

# NONVIOLENCE AS ETHICAL SPIRITUALITY: THE CASE OF THE DALAI LAMA

Lloyd Steffen  
Lehigh University, USA

## Abstract

The Dalai Lama is a political and spiritual leader who, like Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. before him, has voiced strong opposition to violence and oppression while also calling for resistance to injustice. Unlike Gandhi and King, the Dalai Lama has not been on site with his people to protest oppression. In a unique move necessitated by exile from Tibet, he has taken to the world stage to expose the suffering of the Tibetan people while advocating justice, for preservation of Tibetan culture, and for a peaceful solution to the Tibet-China conflict. This paper analyzes the Dalai Lama's understanding of violence as grounded in afflictive emotions that create suffering both in the spiritual as well as in the political realm. The Dalai Lama's analysis of "anger-hatred" as a destructive afflictive emotion requiring spiritual attention underwrites his moral argument for nonviolent resistance. This paper argues that the Dalai Lama not merely examines violence as a problem of spiritual affliction but that he addresses peace and nonviolence as *an ethic*. Rather than seeking public validation in terms of religious particulars, the Dalai Lama presents an ethic that can be universalized, that is benevolent and other-regarding, and that employs the language of normative action guides and rational principles.

No figure on the world stage is more widely recognized today as a proponent of nonviolence than the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. An exiled leader who has become a true global citizen, the Dalai Lama stands before the world a "simple monk," as he calls himself, who has achieved high honor, world-wide notoriety and even celebrity status in the West. In his scores of books and countless lectures and teachings around the world, he has over the last half century brought attention to Tibet, to Buddhism as a philosophy and religion, and to the continuing conflict between Tibet and the People's Republic of China. In the wake of the Chinese invasion and subsequent occupation that

forced his exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama has campaigned throughout the world to advance the welfare of the Tibetan people and preserve Tibetan culture, including religious culture, and in that campaign he has maintained an unwavering commitment to nonviolence. The Dalai Lama's stature as a worthy successor to Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. was confirmed by many when in 1989 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to resolve Tibet's conflict with China peacefully and through nonviolence.

The Dalai Lama is a religious and spiritual leader who has brought the central insights of Buddhism to an appreciative worldwide audience. Many of his books wind up on the *New York Times* bestseller list, but the readers who seek his wisdom in his popular and accessible writings are not necessarily interested in delving more deeply in the mysterious and exotic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which he has also written about with scholarly authority. Tibetan Buddhism is an ancient and complex tradition that would be quite obscure as a sect of Buddhism were it not for the Dalai Lama's writings and teachings. That tradition encompasses Four Schools (including the Yellow Hat or Gelug School to which the Dalai Lama himself belongs), six grades of Tibetan monks, eight types of consciousness, four complete abandonments, seven branches of the path to enlightenment, three kāyas of the base, Six Elements of Meditation, three categories of phenomena, a Bodhisattva vow comprised of eighteen major and forty-six minor precepts, the monk's one hundred and fifty precepts—and this is just to scratch the surface. The Dalai Lama is a bona fide expert in the tradition and his ability to unravel philosophical obscurities and explicate difficult texts is appreciated and admired by scholars of Tibetan Buddhism around the world.

But this expertise is not the reason for his appeal. His appeal rests in part from the story of his elevation and his exile, and from his personal charm, enthusiasm and irrepressible good

humor as a charismatic individual. And of course his message is powerful. In his popular writing and teachings, the Dalai Lama addresses the central spiritual issues of life, proposing a pathway to human happiness based on attunement to the suffering of others, acceptance of impermanence and countering self-defeating emotions with equanimity of mind. He has mastered public communication through various media relying on catchy, popular formats, even offering an occasional “how to” book.<sup>1</sup> In all of his writings he emphasizes the serious Buddhist ideas of detachment and selflessness, advocates forgiveness and love in human relationships, and calls for personal responsibility. He also commends to his readers the Buddhist practices of mindfulness, meditation and nonviolence as the way to happiness both in the psychological and spiritual world of the inner life as well as well as in the moral world of self-other relationships.

The Dalai Lama has translated core values and insights from his Buddhist tradition and then presented them as rational responses to the problems of contemporary life, never asking people to become Buddhist in order to accept the wisdom they offer. His public teachings acknowledge the importance of spiritual wisdom as it comes to humanity through all kinds of cultural lenses, and while he will acknowledge that what he teaches is itself grounded in Buddhism, he appeals to universal aspirations for human happiness and fulfillment. In this effort, so far removed from proselytizing or promoting for public consumption a particular religious viewpoint, the Dalai Lama has extracted spiritual truths from his tradition in order to present the wisdom of that tradition in the universal language of morals and ethics.

In his public teachings and writings, the Dalai Lama addresses ethics through spirituality and spirituality in conjunction with ethics. The need to acquire inner peace is never separated from the need to eliminate the anger that leads to violent emotions. He exhorts people to better their conduct while urging nonviolent and meditative practices that lead to greater awareness of

the suffering of others. He addresses human rights, goods of life like friendship and respect for life, and virtues like humility and patience, which he assures his audiences can be cultivated in the interests of peace. His aim may be spiritual, but his focus is on moral development, for “. . . when we engage in the practice of morality, we lay the foundation for mental and spiritual development” (HHDL, 1995: 20).

