the loss of human feeling that may pose the greatest threat to human survival in the new millennium. And, I wondered if the new problems that we are witnessing among our children, e.g., the incivility, the school violence, are not somehow related to a numbing of human empathy. Garbarino (1999), who recently examined the antecedents of school violence, cited the breakdown of human relationships, and parental abandonment in particular, as the primary reason that so many children are ending up emotionally retarded, "with damaged souls, unable to connect with love to the world around them" (p.38). Is it this diminished capacity to feel for others that puts some adolescents at increased risk for doing harm to others? What role are the media and our educational institutions playing in enhancing or diminishing empathy in our children?

The Dalai Lama believes by cultivating our ability to empathize with our fellow human beings, we can achieve the supreme human emotion, which in Tibetan, he refers to as *nying je*. *Nying je* translates into human love and compassion, not just the inability to tolerate another's pain, but a positive feeling of warm-heartedness and endearment

toward others. Ultimately, the key to ethical behavior is in developing those factors and conditions that enhance *nying je* and restraining impulses that are destructive to it. This, of course, requires a disciplined approach such as we might use when exercising or learning to play music.

## **THE PRACTICE**

Only a few days after I finished reading *Ethics in the New Millennium*, I received a chain e-mail message that summarized the proceedings of a group meeting that several people recently had with the Dalai Lama. I do not know where the e-mail originated from but, since its intent was to share the group experience, I am including it herewith in its entirety. The group focused on what they believed the five most important questions to be considered as we move into the new millennium. The five questions were:

1. How do we address the widening gap between the rich and poor?
2. How do we protect the earth?
3. How do we educate our children?
4. How do we help Tibet and other oppressed countries and peoples of the world?
5. How do we bring spirituality (deep caring for one another) through all disciplines of life?

The Dalai Lama said that all five questions really fell under the last one. If we have true compassion (*nying je*) in our hearts, our children will be educated wisely, we will care for the earth, and those who “have not” will be cared for.

The group asked the Dalai Lama, “Do you think loving on the planet is increasing or staying the same?” He responded, “my experience leads me to believe that love IS increasing.” He shared a simple practice that will increase loving and

compassion in the world. He asked everyone in the group to share it with as many people as they can.

1. Spend 5 minutes at the beginning of each day remembering we all want the same things (to be happy and be loved) and we are all connected to one another.
2. Spend 5 minutes –breathing in –cherishing yourself; and, breathing out – cherishing others. If you think about people you have difficulty cherishing, extend your cherishing to them anyway
3. During the day extend that attitude to everyone you meet. Practice cherishing the “simplest” person as well as the “important” people in your life; cherish the people you love and the people you dislike.
4. Continue this practice no matter what happens or what anyone does to you.

## **SUMMARY**

To the Dalai Lama, when we develop a mind-state of inner peace, see the essential unity and interconnectedness of all life, and cultivate our natural human capacity for empathy and, ultimately for compassion, “peace and joy become our constant companion” and “so far as ethics is concerned, where love of one’s neighbor, affection, kindness, and compassion live, we find that ethical conduct is automatic” (p. 131).

## References

- Garbarino, James (1999). *Lost boys: why our sons turn violent and how we can save them*. New York: Free Press
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1999). *Ethics for the new millennium*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc.

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