

# Actors and the Dalai Lama

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ



There is no “us and them” to His Holiness the Dalai Lama; no “I and other.” That is why he is truly “His Holiness,” and not just in title. To the Dalai Lama there is only us. While his religion is, as he says, kindness, his whole disposition of mind is to recognize our commonality. His energy is in the direction of inclusion: no one is excluded from the kindness of the Dalai Lama.

I recently saw the Dalai Lama up close in Bloomington at the main auditorium on the campus of Indiana University, where he gave teachings on the Heart Sutra to 3200 people, and then not so close up at Conseco Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, where he spoke on compassion to 10,000. Both events were hosted by the Tibetan Mongolian Cultural Center under the leadership of Arjia Rinpoche.

Central to the Heart Sutra is the Buddha’s teaching on the truth of emptiness or the reality of non-self. As the Dalai Lama explained, when the mind creates a notion of an inherently existing self, then the notion of otherness arises, and from otherness come feelings of attraction or aversion or disinterest, leading to a host of problems. The notion of self automatically produces grasping onto a self; that is, trying to make the conceptualized self more and more solid, more and more as if it does inherently exist. This grasping at a self, this holding onto what is no more than a fabrication or contrivance (the result, the Dalai Lama says, of naïve thinking), leads to separation between the so-called self and others. Others become objects of desire or hostility or indifference. Where then is kindness? What happens to empathy? Where is compassion?

Contemplating the truth of emptiness, or the reality of non-self, is the beginning of dismantling the grasping. To dismantle the grasping is to move toward kindness, empathy and compassion. Actors could become skillful at this. Actors have good reason to thoroughly dismantle the grasping. Actors have an innate sense of the insubstantiality of self. Time and again actors endeavor to give up their notion of self in order to walk in the shoes of another. What the Dalai Lama teaches is valuable for actors, beyond compare.

The truth of emptiness isn’t a version of nihilism. Emptiness indeed isn’t actually empty but is experienced as luminosity warmed by compassion and lighted by wisdom. The experience of emptiness comes naturally with meditation and contemplation.

The Dalai Lama has engaged in meditation and contemplation (otherwise known as practice and study) everyday for 60-some years. He is 75 years of age. He has trained his mind, as he noted, “to implement the truth of emptiness in my daily life and in my dreams.” (By dreams he isn’t referring to fantasies, but to the activity of dreaming while sleeping, meaning that he practices even

while asleep!) He is a processed human being, unlike we who tend to divide the world into friend and foe or couldn’t care less. His heart doesn’t support any sort of ideological schism that bleeds across the planet. Undivided on the inside, he is not in competition with the outside. In spite of tremendous, unthinkable personal loss and national suffering, he is not embittered. He is not walking around visibly wounded, and yet for the sake of others tears readily come to his eyes. All this is discernable in his appearance and movement, and audible in the musicality of his speech. The sound of his laughter is ha-ha-ha golden. An audience can only laugh along, hearing him laugh.

The Dalai Lama doesn’t hold himself as someone special. He accepts, but doesn’t promote, his position as the leader of the Tibetan people. When he travels in the United States, he is protected by national security in the manner of a head of state, though in his words he is simply a Buddhist monk. Upon assuming his seat on stage, he opened his monk’s cotton cloth shoulder bag, took out a burgundy sun visor, looked at it, and put it on his head. Three thousand people smiled. A little later he took off the visor, looked at it, held it toward the audience, and said, “New one, Indiana University,” and put it back on. Three thousand people laughed. He was wearing a gift in the school color of burgundy, coordinated with his own burgundy robes.

I have read that some people ask, “Is he for real?” Then they find themselves in his presence, even far up in the balcony of a cavernous venue, and they say, “Yes, he’s for real.” His presence is authentic. The Dalai Lama emanates qualities that actors in the modern theatre strive lifelong to possess.

The qualities of the Dalai Lama come not from possession but from non-possession. He isn’t holding onto things. He isn’t taking money for himself from his talks. His life is testament to the truth that none of us possesses anything, actually and finally. He isn’t in the grip of attachment. Because he’s capable of non-attachment, his attention can touch each passing moment. His mind can exist in the present—uncluttered, free of clinging to the past or craving the future. He can be really truly here, where he is. He can really truly listen, without giving in to distraction. He can really truly see what is in front of him.

He can experience and appreciate the now, quite directly. No delusional multi-tasking for him!

Actors want, and can learn, to live authentically in the now. But actors tend to experience the now (whether onstage or in life) through protective filters, not really very directly, not very often. On stage actors have glimpses of authenticity, moments of touching the actual experience of the present. The Dalai Lama is a model of oneness for actors. He comes from the heart, wisely and undisguised.

It’s pretty evident that while the Dalai Lama’s religion is kindness, his profession is generosity – which could be the most essential, most fundamental quality for an actor. My teacher Stella Adler said of the actor Michael Chekhov, (who was the nephew of Chekhov the playwright and, according to Stanislavsky, the most respected actor of the Moscow Art Theatre), that the essence of his talent was generosity. (You can observe him as a warm-hearted psychiatrist in Alfred Hitchcock’s “Spellbound”.) Generosity is cultivatable: it is a practice. According to Buddhist teaching, the practice of generosity increases confidence, even as it un-clutters the mind and releases the heart. Generosity can benefit the actor: with an uncluttered mind the actor can listen; with a released heart the actor can appreciate the world. In respect of the kindness and generosity of the Dalai Lama, I’d like to recommend that actors everywhere consider learning from his teachings.

The Philadelphia theatre scene is also alive, with new plays. Under the direction of Austin Pendleton, the Philadelphia Theatre Company produced the world premiere of Terrance McNally’s “Golden Age,” a richly intelligent historic look into the “short brilliant life of a musical genius,” namely Bellini, which moved on to the Kennedy Center in Washington. Act II Playhouse produced Bruce Graham’s “Any Given Monday,” an indictment of political correctness directed by Harriet Power. The Wilma Theatre is about to open the U.S. premiere of “Leaving,” a send-up of politics and theatre from playwright Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic. ♦ 2010

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**JOANNA ROTTÉ** is a writer, teacher, director and actor. Her books include *Scene Change: A Theatre Diary: Prague, Moscow, Leningrad* and *Acting With Adler*. She is Professor of Theatre at Villanova University and Director of Asian Studies. She regularly performs in Villanova’s repertory theatre, in “A Long Days’ Journey Into Night,” “Mother Courage,” “The Cherry Orchard,” and has directed featured productions for the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, including her own plays “Art Talk” and “Prajna” (based on a script by the Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa). Her play “All Victorious Ocean: the Noble Life of Yeshe Tsogyal, Tantric Yogini” appeared in the Fringe Festival in September. As a practitioner of Buddhist meditation, she is a member of the Council of Shambhala International. Ms. Rotté is the voice of Pema Chodron, the American-born meditation teacher and Tibetan Buddhist nun. Ms. Rotté recorded four audio books for Shambhala Press – written by Pema Chodron: “The Places That Scare You,” “Comfortable with Uncertainty,” “Start Where You Are,” “The Wisdom of No Escape.” Visit: <http://www.shambhala.com> and type Joanna Rotté in the keyword search box, you can hear a sample recording of each audio book.

*“The intensity of desire and the enthusiasm for participation in life is what it’s all really about!”*

– José Ferrer

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