The Dalai Lama frames his advocacy of peace and nonviolence not in the exclusively religious terms of Buddhist belief or doctrine, but through a moral point of view, appealing to the idea that peace and human well-being are universal aspirations of all people of good will. Any ethic that expresses the moral point of view will include such an appeal to rationality and universality; and in addition, any ethic will attend to impartiality and justice, regard for the well-being of others, and hold a general attitude of benevolence toward others (Runzo, 2001: 23). These characteristics of a global ethic are all highly visible in the Dalai Lama’s teachings and writings, allowing us to say that Dalai Lama is a moral philosopher as well as a religious teacher. He is, in fact, an ethicist who reflects on the meaning of action, values, choices, attitudes, motives and intentions, and he will ask: “Why do people do what they do?” “What should they do if they are to advance goodness for themselves and others?” “How should they account for others in the decisions they make?” and “What are the virtues, practices, and commitments required if one is to realize happiness?” These are the ethicist’s questions, and they are the Dalai Lama’s.

The Dalai Lama will note a difference between the ethical and the spiritual:

An ethical act is one where we refrain from causing harm to others’ experience or expectation of happiness. Spiritual acts we can describe in terms of those *qualities* [emphasis added]. . . of love, compassion, patience, forgiveness, humility, tolerance and so on which presume some level of concern for others’ well-being(HHDL, 1999: 61).

Even in drawing this distinction, the Dalai Lama cannot separate spiritual acts from concern for others, the traditional locale of ethics attention. For all he may be as a religious practitioner, as an expert interpreter of his tradition and a successful communicator of a spirituality grounded in Buddhism, he is also an ethicist. His role as an ethicist is never separated from concern for spiritual development; his role as a spiritual director is never isolated from the ethicist's focus on the meaning of action and attention to such matters as responsible conduct, concern for others and the aim of human flourishing.

As we move to consider a specific question related to the Dalai Lama's teachings, this essential interconnectedness between ethics and spirituality must be kept to the fore, for it is critical to any attempt to analyze the Dalai Lama's contributions as a thinker on the world stage.

The immediate issue before us is violence; and the context for his reflections on violence has been in many ways political, given his criticisms of the Chinese occupation of his Tibetan homeland. Yet even in this context of personal political involvement and his push for a nonviolent resolution to that conflict, the Dalai Lama has brought together the spiritual and ethical dimensions of nonviolence to address the political conflict so much a part of his experience. For his public statements about the need for nonviolent resolution of the Tibetan conflict, which the Dalai Lama believes constituted an unjust act of aggression, are integrally tied to his public teachings that violence and aggression are but symptomatic of inner disquiet and spiritual perturbation. The ethical and the spiritual may be distinguishable, but, as the Dalai Lama presents them, they are also inseparable. We shall now move to consider that interconnectedness between the ethical and the spiritual on the question of violence and nonviolence, looking at the inseparability of the two first from the spiritual side, then from the ethical.

## **Violence and the Inner Life: The Spirituality of Peace**

Although unfashionable in the world of postmodernism, where foundations are denied, ethics are relativized—guttled of universal applicability, and qualities suggestive of essentials or a “nature” are practically ridiculed—the Dalai Lama asserts rather unabashedly a theory of human nature and casts it in terms of a disposition to nonviolence: “. . . fundamental human nature is gentleness. Not only human beings but all sentient beings have gentleness as their fundamental nature” he writes (HHDL, 1997: 4). Elsewhere he observes that “. . . basic human nature is not only non-violent but actually disposed toward love and compassion, kindness, gentleness, affection, creation and so on . . . .” (HHDL, 1999: 71). This passage from *Ethics for the New Millennium* then leads into a discussion of the need we all have to live with sensitivity to one another’s needs and suffering, for we share a basic human nature and “. . . we are all ultimately brothers and sisters, [and] there is no substantial difference between us” (HHDL, 1999: 71).

This foundation of a common human nature expressive of gentleness and disposed to nonviolence is crucial for grasping the way the Dalai Lama relates ethical reality to spiritual matters. So, for instance, he will locate the source of spiritual affliction, as well as positive spiritual possibilities, in various “qualities” framed in the language of non-discursive awareness and understanding, particularly in the language of emotion. These qualities of spirit are integral to the Dalai Lama’s understanding of violence, which he conceives as the destructive emotion and mental negativity through which people inflict harm on another. Although Buddhism seeks to cultivate compassion and detachment from desire, and corresponding actions such as patience, tolerance and forgiveness, the negative emotions and mental states of anger, hatred, and

resentment—“afflictive emotions” the Dalai Lama calls them—are always possible (HHDL, 1997: 23). If publicly observable actions in the sphere of self-other relations are subject to moral critique, the springs of those actions, for good or ill, are subject to spiritual critique. These states of mind and heart locate the underlying causes for action. They affect the motives, aims and purposes that dispose persons to act in particular ways consistent with the emotion, so that angry persons or persons acting out of hatred will not only lose calmness of mind but create through the hatred barriers to “peaceful” relationship with others. The spiritual affects the moral and actually shapes it, giving action its meaning and through the law of karma affecting subsequent actions. Anger, hatred and the desire for vengeance constitute “pollutants of the mind” that express inner affliction and suffering that individuals then recreate in the moral world of their relations with others.

