

Universal Responsibility and Our Global Environment  
His Holiness the Dalai Lama

As the twentieth century draws to a close, we find that the world has grown smaller. The world's people have become almost one community. Political and military alliances have created large multinational groups; industry and international trade have produced a global economy. Worldwide communications are eliminating ancient barriers of distance, language and race. We are also being drawn together by the grave problems we face: overpopulation, dwindling natural resources, and an environmental crisis that threatens our air, water, and trees, along with the vast number of beautiful life forms that are the very foundation of existence on this small planet we share.

I believe that to meet the challenge of our times, human beings will have to develop a greater sense of universal responsibility. Each of us must learn to work not just for his or her own self, family or nation, but for the benefit of all mankind. Universal responsibility is the real key to human survival. It is the best foundation for world peace, the equitable use of natural resources and, through concern for future generations, the proper care of the environment.

That is why it is so heartening to see such non-governmental organisations as yours. Your role in forging a better future is absolutely essential. I have come across many such organisations built by dedicated volunteers out of genuine concern for their fellow human beings. Such commitment represents the forefront of both social and environmental progress.

Whether we like it or not, we have all been born on this earth as part of one great family. Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, belonging to one nation, religion, ideology or another, ultimately each of us is just a human being like everyone else. We all desire happiness and do not want suffering. Furthermore, each of us has the same right to pursue happiness and avoid suffering. When you recognise that all beings are equal in this respect, you automatically feel empathy and closeness for them. Out of this, in turn, comes a genuine sense of universal responsibility -- the wish to actively help others overcome their problems.

The need for a sense of universal responsibility is present in every aspect of modern life. Nowadays, significant events in one part of the world eventually affect the entire planet. Therefore, we have to treat each major local problem as a global concern from the moment it begins. We can no longer invoke the national, racial or ideological barriers that separate us without destructive repercussions. In the context of our new interdependence, considering the interest of others is clearly the best form of self-interest.

We need to appreciate interdependence in nature far more than we have in the past. Our ignorance of it is directly responsible for many of the problems we face. For instance, tapping the limited resources of our world -- particularly those of the developing nations -- simply to fuel consumerism, is disastrous. If it continues unchecked, eventually we will all suffer. We must respect the delicate balance of life and allow it to replenish itself.

Ignorance of interdependence has not only harmed the natural environment, but human society as well. Instead of caring for one

another, we place most of our efforts for happiness in pursuing individual material consumption. We have become so engrossed in this pursuit that, without knowing it, we have neglected to foster the most basic human needs of love, kindness and cooperation. This is very sad. We have to consider what we human beings really are. We are not machine-made objects. However, since we are not solely material creatures, it is a mistake to seek fulfillment in external development alone.

To pursue growth properly, we need to renew our commitment to human values in many fields. Political life, of course, requires an ethical foundation, but science and religion, as well, should be pursued from a moral basis. Without it scientists cannot distinguish between beneficial technologies and those which are merely expedient. The environmental damage surrounding us is the most obvious result of this confusion. In the case of religion, it is particularly necessary.

The purpose of religion is not to construct beautiful buildings, but to cultivate positive human qualities such as tolerance, generosity and love. Every world religion, no matter what its philosophical view, is founded first and foremost on the precept that we must reduce our selfishness and serve others. Unfortunately, sometimes in the name of religion, people cause more quarrels than they solve. Practitioners of different faiths should realise that each religious tradition has immense intrinsic value as a means for providing mental and spiritual health.

I have been extremely heartened to follow the recent developments in the search for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Laying down guns on both sides, and talking face-to-face is, in my opinion, the only way to resolve such disputes. We must learn to live together in a nonviolent way that nurtures the freedom of all people.

There is a wonderful verse in the Bible about turning swords into ploughshares. It is a lovely image, a weapon transformed into a tool to serve basic human needs, symbolic of an attitude of inner and outer disarmament. In the spirit of this ancient message, I think it is important that we stress today the urgency of a policy that is long overdue -- the demilitarisation of the entire planet. Demilitarisation would free great human resources for protection of the environment, relief of poverty, and sustainable human development.

I have always envisioned the future of my own country, Tibet, as founded on this basis. Tibet will be a neutral, demilitarised sanctuary where weapons are forbidden and the people live in harmony with nature. I have called this a Zone of Ahimsa or non-violence. This is not merely a dream -- it is precisely the way Tibetans tried to live for over a thousand years before our country was tragically invaded. In Tibet, wildlife was protected in accordance with Buddhist principles. We enacted decrees to protect the environment, but it was mainly protected by the beliefs which were installed in use as children.

I would like to conclude by stating that I feel optimistic about the future. There are a number of recent trends which show our potential for achieving a better world. The rapid changes in our attitude towards the earth are a source of hope. As recently as a decade ago, we thoughtlessly devoured the resources of the world as if there was no end to them. We failed to realise that unchecked consumerism was disastrous for both the environment and social welfare. Now, both individuals and governments are seeking a new ecological and economic order.

It is true to say that as late as the 1980s people believed that war was an inevitable condition of mankind. The notion prevailed that people with conflicting interests could only confront each other. This view has deminished. Today people all over the globe are more committed to peaceful co-existence, as is evident here in the Middle East. This is an astonishingly positive development.

After believing for centuries that human society could only be governed with rigid authoritarian discipline, people in all corners of the world have woken up to the virtues of democracy. Speaking from their hearts, they have shown that the desire for freedom and truth and democracy stems from the core of human nature. Recent events have proved that the simple expression of truth is an immense force in the human mind, and as a result, in the shaping of history.

One of the greatest lessons for all of us has been the peaceful change in Eastern Europe. In the past, oppressed people have always resorted to violence in their struggle to be free. Now, these peaceful revolutions, following in the footsteps of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, have given future generations a tremendous example of successful, nonviolent change. When, in the future, the need arises to change society, our descendents can look back to 1989 as a paradigm for peaceful struggle: a real success story on an unprecedented scale, involving more than half a dozen nations and hundreds of millions of people.

Meanwhile, there has been a growth of awareness of human rights. Crude power can never subdue mankind's basic desire for freedom, truth and democracy, which are our fundamental right. People simply don't like a person or a system that bullies, cheats and lies. These activities are essentially opposed to the human spirit.

All these encouraging signs reflect a renewed appreciation of the benefits of basic human values. Because of the lessons we have begun to learn, the next century will be friendlier, more harmonious, and less harmful. Compassion, the seeds of peace, will be able to flourish. At the same time, I believe that every individual has a responsibility to help guide our global family in the right direction. Good wishes alone are not enough, we each have to assume responsibility.

I hope and pray that in the days ahead, each of us will do all we can to see that the goal of creating a happier, more harmonious and healthier world is achieved.

[This is the text of the address delivered to the Society for the Protection of Nature, Israel, on March 22, 1994]