

Universal Responsibility and Our Global Environment

Global Forum

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by 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 sake, 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.

I have come to this international gathering of environmental leaders in a spirit of optimism and hope. The meetings here represent a threshold for humanity; the chance for our emerging global community to cooperate in an unprecedented manner. Even though it appears that the Earth Summit may, in some respects, fall short of what is needed, the very fact that it has taken place represents a tremendous achievement. That is why it is so heartening to see so many non-governmental organizations here. Your role in forging a better future is absolutely essential, and while this role is still, within the United Nations, limited, it is expanding.

So many non-governmental organizations are built by dedicated volunteers out of genuine caring for fellow human beings. Your commitment represents the forefront of both social and environmental progress. All of the organizations represented here have particular wants and needs just, in fact, as individuals do. Without our collective efforts, however, the gains made here will be significantly less.

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 just 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 recognize 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.

Of course this sort of compassion is, by nature, peaceful and gentle, but it is also very powerful. It is the true sign of inner strength. We do not need to become religious, nor do we need to believe in an ideology. All that is necessary is for each of us to develop our good human qualities.

The need for a sense of universal responsibility affects every aspect of human 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 independence, considering the interests of others is clearly the best form of self-interest.

Interdependence, of course, is a fundamental law of nature. Not only myriad forms of life, but the most subtle level of material phenomena, as well, is governed by interdependence. All phenomena, from the planet we inhabit to the oceans, clouds, forests and flowers that surround us, arise in dependence upon subtle patterns of energy. Without their proper interaction they dissolve and decay.

We need to appreciate this fact of 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 matrix of life and allow it to replenish itself. The United Nations Environment Programme warns, I'm told, that we are facing the most massive wave of extinctions in 65 million years. This fact is profoundly frightening. It must open our minds to the immense proportions of the crisis we face.

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. If we were merely mechanical entities, then machines themselves could alleviate all of our sufferings and fulfill our needs. However, since we are not solely material creatures, it is a mistake to seek fulfillment in external development alone.

Basically, we all cherish tranquillity. For example, when spring comes, the days grow longer, there is more sunshine, the grass and trees come alive and everything is fresh. People feel happy. In autumn, one leaf falls, then another, then all the beautiful flowers die until we are surrounded by bare, naked plants. We do not feel so joyful. Why is this? Because deep down, we desire constructive fruitful growth and dislike things collapsing, dying or being destroyed. Every destructive action goes against our basic nature; building, being constructive, is the human way.

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 build beautiful churches or temples 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 realize that each religious tradition has intense intrinsic value as a means for providing mental and spiritual health.

There is a wonderful verse in the Bible about turning swords into ploughshares. It's 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 demilitarization of the entire planet.

Demilitarization will free great human resources for protection of the environment, relief of poverty, and sustainable human development. It is my hope that the United Nations can soon help make this a reality.

I have always envisioned the future of my own country, Tibet, to be founded on this basis. That would be a neutral, demilitarized sanctuary where weapons are forbidden and 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. In the 17th century, we began enacting decrees to protect that environment and so we may have been one of the first nations to have difficulty enforcing environmental regulations! However, mainly our environment was protected by our beliefs which were instilled in us as children. Also, for at least the last three hundred years, we had virtually no army. Tibet gave up the waging of war as an instrument of national policy in the sixth and seventh centuries.

I would like to conclude by stating that in general I feel optimistic about the future. The rapid changes in our attitude toward the earth are also a source of hope. As recently as a decade ago, we thoughtlessly devoured the resources of the world, as if there were no end to them. We failed to realize that unchecked consumerism was disastrous for both the environment and social welfare. Now, individuals and governments are seeking a new ecological and economic order.

I often joke that the moon and the stars look beautiful, but if any of us tried to live on them we would be miserable.

"HUMANITY AND ECOLOGY"

Peace and the survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human activities that lack a commitment to humanitarian values. Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed and lack of respect for the earth's living things.

This lack of respect extends even to the earth's human descendants, the future generations who will inherit a vastly degraded planet if world peace does not become a reality, and if destruction of the natural environment continues at the present rate.

Our ancestors viewed the earth as rich and bountiful, which it is. Many people in the past also saw nature as inexhaustibly sustainable, which we know is the case only if we care for it.

It is not difficult to forgive destruction in the past which resulted from ignorance. Today, however, we have access to more information; it is

essential that we re-examine ethically what we have inherited, what we are responsible for, and what we will pass on to coming generations.

Many of the earth's habitats, animals, plants, insects and even micro-organisms that we know to be rare may not be known at all by future generations. We have the capability and the responsibility to act; we must do so before it is too late.

Just as we should cultivate gentle and peaceful relations with our fellow human beings, we should also extend that same kind of attitude towards the natural environment. Morally speaking, we should be concerned for our whole environment.

This, however, is not just a question of morality or ethics, but a question of our own survival. For this generation and for future generations, the environment is very important. If we exploit the environment in extreme ways, we will suffer, as will our future generations. When the environment changes, the climatic condition also changes. When the climate changes dramatically, the economy and many other things change. Our physical health will be greatly affected. Again, conservation is not merely a question of morality, but a question of our own survival.

Therefore, in order to achieve more effective environmental protection and conservation, internal balance within the human being himself or herself is essential. The negligence of the environment, which has resulted in great harm to the human community, resulted from our ignorance of the very special importance of the environment. We must now help people to understand the need for environmental protection. We must teach people to understand the need for environmental protection. We must teach people that conservation directly aids our survival.

If you must be selfish, then be wise and not narrow-minded in your selfishness. The key point lies in the sense of universal responsibility.

That is the real source of strength, the real source of happiness.

If we exploit everything available, such as trees, water and minerals, and if we don't plan for our next generation, for the future, then we're at fault, aren't we? However, if we have a genuine sense of universal responsibility as our central motivation, then our relations with the environment, and with all our neighbours, will be well balanced.

Ultimately, the decision to save the environment must come from the

human heart. The key point is a call for a genuine sense of universal responsibility that is based on love, compassion and clear awareness.

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This blue planet of ours is a delightful habitat. Its life is our life; its future our future. Indeed the earth acts like a mother to all. Like children, we are dependent on them. In the face of such global problems as the greenhouse effect and depletion of the ozone layer, individual organizations and single nations are helpless. Unless we all work together, no solution can be found. Our mother earth is teaching us a lesson in universal responsibility.

I think we say that 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. I am very hopeful. 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 have to assume responsibility. Large human movements spring from individual human initiatives.

The sponsor of these events, the United Nations, was founded out of the need to prevent military conflict. I am very moved that its mission has now grown to take on a new challenge- that of safeguarding the long-term health of ourselves and our planet. I hope and pray that in the days ahead, each of us does all we can to see that the goal of creating a happier, more harmonious and healthier world is achieved.