The Dalai Lama invites readers to consider Buddhism as distinctive—even “unique”—in its focus on “the possibility of the total cessation of negative impulses” (HHDL, 2000: 28). The Buddhist focus on impermanence opens up the possibility that negative thoughts and emotion can be overcome, although “the broader and more fundamental question is whether it is possible to eliminate these pollutants of mind completely” (HHDL, 2000: 27). Buddhism, of course, says that this is possible, for the basic mind is “neutral” in the sense that it can be influenced by positive or negative thoughts and emotions, and this understanding then makes possible the hope that the negativities can be eliminated. To eliminate the inner violence of harm-causing negativities of thought and emotion requires spiritual practices that can deliver the mind and heart to the unpolluted state of true mental and emotional clarity—enlightenment. The person who has eliminated inner violence and achieved the Dharma or way of life of inner peace will

then be present to others in the world as one able to act consistently with the achievement of calm and equanimity.

The Dalai Lama argues that if the pollutants of mind can be eliminated and inner peace attained, the individual practitioner will be attuned to the true disposition of human being, which is then free from the suffering these pollutants cause both the self and others. To be free of the negativities of thought and emotion that can result in harmful actions toward others is to remove the obstructions to the natural human disposition to gentleness and nonviolence. Nonviolence is critical to progress in the spiritual life, for the achievement of inner peace through non-harm-inducing, nonviolent spiritual practice (e.g., meditation and cultivation of virtues) is a necessary precondition for attaining peace in human affairs. The Dalai Lama indicates that the Buddhist pathway toward peace or Dharma can be translated into broad ethical terms and, as I read it, this pathway is no less effective or valid when constructed as a universally accessible moral program. “Love and compassion,” he writes in his autobiography, “can be developed by anyone, with or without religion” and he even explains the value of religion in universal moral terms: “. . .all religions pursue the same goals: those of cultivating goodness and bringing happiness to all human beings”( HHDL, 1990: 270). This ethical understanding would seem to subsume religion under it, but the Dalai Lama will also note “I have found my own Buddhist religion helpful in generating love and compassion” (HHDL, 1990: 270), and he will emphasize the specific and unique Buddhist contributions to the achievement of peace and nonviolence:

In the context of ethics [we can] speak about refraining from killing, from lying and so forth, and about engaging in virtuous activities. However, this is Dharma only in a very general sense of the word, since ethical guidelines are not particularly unique to Buddhist teaching. The understanding of spiritual practice that is unique to Buddhism lies in this possibility of the total cessation of negative impulses. This is called nirvana—total relief from, and cession of, the afflictions of mind. . . . all aspects of the Dharma

practice have to be understood in the light of this ultimate spiritual aim of gaining freedom from the pollutants of mind (HHDL, 2000: 27, 28).

Ethical living does not aim at the spiritual goal of totally eliminating all negative impulses--nirvana is a specifically religious idea. But the idea that human persons must learn to manage and dissipate interior violence as expressed through negative thoughts and destructive emotions is essential to any moral vision that seeks to promote a way of ethical living where persons do not inflict harm on one another, where they observe precepts concerning the goodness of life and commit themselves to acting in ways that do not harm the self or cause injury to others. The moral vision held up by the Dalai Lama conforms in this regard to any ethical vision that seeks to promote and encourage human flourishing. He calls for a spirituality that encourages people to become reflective about who they are and what they value. This call for spiritual development has moral consequences as persons acquire the habits and virtues that finally express the positive “qualities” previously mentioned: “love, compassion, patience, forgiveness, humility, tolerance and so on which presume some level of concern for others’ well-being.”

### **The Example of Anger**

The Dalai Lama frames nonviolence in a Buddhist understanding that is, as he has said, “unique,” and which could not be said on that basis to constitute a universal ethic to which all rational persons of will could be expected to consent. Yet the Dalai Lama also advances nonviolence as an ethic, so that nonviolence is understood to be directed toward the good of human flourishing; and as an ethic it is cast as any ethic would be—as universally applicable, as beneficent, as other-regarding and as a normative action guiding actual conduct. As much he

takes pains to explain how Buddhism contributes and informs the ethic of nonviolence, in the end it is the ethic itself that the Dalai Lama commends to his wide audience: the ethic—not any particular religious view of the ethic. Nonviolence is finally a committed and transforming way of being in relation with oneself and others, and the challenge of nonviolence is not necessarily to grasp how different philosophies and religions could endorse nonviolence (and not all do), but to grasp that nonviolence is a rationally accessible mode of operation required for human happiness and well-being. Nonviolence is an ethic, a normative principle for action that is universally commendable.

But how do we get to it? The fact that persons do not, in fact, universally endorse nonviolence ought to be no barrier to its status as a rational principle worthy of such endorsement. People do not always do what is best for them, and people can resist nonviolence the same way they resist truth-telling. The Dalai Lama would undoubtedly say that people can resist the rational pull of nonviolence and violate the norm of conduct it upholds and endorses. The violence in the world provides ample empirical evidence to establish that fact. But the Dalai Lama also would attribute such resistance to the nonviolence that is our natural inclination and disposition to the unrest and afflictions people experience in their spiritual lives. The human heart is troubled and the mind unsettled, and without spiritual discipline and understanding, the Dalai Lama would say, the ethic of nonviolence cannot rise to the level of universal acceptance.

The Dalai Lama has written much about anger and hatred, and it is worth considering his insights on this topic since his understanding of anger-hatred is critical to understanding how inner violence gives rise to violence in the moral sphere of self-other relations.

First of all, the Dalai Lama understands that because anger can sometimes be a good thing, any discussion of anger as an afflictive emotion must focus on hatred, which is “totally

negative”: “there are many afflictive emotions such as conceit, arrogance, jealousy, desire, lust, close-mindedness and so on, but of all these, hatred or anger is singled out as the greatest evil.”(HHDL, 1997: 7). Anger is an obstacle to developing a “good heart” and it “destroy[s] one’s virtue and calmness of mind.” (HHDL, 1997, 7). If the “purpose of our existence is to seek happiness and fulfillment,” then the “state of one’s mind is critical” and “the state of mind is crucial in determining whether or not we gain joy and happiness” (HHDL, 1997: 8) Peace of mind is required if people are going to attain happiness and fulfillment, and peace of mind is “rooted in affection and compassion” so that

“If we examine how anger or hateful thoughts arise in us, we will find that , generally speaking , they arise when we feel hurt. . . there is a sense that [anger] comes as a protector, comes as a friend that would help our battle or in taking revenge against the person who has inflicted harm on us. So the anger or hateful thought that arises appears to come as a shield or protector. But in reality that is an illusion. It is a very desultory state of mind.” (HHDL, 1997: 9)

Anger-hatred distorts reality, causing the object of anger to be “more awful than is actually there” (HHDL, 2005: 16). “Anger is fomented by the misconception that the object [of anger] and yourself are established this way as enemy and victim in and of themselves. Hatred is not part of the mind’s foundations (HHDL, 2005: 16). As the nature of water is not destroyed by pollutants, anger does not destroy the essential character of mind as disposed to gentleness and nonviolence. Anger, however, creates out of the object of anger an “enemy” in relation to which one sees oneself as “victim. The practices of spiritual discipline, however, can dissolve the anger and cause the enemy to disappear and restore the mind to its true nature, which is peace-loving and gentle. The Dalai Lama demonstrates the method of inward reflection and assessment that allows the anger to dissipate:

In that flash of rage we feel that both the subject, “I”, and the object, the enemy, are solid and independent. Because we accept

these appearances as inherently established, anger is generated. However, if at that first flash of rage you make use of reason to ask yourself, Who am I? Who is this one who is being hurt? What is the enemy? Is the enemy my body? Is the enemy the mind? This solidly existing enemy, who previously seemed to be inherently created as something to get angry at, and this “I,” who was inherently created to be hurt, seems to disappear. And the anger breaks apart. (HHDL, 2005: 16)

Anger and hatred are emotions. They are afflictive and cause suffering. They are destructive. They are violent, causing harm to self and motivating persons to inflict harm on others. Yet they are also subject to control and can be overcome with nonviolence, which in the above passage emerges from a practice of rational inquiry into the nature of anger.

The Dalai Lama presents a philosophically sophisticated understanding of emotions in his discussions of anger-hatred, and he joins with many contemporary philosophers who have analyzed emotions not as episodic feeling states but as cognitive states which may or may not, or to lesser or greater degree, be accompanied by certain feelings. Emotions, however, entail a cognitive core and are associated with the cognitive activities of perception and evaluation. They are involved in basic knowing and awareness, even if they are experienced non-linguistically or non-discursively. Yet emotions have objects and those objects are perceived and then subject to emotional interpretation and assessment, and they motivate decisions and actions. As cognitive capacities, they are subject to influence and control through thought and interpretation. On this understanding of emotion as cognitively centered perceptions and evaluation, the Dalai Lama could be interpreted as saying that detaching from the immediate and unreasoning energy of an emotion like anger-hatred is necessary so that it can be reflected upon and analyzed. This detachment and assessment allows anger’s construct of the self as victim and the object of anger as enemy to be called into question. The potential destructiveness of the opposition between self as “victim” and other as “enemy” generated by the emotion can be, upon

reflection, diffused; and the illusion of a substantial self standing independently of, and unrelated to, the other can be discerned. Meditation and spiritual reflection are essential to coming to grips with the dynamics of this emotion. Detaching from anger-hatred allows one to subject the dynamics of the emotion to critical reflection, which in turn allows one to redirect and finally dissipate negative emotional energy through rational reinterpretation:

Use your common sense. Is anger useful? If you get angry at someone, the result is good neither for you nor for the other person. Nothing helpful comes of it. In the end, anger does not harm others; it hurts yourself. When you are angry, food is not tasty. When you are angry, even the faces of your spouse, children, or friends are irritating, not because their faces have changed but because something is wrong with your own attitude. . . . Once lit anger feeds off the air of exposure and can rage out of control. The only alternative is to control anger, and the way to do this is to think, What is the value of anger? What is the value of tolerance and compassion? . . . Actions stemming solely from anger are of no use to us; realizing this can serve to strengthen your determination to resist them (HHDL, 2005, 147, 148).

The inner world can be churned into a violent state through negative emotions like anger hatred. Negative and destructive emotions create inner violence due to the way such emotions fester and harm oneself and those to whom one is in relation. But anger-hatred can be subdued and overcome, and for that reflection—thinking—is required. In the above paragraph the Dalai Lama is subjecting anger-hatred to a reflective process that can surely be also seen as a detached and critical analysis of the anger-hatred dynamics, which is precisely what people gripped by anger seem to find themselves unable to do. The Dalai Lama holds, however, that failure to move toward such a detached critical state with respect to negative emotions is a failure of thought and will, for we are all capable of addressing anger by reflecting on its lack of utility by considering rationally and in a detached way what is wrong with our own attitude. Anger is a

projecting emotion and the Dalai Lama reels it in as if to say, “Think about how you are projecting the negativity of this emotion on others.” Above all, think.

The moral and spiritual task of addressing and then overcoming anger-hatred, as the Dalai Lama advocates, requires the cultivation of certain counter-capacities that function to detach one from the energy of the negative emotional states. Those afflictive and negative emotions cloud the luminosity of the mind that is always capable of seeing things as they really are and avoiding the traps of illusion. The mind must be tamed, the Dalai Lama warns, for an immediate consequence of hatred is an “ugly physical transformation” in which anger makes

the best part of our brain, the ability to judge right from wrong and assess long-term and short-term consequences, become totally inoperable. It can no longer function. It is almost as if the person had become crazy. These are the negative effects of generating anger and hatred. . . . and it is necessary to distance ourselves from such emotional explosions” (HHDL 1997: 10-11).

With the loss of “the sense of right and wrong,” the constraints of rational morality are loosened and without such constraints violence ensues. Violence, on this account, is rooted in anger; anger feeds the victim-enemy relation; and anger creates destructive effects that must be overcome so that the basic aim of existence—happiness and fulfillment—might be realized. The Dalai Lama directs attention to the inner life to address the problem of anger in human existence, and he claims insight into a process of defusing anger and hatred by means of a detachment that allows reason to counteract the press of the emotional response. That counteraction is ethical activity because it eventually appeals to the need to develop moral virtues like patience and tolerance to adjust the attitude of the hate-filled mind and diminish the negative effects in the moral world of self-other relations. The Dalai Lama frames anger’s negative effects in a language of ethical spirituality and practice: “The only factor that can give refuge or protection

from the destructive effects of anger and hatred is the practice of tolerance and patience” (HHDL, 1997: 11).

Anger, according to the Dalai Lama, is inner violence reflecting a mind in a state of unrest and an ego feeling assaulted and victimized by some “enemy” other. Anger-hatred creates fractures in moral relations with others, and the solution to it, the Dalai Lama asserts, can be interpreted as a moral solution: cultivate the moral virtues of tolerance and patience so that one will be disposed out of one’s very character to respond to anger—one’s own as well as that of others—with compassion. Tolerance and patience are, in this moral construction of anger-hatred, effective responses to the violence of anger, and they present a counter-force to anger sufficient to dissipate anger through nonviolent means—through compassion-related virtues.

### **Violence between Persons: The Ethic of Peace**

The Dalai Lama understands violence to be connected to the spiritual life. Inner unrest is tied to turmoil in the world. Mental pollutants and afflictive thoughts and emotions affect how people enter into relation with one another. This connection between violence and spirituality allows us to inquire into the Dalai Lama’s understanding of violence as an ethical matter in the sphere of self-other relations, which is also the political world. As the spiritual and exiled political leader of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama has faced the question of what to do—how to act—in the face of foreign invasion, occupation, and perceived injustice. How has the concern to address inner violence nonviolently been reduplicated in the world of political engagement? What is the Dalai Lama’s response to injustice and engagement with those who present themselves as enemies and who then visit harm on their adversaries? This inquiry turns now to the question, What has been the Dalai Lama’s general approach to the question of justice and

response to injustice? Is the call for nonviolence so strong that it will not resist injustice with any kind of force, even the force of nonviolence?<sup>2</sup> And then, with reference to the Dalai Lama's role as a political figure advocating justice for the Tibetan people, we can also ask about the role political context plays on the idea of using force to address injustice. How does the reality of a concrete political context where conflict has arisen affect or alter the moral commitment to non-violence? We can get at all of these questions by inquiring into the issue of justice and injustice.

Justice invokes an idea of fairness and impartiality regarding how one treats others and is in turn treated by others, and the Dalai Lama endorses such a notion of basic human equality and the good of fair, nondiscriminatory, unbiased treatment based on that idea of human equality. He writes that “. . .when you have developed an affinity for all sentient beings and desire that they should all have happiness, such desire is valid because it is unbiased”(HHDL, 2005: 102).

Furthermore,

[R]emember that in the practice of altruism there is no possible reason for an exception, treating one person better while neglecting others. In this world alone there are several billion, who, like yourself, do not want suffering and do want happiness. . . .There is no reason to treat some better and others worse. . . .Once we recognize our community in deprivation, there is no sense in being belligerent with each other” (HHDL, 2005: 114).

The Dalai Lama lays out in reflections like these, a foundation for a particular view of human rights. The appeal is not to a Kantian notion of the intrinsic value of persons but a Buddhist notion that all persons are equal in that whatever one's life situation or circumstance—all are connected in a common condition of suffering and all share a common desire for happiness and fulfillment. Human beings share natural aspirations and “based on this natural aspiration you have the right to obtain happiness and to get rid of suffering” (HHDL, 2005: 115). Recognition of human equality and the common condition should prevent any from exploiting or

doing injustice to another, and clearly in the sphere of self-other relations people should not assert themselves and claim privilege at someone else's expense—"I am not unique; I have no special privilege. You are not unique; you have no special privilege" (HHDL: 2001: 113). The appeal here to a notion of radical equality among all people forms the basis for affirming universal human rights.

But in the world of human relationships, injustice exists. People do assert themselves over against others and seek power to impose their will on others, doing so unjustly at someone else's expense. What is the right thing for a person facing such injustice to do? Does one fight against injustice, resist injustice, or let injustice be? In the following passage the Dalai Lama's provides counsel about what is really at stake in any act of injustice—and how injustice itself is to be understood:

If one has been treated very unfairly and if the situation is left unaddressed, it may have extremely negative consequences for the perpetrator of the crime. Such a situation calls for a strong counteraction. Under such circumstances, it is possible that one can, out of compassion for the perpetrator of the crime and without generating anger or hatred, actually take a strong stand and take strong countermeasures. In fact one of the precepts of the Bodhisattva vows is to take strong countermeasures when the situation calls for it. (HHDL, 1997: 10)

The call here is not to ignore injustice or to offer violent resistance but first of all—to think. The call is to think about why the injustice is occurring and to take "strong countermeasures" to oppose the injustice. The Dalai Lama is certainly aware of the many terrible injustices in the world, asking at one point:

What are we to say about those individuals whose lives seem given over wholly to violence and aggression? During the past century alone there are several obvious examples to consider. What of Hitler and his plan to exterminate the entire Jewish race? What of Stalin and his pogroms? What of Chairman Mao, the man I once knew and admired, and the barbarous insanity of the Cultural

Revolution? What of Pol Pot, architect of the Killing Fields?  
(HHDL, 1999, p. 71)

In his autobiography he again reflects on his own experience with injustice, offering in a best-selling book read the world over his own effort at strong countermeasures, namely, truth telling about injustice:

The truth remains that, since the Chinese invasion, over a million Tibetans have died as a result of Peking's policies. When adopting its resolution on Tibet in 1965, the United Nations stated plainly that China's occupation of my homeland has been characterized by 'acts of murder, rape and arbitrary imprisonment; torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of Tibetans on a large scale' (HHDL, 1990: 267).

The Dalai Lama knows about injustice and advocates resistance to it. Yet in advocating thoughtful reflection, he responds to the violence of Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot by saying “. . . I must admit I can think of no single explanation to account for the monstrous acts of these people” (HHDL, 1999, 71). And of the Chinese invasion of Tibet his first response as recorded in his autobiography is the same:

I remain at a loss to explain how this happened, how the noble ideals of so many good men and women became transformed into senseless barbarity. Nor can I understand what motivated those people within the Chinese leadership who actively counseled the total destruction of the Tibetan race (HHDL, 1990: 267-68).

The reason I think the Dalai Lama expresses mystification in the face of these horrors is that the Dalai Lama approaches such issues in a political context where universal ethical principles tied to decency and respect for humanity—as opposed to the particularities of religious doctrines—should rule the day. In the Dalai Lama's own understanding of ethics, the ethical act is a non-injuring act. Yet if ethics is tied to rationality and to universal norms of conduct that serve the end of human happiness and human flourishing, the destruction of peoples and their cultures—the genocidal destructions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—present themselves as outside the reach

of ethics and even rationality itself. Ethics will of course condemn such unjust, destructive and murderous actions and do so without controversy. Yet the rational person will not claim to understand why these things happened. A rational moral person not only is, but should be, mystified by such murderous and unjust activities. And responding with anger-hatred and violence simply compounds the injustice and thus increases the mystification: “There is a certain irrationality in responding to injustice or harm with hostility,” the Dalai Lama writes (HHDL 2001, 11).

In the face of such injustice as is represented by these various human rights violations and political tragedies, the Dalai Lama makes three responses.

First, he acknowledges the injustice and sees it as a duty connected to the Bodhisattva vow to resist the injustice through strong countermeasures. Since the Dalai Lama did not lead protests with the Tibetan people in the streets of Lhasa, it appears that he did not act as his hero, Gandhi, did when Gandhi led the march to the sea to protest the British Salt Tax. Nor did he adopt the tactics of nonviolent resistance Martin Luther King, Jr. used to lead a bus boycott in Montgomery. The Dalai Lama did not stay on site. Having good reason to believe his life was in immediate danger, he chose to flee Tibet, and by doing so he devised a new form of protest and began to conduct resistance in exile from his new home in India. From that position, he has campaigned against the Chinese invasion and occupation and brought to the attention of the world the injustice his people have suffered under Chinese rule. His circumstances were different from Gandhi’s and King’s—in some ways his enemies were, arguably of course, even more ruthless. But in examining his form of off-site nonviolent resistance to injustice, the question can be put: “What has been the effect of his efforts?”

The Dalai Lama's campaign for justice has brought shame on China in the eyes of many in the world community. That same world community has expressed support for the Tibetan people and the Tibetan culture in many ways: in United Nations resolutions; in a burgeoning of scholarly attention to Tibetan Buddhism chronicled by such scholars as Donald Lopez, who relates the story of the development of America's Tibetan Buddhist doctoral programs (Lopez, 1998: 156-80); and in the warm reception the Dalai Lama has received throughout the world as he has spoken up for the Tibetan people and continued to extend peace offers and compromise proposals to the Chinese. In all of these responses, the injustice of the invasion and occupation has been brought to the fore and kept there for decades in the countless appearances and public statements the Dalai Lama has made. The Dalai Lama appealed to the world community—and to the Chinese—for justice, even referencing “just war” thinking in its ethical requirement that a use of force to counter injustice must itself establish warrants for resistance, including a requirement or criterion of “just cause.” In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech the Dalai Lama said “Our cause is just” and again in his autobiography offered the comment that “our cause is 100 per cent just and in accordance with the wishes of the entire population of Tibet” (HHDL, 1990: 225-26).

In assessing how effective his nonviolent actions have been as resistance to injustice, we note that the Dalai Lama has gone to the world community to protest his homeland's political situation. Given the Chinese response to the Dalai Lama and the continued Chinese suppression of his image in Tibet and any communications from him to Tibetans, one could fairly conclude that his efforts to be heard and to make the unjust suffering of the Tibetan people known to the world have been successful—that is to say the Dalai Lama has taken actions that the Chinese have experienced as “strong countermeasures.”

Secondly, the Dalai Lama has found the reality of injustice an occasion for reflecting on the spiritual dimension of political conflict. He refers in his autobiography to the Chinese as Tibet's enemy, but he never relents from his view that

. . . people are neutral. They are neither friend nor enemy, Buddhist nor Christian, Chinese nor Tibetan. Our true enemy is actually within us. It is our selfishness, our attachment and our anger that harm us. . . . [W]hen powerful emotions like extreme anger, hatred, or desire arise, they create disturbance the moment they occur within our minds. They immediately undermine our mental peace and create an opening for unhappiness and suffering to undo the work of our spiritual practice (HHDL, 2001: 112).

Despite being a political leader and engaged in a political contest over national sovereignty with the People's Republic of China, the Dalai Lama's attention to the justice question at the center of the conflict never strays from the disciplined view that there is a spiritual as well as a political contest at stake, and the spiritual contest is vitally important. In fact, so important is what one decides to do in response to such a conflict that the Dalai Lama urges a reflection that reenvisions the enemy through the lens of gratitude, for the enemy creates the opportunity for spiritual growth.

The enemy has a conscious will to harm you. But this [is not] a valid reason not to respect the enemy. In fact, if anything, it is additional grounds to revere and be grateful to your enemy. Indeed it is this special factor that makes your enemy unique. If the mere inflicting physical pain were sufficient to make someone an enemy, you would have to consider your doctor an enemy. . . . [I]n order to practice sincerely and to develop patience you need someone who willfully hurts you. Thus these people give us real opportunities to practice these things. They are testing our inner strength in a way that even a guru cannot. Even the Buddha possesses no such potential. Therefore, the enemy is *the only one* who gives us this golden opportunity (HHDL, 1995: 82).

The adversary never loses status as one's equal in deserving respect, even in conflict and even when acting to inflict harm. The Dalai Lama continues to push his ethical spirituality into

that understanding of persons as equal and tied together in a common condition, from which basis he maintains respect for the enemy and even honors the enemy as one who creates the conditions where the virtues of patience and tolerance can be developed and practiced. For this opportunity the Dalai Lama expresses gratitude, for “It is almost as if the perpetrator of the harm sacrifices himself or herself for the sake of our benefit” (HHDL, 1995: 81). This conclusion conforms to a religious ideal advanced in Buddhism (and Christianity as well: “love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you”); yet in the respect he directs to the adversary the Dalai Lama continues to advance a rational moral perspective built upon the equality of persons and the sharing of all in a common lot of suffering.

And lastly, conflict and injustice, while they create the occasions for anger-hatred to spill over into violence, also provide the occasion to practice nonviolence. “My basic belief is that human problems can only be solved through human contact,” he has observed in his autobiography (HHDL, 1990: 225), and the Dalai Lama has continued over the years to express openness to settling the conflict with China nonviolently. He has offered to negotiate with the Chinese, even going so far as to accept Chinese presence in running governmental operations, thus relinquishing his political authority in Tibet, so long as Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan culture receive assurances of protection. The Dalai Lama, in reflecting on the Chinese incursion, shared in his autobiography that in his view the Chinese leadership had proved to be “untrustworthy” and that “Through countless atrocities, they had shown a total disrespect for human life. It seemed to the Chinese mind, perhaps because of the huge size of their own population, human life is considered to be a cheap commodity—and Tibetan lives to be of still less value” (HHDL, 1990: 225).

Although these are experiences of terrible suffering for the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama has never advocated or condoned violent resistance in response to them. Violence itself is deemed a mode of action that is neither morally justifiable nor spiritually authorized. Nonviolence includes within it an attitude of respect for the adversary—that had been Gandhi’s perspective as well—and also a confidence that injustice can be overcome by holding open the possibility of changing another’s mind and perceptions. The way to effect this change is through nonviolence. Nonviolence is, then, a way of acting effectively to resist injustice in the moral sphere of human relations. It is a spiritual attitude that resorts to thought and reflection and practices designed to diffuse anger and hatred, to maintain respect for the enemy, and to bring about the peace that is integral to human flourishing, happiness and fulfillment.

In the end, what the Dalai Lama offers to a discussion on violence is a spiritual ethic of peace, or, from the other pole, an ethical spirituality that will not divorce what happens in the external world between persons from what happens in the inner world of the heart and mind. In the karmic cause and effect world of the Buddhist, violence will beget violence and nonviolence will counter violence, opening the door to friendship and effecting change in the direction of justice—that is the Dalai Lama’s belief. The Dalai Lama never loses sight of the moral and spiritual end of happiness that all persons seek, and he calls for an ethic of responsibility based on a theory of human nature, where all are connected to one another in a grand unity of interrelatedness. It is an ethical spirituality he calls for, casting the spiritual in terms of the ethical and envisioning the ethical as a function of the spiritual:

. . . the problems we face today –violent conflicts, destruction of nature, poverty, hunger, and so on—are mainly problems created by humans. They can be resolved—but only through human effort, understanding and the development of a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood. To do this, we need to cultivate a universal

responsibility for one another and for the planet we share, based on a good heart and awareness. (HHDL, 1990: 270)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Consider for example his volume entitled *How to Expand Love: Widening the Circle of Loving Relationships*,” (New York: Atria Books, 2005) which assumes the “how to” format yet is translated by one of the outstanding Tibetan Buddhist scholars in the United States, Jeffrey Hopkins from the University of Virginia.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the way Gandhi used non-violence as resistance to injustice and as a means of force to achieve political objectives, see Lloyd Steffen “Gandhi’s Nonviolent Resistance: A Justified Use of Force?” *Journal of Philosophy and the Contemporary World* 15: 1 (June 2008): 68-80; and a broader treatment involving King and Gandhi in Lloyd Steffen, “The Presumption of Peace: Where Just War and Non-Violent Resistance Meet (and Diverge),” Jason Daverth, ed., *Conflict and Conciliation: Faith and Politics in an Age of Global Dissonance* (Dublin, Ireland: Columba Press, 2007): 20-38.

## References

Bstan-‘dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV (cited in text as HHDL)

- 1990 *Freedom in Exile: the Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco).
- 1995 *The World of Tibetan Buddhism: An Overview of its Philosophy and Practice*, trans. and ed. Geshe Thupten Jinpa (Boston: Wisdom Publications).
- 1997 *Healing Anger: The Power of Patience from a Buddhist Perspective*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion).
- 1999 *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books).
- 2000 *Transforming the Mind: Teachings on Generating Compassion*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa (London: Thorsons).
- 2001 *An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life*, ed. Nicholas Vreeland (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.).
- 2005 *How to Expand Love: Widening the Circle of Loving Relationships*, trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (New York: Atria Books).

Lopez, Donald S., Jr.,

- 1998 *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Runzo, Joseph.

- 2001 “Being Religious and doing Ethics in a Global World,” in *Ethics in the World Religions*, eds. Joseph Runzo and Nancy M. Martin (Oxford: One World)

Sangharakshita

- 1996 *Tibetan Buddhism: An Introduction* (Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications).